

Emma Belle Roos

To those Waterloo residents who had been advocating for an improvement of the Free Library in town, the year 1905 was truly significant. On November 1 of that year, the new Carnegie Library was opened to the public. The building committee, some town councillors and interested citizens attended and as part of the ceremony, the librarian to be in charge of the new facility, Emma Belle Roos, was introduced to those present.



Roos was not a stranger to the Waterloo scene. For the previous two or three years, she had been in charge of the Free Library housed across the street in the Town Hall. She, no doubt, had the responsibility of supervising the move of these books to the new library and integrating them with the volumes purchased for the opening event. Along with the newly-elected board members, she sorted out operating procedures for the new facility. She served as librarian for forty-six years.

Roos was born on November 15, 1880. She was probably given the two distinctive given names to set her apart from her Aunt Emma Roos who had been a teacher and a secretary. When she was about 21 years of age, Emma Belle took the part-time job of librarian in the Free Library in the Town Hall.

Her father was Henry “Hy” Roos who, for a number of years, worked for various hardware stores in town. In the 1880s he became a partner with druggist Simon Snyder when they took over the bankrupt Reichert Furniture Company located in the Devitt-Snyder Block. The new business was called Snyder Roos and Company and they manufactured dining room suites, chairs, couches, and mattresses.

Emma Belle’s mother was Mary Ann Springer, a grand-daughter of Moses Springer, who had been one of the most influential citizens in the early Village and Town. Moses Springer played a significant role in the formation of the Waterloo Mutual Fire Insurance Company, and the Mutual Life Assurance Company, and became Sherriff of Waterloo County.

Her father built a large white brick home on the corner of George and Willow Streets in the 1880s. For most of her life Emma Belle, one of eleven children, lived at home. In later years she, along with sisters Hilda, a school teacher, and Bernice were very close and continued to live in the family residence.

In the new library, Emma Belle continued her work as it had been conducted in the Town Hall. The atmosphere was one of whispered silence, with no chatting, and demonstrative behavior was frowned upon. There were no computers back then and for a number of years, she alone checked out books, did the reshelving and carried out the ordering and cataloguing of new purchases. In the year 1909 it is recorded that the library contained 8,000 volumes.

Gradually the library board recognized the need for more help and an assistant was added. More and more children were using the facilities and in the 1920s a special

section was devoted to the younger readers. By 1931 extra storage space was needed and the Children's Department was moved to the renovated space upstairs. A children's librarian was hired.

Chief librarian Emma Belle Roos quietly and efficiently took all these changes in stride. After the Second World War, she began to feel the approach of aging years, and on August 1, 1949, she retired from her life's work at the age of sixty-eight. In October of that year a retirement dinner was held in the Waterloo Hotel to recognize the many years of service that she had provided to the community. After the meal she was presented with a set of traveling bags. In her reply she modestly stated that she enjoyed her job because "you get to know so many people."

Adapted from the profile by Ellis Little

Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library