

BISSEN

A life for the library

18 HOURS AGO • [RYAN HENRY HOUSTON COUNTY NEWS](#)

When one thinks of the Hokah Public Library, it's nearly impossible not to associate it with one person: Barb Bissen. And why not? After all, the 65-year-old Hokah resident is credited as the driving force behind establishing a library in Hokah 28 years ago, and has served as its director ever since.

Now, the woman who has put so much time, energy and love into the small, but impressive, library in the basement of city hall has decided to step away. She ceded her position to current

director Shari Carlson in June and assumed the assistant's role. But as of the first of the year, she'll be officially retired.

"She was instrumental; she started the library," said city administrator Rod Blank, who's worked with Bissen for almost 30 years. "She has built it from nothing to the current status it is today, but that's not her total contribution to the city. ... Basically, everything that happens around Hokah, she has her finger on some way or another. She's been instrumental in a lot of community things in Hokah."

Bissen said the time was simply right to let go of the library she's built over the years, though admitting an open-heart surgery she had in July played a large part in switching positions with Carlson early.

"I needed somebody with newer, fresher ideas, and it's a lot of work getting ready for an event," Bissen said. "I couldn't tote chairs or tables anymore and I needed help."

That, and Bissen really wants to see the country, so she needs to do that while she's still able.

"My daughter was after me," she said with a grin. "I wanted to travel and she said, 'I'm not pushing you around in a wheelchair if we travel.'"

Though Bissen's been a paid staff member since 1987, it was in 1986 that she began working to establish a library. At first, there was a summertime library at the Hokah Learning Center in a room the school district allowed it use when school wasn't in session. But Bissen, who's been attuned to regional and state library issues, knew legislation was coming a few years later that called for all counties to be a part of a regional library system – in this area, Southeast Libraries Cooperating, or SELCO.

So then in 1989, after the city established a library board and began levying money for its support, and because the school district needed the space back for a classroom, the library

moved to its current location.

“I didn’t want us to end up with a bookmobile,” she said. “Another thing is, I can’t see stuff tossed out and I just had a hunch that a lot of the books that weren’t kindergarten level would just get rummaged off up there (at the learning center), and I wanted to keep it together and make good out of it.”

But the location Bissen was allotted was a shared space with the city’s police department, as well as a seniors group that used it to play cards, so she was given “only six or eight feet out from the wall.”

Today, the library has grown to completely consume the room it started in, expanding into hallways and side rooms as the collection grew. In addition, Bissen applied for and received a \$10,000 Extension grant to begin a food shelf, which is now housed in the library. And just recently, the Hokah Heritage Room was established as a space dedicated to displaying newspaper clippings and artifacts detailing Hokah’s history.

A lot has changed about the library’s physical location in her almost three decades of work, but there’s just as much different about the job itself that kept her busy updating her skills and knowledge. In 1998, she said, the library became automated, meaning barcodes on books were scanned at checkout and logged in the regional SELCO system.

“And now it’s eBooks, and eventually, it’ll be downloadable music,” Bissen said, adding that the library’s VHS movie collection is also being replaced by DVDs as she finds matching copies. “There’s a few that do not have DVDs to them, but if somebody really wants to watch them, I collect VCRs at rummage sales.”

She remembers the first computers in the early 80s, then the subsequent changes in operating systems and the new skills she needed to operate them throughout the years. It was all self-taught.

“I learned as I went. If I got stuck, I’d ask (Blank), and he’d either tell me what to do or tell me to Google it,” said Bissen, using a term that itself has become common in everyday vernacular. “We have five public computers and two staff.”

But it’s not just movies and music that the library has come to offer. Because of other grant funding Bissen has obtained, it has 38 pairs of snowshoes available for checkout, as well as cake pans, watt meters, and a fishing kit. It’s also recently utilized Minnesota Legacy Funding Grants to bring arts and cultural opportunities to Hokah. In recent years, that’s included storytellers, musicians and acting troupes.

“They get to see entertainment, the Minnesota History Players, and that type of stuff,” she said. “That’s entertainment we wouldn’t be able to afford if we had to pay the going rate,” adding that feedback has been positive and attendance strong.

But of the money she does have to spend, Bissen stretches the most out of each dollar. The library receives \$21,000 a year in city tax levy dollars, and Bissen said she wouldn’t be able to run it as inexpensively as she does without her family connections in the surplus business. Most everything in the library was purchased at a discount price or it’s come from other libraries that no longer needed items like bookshelves.

“In the whole library, there are very few new things,” she said, pointing out shelving cases she

purchased for \$5 with \$20, library-bound books on them that she got on discount from a thrift store for 38 cents apiece. “That’s my goal is to find this stuff, so that, I think, has helped.”

Building what she did with the money she had is a proud accomplishment for Bissen, but what she’s even more pleased about is the fact that Hokah has a library at all. It’s something, she said, several people didn’t think could happen.

“People didn’t think it could be done because Hokah is so small,” she said of the now 27,000-item library. “We have a very good library, and how surprised people are when they come in. I think they expect to see some rickety old books. They’re just shocked by what we’ve got.”

And it’s everything in that library that she’ll miss most once she’s done. Bissen enjoys scouring the catalogs and thumbing through the shelves looking for books or finding DVDs that would complement the collection.

“The hunt is the most fun,” she said.

Although she’s officially retiring, Bissen plans to remain active in the library. She’ll become a Hokah library representative on the SELCO board and continue adding to the artifacts in the Heritage Room. She also plans to keep hours for the food shelf.

“I’m still easing my way out,” she said. “A lot of people, it’s two weeks and they’re out. There’s no way I could do that.”

And Blank wouldn’t expect her to.

“Literally, she patrols the city of Hokah,” he said. “She’s helped me a lot with my job, with ideas and things she sees and things she feels are wrong. It’s been very beneficial.

“She informed me a couple weeks ago that she wasn’t going to give up her keys to the building.”

Bissen’s is a job – and a library – she nurtured from infancy to capacity. Handing over the reins isn’t easy, but it’s easier knowing who’s there to receive them.

“I always said this library is my baby, and I wanted somebody that would adopt my baby and not babysit it,” she said. “Shari is adopting it.”

Beneficial Bissen

In addition to taking care of planters in front of city hall, securing Legacy funding for heritage signs around Hokah, and beginning a project to update city hall with \$150,000 in grants and fundraising, Bissen has also donated her time to a variety of projects and organizations around Houston County. They include:

- La Crescent-Hokah School Board
- La Crescent-Hokah Community Education
- Houston County League of Women Voters
- Houston County Red Cross
- 4-H clubs at the local, county and state level
- Houston County Agricultural Society
- Houston County Extension

- Historic Bluff Country regional tourism
- Houston County Economic Development Authority

IF YOU GO

What: Retirement open house for Barb Bissen

When: 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 2

Where: Hokah City Hall