What is a Library Anyway?

I recently travelled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – home to one of the first Carnegie Libraries, built by the great philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. On one of our city tours, the guide shared some interesting stories about those earliest libraries, one of which made me laugh out loud. In those early years, people didn’t understand what they had to offer or how they worked. One story that was shared was that the first library built in Allegheny had to have shelves completely restocked, because people “checked out” books but never brought them back! I guess they assumed that these books were theirs to keep!

It was also interesting to me that, although Andrew Carnegie provided grants to build libraries, he expected – required – communities to have or generate the funds to keep the libraries funded. However, if a community already had a library, they could apply for grants to cover building maintenance costs and new book purchases. Through Carnegie’s philanthropic endeavors, over $40 million dollars was donated to build over 1,600 public libraries in 1,412 communities throughout the country.

Libraries have changed dramatically in the 125 years since Andrew Carnegie’s time – or have they? Not all library buildings today are massive brick and mortar masterpieces, but they are still cornerstones of their communities. They also offer more than books as they did in his time. At Albertson Memorial Library, our services go far beyond those early libraries, as all libraries today do. Books, magazines, newspapers, and movies have been mainstays for years, but the addition of computers, printers, and other technological devices has added so much more. With the advancement of technological devices came e-books, magazines, podcasts, and more. Libraries subscribe to services that provide patrons opportunities to search for and read books on their phones or tablet devices.

Lots of libraries have expanded services to include household items, and those possibilities are endless. In June, our Albertson Memorial Library opened the Treasure Trove – our Library of Things. Patrons and community members can come to the library and find folding tables, canopies, Nesco roasters, a hotdog roller, a beverage cooler, a leaf blower, a telescope, a metal detector, lots of outdoor family games, a piano keyboard, a ukulele, bongo drums, a BINGO set, and so much more.

In addition to “things”, libraries offer so much more. They provide a wealth of resources from income tax return forms, links to public health and welfare assistance, and voting information. The most recent addition to our services at Albertson Memorial Library is providing women’s hygiene products for those in need. Who knows where library services will end. In the meantime, it’s good to know that any one of us can go to our local library and get whatever it is that we need.