Brief History of Washington University Biology Library, 1926-2009

The year 1926 saw the laying of the cornerstone for Rebstock Hall, which was to be the new home of the Botany and Zoology departments. The building was completed and the first classes were held there in 1927. Rebstock professor and head of the Department of Zoology, Professor Caswell Grave, was instrumental in establishing a Biology Library in Rebstock Hall in 1927. Previous to that time a number of monographs that were classics in biology had been secured by professor Grave from various sources and they became the nucleus of the new library.

Mrs. L.V. Roach was appointed secretary-librarian and served until 1934. Mrs. Roach culled books of a biological nature from the main library in Ridgely Hall and had them transferred to the new library. It was decided that the library would use the Library of Congress cataloging system. Various science weeklies - Nature, Naturwissenschaften, and Science - were transferred to Biology from Ridgely. Other journals were received from the Missouri Botanical Garden. The new library became so popular that students had to be turned away at times.

In 1928 there were 2600 books and 2275 bound volumes of journals in the new library plus 350 books on permanent loan from the Botanical Garden. During this period the department office was housed in the library and the person in charge of the library was also serving as department secretary. Mrs. Roach left the library in 1934 and it is unclear who took over. Antonia Umbright served some period between 1938 and 1940 and it was a report she wrote that provided some of the information on the founding of the library.

1947-48 saw the emergence of the library as an adjunct unit separate from the department office. The office was moved out of the library and Mrs. Antoinette Singer was appointed as the first full-time librarian. Also in 1947 a coordinator of departmental libraries was established through Ridgely Library. It was that person who decided the library needed a full-time librarian. When Mrs. Singer left in 1948 she was replaced by Roger Poulin who served until June of 1951 when Svetlana Netchvoldoff took over. Alice Booker was librarian from 1953-54. She was followed by Irma Godfrey (1955-56), Madeline Veron (1957-58), and Maria Munroe (1959-60). New lighting was installed in the library in 1957 and also a new phone was put in. Prior to the new phone the library was still sharing the phone with the Zoology department but now they had their own line.

Mary Quinn became the librarian in 1960. In 1961 a library committee was formed by the faculty to help formulate policy and offer suggestions. With the move of the main library from Ridgely to the new Olin Library in 1962 the Biology library inherited several file cabinets. Also, there was less crowding in the library as those who just used it as a place to study moved to Olin. In 1963 the library was repainted. In 1965 handsome new stacks were added. During this period several new faculty members arrived and collections were expanded to meet their needs. This policy has continued through the years as new faculty were hired and new programs added. During the sixties there were complaints about the library key policy and how it led to the loss of unbound journal issues. Also a continual complaint was the lack of air conditioning. Through the years the library was told they would be getting air conditioning soon but it never happened while the library remained in Rebstock. In 1969 students and faculty drew up and signed a petition voicing their complaints about conditions in the library.
In January, 1970, Ray Russell joined the staff as the first shared assistant in the biology, chemistry and earth science libraries. Around this time Mary Quinn moved to the serials department in Olin Library and Gwen Reveley became librarian. She was followed in 1971 by Betty Jo Dollar and then by Bernard Watts. Mr. Watts resigned in January, 1973 and Betty Galyon was appointed library supervisor in February of that year. Ray Russell became a full-time assistant in Biology and Mary Jane Gwin became the shared assistant.

After many years of being in cramped quarters with no air conditioning the dream of having a new Biology library came true with the Life Sciences building was begun in 1973. The building was completed and the new library opened in 1975. With the opening of the new library it was decided that the library needed another full-time assistant and Charlotte Ellis moved from the circulation department at Olin to be the circulation/reserve assistant. She later became the senior assistant after Ray Russell left his position. There were many problems that had to be ironed out in the new library before it could run smoothly. By this time the Zoology and Botany departments had merged to become the Biology department which also became part of the Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences. Many more faculty, researchers and graduate students have been added over the years making Biology one of the largest departments on campus.

Betty Galyon retired in May, 1985, and Ruth became the new librarian that fall and continues to serve in that capacity today. Charlotte Ellis continued as senior assistant and Ray Russell, after being gone for many years, returned for several years until retirement.

In 1988 the Jeanette Goldfarb Plant Growth Facility was built adjacent to the Life Sciences Building. At that time the library was to be remodeled and have expanded space but plans were changed and this did not come about. However, with the addition of offices and conference rooms in Life Sciences the librarian was finally able to have a private office.

In fall 2008, collection and services of the biology library were condensed onto level 3 of the Life Sciences Building. Level 2 will be used for student space and biology office space. Christopher Goodman began work as a library assistant in Biology and Math in 2008.

We have seen constant changes over the years in the Biology library. Circulation had gone from a system of signed cards through several types of computerized circulation. Many journals, indexes and other types of databases are now available electronically and many print journal subscriptions are being cancelled. With the opening of the West Campus library many of our older journal volumes and books were sent there for storage with easy retrieval. Over the years the Biology department has recorded some of the larger classes and these have been available to the students in the library first on reel to reel tape, then VHS, and now streaming video. Some reserve articles are also being put on electronic reserve. We have added many computer workstations for patron use in the library.

There have been many other people who have worked in the Biology Library over the last 30 years either as full-time or shared assistants. Some of them are: Richard Amelung, Eunice Bunnell, Velda Chowning, Charlotte Ellis, Lyn Friesner, Christopher Goodman, Cecile Guenther, Gerri Hirst, Georgia Hunter, Bernyce Kennedy, Reka Kozak, Pam Levy, Barbara
Luszczynska, Ioana Masek, Chris McClarren, Deborah Nowland, Deborah Martin Polley, Ray Russell, Loren Stamper, Jessie Swoboda, William Toombs, and Theresa Wondracek. There have been numerous student workers also.

The Biology Library was closed August 7, 2009, due to changing use patterns and economic belt-tightening at the university. Books and journals will be interfiled with materials at Olin Library. Paper materials will mostly be on Level B at Olin Library. Significant portions of the journals and databases are available 24/7 online to WU users. The Biology collection included more than 73,000 volumes, including more than 40,000 volumes at West Campus.

The original version of this page was written by Charlotte Ellis when she was Senior Assistant in the Biology Library.

The wall hanging in honor of superb librarian, Betty Galyon, has been moved to the WU Memorabilia collection at WU Archives.