

Summertime, and the Library Is Easy...

By Steve Norman

Libraries in Maine are wild places during the summer. Unlike libraries in some other parts of the country where hours of operation get pared back for the summer, most libraries in Maine are way busier in the hazy, crazy, hot months than in the rest of the year. Why? At least a big part of the reason is summer people.

At the Belfast Free Library, we can tell what week it is by the reappearance of familiar faces, people who have returned to the Midcoast and our library every summer for decades, like swallows to Capistrano. “Ah! You’re back! Welcome!” we say.

Naturally, they come to us for books. Books by Maine authors or with Maine themes are especially popular with summer visitors for beach and front-porch reading. Children’s books are another big hit. But summer people also come for the many cultural programs, author lectures, book discussion groups, movie series, art exhibits, the summer reading program and other special programs for children, and sometimes even to do research. Computing services are a major attraction, too.

Travelers and summer people visit the library to check email, make reservations, print boarding passes, and so on. A sure sign that the library is closed (say, on a Sunday afternoon) is the sprinkling of people sprawled on the lawn or camped out in the back garden or front patio with laptops plugged in to use the library’s WiFi connection.

Besides serving the perennial summer people, Maine’s libraries also can delight the casual seasonal passersby. For instance, last summer—as part of the Belfast library’s 125th anniversary celebration—a concert (along with birthday cupcakes!) was presented by the local duo Tango on an early Friday evening on the library patio adjacent to one of the main downtown streets. The look of astonishment on the faces of people who stumbled onto this marvelous performance was priceless. No doubt, other libraries in Maine can report similar stories of wonder and amazement.

Several Maine libraries show movies outdoors on summer nights. The Camden Public Library has programs in the amphitheater in its beautiful harbor



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A crowd gathers for the dedication of the Squirrel Island Library on August 8, 1904. The library and a pilot collection of 4,000 volumes were the gift of philanthropist Albert H. Davenport of Malden, Massachusetts, owner and director of one of the country’s leading furniture manufacturers, and a summer resident and benefactor of Squirrel Island since 1887. The island, off the coast near Boothbay Harbor, was incorporated as a summer colony in 1870.

park that slopes down to the bay. (The Camden amphitheatre and public library was recently [2013] selected as a new national historic landmark.) The Blue Hill Public Library sponsors a major art auction as a fundraiser. The Freeport Community Library, appropriately for the hometown of L.L. Bean, checks out fishing gear. Libraries often schedule their big annual book sales to allow summer people to participate and to boost sales. Summer camps take trips to town to the library. Boaters moored at harbors and passengers from cruise ships anchored for an afternoon come to libraries. Crews from ships docked for repairs use libraries.

A few summers ago when it seemed that the rain in Maine would never stop, libraries were one of the few dry places to settle in while the deluge continued. Libraries were practically wall-to-wall people. Floor space and electrical outlets were at a premium.

Clearly, summer people receive valued services from Maine's libraries—but, notably, they provide much of value in return to communities and libraries. Undeniably, summer people are vitally important to the local economies. Summer people also are often generous donors to libraries in Maine. And summer people are frequently highly skilled individuals (writers, artists, musicians, teachers, scholars), looking for opportunities to be useful and volunteering in ways that are helpful beyond measure. Further, many a summer person has chosen to relocate permanently to Maine, more than once citing an excellent library as one of the compelling reasons—which, as it turns out, is good for Maine's libraries, its economy and its civic fabric. 🐟



Steve Norman has been director of the Belfast Free Library since 2001. Before that, he directed public libraries elsewhere in Maine and in Wisconsin.