Rediscovered film reveals Montclair's innovative library in 1940

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'Portrait of a Library' is a snapshot of the Montclair Public library in 1940. A small snippet will be shown at the library's 125th celebration on April 14.
Courtesy MPL

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for Montclair Local

A newly-digitized, 16mm film captures the Montclair Public Library as a pioneering institution of knowledge and progress.

"'Portrait of a Library' is a snapshot of the Montclair Public library in 1940. It shows people using the library, our home delivery service, people calling to reserve books, use of the first automated circulation card catalog and a reading of 'Native Son,' which was controversial," said Peter Coyl, Montclair library board director.

IBM had designed the first punch card data processing system and equipment to record book loans and returns that was used in Montclair, prompting librarians worldwide to visit the library and view its offerings.

The "Portrait of a Library" film's digitization and availability to a wider audience reflects the library being at the forefront of innovative library services.

"It's an important piece of our history and speaks to the longstanding culture of Montclair as being progressive and forward thinking," Coyl said.

A brief clip of the film will be screened to coincide with the library's 125th anniversary Gala Celebration on Saturday, April 14, 7 p.m. Tickets are $50. The event includes light fare, discussion, overview of future plans for the library and dessert. The film will be screened in its entirety as part of the Montclair Film Festival on Saturday, April 28, 12:15 p.m. at

Clairidge Cinemas. Tickets are $12 for members, $14 for non-members.

Created by cinematographer Sy Wexler and director/producer Hans Berger, "Portrait of a Library" was in the Montclair Public Library's archives. It was made for the sum of $1,200, paid by the Agnes Osborne Fund, whose mission was to spread international understanding.

"Early this year we donated the film to the Library of Congress who has digitized it using the three copies we had for the use of the American people," said Coyl.

The film showcases "the democratic values embodied in the American library system," according to the Montclair Film Festival website, which noted that "Portrait of a Library" was distributed internationally by the Museum of Modern Art.

Since 1893, the Montclair Public Library has remained ahead of the times. It started out as a subscription-based library, and later turning into an association library. In the 1920s, the delivery service for homebound patrons and a computerized circulation system began. By 1969, bookmobiles on street corners, parks and playgrounds boosted library use by 40 percent within two years. Public computers were brought in during the 1980s and integrated the Adult School of Montclair. Robotic Electronic Checkout and bookbike were introduced in 2015.

Looking ahead, library trustee Ilmar Vanderer said that although we live in a time of remarkable and rapid change in information environment, the basic purpose of libraries has remained unchanged.

"Strategies for meeting that purpose must evolve to meet changing community needs and emerging new technologies," Vanderer said. "We want Montclair Public Library to continue being an innovative, dynamic, engaging, purposeful and welcoming as possible, from its customer service, community programs, and collection development to accessibility, building design, and multi-media technology."

Short term goals include implementing a new Strategic Plan for the next five years. Long term goals include $16 million re-design of both library buildings as announced in March, and to be formally presented at the 125th anniversary celebration on April 14.