

Small timber, big idea: Darby library serves as national example of round wood construction

By JENNY JOHNSON Staff Reporter

DARBY - Three weathered, leather-bound volumes of "A History of Montana" are poised atop a new oak bookcase in the reference center at the new Darby Community Library.

Written by Helen Fitzgerald Sanders and published in 1913, the tomes haven't seen the light of day in many years. They've been buried in the small library among novels, references and equipment.

But the construction of a new, larger building has opened up new possibilities for the library and community.

"It's unbelievable," said Veryl Kosteczko of the library board. "I'm jumping out of my skin."

Thursday, friends of the library, Forest Service officials and community members joined in the library's grand opening and ribbon cutting.

Touted as the "Sistine Chapel of small-diameter round wood," Forest Service officials cite the library as an example of using underutilized small timber. The 5,000-square-foot library is a national demonstration showcasing a new type of construction using small-diameter logs for beams and trusses. It was constructed using local contractors and suppliers, incorporating as many local supplies as possible, Kosteczko said.

The library's high ceilings and open design feature dark stained logs and wood trim. It includes a conference room that was designed for community use, said Ted Almgren, co-chairman of the library's building committee, and a children's room and outdoor enclosure. Below stained glass in a high window, a fireplace is the centerpiece of a relaxing cozy reading area.

"We've never had a place where people could sit and relax," Almgren said.

"It's a warm and inviting place for the community to come and enjoy the library," Kosteczko said.

The old 500-square-foot library didn't have space for a lot of things. There is no bathroom in the old, 68-year-old library, and hundreds of books are stored in garages all over the valley waiting to be shelved, Almgren said.

The new space also has new computers and will soon be networked with libraries in western Montana.

"When we get online with Western Library Network, we can check out books from other libraries," Kosteczko said.

The library board purchased four lots near the old library in 1999, figuring it would take years to pay off the \$35,000 mortgage. But it took just 10 months with help from local contributions, including a \$10,000 challenge grant.

To celebrate, Kosteczko and others gathered in the then-vacant lot on a cold February night and burned the paid-off mortgage documents. About \$665,000 was raised and funding came from many sources to

complete the \$900,000 project, including grants from private foundations, the U.S. Forest Service and business and individual contributions.

The largest single contribution came in 2001 in the form of a \$250,000 anonymous challenge grant.

The Forest Service and its Madison, Wis.-based forest products laboratory was looking to demonstrate more uses for small-diameter timber, also called round wood. Library folks were excited about using timber construction - Darby is historically a timber town - and it was a perfect match, Almgren said.

Now the library opens without any debt and with more room to draw in library users.

Kosteczko said the library has already drawn in more users with the upgraded computer system.

"We're going to be holding programs and doing all of the things that libraries do for communities," she said.

The library is open from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Library officials are looking at expanding hours or adding services depending on the needs of the community.

Reporter Jenny Johnson can be reached at 363-3300 or jjohnson@ravallirepublic.com