Libraries not just for reading anymore

By Deborah A. Malick

The East Baton Rouge Parish Library has a lot more to offer these days than just reading services. Polaroid Corp. has donated 100 Sun 600 cameras to the library that members may check out, and, in conjunction with the children's summer reading program, Baton Rougeans have joined the library world's fair memorabilia both from the 1984 New Orleans Cotton Exhibition and from other fairs.

The Goodwood Boulevard library is in the top five in circulation among public libraries in the United States, according to assistant librarians Mildred Ramsey. This year alone 125,831 pieces of material have circulated. The number includes 66 cameras that have gone out since the library received them, and items ranging from books to record albums to art prints.

"Libraries haven't only for reading for a long time," says Beth Bingham, head of adult services. Ms. Bingham says the camera program has been successful since its inception three weeks ago. The library hasn't had any problems with theft. Library card holders can check out the cameras for three week periods — just like a book — and may ask for a camera to be put on reserve if they are all checked out — just like a book.

The cameras were acquired at no cost to the library or the parish.

Ms. Bingham says Polaroid offered the camera program a couple of years ago to members of the American Library Association, and the Goodwood library is one of the most recent branches to benefit from the program. Borrowers have to buy their own film.

Ms. Bingham says she hopes the camera program will help draw non-library users to the library.

"Anything that people can come in for, then we can make them read," she says. Polaroid users may well be familiar with the "instant art" that can be created from using an instant camera. But if making art isn't what a borrower goes to a library for, the library also offers art objects — prints and sculptures — that can be loaned out for up to six weeks at a time.

Art from previous World's Fairs can't be borrowed, but they will be on display at the library during the summer. The exhibition is in conjunction with statewide Louisiana Summer Reading Club being held at libraries throughout the state. The theme is, of course, the World's Fair. The display includes objects ranging from a guide book of Expo '70, Japan, to a key ring from the 1933 Chicago fair. The older objects bring their own histories with them, and help to highlight the diversity of people who have settled in Louisiana in the past.

Edith Stevens donated a book from the 1883 Chicago World's Fair. Her mother went to that summer fair when she was about 8 years old, and received the book later as a Christmas present. Mrs. Stevens, a former Missourian, came to Louisiana when her husband enrolled at LSU. She says she's not sure if the book has property value, but she has retained it for sentimental and historical reasons.

"It's probably sentimental. I've never run across one," Stevens says.

Lola Brown of St. Gabriel has a pocket knife from a World's fair held in Paris in 1869. Her grandfather was from the Bordeaux region of France and emigrated to Louisiana when he was 18 years old. When he went back to France during the one trip home he made during his lifetime, he attended the fair and brought back pocket knives for his sons and silk scarves for his daughters. The scarves have since been lost but Brown retains a tangible memory of a different era.

Betty May has been selling historical documents for about 1/4 years. She is exhibiting her old "Hunter's Weekly" magazines highlighting the International Cotton Exhibition of New Orleans in 1844. Current New Orleans livestock auction afficionados may be interested in looking at the woodcut of Louisiana's first world's fair.

Parents and children interested in this small but comprehensive exhibition may want to know the summer reading program will continue through July 28. More information may be obtained by calling Diane Brady at the library at 380-2100.