

Solano's library history is a story of steady growth

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Over the years, the Solano County Library system and its wonderful, hard-working librarians have assisted me in many intricate research projects, often procuring obscure books and information at short notice.

Come August, the Solano County Library will celebrate its 90th anniversary, a good reason to look at its colorful history and at its important contribution to our life in Solano County.

Aspirations for a library go back a long way. During the early years of the 20th century, book clubs were the main source of reading materials for local book lovers. In Vacaville, plans for a reading room cropped up again and again, until citizens founded the Ulati Book Club in 1900.

In 1905, the Carnegie Library Fund began to offer \$ 5,000 grants to small communities like Vacaville or Dixon for the establishment of a library.

The San Francisco earthquake delayed these plans, as all resources had to go to rebuilding. In Vacaville, town trustees also could not decide where to locate a suitable building site.

By 1910, the Ulati Book Club boasted 84 members and 137 volumes. At that point, its operation was taken over by the women of the Saturday Club. A committee, chaired by Mrs. Opra Long began planning for the establishment of a permanent library building.

The nearly 200 members of the Saturday Club organized a public library on the corner of Main and Dobbins streets. About 400 books were purchased from the by-then-defunct Ulati Book Club. The library room was financed through private subscriptions, donations and volunteer efforts. It opened on Jan. 4, 1912, with subscriptions available from 50 cents to \$2.

At the same time, the Saturday Club started a campaign to establish a union high school library district. In the election of November 1912, voters approved a five-cent property tax to pay for maintenance and book purchases.

At that point, library affairs went back to a board of trustees including R. H. Clark, George H. Sharpe, S. P. Dobbins, Monte Gates and John Montgomery.

While some residents proposed to build the new library on high school grounds, the trustees finally decided on a site downtown. In 1914, after the Carnegie Fund increased its grant to \$12,500 under condition that the city provide the land, the trustees bought the corner lot at Main and Parker streets from Thomas S. Wilson for \$3,000.

A few months later, town officials called for bids. Local builder George Sharpe resigned his town trusteeship to be able to bid on the project. Though his bid of \$11,815 was

\$388 higher than that of his closest rival, the trustees awarded him the contract. George Sharpe finished the reinforced concrete building with its typical Carnegie library facade in 1915. A history of the library was sealed into the cornerstone.

The library remained in the building for more than 50 years before moving into new quarters on Merchant Street. Today, the Carnegie Library building houses the Chamber of Commerce.

Like Vacaville, Dixon acquired a Carnegie Library Grant through the endeavors of the Dixon Women's Improvement Club.

Fairfield, on the other hand, went a different route.

In 1909, James L. Gillis, the California state librarian, proposed that a county library system would be the most economical way of providing books to the general public. The California Free County Library law was approved by the Legislature in 1911.

In 1914, construction of the new Armijo High School building was under way, including a proposed Union High School library. Gillis felt this to be a restrictive venue. He sent the State Library Organizer, Miss Harriet G. Eddy, to speak with the County Board of Supervisors and the County Superintendent on the merits of establishing a county library rather than a Union High School Library district.

The Board of Supervisors recognized the advantages that a county library located in the heart of the county's government center would bring to its residents, voting for its establishment on Feb. 16, 1914.

The first librarian was Clara Dills of the Kings County Free Library, who was appointed in June of 1914 and was able to take up her post on Aug. 1.

Armijo High School was still under construction, and the library moved into temporary quarters in the Solano County Superintendent of School's offices. Miss Dills ordered new books, including the Dewey Decimal System. She also traveled throughout the county to decide where to establish branch libraries. Benicia Public Library and the

Dixon Union High School District Library elected not to join, while Vacaville decided to stay independent and to only contract for non-fiction books and reference materials, at a cost of \$300 for the first year.

On Aug. 11, 1914, the Solano Republican reported that Armijo High School construction was finished, at a cost of \$ 85,000. A detailed description of the 16,000-square-foot building included: "The south end of the first floor of the building contains the library. This room is amply lighted and contains 170 feet of book shelving 7 feet in height. Three classrooms lie between the library and teacher's locker room on the west side of (the) main hall, and on the east side lies another classroom between the stair hall and reference library of the school. ...

"Both the auditorium and library have their own entrances, being thus independent of the rest of the building; the use of any of them not interfering with the use of the other two."

The idea of a countywide library system spread. Rio Vista immediately applied for a branch library, which was sponsored by the Rio Vista Women's Improvement Club, including upkeep and staff salary. Club President Mabel Ruble personally donated a desk, chairs and tables. The Rio Vista branch opened in October 1914, in a room off the Post Office Building.

Cordelia also petitioned for a branch library.

The workload quickly proved too much for Miss Dills and the Board of Supervisors appointed Miss Nell Peabody as her assistant, with a low starting salary of \$15 a month.

The demands placed on the librarian and her assistant were tremendous. Schools needed materials, other towns clamored for a branch, books needed to be ordered, unpacked on arrival, cataloged and filed according to subject.

The first books to arrive were on loan from the State Library, which provided this service to all newly founded county libraries.

That autumn, the California Library Association held its district meeting in Solano County. The meeting, which included State Library officials and librarians from throughout California, was hosted at the Suisun Wednesday Club rooms, with club members providing an afternoon tea.

Shortly thereafter, the Board of Supervisors appointed James L. Mills as the farm adviser. He immediately met with Librarian Clara Dills and proposed cooperation. For

the next years, Miss Dills would accompany Mr. Mills on trips throughout the county, giving talks at Farm Center meetings. While this saved the library traveling expenses, it helped bring its message to all areas of the county. Larger places like Vallejo could be reached on the Southern Pacific Line, others like Cement or Vacaville by Electric Rail. Smaller settlements such as Collinsville, Birds Landing or Rio Vista required Mr. Mills' automobile, often necessitating an overnight stay at somebody's home.

November 1914 saw the first county library tax with a rather complicated rate that varied from one cent in town districts to four cents in rural districts.

In January 1915, the county library finally was able to move from the by-now-overflowing temporary quarters into its new room at Armijo High School. Wheelbarrows transported all the books and equipment across the road.

No contract had been negotiated between Armijo High School and the new county library. Although Miss Dills strongly urged the Solano County Board of Supervisors and the school's Board of Trustees, no contract was developed at this point, either.

While the school provided the library room rent-free, it expected to be reimbursed for light supplied by a separate meter. Heat on the other hand was provided by the school, but not on Saturdays, after school hours or during vacation times. Students could use the library at all times, yet the library did not feel that it could supply all the needed reference works or school magazines out of its budget. Each new school principal defined the relationship between school and library anew.

Despite these operational differences, the relationship between school, library and library patrons remained cordial, leading State Superintendent Will C. Wood to suggest that this arrangement was ideal for high school libraries and should be copied elsewhere.

My next column will continue the history of the Solano County Library system. I am grateful to the Solano County Library for permission to use its resources and photographic collection.

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