

Participation authors growth of library system

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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With the opening of the new Solano County Free Library in 1914 and its move to its permanent home in the newly constructed Armijo High School in 1915, a major community-building institution began to establish itself.

Under the expert guidance of Solano County Librarian Miss Clara Dills, who toured the county regularly with farm adviser James L. Mills to meet all residents, the interest of the other communities grew to be included in the countywide library system.

The library in Fairfield served in three different capacities: as the Fairfield library branch, the Armijo High School library, and as the head of all the other branches that were installed throughout the county over the next few years.

The public responded eagerly to the new facility. Opening times were from nine to five, Monday through Friday, roughly equivalent with Armijo High School's heating time. For years, efforts to install an evening schedule for library patrons who worked during the day failed, as the county's Board of Supervisors refused to allot funds for the purchase of extra heating materials.

Private donations further helped to set the library on its path. Residents such as the descendants of Judge Buckles donated complete private libraries after a loved one died. The Noah Adams Lumber Company donated books and paintings, sent from its Oakland plant.

In 1915, public awareness of the importance of local agriculture increased with the Panama Pacific International Exposition taking place in San Francisco. On the suggestion of the Secretary of the County Chamber of Commerce, the library prepared and exhibited a cabinet full of agricultural books in the booth of the Solano County exhibit. In return, exposition visitors learned about the existence of the new county library.

Miss Clara Dills and her staff felt that the exposition had been a successful advertising opportunity. Consequently, the following year they installed another exhibit at the county fair in Dixon. This time, they established a staffed booth in a tent, creating a mini-library stocked with agricultural books, children's books, photographic displays of the schools the library served, and a county map showing the location of the different branches. Fair visitors could talk to staff or take a break by sitting quietly and read.

Learning about the many services the barely two-year old county library system already rendered to the community settled some of the rumblings against the library tax of 1914 about "this here library that was causing such high taxes."

By 1916, branches in Cement and Rio Vista had opened, and the Fairfield headquarters supplied books to the public libraries in Dixon, Vacaville and Vallejo. The Benicia Public Library joined in 1917. Four years later, by 1920, a total of eight branches (Cement, Cordelia, Good Templars, Grizzly Island, Mare Island, Rio Vista, Suisun and South Vallejo) and four affiliations (Benicia Public, Dixon Public, Vacaville Public and Vallejo Public) had been established. In addition, 49 schools received regular library services.

Collinsville opened its branch in 1925. In the late 1920s, small branches were also established at Lock-Padden, Patton on the Highway, Bay Terrace near Vallejo, and at the home of the manager of the Pacific Gas & Electric Substation.

Other programs quickly followed. Story hours proved very popular. Often more than 50 children attended, gathering either in an office or on the lawn in front of the courthouse. The librarian visited schools during the Christmas season. One event even featured an Arabian Nights theme, complete with a storyteller in Oriental costume. Puppet shows also drew large, enthusiastic crowds. Book Week became another popular program, with book displays sent to schools throughout the county each November.

Besides serving the county's children, the library also tried to respond to the needs and interests of adult readers. Agricultural books remained important. During World War I, the number of books, pamphlets and brochures relating to the war increased.

The library participated in the National Military Library Service Commission, raising both money and later books to support the soldiers by providing them reading materials for their entertainment.

The men stationed at Mare Island were in need of specialized literature covering subjects such as higher mathematics and other topics concerning aeroplane and submarine construction. The Solano County Library borrowed the necessary materials from the California State Library. The library also provided books in German to prisoners kept at the Mare Island prison.

A more lighthearted collection was added in 1918 with establishment of a phonograph collection under supervision of Ada Jordan Pray, a musical adviser who had worked with the Victor Phonograph Company.

With these phonographs, librarian Clara Dills entertained school children throughout the

county. The phonographs also were used at dances and other entertainments.

In 1921, the county appointed music teacher Anna Kyle as the rural music supervisor and another lady as the county home demonstration agent. Librarian Miss Dills, Anna Kyle and the county home demonstration agent traveled to the schools, as well as many meetings, providing information, teaching and entertainment to residents throughout the county. This cooperation between the three departments proved very successful, leading the state farm adviser to nickname the trio the "Solano County Triplets."

The County Federation of Women's Clubs sponsored a pageant in Benicia in 1923, celebrating the early pioneer history of Solano County. They selected Clara Dills and Anna Kyle as promoters of this event. The many women's service clubs in the county participated. School children worked on projects exploring the early pioneer history, and Gold Rush pioneers and descendants were invited to participate. From this material, Miss Jean Davis and Dr. Douglas created nine episodes for the pageant. The library provided research materials and organized lectures and displays. The pageant itself was a huge success, with more than 2,000 participants and many more visitors congregating in Benicia to witness this celebration of early local history.

The County Wild Flower Show became another popular annual event. The first show took place in March 1925 under the guidance of Prof. Willis Jepson, the well-known botanist and Vacaville resident. "A Marvelous Flower Show" was the Solano Republican title on April 2, 1925.

"Instigated by Librarian Miss Clara B. Dills and members of the Solano County Free library staff, the first annual California wild flower festival and exhibit was held at the library here on Saturday last and proved the most gorgeous and wonderful display of the kind ever seen in this section of the country, far surpassing in the number of varieties and arrangements that held at Napa ..."

"The flowers, gathered in all parts of the county by the school children, were brought to the library on Friday and were there assembled as to the various kinds and placed in vases. The many varieties were then arranged and classified by Miss Marie Glasshoff of the library staff, who is a student of wild flowers...

"The idea was not so well advertised as the importance of the scheme warranted owing to the lack of time. Miss Anna Kyle, however, carried the message to the various rural schools and brought many fine specimens gathered by the school children. Many grown-ups of this vicinity, getting the idea, contributed many specimens, both of the wild and tame varieties and ferns, some coming from Green Valley."

Flower paintings by well-known artist Mrs. Burbeck added to the instructional aspect. The state library sent a remarkable collection of photographs. In addition, children of the Fairfield Grammar School and Crystal School presented songs and dances around the theme of wildflowers.

Prof. Jepson of the Botanical Department of UC Berkeley, whose publication on Native California Wildflowers remains the standard botanical textbook to this day, gave the afternoon address.

The flower show, initiated by the Solano County Free Library, grew to become a much-anticipated annual event.

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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