

Library grows to bursting, then burns in blaze

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Within a decade of its founding, the Solano County Free Library, under the guidance of Librarian Clara Dills, had become an established institution, valued throughout the county.

By the end of the 1920s, the room that the library occupied in the Armijo High School building was bursting at the seams. In addition, Armijo High needed more space, too. According to Maryalice Maxwell, who joined the library as a library assistant in 1929: "...it was a nice school. The library had fairly good quarters. A big study hall was the reading room. So we had to work around the students."

The continuing strong collaboration between the library, farm adviser, Home Demonstration Agency and Horticultural Commission - all agencies located in rooms too small for their needs - led to a conference where possible expansion plans were discussed. One such idea was the establishment of an annex to the courthouse, which could house all these organizations.

While the Board of Supervisors clearly recognized the need for such an annex, it had committed significant resources to build local memorial halls for all communities with a legion post.

Resourceful as always, Clara Dills and her staff had a San Francisco artist create a model of the annex, complete with electricity and showing visitors inside reading books. They had the model displayed at the state fair in 1928.

She also lobbied for the expansion of clubs and other organizations throughout the area. By 1929, the Board of Supervisors was seriously discussing a possible expansion of the library.

Yet events overtook their slow deliberation. On Sunday afternoon, December 8, 1929, fire broke out in Armijo High School and the Solano County Free Library.

"The fire was discovered at 12:45 Sunday afternoon by Professor J.E. Brownlee and Athletic Director C. Bailey, who had opened the building during the forenoon for members of the Italia Virtus Club of San Francisco who were to go over the course of the Fairfield-Valejo [sic] marathon race, to be run December 22nd," the Solano Republican reported Dec. 12.

"All of the athletes had left the building and Brownlee and Bailey were locking the doors when they detected an odor of smoke.

"They immediately investigated and found the locker room of the building ablaze, with smoke pouring out. ... The alarm was sounded at once and both the Fairfield and Suisun fire departments were summoned.

"Fire Chief Matt Knolty and his firemen were on the scene in exactly 40 seconds from the sounding of the alarm by Buck Bailey, who made the run from the school to the fire house on Texas street [sic] in nothing flat."

Despite the quick response, the firemen were unable to bring the rapidly spreading flames under control. The fire burnt too hot for them to enter the building, and their ladders were too short to reach the upper story. Despite additional help from Vacaville and Napa fire departments, the inside of the building was completely destroyed.

The Fairfield community also rallied to help control the fire, rescuing at least some of the library's books.

Nonetheless, the destruction was devastating. "The days of salvaging that followed are sad ones for rain kept up for several days materially adding to the fire loss," Clara Dills later wrote in a summary of her years as the county librarian. "Jagged walls, charred openings where doors had been, cracked ceilings, sagging book shelves, muddy pools on the remaining floors in which floated valuable reference volumes, met the eye at every turn. Library bureau cabinets balanced at precarious angles or had already toppled over in the muddy water, new books lay in masses of pulp, and everything dripped, dripped, dripped in the softly falling rain."

Damage to Armijo High School was estimated at more than \$200,000. The library loss totaled more than \$150,000, while the insurance carried came to just \$15,000.

"The first thought was one of hopelessness," Dills wrote, "for every attendant realized that years of labor had gone for naught. But, distressing as the sight was, there was little time for contemplation. This calamity which all shared, brought forth action and everyone was put to work to take to safety the volumes that had been rescued.

"The catalog drawers had been lifted out of the windows as had been the branch and shelf list records, badly damaged by water, but found legible when dried later."

The most important task was to find a new home. The American Legion in Suisun offered its building and would house the library for the next couple of years. First though, the damages needed to be recorded. The final tally came to 22,047 books

destroyed and damaged beyond repair. Fortunately, the Glen Falls Insurance Company paid the full \$15,000 insurance, recognizing the fact that the overall loss was so much higher.

While the cause of the fire remained unclear, "the fire, it is stated by authorities, was of incendiary origin," reported the Dec. 26, 1929, editorial in the Solano Republican.

In addition to the fire, a local store was broken into and robbed, following several similar crimes during the previous months. The Solano Republican editorials gave voice to citizen concerns about the mounting crime rates, demanding both the reinstallation of night watchmen and better equipment for the fire department.

"Fairfield had been without a night watchman for several months because the city council desires always to save the taxpayers money, and because the night watchman was needed to take care of the city's trees," the editor wrote Dec. 12.

"Fairfield citizens should request to put a wide-awake night watchman on the job at once, and should also make it clear to the council that as citizens they will be willing to pay the few cents additional tax for the added protection against "firebugs" and other prowlers. The night watchman who prevents one fire a year more than pays his salary.

"The local firemen want a new fire engine - not so much for its ability to throw a large stream of water when the water is available, but principally because the old engine is unreliable, having served way beyond its expected age, and should it fail at ONE fire, the city may lose more than enough to pay for an engine and added apparatus."

It would take until 1931 before the Fairfield Fire Department received its new fire engine and the Solano County Free Library returned to downtown Fairfield.

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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