

## New library for Solano stacked up fairly well

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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After the total destruction of the Solano County Free Library in the fire of Dec. 8, 1929, months of work lay ahead for Librarian Clara Dills and her staff. The American Legion post in Suisun offered its hall as a temporary refuge. Despite the relocation, the library's phone number remained the same: Suisun 103.

"Bringing order out of Chaos," began the Solano Republican in its editorial Jan. 2, 1931, "is the work of the County Free Library, housed today in temporary quarters, with book piles here and there, some half-burned, others water-soaked. It is a heroic task that Miss Clara B. Dills, county librarian, has undertaken, and that she will carry on until order is again established (as) is typical of her. ...

"The public will bear with the County Free Library in it's (sic) great handicap, that is sure. Time will erect a suitable library building in Fairfield, and the county supervisors know well the needs and requirements of such an institution - perhaps the most important point of education in the county."

Other organizations jumped in to help lobby for a new library building. Miss Harriet G. Eddy, State Home Demonstration leader declared, at the annual Farm Home Department meeting in Vacaville, that "The biggest project before the Solano County Farm Home Department for this year is the promotion of a county building," delegating Elmira resident Mrs. Frost to be the designated library reporter for the department.

"Mrs. Frost's pleasing and untiring efforts were very valuable," recalled Librarian Clara Dills later, "for she carried the need of a building and the crowded condition of the temporary library home to clubs all over the county."

On Jan. 16, 1930, the Solano Republican reported that the reconstruction work was progressing satisfactorily, although "It will not be possible to purchase any books for a month, but specially needed volumes will be borrowed, either from the California State Library or from some of the many county libraries of the state. Generous offers from all over the state have come to aid this institution in its dilemma ..."

Despite the cramped new quarters, circulation numbers more than tripled over the next few months, further illustrating the need for a new building.

The initial idea was to build an annex to the courthouse. The Board of Supervisors

received calls from several architects interested in the project and in October 1930, finally settled on the firm of Coffman, Bahlberg and Stafford, who had previously designed several Carnegie libraries. At the time, \$40,000 had been included for the purpose in the 1930-31 county budget.

On June 12, the Solano Republican reported that Clara Dills had resigned her position as county librarian. She had accepted a position as county librarian in San Mateo County, enabling her to live closer to her family.

"Miss Dills has done a wonderful work during her years of untiring effort and has built the library practically from nothing to one of the largest and finest in the state," the Republican said on June 19. "She is loved and admired by the entire community and her departure from the field in which she has so faithfully and conscientiously labored for so many years will be felt with the keenest disappointment."

The first of many farewell receptions for her took place that evening at the Wednesday Club in Suisun, where more than 125 guests celebrated Miss Dills and her many achievements.

On July 10, 1930, the Board of Supervisors appointed Miss Edith Gantt as the new county librarian. Miss Gantt previously had served as county librarian of Plumas and Sierra county. She then was appointed to the State Library in Sacramento as an instructor, where she also served as assistant to Mrs. Henshall, State Library Organizer.

Miss Gantt's experience allowed her to familiarize herself quickly with the ongoing efforts to construct a new library building. That expertise was definitely necessary at that point, judging by the annual report covering the years 1930 and 1931:

"The new building was an assured thing when Miss Dills left Solano Co. ... ," the report said. "The plans were not decided upon nor the architects, though it developed later that three of the board had decided upon W. E. (William Elmer) Coffman of Sacramento.

"The supervisors had a quite terrible floor plan of many rooms, drawn by this architect, a Carnegie type building at it's (sic) worst. The first thing necessary was a coherent floor plan from the point of view of the library for the building in which the library work could be carried on efficiently and economically. An el (L) shaped building seemed the best for this since a Fairfield branch must be included in the plan so this was worked out with the help of the State Library. The Branch room was planned large enough to hold the present stock of general books so that the room would be available for county use as well as local use.

"The supervisors were so relieved to have someone know definitely what they wanted that they turned the architects over to the librarian and told them that she must be satisfied with the plan before they would consider it."

The report continued, saying that the different architects each contributed ideas, such as dropping back a wing to form a courtyard at the entrance. "... some of the ideas were very peculiar, particularly that of one architect who insisted that the shipping room should be in the very heart of the building ... Mr. Coffman took our floor plan without complaint, at least, and clothed it beautifully. ... The style of the building is Spanish and this goes back to Miss Dills who felt that this style would fit in best with the Court House and the High School; the idea of the el (L) shaped building was also hers. ... The architects last year had 'gone Mediterranean or Italian Renaissance' and one told me that no one was 'doing Spanish' now. However when Mr. Coffman was asked if he 'could' design a Spanish building he produced drawings which were liked very much."

Throughout 1931, the Solano Republican chronicled the process of building the new library. While the County Library, the Fairfield Branch and the offices of the librarians would occupy the first floor, the second floor was designated to house the Office of the Horticultural Commissioner, the Farm Adviser, and the Home Demonstration Agent. These three agencies had collaborated with the County Free Library since its inception and had worked hard to help create the new library building.

Finally, on Oct. 5, 1931, dedication of the new library took place. Hundreds of Solano residents attended the ceremony, as well as dignitaries from throughout California.

Sen. Thomas McCormack officially dedicated the building, assisted by the Board of Supervisors, State Librarian Miss Mabel Gillis and Miss Clara Dills.

The Dixon Tribune, on Oct. 9, 1931, summed up what the new building represented, both for Fairfield and for the Solano County Government Center: "This county building is unsurpassed in appearance and equipment by any other county library building in northern California, and with the imposing court house and the new Armijo high school, completes a mighty fine civic center."

In a 1988 interview with local historian Clyde Lowe, Maryalice Howe Maxwell, who had worked as a librarian under Miss Gantt, added: "It was a very beautiful building, and it was outstanding for that time. That site was on the county government ground, that Capt. Waterman had donated ... and that was the first building of the kind built specifically for county library services and for agricultural services."

Yet, despite all the praise, some things were not quite satisfactory, according to the 1930-31 library report: "However any detail which we overlooked (in the planning) like

the cooler in the kitchen, never materialized as well as the lights between the stacks which we mentioned and explained in detail more than once. Theses stack lights are still to be added. The rain comes through the walls in places suggesting shoddy cement work but on the whole the library is very satisfactory, attractive and workable.”

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. At its June 22 session, the Board of Supervisors will discuss whether to move the historic library building. The Solano County Historical Society and other organizations are circulating a petition urging the supervisors not to move the library. If you'd like to add your signature, please send it along with your name and address to SCH, P.O. Box 3009, Fairfield, 94533-0309, together with ” I petition the Solano County Board of Supervisors to preserve, protect, and restore the Old Library, a Historical Landmark, at its original site at 601 Texas Street in the City of Fairfield.”

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