

## Chief Solanos statue didnt move easily

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

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This column finishes the story of the Solano County Library. Jerry Bowen will resume his column next week. - Editor The Solano County Free Library building on the corner of Union and Texas streets was designed by architect William E. Coffman in 1930 and built in 1931. In 1932, Joseph Nolan, owner of the Oakland Tribune, sponsored a statewide competition. William Gordon Huff, the well-known sculptor, won with his 12-foot bronze statue of Chief Solano.

The statue originally was installed with much fanfare on a hill near Rockville - at a location that is today along Interstate 80 west behind the truck weigh stations - in the summer of 1934. Unfortunately, vandals soon began to damage the statue, and government officials decided that it needed to be relocated.

A few years later, architect William E. Coffman's name was connected to the library one more time.

In a recent letter, his son, William Merrill Coffman, remembered:

"As a young boy traveling with my father, he told me the story of Chief Solano and how he loved the great statue. After his untimely death due to an automobile accident in December 1937, my mother was informed that the statue would be placed at his building in his honor."

Relocating the statue did not prove so easy. Different locations were discussed and finally, a model was created to envision how the statue would look. The Solano Republican devoted a tongue-in-cheek article to the debate on

April 28, 1938, titled "Where Do You Wish The Chief To Pose?"

"Every citizen interested in the last standing ground of Chief Solano is requested to appear at the courthouse grounds next Monday afternoon, and make their wishes known, if any they have, to the county's 'location' committee, headed by Sen. Thomas McCormack and supported by County Clerk Halliday, County Supervisor F. A. Steiger and Supervisorial Chairman J. B. Danielson. The life-sized model of the chief, made by the Armijo shop crew, will be 'spotted' here and there on the courthouse grounds and on the library grounds to determine where the real statue can be placed, or where he will 'fit' into the picture best.

“Some say the Chief would do well in front of the courthouse, but his southern exposure is not altogether inspiring - and all are agreed that to place the 12-foot giant on the library grounds near Texas Street or Union Avenue would simply ruin the beauty of the library. So-o-o, come Monday and tell the committee where you want the monument - and they will locate him where they please anyway.”

And the Republican was proved correct - the final installation took place according to the wishes of the location committee, despite opposition voiced by citizens who thought that this location would impact the beauty of the library.

The World War II years brought its own set of problems to the library system. On the one hand, materials and supplies became severely limited, forcing the librarians to make do with what they had at hand to offer services to their patrons.

On the other hand, librarians had to deal with the same restrictions encountered by all residents of the county. Marialice Maxwell, then the school department librarian, remembered what it felt like:

“We had to blacken the windows when we had night sessions, which meant keeping all the window shades closed. In those times we were working nights. My duties also included night work.

“I remember having to walk from Fairfield down to Suisun, where I lived at the Arlington Hotel for a number of years. It burned down after I moved out. So I had to walk in the night without any streetlight of any kind after nine o'clock. It was fairly safe, but we were always a little bit uneasy walking at night by ourselves. If anybody else was going that direction, why, we used to join forces and walk together.”

In addition to low supplies and other restrictions, the library system suffered through a leadership crisis throughout the 1940s.

After eight years at the helm of the Free Library, county librarian Edith Gantt resigned her position in 1937 to take up a new job in Washington, D.C. She was followed by Dorothy Wents of Orange County, who served as County Librarian until 1940, at which time she resigned to get married.

Frederick Wemmer took over after Wents. His tenure, too, was short. With the United States entering into the war, he enlisted in the Armed Services in 1942, moving to Alaska to serve as librarian on an Army Post.

The Board of Supervisors appointed librarian Helen Luce to take over Wemmer's position as a temporary measure. She served as county librarian from June 1942 until

August 1945, followed by Esther Mardom, who filled the post until July 1946.

At that point, Wemmer returned from his post in Alaska to take up again the reigns of the library system, but decided to leave for another job in Sacramento County in March 1947. His successor, Miss Dorland March, lasted from March 1947 to April 1948, when she accepted a position in Plumas County. According to Marialice Maxwell's recollections: "She was the nervous one that didn't stay." She was succeeded by Elsie D. Holland who served until November 1949, followed by Mr. J. A. Ramsey, then administrative assistant for the Stockton Public Library and San Joaquin County.

The library system began to expand rapidly throughout the 1950s, in part due to the rapidly increasing number of books that were now available in print.

Mrs. Maxwell recalled other changes that happened to the library system: "During the fifties ... there was a general movement throughout the state for the schools to set up their own libraries. And the school service department gradually became the teacher's professional library. ... By '62 we had even turned over all of our supply of books and maps and globes. ... But I still acted as an adviser and assistant to the teachers. ... helped them get the libraries set up, and showed them how to choose books and all that."

In 1962 librarian Marialice Maxwell was appointed as county librarian, serving and expanding the library until her retirement in 1971.

In June 1963, she received the honorary life membership award in the California Congress of Parents and Teachers for her service to the Solano County Free Library system.

In 1964, the County Library celebrated its 50th anniversary with an elaborate series of receptions. Fairfield started the celebration on

Aug. 24. Vacaville followed on Aug. 28, 1964.

By the late 1960s, the Fairfield library was outgrowing its quarters. Services moved to a different location, and the library building at 601 Texas Street was converted into a reference center.

Josephine Becker was appointed County Librarian in 1971 after Marialice Maxwell retired. Under Becker's guidance, the new library complex on Kentucky Street was built and dedicated in 1976.

The "old" library was converted into county office space and recently has housed the

construction company for the new government center. With the unanimous vote this week of the Board of Supervisors to incorporate the “old” library into the new plaza design, the future looks hopeful for this building to once again become a center for Fairfield and Solano County residents.

I am grateful to the Solano County Library for permission to use its resources and photographic collection.

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