

# Temperance, taxes part of librarys past

By Jerry Bowen

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During several of the Solano County Historical Society meetings to save the old Fairfield Library building, some of those in attendance from Vallejo expressed continuing anger over the razing of the Vallejo Carnegie Library building.

Since I haven't done very many articles on Vallejo, I decided to do an article on the history of the Vallejo library system.

I found it very interesting to find that 15 residents organized the first library in the old Vallejo State Capitol building in Vallejo in 1856. The library had only 75 members out of a population of 2,550 Vallejo residents. Included in the library were about 500 books and newspapers from several countries. Unfortunately, everything was lost in 1859 when a fire destroyed the historic building that was located on a hill in the middle of the block bounded by York, Sacramento, Maine and Santa Clara streets. Even the hill no longer exists since having been removed for development.

The next organization to take up the banner for a library was none other than a Temperance Union known as the Dashaway Club. It opened to the public a non-alcoholic environment reading room on Sept. 25. 1869. It was located in Aspenall's Hall on the northeast corner of Virginia and Santa Clara streets.

In an effort to recruit members, the organization was opened even to members who brewed and sold alcoholic beverages. One must assume that its beliefs tended toward restraint instead of prohibition; and its membership quickly grew to 450.

Another temperance union known as the Temperance Legion also opened a reading room and library on Virginia Street near Sacramento Street.

Although both libraries were open free to the public, they lasted only a few years before closing down. In the 1870s, Vallejo was divided by a swampy area and was known as Vallejo and South Vallejo. In 1875, a group organized a library association in the rear of a railroad engine house in South Vallejo. The president of the association was Harry Barnes; the secretary, John B. Frisbie; and the treasurer, H.S. Lazelle

Then on May 9, 1883, a branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was organized in Vallejo. At a meeting on May 23, the members discussed the idea to create a library and adopted it as a worthy project. They followed up with a request to

the Vallejo Evening Chronicle for a donation of rooms in its building on Georgia Street for the library.

Owner E. J. Wilson offered two rooms rent free for six months. The ladies of the WCTU went to work. They furnished the rooms, provided books and were open for business in less than a month. The Vallejo City Board of Trustees then set aside \$577, that wasn't allocated for anything in the city treasury, for a library fund. This could be considered as the true beginning of the present public library system in Vallejo.

During a meeting Sept. 4, 1883, the WCTU drafted a proposition to be presented at the next meeting of the city trustees: "If the board will purchase books with the library fund and properly mark them and place them in the WCTU library, we will take care of them for one year at our own expense. We will keep a proper librarian in charge and be responsible for their return in one year."

The proposition was immediately denounced as "illegal, improper and undesirable." Trustees Powell, Skinner, and Widenmann were directed to meet with the WCTU ladies and report back. On Nov. 7, the city directed the same trustees to purchase books with the library fund, but gave no instructions on what to do with them.

During the next few months, scant library attendance and library expenses gradually drained the WCTU treasury. To cut down on expenses, the WCTU decided to keep the library open in the evenings only and the librarian position was abolished. In order to raise more money, the WCTU offered subscriptions and decided to open a coffee shop. Rooms in the Good Templars Hall on Sacramento Street were obtained and in February 1884 the library moved into the new location where lunch and coffee were served at a price averaging five cents for each item. Meanwhile the trustees had relented and books purchased by the city were in the new WCTU reading room, but could not be checked out.

In February 1884, the first board of library trustees was elected and the WCTU immediately requested that the city-owned books be left in their care.

On May 6 the library trustees agreed to a proposition presented by the WCTU subject to the following:

“Ã,Â¢ That the WCTU shall accept such regulations as are consistent with the law of California governing social library associations.

“Ã,Â¢ That the WCTU shall pay all expenses incurred by the board of library trustees for the purpose of placing and keeping the books in circulation, it being understood that the board shall not fix the salary of the librarian without consulting the WCTU.

“Ã,Â¢ That they accept the rules and regulations for the governing of the library herein appended.

“Ã,Â¢ That the board of trustees reserves the privilege of revoking this permit at any time.

The WCTU replied that it could not accept the conditions.

A report on Feb. 10, 1885, by the WCTU stated that the library books had been in circulation for about seven months and during that time about 4,500 books had been checked out from the library. In the same report the ladies of the WCTU asked the board to allow them \$20 per month toward support of the library.

Taxes had already been raised, so the Library Trustees Board took possession of the books and placed them in circulation in rented rooms in the Bernard house. In April 1887, the WCTU requested that the library board purchase the books remaining in its possession. The board declined to purchase those books and instead purchased more than \$400 worth of new books.

In May 1891 the library was moved into the Times Building on Georgia Street and by 1893 more than 15,000 visitors were recorded. By 1902 an additional room was added to the library in the Vallejo Times Building, but it soon became apparent the location was totally inadequate to serve Vallejo. The Board of Library Trustees decided to solicit a building from Andrew Carnegie. At the end of the year Andrew Carnegie agreed to give the city \$20,000 for a new building if the city agreed to spend \$2,000 annually for the maintenance of it and furnish a site.

On Jan. 7, 1903, the city trustees accepted Mr. Carnegie's offer with a unanimous vote and designated city-owned property at the northwest corner of Virginia and Sacramento streets for the building.

The cornerstone for the Carnegie Library was laid on Dec. 3, 1903, containing photographs, newspapers, coins and documents. The building was dedicated on July 4, 1904, but didn't open to the public until March 1905. In 1932 an addition was added to the building to provide a children's room and a mezzanine.

After World War II it was apparent that the Carnegie Library was too small to serve Vallejo. A study in 1959 to evaluate the library's needs revealed it was inadequate to serve the community. In 1962 preliminary plans were drawn for a new library. Two library bond issues were submitted and defeated. After these defeats, State Sen. Luther Gibson obtained a federal grant of \$900,000 to have a new library constructed by the Vallejo Redevelopment Agency.

The City Council added a three-cent per pack cigarette tax to pay for the bonds. The new library was named in honor of John F. Kennedy and the cost went \$2,300,000 above the \$900,000 grant. Groundbreaking ceremonies for the 90,000-square-foot building were held in 1968 and the cornerstone laid in November 1969. The library first opened to the public on Sept. 10, 1970, and was dedicated Oct. 3, 1970. In July 1974 the Vallejo Public Library became a part of the Solano County Library system. Much to the consternation of many citizens, another unique historical building was lost forever when the old Carnegie Library building was razed in October 1970 to make way for the new library. As for the cornerstone, all was lost except the coins.

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