

## **‘Esther Days’ Will Long Be Remembered**

**By John Rico**

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BOOK LEARNIN' — Vacaville residents cannot say they have been deprived of access to book learning throughout our past history. Events will prove that as far back as 1858 there were attempts made to provide a library service to the few people who resided here. The Women's Christian Temperance Union also had a part in seeking to provide such facilities here.

But it was not until 1910, that the 200-member local Saturday Club, headed by Mrs. F. A. Steiger, correlated a heretofore slipshod library set-up, and provided the small community with a 400-book facility in a building at the corner of Main and Dobbins Streets.

Multi-millionaire steel tycoon, Andrew Carnegie, who had so much money he did not know how to dispense with it, had started a program to provide library buildings in many cities across the nation. Back in 1905, an energetic group of Vacavillians sought only a few thousands from the Carnegie source as the means to provide a suitable building here.

Despite continuing efforts to secure a Carnegie grant, it was not until 1914 that word came through making available the sum of \$12,500 which was to be used in the construction of a Vacaville building.

In 1912, state legislation permitted, with approval of local area voters, a tax on real estate to maintain and operate library facilities. This was permissible through a high school library district. Vacaville voters approved such a plan.

The routine debate continued for some time as to just where the Carnegie building was to be situated in Vacaville, and as was the practice and there being only one Main Street, it was proposed it be located somewhere along that street.

Tom Wilson had a piece of property on the corner of Main and Parker Streets, on which he had put a price of \$40 a front foot for the 75 feet. A group of downtown Vacaville businessmen put their signatures on a \$3000 note, and a library site was assured.

When the building went out to bid, George Sharpe, a well known local builder, submitted a figure of \$11,815, promising to use artificial stone (concrete) and to install granite steps. The job was his and in less than six months the two-story fortress-like

structure was completed, and opened to the public on July 17, 1915.

For the next 55 years, thousands of Vacaville residents had access to the books made available there. But as Vacaville continued its population growth, that unique building became too cramped. A \$335,000 bond issue was approved here in June 1968, and the present library facility on Merchant Street opened its doors in October 1970.

The Main Street library building was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Tomas Garcia of Vacaville, who have used it for mini-shops and a restaurant. Because of its sturdy construction, that Carnegie Public Library building at the corner of Main and Parker will live on infinitum. It could be called a monument to builder George Sharpe.

One of the four librarians who served at that Carnegie Library in the 55-year span is Esther Eldredge, daughter of the man who constructed the building. She was the librarian from 1945 to 1966. Esther Eldredge continues to reside in Vacaville, being a native, and a graduate of Vaca High with the class of 1909.

During the "Esther Days" at the local library, many of us who knew this charming personality, will vouch that conditions were a bit more hectic than one would expect to find among the solitude of the present-day libraries.

Being a local native, schooled here through Vaca High, and married to a rancher (her husband Guy, died in 1933), Esther Eldredge was in a position to know most of the inhabitants of this rural community by their first names. She could spill yarns about fruit with Mike Caligiuri; gave me (John Rico) a constant belittling for not publishing her Library Notes the way she wrote them; chatted with the Buck Avenue ladies about their card games; chided with city officials; and spared no bit of her vast vocabulary in making her views known. She was inebriated with compassion, and although she was being paid to dole out books, her prime concern was about the health of her many visitors to the library.

Unfortunately, should the name of Esther Eldredge be a topic of conversation for Vacaville's 40,000 residents today, the answer would be "Esther, Who?" Yes, Esther Who will long be remembered by many of us, and although she has never made known her exact age, we can well guess fairly close because she graduated from Vaca High in 1909. That's 70 years ago.

Referring to the present Carnegie Library Building, one wonders just what such a structure would cost today to erect. We know that Esther's father constructed that building on a bid of \$11,815. The workmanship, both inside and out, are flawless, there's granite steps and massive columns; two fireplaces.

Ironically, right across the street, with a For Lease sign in the door, is the former Vacaville Postoffice building, constructed in 1938 at a cost of \$67,760; with full basement; the building made of reinforced concrete.

That postoffice building was vacated in 1967, and in recent years has been home for Jake's Liquors. The massive Carnegie Library and the old postoffice are a guarantee that these bastions will be the anchor which will always insure a Main Street for Vacaville.

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