

Library Was County's First

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FROM THE

BEAVER FALLS AREA CENTENNIAL

HISTORICAL SALUTE TO THE CENTURIES 1868-1968

Carnegie Library of Beaver Falls has the distinction of being the first public library in Beaver County. To most people, the history of the Carnegie Free Library begins when the doors to the present building were opened to the public in 1903. But the roots of this library reach back to a much earlier day when a group of prominent and civic minded men gathered to form a library association for the purpose of establishing a public circulating library.

This occurred in the autumn of 1883. A year later, a plan to give a series of public lectures was suggested to a limited group of citizens meeting in the reading room of the engine house. It was decided to present six lectures in conjunction with the students of Geneva College. The profits were to be shared with Geneva, the manager of the Opera House, and the Library Association. The association's share was \$60.86.

Quoting from a lecture given by M. L. Knight, superintendent of schools, we read: "With \$60.86 in the treasury, visions of a magnificent, brownstone, four-story building rose before our eyes in the misty future."

Three results emerged from this effort. First the definite organization of what was to be known as the People's Library Association with Julius F. Kurtz as the president. Second, the decision to maintain an annual lecture course which continued to flourish long after the present building was erected. Third, the establishment of a circulating library. This library, with a nucleus of 100 books, was opened Dec. 31, 1884, in Will Mitchell's grocery store, located on the corner of 13th Street and Seventh Avenue where the S&H Green Stamp center is located. The fee charged was \$1 for two years, representing one cent a week.

The wish of the association was to open the 1885-86 lecture course with Andrew Carnegie as speaker. Carnegie declined because of a business engagement. However, he sent a check for \$100 with the intimation to call again.

THE EXPOSITION

Money accumulated very slowly. Donations of books and money were received but by the first of 1887, there still was only \$258.72 in the treasury. Because of this, an industrial display was planned. Beaver Falls had many varied industries. This exposition was held in

the Sixth Avenue Theater, the center of all cultural activities at the time. The affair was under the direction of Dr. H.C. Watson, a prominent citizen and a man with many interests but chief among them was the establishment of a free public library.

It is interesting to note the variety of industries displayed. Among the firms exhibiting were Hartman Steel Co.; Co-operative Flint Glass Co.; Hubbard Co. (with its display of chopping axes and cotton hoes); Beaver Falls Great Western Tile Co.; H. M. Myers Shovel Co.; Mayer Bros. Fine China Co.; Knott Harker Co., manufacturers of grates, marble and slate mantels; Art Tile and Decorative Tile Co.; Howard Stove Co.; Beaver Falls Steel Co.; Beaver Falls Glass; and Emerson Saw Co.

The exposition opened with a selection by the Merchant's Band, followed by an inspiring address by the superintendent of schools, M. L. Knight. In his talk he stated, "It is the desire of the association to present to the public a class of literature attractive to all classes of people."

After all the expenses had been paid, \$700 was added to the treasury.

In January 1899, a committee composed of W. H. Morrison, J. F. Merriman, H. W. Reeves and F. F. Brierly was appointed to contact Andrew Carnegie, asking for a donation with which to build a library. Considerable correspondence ensued. Finally a letter was received in which Carnegie offered a gift of \$50,000 for the purpose of erecting a building suitable for a library.

The Daily Tribune of Sept. 13, 1899, the day the letter was received, carried the following headline and report: "Beaver Falls is to Get a Library."

"Beaver Falls is to have a public library. Andrew Carnegie, the iron king, has again shown his philanthropy. At noon today, William Morrison Esq. received a letter from Andrew Carnegie at Skibo Castle and dated Sept. 4, 1899, stating that he would give \$50,000 for a library for Beaver Falls providing the people of the town would furnish the site and maintain the library."

Of course, the offer was accepted. The committee immediately started to search for a plot upon which to locate the library. John T. Reeves offered a lot back of the old post office, where the present News-Tribune building stands, but this plot was too small for the building they planned to erect. At last, the committee decided upon the present site at the corner of 13th Street and Seventh Avenue, where, at that time, Adolph Yokel's shoe shop was located. This shop was moved to 2411 Seventh Ave.

The association had \$1500 in the treasury. This was augmented through solicitations and donations.

Then, when plans and blueprints were prepared, it was found that more ground was needed in order to provide adequate lighting on the north side. Thirty more feet were added to the original lot but the association still lacked \$355 of the needed amount and John Reeves made up the deficit. Thus, the purchase was closed with the property owners, Cynthia and Sarah Reeves. The total purchase price was \$14,000. The additional 30 feet made it possible to place the building 24 feet from 13th Street and 10 feet farther north than was planned.

MAINTENANCE A MUST

The next step was to arrange for maintenance of the building. Borough council was approached but did not wish to be obligated. The committee next visited the school board. After several meetings with the board and much correspondence between Andrew Carnegie and the school board, an agreement was reached. Carnegie was not willing to give the money until he was assured the library would be adequately maintained.

It was not until Nov. 13, 1900, that Carnegie wrote the agreement with the school board was satisfactory. The board agreed to maintain the building and provide appropriations for books and salaries, provided it was represented on the library board. The president of the school board and the superintendent of schools always have been members of the library board. The school board explained its reasons for assuming responsibility with these words. "The placing of a free public library in Beaver Falls would be a public benefit and of great advantage to the educational interests of the Borough of Beaver Falls." The library first was opened for inspection in June 1903; the reading and reference rooms were opened on Sept. 21, and on Dec. 17 that year the first books were circulated. To appreciate the growth of the library, and to realize its need for expansion, compare the statistics of various periods. In 1884, the circulating library had 100 books; in 1904, the Carnegie Library had 2,872 books; and today, the total book content is 36,306.

The circulation for the 1904 year was 11,978, and the daily average was 94. Today the annual circulation is up to 108,960 with a daily average of 358.

In the early days, 62 magazines were available to the public in the reading room; today, there are over 100. The newspapers have not varied much. Six papers were taken in 1904 as compared to eight today.

Through the 62 years of the library's existence, only five people have served as head librarians. Miss Miriam Morse was the first librarian. Miss Hazel Clifton, now Mrs. J. D. P. Kennedy, served from 1905 until 1917; Miss Elsie Rayle from 1917 until 1956; and Miss Fern Medley, who resigned in June 1966 because of ill health. Abdul Aziz Khan, of Pakistan, became head librarian March 1, 1967. In both World Wars the librarian, Miss Clifton and

Miss Rayle, did outstanding work collecting, packaging and sending books to the boys in camp.

THE BOARD MEETS

The first official Carnegie Library Board held office in 1903-04 and included the following members: A. J. Jolly, George W. Altsman, G. Fred Siemon, Dr. James S. Lou- than, Edward L. Hutchinson, John A. Snyder, Joseph D. Strock, who was president of the school board, Edward Maguire, the superintendent of schools, and Charles F. Bond, school district treasurer.

It is interesting to note that in the days of the library association only men were members. This also was true of the library board, until 1937, when the first woman was elected as a trustee. Today, there are three women as members.

Many changes have been made as time has passed. There was a period when patrons were permitted to take out only one or two books at a time. Since the book stock has been augmented from year to year, these restrictions have been removed. Constantly new books and more books were purchased. This meant more space was needed. Everything possible was done to get more shelving for books and materials.

The library building, in addition to housing books and magazines, has also served many and varied purposes. The entire second floor rooms were used for all the eighth-grade pupils of the public schools during the years

1916 to 1930 or '31.

Again, after a fire in the Eighth Avenue building, these rooms were used for school purposes.

Today, all rooms on the second floor, except two, are maintained and occupied as administrative offices for the school district. One of the two remaining rooms has been turned over to the recreation board; the second, to Beaver Falls Historical Society.

The basement on the 13th Street side for years never served any special purpose. Now a public comfort station has been established and maintained by Beaver Falls. The large room on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 13th Street has been given to the Senior Citizens and is under direction of the recreation board.

The two rooms on the north side of the basement have been used for years as storage rooms for books, magazines and newspapers. Both rooms were filled. It was on the first floor that the crowded conditions were most apparent.

GROWING PAINS

Where once a small number of patrons used the reference room, during the last few years many times there were over 100 seeking material. It became necessary to use the reading room and even that was not adequate, and chairs had to be placed in the lobby.

Appreciating the great need for expansion, the board of trustees sought a solution to the problem. Someone presented a plan for a new building to be built on 11th Street and Sixth Avenue. The trustees dismissed this as impractical. Already, they had considered that the logical space to be used would be the auditorium. For many years, this had been the cultural center of Beaver Falls and was a source of income for the library but, after the erection of the present high school building with its modern auditorium, the one at the library became a liability to maintain rather than an asset.

The opportunity arose to rent the auditorium to the Pennsylvania Bureau of Employment Security as offices at a profitable figure, providing it could be converted to suit their needs. This was considered carefully by the trustees and changes planned were such as would be necessary in remodeling for library use as well as fulfilling the requirements of the bureau. For instance, the floor which sloped from the rear of the room to the stage was raised to be on a level with the floor of the library.

The expenses incurred were paid for through the rental and a substantial sum remained to help with the present improvements. The auditorium was rented with the understanding that if the board was able to remodel, the Bureau of Employment would vacate after sufficient notice.

The changes needed were planned over a long period of time.

Welcome aid came in June 1962 when the state granted money to improve library services. This grant was to be used for books, salaries and equipment. Trustees had accumulated money to be used for remodeling. It meant a great deal when it was found that, through a federal grant under the Library Service and Construction Act, the library might receive 49 per cent of the amount needed if they could supply 51 per cent. There wasn't sufficient money to cover the 51 per cent. The school board arranged to loan the money needed to meet the deficit, as the library did not have borrowing power. This the trustees will return, paying so much annually. Frank J. Dickerson was named as architect. The remodeling has been completed.

The present library is a blending of the old and the new, with its wealth of material of past years, together with the best of the latest fiction and non-fiction.

There is a much-used microfilm reader, with record copies of The News-Tribune since 1941. These are furnished monthly through the courtesy of The News-Tribune. Copies of the newspaper are on file, beginning with September 1903.

There is a Califone record player with earphones.

Hobby shows are arranged and changed frequently.

The library family, as well as the public, has been saddened by the passing of Miss Medley, whose warm welcoming smile made many friends for the library. The public reading room. has been furnished and decorated as a memorial to Miss Medley, a painting of whom hangs over the fireplace. The money provided to establish this memorial came from the school children of Beaver Falls and other friends.

Because of the increased capacity, secured by remodeling the library, an enlarged staff became necessary. At present the library staff consists of six full-time and four part-time members. Khan and Keith Gordon, reference librarian, graduated in library science; Gordon, having majored in reference work. Of the four full-time assistants, Mrs. W. G. Thomas and Miss Mary Doney have been valued members of the staff for many years. The expense of this increase is being met through grants recently received from federal and state governments. They are given to libraries whose qualifications meet certain standards and requirements. The federal government has granted the library \$50,000 a year for two years. Of the sum, \$7,000 a year is to be used to pay the salary of the reference librarian, and the remainder to purchase reference books. The state grant amounts to \$4,753, of which \$3,000 is to be used to pay the salary of an assistant librarian and the remaining \$1,753 is to be used for the purchase of books and library material.

At the present time the board of trustees of the library consists of the following: Harry W. Gubits, president; Mrs. Preston W. Cleckley, Claire G. Donnelly, Dr. Richard Fruth, Harry Fry, Mrs. Wm. J. Jones, Frank Matsukas, Mrs. Claude W. Pennell, and Dr. William H. Russell.