

HISTORY OF CARNEGIE LIBRARY, BRYAN, TEXAS
December 1903 -

by Hazel Adams Richardson*
c. 1969

From the beginning of the settlement of Bryan, its citizens, many of them cultivated people, were interested in making the town one of culture and, as it came to be known, the "city of schools and churches." There were few forms of amusement; there was plenty of leisure time. There was little reading material. The books the early settlers had were passed around from house to house but were soon read by all.

Sometime before the turn of the century the need and desire for books became so great that a rental library was opened in the rear of the James and Fountain drugstore, operated by Meredith James and E. J. Fountain, and on the corner of what is now 25th and Main Street. That this library did not really satisfy the need for books for everyone was soon apparent.

Nothing could bear more eloquent testimony to the fact that certain of the citizens were intent on doing everything possible to civilize the town, improve their own minds, and those of the community, than the organization in 1895 of a club of women. The club, which had twenty-five charter members, was called "The Mutual Improvement Club." These ladies had definite projects: to get the horses, wagons and cows off of Main Street, to make the town beautiful with the planting of trees, to make a city park, and to get a free public library.

Two members of the Mutual Improvement Club (which was to become the Woman's Club in 1909) set the sequence of events in motion which resulted in the building of the Library. They were Mrs. Rose Fountain Howell and Mrs. George M. Brandon. In 1902 the time and circumstances were on their side for the successful realization of a public library free to all. Andrew Carnegie was dispersing sums of money to towns throughout the United States for the building of libraries.

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On July 17, 1902 the Eagle reported that a letter had been received from the office of Andrew Carnegie instructing the council to elect a board of managers for the Carnegie Library to be composed of five men and four ladies. Those appointed were: Mrs. M. W. Sims, Mrs. W. S. Howell, Major L. L. McInnis, Dr. Paul M. Raysor, F. M. Law, Jr., Miss Lillie Wilson, Mrs. G. M. Brandon, Professor J. H. Allen, and W. E. Saunders.

The council was further instructed to notify the board of directors to hold their first meeting next Monday afternoon at 4:00 o'clock to organize and elect officers and frame their rules and regulations subject to the approval of the Council.

A part of the property known as the city park was donated and set apart as the site for the building; "The same to commence at a point opposite the South line of Block 256; thence north with the East line of said city park; thence West to be of sufficient length to give ample room for such building."

The contract for the library building was let to Howell Lumber Company. The contractor was H. T. Lewis and the Architect, F. E. Giesecke.

Mayor of the city at the time was Dr. R. H. Harrison. Aldermen were W. S. Howell, W. R. Johnston, D. B. Knot, T. A. Searcy, and J. E. Stevenson.

On March 19, 1902 the Bryan Daily Eagle reported that the Carnegie Library Board, meeting the day before, planned the exercises of the laying of the cornerstone during the first week in April. "The cornerstone will be laid according to the rites of Masonry, with General Stoddard as master of ceremonies. Governor Lanham will be invited to be present and deliver the address. All civic societies, lodges and clubs will be invited to participate.

A search of the Eagle files for the rest of the year fails to note the laying of the cornerstone.

On December 17, 1903, in the Bryan Eagle, there is a long and eloquent article by F.M. Law, Jr., a member of the Library Board marking the opening of the Library. He says, "This library, just opened, if maintained and managed along wise and broad lines in the years to come will make a

deep impression upon the homes and lives of this generation and future generations.”

The original collection of books seemed as fabulous a treasure to the citizens as did the beautiful building. Mr. Law notes in his article on the opening of the building, that the main shipment of new books had arrived and were installed in the library on December 14 and that a further impetus to the collection had been given by Mesdames Rose Fountain Howell and M.W. Sims, members of the Mutual Improvement Club and of the first Library Board, who had sent appeals to every former resident of Bryan for books and money. The response was very generous. They collected \$1500. The friends of Mrs. Allen Sanford contributed \$350 for a memorial to her and a collection of books was donated as a memorial to Mrs. J.J. Adams, one of the Charter members of the club. In 1899 and 1900, Mrs. Rose Fountain Howell, the President of the Club, had started a circulating library. Every member purchased a book each year. These books were circulated among the members and later given to the Carnegie Library.

Miss Malcolm McInnis, daughter of Major L.L. McInnis, a member of the first Library Board, recalls that the books collected and bought were at their house before they went to the library. She also remembers that the collection got a great boost in this way: Major and Mrs. McInnis gave a reception at their home to which everyone in Bryan was invited. Requirement for admission was one book. Various accounts state that the number of books in the beginning collection was something like a thousand.

During its 65 years history this grand old building has been what those men and women who were responsible for building it wanted it to be, the center of the cultural and civic activities of the community. The Woman's Club (Mutual Improvement Club), sponsors of the Library building, met in the Library auditorium on the second floor for many years. March 2nd of each year was designated as Library Day and a silver tea was given for the benefit of the Library. Often as much as \$150 was raised and given to the Library for the purchase of books. The Woman's Club paid for the planning and re-landscaping of the grounds of the Library.

Other clubs, cultural and civic groups met here through the years. Churches temporarily out of a home held services in the building. During two World Wars the Red Cross met here and rolled bandages.

In 1944 Mrs. Lee J. Rountree, who was President of the Library Board for 17 years, established the Children's Educational Foundation. She built up a fund by soliciting gifts to establish memorials for leading and pioneer citizens of the town. With the money realized from her solicitations, which included contributions from \$1 to \$500 and from people all over the world, she made possible the conversion of the second floor which had been used as an auditorium and meeting place into the Rountree Room for Children. The completely and appropriately furnished Children's Room with a wonderful collection of new books was opened on April 19, 1953. This was the 50th anniversary of public library service in Bryan. Mrs. Velora Hanna was the first children's librarian and holds this position now.

The building's first historic significance is that it served as the last home and meeting place of the veterans of the greatest military outfit. At this meeting John Bell Hood, Jr. spoke to the veterans as he was to do at several future meetings of the Association.

The meetings in Bryan were occasioned by great hospitality on the part of the townspeople, and exuberance and fervor on the part of the veterans. From the time of their continuous meeting in the Library in 1919 they were joined by the veterans of Green's Brigade. Many of the veterans stayed year after year in the home of the townspeople. Entertainments were held for them in homes and on the lawn of the Library. As the years went by there were fewer champagne and beer parties and more ice cream socials and teas.

The meetings were the occasions for famous visitors to the Brigade meetings: governors, senators, state officials, writers, people who were interested and who came to speak to them or to pay their respects to those gallant soldiers.

A typical program for an annual meeting in the Library:

1. Invocation.
2. Music, followed by a welcome and response.
3. Letters and telegrams from people who couldn't make it, read to the group.
4. Lunch.
5. More music, followed by an address from some prominent Texan.
6. Reminiscent talks by comrades.

7. Annual memorial address by friends of those veterans who had died in the past year.

8. Conclusion - all members joined hands and sang "God Be With You 'Till We Meet Again."

As of this writing a new library building is under construction at 26th and Regent Streets, a stone's throw from the old building. The Brazos County Historical Survey Committee at its November meeting, 1968 drew up a resolution to be presented to the City Commission asking that the old Carnegie building be completely and appropriately restored and used in the future as a meeting place for historical, cultural, and civic groups.

Separate document:

The Carnegie Library was built and opened to the citizens of Brazos County on December 14, 1903. Andrew Carnegie gave the City of Bryan \$10,000 to build this structure with the understanding that the City of Bryan would insure \$1,000 each year to maintain it.

The building is one of the more beautiful libraries made possible by Andrew Carnegie at the beginning of the 20th century. The architectural style is Greek Revival. The building is of beautiful soft mellowed red brick. Two enormous Greek Corinthian columns (Icanthus leaves) form its façade. The entrance is flush with the ground. There are no steps. Old photographs show two chimneys. The chimneys were removed in 1954. There is a large foyer with handcarved, wooden stairs on either side leading to the second floor. Underneath the stairs are ample store rooms.

The building has two small side rooms on either side of the first and second floors, which are the two octagonal towers seen in the side view of the old photographs.

At the back of the building are two more small rooms, one which was used for a workroom and the other the librarian's office.

The ceiling of the main floor is particularly lovely. It is decorative plaster work-coffered.

On the second floor is the auditorium with a small stage. The big room here was used as the children's room, which was opened in 1953. Side rooms here were periodical storage rooms and workrooms and a historical and genealogical room.

The architect for the building was Fred Edward Giesecke of the Architectural Department of Texas A&M University.

The floor space of the entire building is 4,000 square feet.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The old Carnegie Library has several strong points of significance which make it the most important (historically) building in the town.

From the time of building, it was the center of the town's cultural, religious, civic and political activities. Clubs temporarily out of home met here. Some clubs called it their home. Churches met here. Political rallies were held here. Any person of whatever importance, who came to town to speak, spoke here.

Perhaps the building's greatest historical significance is to do with the Hood's Brigade Reunion Association. Hood's Brigade, called by historians the greatest fighting outfit ever to be raised in the Eastern Hemisphere, met in the auditorium from 1919 to the time of the final soldier's death in 1933.

The Reunion Association was organized in 1872 in Houston. They met in June of every year in various Texas towns. After they met in Bryan, they found the hospitality so wonderful (every home in town was opened to them,) they were feted with champagne parties and waited upon by the prettiest of the town's girls, that they decided to make Bryan their home and had a small white stone set into the red brick of the old library which reads:

HOOD'S TEXAS BRIGADE
BRYAN OUR LAST HOME
AND THIS HOUSE
OUR LAST HEADQUARTERS

To their annual meetings each summer came the great of the nation: Governors, Senators, Poets, Musicians. They all felt it a privilege to speak to these gallant soldiers.

The building was the first in Brazos County to receive a medallion.[†]

[†] Editor's note: This reference is to the Texas Historical Commission Official Historical Medallion. See accompanying picture posted on website.