

## HISTORY OF THE TACOMA PUBLIC LIBRARY

By

Mrs. Grace R. Moore

When an institution has reached a stage of development that deserves and receives appreciation on the part of the public for its usefulness, an interest is aroused to know the facts connecting with its origin and the ways and means by which in its early days, it struggled for recognition and adequate support.

Just as in the case of individuals who have succeeded by personal ability, so the life of an institution is an instructive and inspiring subject, impressing the lesson, that time increases and multiplies the fruit of labor well spent.

If we could trace the beginnings of all steps in social advance, we should probably find that the germ of thought which afterwards developed into an act, was an accidental, although perfectly natural suggestion, arising in some ordinary everyday manner.

The personal need or desire of some one individual, is the path which leads to a wider and more unselfish end--when the good of one, is secured for all--it is the application of the Golden Rule.

In 1886 the now flourishing and beautiful city of Tacoma was little more than a frontier town with ungraded streets, uncleared lots and a small business district. Its limits were confined between Annie Wright Seminary on the North, and what was known as "Galleher's Gulch" on the South. Wright Park was an unfenced

TACOMA

Public Library



area of tarweed, and thick forest trees stood on the section that is now the fashionable residence portion.

The population of that period consisted of hardy pioneers, who brought with them little beside courage, energy and the capacity for work. Nature had done so much to attract settlers to this wonderful part of our country, that it only remained for man to do his share to create a city of untold possibilities. What man and nature have since accomplished can be seen today in the advantages and attractions that make of Tacoma a city that can scarcely be surpassed in its location, natural scenery and social life. Twenty-five years ago these facts were still of the "fabric that dreams are made of". Only by energy and persistence, inspired by hope, have those dreams been realized. Some words of praise are due to those men and women who were first in the field, and who planted in virgin soil the seeds that have brought forth today's harvest.

The social side of a pioneer town is sure to be in an unsettled and unsatisfactory condition--all strangers to one another, with no past to bind them in ties of friendship. The churches naturally were the nuclei of society and in them newcomers found their first and most congenial friends. The work of building up the church and charities connected with it, occupied the time of most of the women,--varied among the more worldly-minded by card-parties and occasional dances. The result was that the little community was divided into cliques, that seldom intermingled and narrowed even the limited opportunity for recreation and sociability that the circumstances offered.

9. W. P. Bonney, Museum, City

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The men were too actively engaged in business to feel the want of social enjoyments, but the class of women who had shared in the artistic or intellectual advantages of older and larger cities, felt that there was nothing to appease the hunger of the soul - except the placid beauty of Puget Sound and the visions of Mount Tacoma.

A love of reading lead three ladies to spend an afternoon once a week sewing and listening while each in turn read aloud. The only obstacle to their pursuit of knowledge was the scarcity of books. As soon as it became known that such a circle had been formed, other ladies asked to be included, and it was decided that each member should furnish a new book. As members and books increased, it was evident that some system would be needed to care for and distribute this small loan collection, and the suggestion was made, "Why not organize a circulating library, in order to have more books, and benefit more readers?" The idea was so timely and practical that it met with unanimous approval, and the ladies present decided at once to put the plan into operation. Within a short time a meeting was called through the daily papers, to be held at Mrs. Frank Clark's residence at the corner of A and Tenth Streets, where eighteen ladies assembled and steps were taken to form a Board of Library Trustees. It was decided to call the new enterprise "The Mercantile Library", and to charge fifty cents a month for membership. Requests were made for donations of books and money.

Mrs. Grace R. Moore was elected President



Miss Emma Unthank - Vice-President  
Mrs. E. M. Hunt - Treasurer  
Mrs. Hadley - Secretary, beside these

officers a Board of five trustees was chosen from among those present. After a lapse of more than twenty-five years it is impossible to recall the names of all who gave the Library their active support; but among them were Mrs. A. H. W. Raynor, Mrs. William Frazier, Miss Fannie Paddock; Mrs. John Hall, Mrs. Van Ogle, Mrs. Richard Vaeth, Mrs. Samuel Wilkeson, Mrs. Wm. Misner and Mrs. Munson.

The Board of Library Trustees used the money for books with the greatest economy. They ordered from Macy of New York paper-bound editions of standard authors, and these were made more lasting by putting on covers of thick, brown cardboard fastened with "clips". The book committee did this work skilfully, and soon the fact became known that a Public Circulating Library was in operation. Mrs. Grace R. Moore donated a dozen bound books, and offered space in her home and her services as Librarian. Her interest in the work was unceasing, and its success more than repaid her for the time and labor involved.

New members applied almost daily - some coming from distant farm lands or small homesteads across the Sound - eager to get the books they had longed for in their lonely and isolated lives. As a typical instance, may be mentioned the case of one woman who rode fifteen miles on horseback to apply for membership, and to ask: "Have you Emerson's Essays?" In her youth she was a school teacher--until she married a man with a college education, and they came west to grow up with the country. Years spent on a timber claim had made her look as weather-beaten as a pine, but under the rough exterior still



flowed the sap of New England culture. These were the type of settlers it was a pleasure and a privilege to serve.

In the course of a year the membership warranted changing the library from a private house to a more central location, and the books were placed in the outer room of H. K. Moore's law office, where Miss Tiffany gave out books, combined with her work as stenographer. New shelves were required and to save expense, two of the Library Board painted them, - not perhaps in an artistic manner-- but with great satisfaction to themselves. Ah! the petty economies of those days! How well they were rewarded by seeing one book after another added to the list. Entertainments were given occasionally that netted hard-earned dollars. One of the earliest was a real old-fashioned spelling match at the opening of a new school building. The occasion brought together men and women from professional circles and the rival spellers were chosen by the leaders, from well-known doctors, lawyers, ministers, teachers and a few advanced pupils. Professor Robb, who was at the head of the school department, gave out the words, and much merriment followed, as everyone sooner or later went down in a good cause. The refreshments that were served afterwards soothed the pangs of vanity, for no one, young or old, likes "to miss".

Few theatrical troupes came to Tacoma in those days, so it encouraged amateurs to try their talent, and we found pleasure in listening to Shakespearian readings, vocal and instrumental music, and short plays by local talent. The most elaborate dramatic event for the benefit of the Library Fund was a performance of Pygmalion and Galatea in the opera house. The well-known actor, Theodore Roberts, gave his time without charge to the training of the



young people who were in the cast. The part of Galatea was acted by a beautiful young English lady named Robinson, and Mr. Roberts played Pygmalion. The affair was a brilliant success, artistically as well as financially.

The Trustees of the Library encouraged public lectures, and at various times secured such speakers as Professor John Fiske, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, George Kennan and others of less renown. Nothing was left untried that would educate the taste of the public and advance the interests of the library. Within the first five or six years more than twenty entertainments were given. One of the most attractive was a Flower Festival, in which booths were decorated with flowers made of tissue paper and the young ladies who sold these works of art were dressed in tissue paper costumes, that made them even more attractive than their wares. The art of making flowers out of paper had just been invented and proved a novel attraction. During the evening several elaborate tableaux arranged by Mr. Harold De Rassloff were shown, and were much appreciated from an artistic standpoint.

The most elaborate affair undertaken by the Library Board was a loan collection that was held during three days and nights, exhibiting over five hundred articles of historic or intrinsic value. The prime movers in this undertaking spent weeks canvassing the city and its environs for objects of interest and were surprised at the number that they unearthed. One could hardly have expected in a new frontier community to discover a genuine portrait by Sir Peter Lely, which was loaned by Mrs. Van Ogle. The picture was a nearly life size portrait of a Court Lady, and had been in the possession of the owner's family for several generations. Another rare exhibit was an original sketch



in oil by Rembrandt, which was loaned by Mrs. Clarence Slaughter, whose father, an eminent English artist, had bought in Europe.

There were antiques and curios collected abroad by Mr. Herbert Griggs, besides fine laces, quaint old costumes and relics of Revolutionary days. The responsibility for the safety of these valuable collections was so great that the two ladies in charge did not leave the hall even for their meals, until the watchman came on duty for the night. Every article was safely restored to its owner, except one antiquated bonnet which no one claimed.

While the majority of the Library Board were ladies, at times the following gentlemen were active and valuable members, generously contributing time, money and influence to the work. Among its generous supporters were Messrs. Walter J. Thompson, Samuel Collyer, Henry Drum, S. A. Wheelright and Henry K. Moore. At all times the spirit of harmony and cooperation was unbroken and invariable. In it lies the secret of success, and explains the steady progress of the work, until the responsibility for its support was lifted from their shoulders, and assumed by the city.

After nearly five years, the business men of the city realized that the Mercantile Library had proved its value, and deserved to be supported out of the public funds. At a public meeting which was attended by many leading citizens, the Mercantile Library donated all of its books amounting to over two thousand volumes, and a sum of money in the bank, above all expenses, to a new organization to be known as the Tacoma Public Library, which should receive a proportion of the fines and licenses and be under the management of a Board of seven Trustees, three of which were ex-officio the mayor and



two councilmen. DEVELOPMENT IN TACOMA

Walter J. Thompson was elected President of the Tacoma Library Board with Grace R. Moore as Vice-President. The city provided ample accommodations in the new City Hall and engaged the services of William Curtis Taylor as Librarian. Under his able management, its sphere of usefulness rapidly increased, and it supplied the growing demands of a rapidly growing community. Small as this library was in its incipiency, it has the honor to be the first Public Circulating Library founded on Puget Sound. Book clubs existed in other cities, but they were restricted to their own membership and did not benefit the mass of people. The Tacoma Public Library now occupies a building donated for the purpose by Andrew Carnegie, which is already too small to meet its requirements. We hope the time is not far distant when it will be housed in a new and larger edifice that will be worthy to take its place beside the magnificent High School and the spacious Ferry museum, making a trio of educational institutions that will add to the fame of Tacoma, and the advancement of its citizens.

Written in 1916.

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