

The Toy Loan Library

Christmas day every day in San Diego. Toys every day for children to whom the real Christmas has never meant a thing. That is the purpose of San Diego toy loan libraries.

--San Diego Union, August 13, 1939.

“Toy libraries,” where children could borrow most any kind of toy from a shiny red fire wagon to a quacking Donald Duck, brightened the lives of thousands of San Diego children during the dark days of the Great Depression. A project of the federal Works Progress Administration, the program operated in large cities across the country, and sponsored more than twenty toy lending centers in San Diego in the late 1930s.

It began in San Diego as the “Toy and Furniture Repair Project” in December 1936. In a former industrial building at Main and Crosby Streets, WPA workers cleaned and repaired 2000 toys collected by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Most of the toys had come from the blackened ruins of Whitney’s Department Store—a downtown merchandiser that had burned in a spectacular fire on October 21, 1936.

The next year San Diego’s first “toy library” opened from a bungalow on the campus of Alice Birney Elementary School. Other toy centers quickly followed.

The novel program was headquartered in the Education Building in Balboa Park. Donated toys collected from families, schools, churches, merchants, and manufacturers were first brought to a repair shop at 1902 Kettner Blvd. Here, workers “rejuvenated” and sterilized the toys (“we loan toys, not germs”), then sent them to centers throughout the county.



There were nine toy libraries in the city of San Diego and fourteen county libraries--ranging in location from San Ysidro to Oceanside and as far east as Campo. Elementary schools and churches housed most of the toy libraries.

In the program’s first year ten thousand toys circulated repeatedly to more than 5000 children registered with the libraries. A “shining example” of the project was Cardiff, where officials boasted “every child in town is registered and all but two have borrowed toys.”

“The Toy Loan Library is operated in much the same manner as book library,” explained the program supervisor, Mrs. Margaret Fling. “The toys are loaned on a seven and 14-day basis. There is no charge . . . either for the privilege of borrowing, breakage or delay in returning.”

The toys were expected to be returned on time and in good condition. Overdue or badly damaged toys cost a child borrowing privileges for a certain time. “This is really a character building project,” said Mrs. Fling. “We teach children to share their toys and to take care of property belonging to themselves and others.

Every time a toy was returned in good condition, the child received a star after their name. Twenty-five stars awarded the child a toy they could keep permanently.

Administrators believed the program prevented adolescent crime. “We know that toy loan will not solve all the problems of juvenile delinquency,” said one WPA supervisor, [but] most children will not steal what they can borrow without cost.”

Remarkably, many San Diego children had never had toys. In the hard times of the 1930s, toys were a luxury that many parents could not afford. “Yesterday I went home and washed my doll clothes,” wrote an excited San Ysidro girl to her local library. “It is nice to get a new toy every week. We never had any toys in our lives before.”

Tak Sugimoto, a ten-year-old boy from Encinitas, remembered his local toy library in a 2005 interview: “None of us were really rich. It was neat for the kids because we didn’t have money to go out and buy these things, like a tractor, or a car or a wagon even. So they had that in Leucadia and we used to go there a lot. That was a neat thing for all of us.”

Like other WPA programs, the toy loan libraries ended by 1943, shortly after the start of World War II. Unlike many of the New Deal programs of the Roosevelt administration, the toy loan project seemed to have prospered without complaint or criticism—a popular project that enriched the lives of San Diego children.

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