

“The Library Mutiny”

The public library will be open to the public evenings and Sundays, even if it requires the use of an axe, a la Carrie Nation style.

--City Councilmen Percy Benbough, January 20, 1917.

San Diego’s city councilmen were irate. They had recently given the Public Library a budget of \$35,000 for 1917--the same amount as the previous year--to cover the cost of books, salaries, and maintenance for the downtown library and four branches. But the library’s Board of Trustees considered the amount far too small cover the growing expenses of the popular institution. Rebellion was in the offing.

Without consulting the council or city manager, the three-member library board decided to slash hours to save over \$4,000 in operating expenses. A combative sign hung on the front door of the Carnegie Library: “Closed because the council refused to allow more funds.”



The library budget battle of 1917 threatened to interrupt a remarkable success story. The fifteen-year-old downtown library at Eighth and E Streets--built for a city of 17,000--now served a population of over 70,000. Open twelve hours a day, Monday through Saturday and six hours on Sunday, the library closed its doors only on July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Since 1914, annual book circulation had increased 75%.

In December 1916, the library board proposed a budget of \$60,000. Instead, the council offered the smallest amount allowable under the City Charter: 4% of property tax revenues. The councilmen did promise to consider a ballot measure for the spring primary election that would ask voters pay more taxes to support their library.

The librarians scrambled to make the budget work. Salaries were reduced, branch additions were cancelled, and needed expansion of the main library was put on hold. But the most painful cut was to the book budget, which fell to less than \$5,000.

To save money for books, the library trustees announced reduced operating hours for the Carnegie Library. Beginning on January 2, 1917, the library would be open from 10 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. daily, closed on Sundays and holidays. The new hours startled the public and enraged the city council.

In a raucous public meeting on January 14, the library board met with the city council to explain their position and request that the council put the matter before the voters.

Councilmen loudly rejected the idea and charged that the reduced hours were for political effect and meant only to influence San Diegans and encourage a vote for more money.

The charge infuriated library board president Eugene Ferry Smith, who “leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing, and declared the accusation was false.” Tension in the room increased when Councilman Otto Schmidt stated there was “absolutely no reason why this library cannot give the same service for the same amount that it did last year.” Schmidt vowed to take steps to compel the librarians to open their doors for full schedule.

“I’d like to have some more say in the matter,” spoke up Councilman Percy Benbough. “That’s what I want!” shouted Smith in reply. “I wish you councilmen would visit the library and go over it with me instead of sitting down here at the city hall roaring about something you don’t understand!”

The council refused point blank to honor a pledge made in December to offer the question to the voters. “But you said when you held our appropriation down to \$35,000 that you would submit an increase to the voter!” cried Smith. “That was before you shut up the library every evening at 6:00,” Schmidt replied. “I’ve changed my mind!”

Anger simmered for the several days. “A mutiny—that’s what it is!” thundered Benbough to newspaper reporters on January 20. “There’s no reason why [the library] should be closed. I am ready to go up there tonight and see that it is opened, even should it be necessary to break open the doors.”



Library patrons waiting for the doors to open.

By month’s end, compromise seemed possible. The library board formally invited the council to attend a “bury-the-hatchet” meeting at the Carnegie to devise a means of keeping the building open at nights. The peace parley resulted in a partial adjustment of hours: the library would stay open in the evenings but would now close two hours each morning. The council did not offer more funds; to pay for the restored hours, the library board grudgingly subtracted more money from the ever-shrinking book budget.

Speaking to a PTA meeting in February, board president Smith told his audience that while funds had declined in the last two years circulation of books had doubled. Smith then noted that none of the city councilmen had library cards, adding they “who are so sparing of appropriations for the library do not have much use of it themselves. I understand, although there are a number of good books on city government that would be available to them.”

Budget relief for the library would come with the March 20 primary election. From the incumbent six-member council, only Percy Benbough was re-elected to another term. On May 11, the new council increased the library budget by 30%, raising it \$45,400.

For the San Diego Public Library the year 1917 would turn out to be the most active in its history. With an improved budget, three new branches were added, circulation numbers soared, and the cramped main library expanded by moving several departments into the “Library Annex” at 9th and E Streets.

Photographs from *Special Collections, San Diego Public Library*.

Originally published as “Funding Fight in 1917 Leads to Best Year in Library History,” by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, May 12, 2011.