

“The Public Library in Balboa Park”

The building was populated with an amazing assortment of wildlife—squirrels, bees, doves, flies, lost cats and dogs, lizards, fleas, termites, spiders, and mice. None of these visitors could really be blamed on the proximity of the Zoo next door. The staff learned not to feed the squirrels, to administer soda and sympathy for bee stings, [and] to wield a well-aimed fly swatter . . .

*--Clara Breed, City Librarian, *Turning the Pages**

Conditions in San Diego’s Central Library were less than optimal in the summer of 1952. Construction of a new library was underway at the corner of Eighth and E, the site of the recently demolished, fifty-year-old Carnegie Library. But for the next two years the library staff would work from temporary quarters in Balboa Park.

The contract for the new library had been awarded on June 10 to F. E. Young Construction. For the princely sum of \$1,686,500, the city would gain a three-story structure with five times the floor space of the old Carnegie.

With the contract signed, the librarians addressed plans to move into the Food and Beverage Building in Balboa Park--a cavernous, wood and stucco relic of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. City Librarian Clara Breed described the designated library space as “barn like”: three huge rooms with very high ceilings covering 50,000 square feet.

To make the new home habitable \$19,000 in library funds were spent to install large space heaters, hang new light fixtures from the rafters, patch floor tiles, and renovate the rest rooms. A night watchman was hired and fire alarms connected.

At the Carnegie building over 125,000 books and 100,000 pictures, magazines, and documents were carefully packed in cardboard boxes to be carried up and down stairs (in the elevator-less building) by commercial movers. But the librarians were stunned in mid-June to find that not a single professional moving company cared to bid on the big move. It was the peak of the home moving season and the movers refused to spare the trucks and men for a week.



City workers scrambled to find a solution. Hank Shaw, head of city purchasing, borrowed 100 pallets from the Navy and forklifts from the City Public Works. A motorized conveyor belt came from a roofing company and trucks were leased from a local agency.

The move began on June 24. In the next two weeks over 4000 boxes of books were lifted through a second-story window and moved down the conveyor belt to trucks. Loaded on pallets, the books were trucked to Balboa Park and unloaded by forklift at the front door of the Food and Beverage Building. Hand trucks carried the boxes into the new library space.

While the Carnegie was being vacated the Library Annex on the next block at 902 E Street, remained opened. Years earlier, the crowded Carnegie had moved the Children's Room, Cataloging, and business departments into the rented Annex building. When the move from the Carnegie to the Food and Beverage Building was complete, the Annex closed and its collection was also trucked to Balboa Park.

In mid-July, the razing of the Carnegie building began. A few relics were preserved. A sundial donated by Jessop's Jewelry Company and park benches from the library's front lawn was saved. A clump of palm trees were carefully dug up and replanted at Mission Bay Park. Several curb-side hitching posts that had once restrained horses were pulled up and donated to the San Diego Historical Society.

The Carnegie walls came tumbling down at the end of the month. It took only two days for a steam shovel to level the building on July 29 and 30. Excavation for the new Central Library began immediately.

In Balboa Park, the library staff slowly adjusted to their temporary facility, which opened on July 7. Adequate shelving was a problem for a while. City carpenters nailed together wooden book stacks and steel shelving ordered for the new library was diverted to the Park. For months much the collection was used from open boxes lined up in rows.

Wildlife in the old building took some adjustment. Marco Thorne, the Assistant City Librarian recalled, "We had to capture a squirrel who moved in with us and made a nest of some valuable newspapers. However, we did not bother a relatively harmless lizard who lived in our discard books shelving. He only came out in the sunlight once a month and ate the many spiders and other insects that battled us to the very end for possession of the Park building."



The Children's Room in Balboa Park. *San Diego Public Library*

Everyone seemed to appreciate the wide open spaces after the cramped quarters of the Carnegie. For the first time in many years, the entire Central collection was available at one location. The popular Children's Room, which had shorter hours at the Annex, was now available with the regular library hours: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, except Sunday.

Library book circulation did drop off modestly in the new location, falling 7% in 1952-53. Only one bus line served the park and business traffic from the busy downtown area fell off.

But the library kept the public interested with a weekly "New Books in the Library" column in the *Union*, which listed acquisitions and commented on noteworthy new titles. In Clara Breed's

annual report to the City Manager—always a news item in the local press--she noted that the most popular fiction books in 1952 were Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* and James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*. The most borrowed non-fiction title was Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*.

The new Central Library at 820 E Street neared completed in June 1954. Once again, the main library prepared to move its entire collection—this time with professional movers. The Balboa Park library closed on June 7. Nearly 100 truckloads of books, newspapers, and furniture were moved in the next twelve days. Dedication ceremonies for the library were held on Sunday, June 27. The library opened for business the next day.



The 50-year-old Carnegie Library on E Street was demolished in late July 1952. *San Diego Public Library*

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