

## **Library renewals: private citizens are remaking a public institution**

Elizabeth Larson

FOR BOOK LOVERS IN MERCED COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, THE WINTER holidays didn't get off to a merry start last year. Two days before Thanksgiving, the Merced County Board of Supervisors voted to shut down all 19 libraries in the county system by New Year's Day. The move came after the county lost \$11.9 million in state aid as a result of California's struggle to balance its budget.

Across the country, tight budgets are leading to dramatic cuts in funding for public libraries. So many libraries have closed their doors in recent years that the American Library Association says it's no longer able to keep track of them all. The trend began in 1990, when officials in Worcester, Massachusetts, a city of 170,000, closed all six library branches. Cutbacks and closures spread quickly as other towns and cities succumbed to a weakened economy.

The Old Mill Green Public Library in Bridgeport, Connecticut, announced it would be open only on Thursdays. Bookmobiles in Fairfax, Virginia, and Syracuse, New York, were eliminated. And in Los Angeles, the county library system was threatened with the closure of about 50 of its 87 branches. New York librarians began an "Index of Misery" to record closures in the state.

Public libraries that can afford to remain open are finding their collections becoming dated, as money for new books and magazine subscriptions disappears. The materials budget for the Nevada State Library & Archives went from \$153,000 in 1992 to zero in 1993. Other states have also eliminated their book budgets and have seen magazine-subscription budgets slashed by more than 50 percent. In Phoenix, library staff members were recently asked to take furloughs in order to maintain the book budget.

These funding cuts have accelerated a process that has been going on for much of this century: Libraries are losing their focus. Scrambling to justify their existence, they are taking on roles that have little or nothing to do with their central mission. Bernard Vavrek of Clarion University's Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship has said that public libraries should consider offering services such as shelter for the homeless and day care for children and the elderly. Public libraries in Seattle, Philadelphia, and Greensboro, North Carolina, already offer latchkey programs. And 39 percent of the respondents in a national telephone survey recently conducted by the library school at the University of Illinois, Urbana, said public libraries should offer safe places for children to stay after school.

But social services do not mix very well with a public library's other purposes. When the Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation Department eliminated local after-school programs in 1992, 40 or so middle- and high-school students adopted the Culver City Library as their after-school hangout. While some kids try to study, says head librarian Josie Zoretich, most are too rambunctious to sit still and keep quiet. "It's very difficult," says Zoretich. "We monitor them, we walk around. And that's the only thing we've found that works. But it's not the staff's job either. We're not recreation leaders, and we have still a whole public to serve." Memos at the circulation desk remind parents that "the library is not an alternative child care facility."

Amid the gloom, however, citizens in a few scattered towns are demonstrating another way to make libraries relevant. They have managed to create and sustain libraries without government money, reconnecting these institutions with the people they are supposed to serve. These private alternatives address both the fiscal and identity crises public libraries now face.

PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA, HAS A REPUTATION as a desert oasis for the very rich, but the vacant storefronts along the main street tell another story. Palm Springs hasn't escaped the hard times facing the Golden State, nor have its public libraries. When it came time to close the Welwood Murray Memorial Library, however, the people of Palm Springs took charge. The result was one of this country's first privatized libraries.

The city planned to sell the site of the library to a developer, but the land had been donated to the city in 1938 by the Murray family on the condition that it be used for a library. Public-library officials and the Save the WMML Committee, allied with City Council member and "reinventing government" advocate Deyna Hodges, successfully challenged the sale in court.

By the end of June 1992, city officials had removed every last book from the library and closed its doors as a public institution. The next day, the library began its new life as a private volunteer enterprise, run by WMML, a newly

incorporated nonprofit foundation, and overseen by a board of seven trustees. "They left us with nothing," says trustee Jeanette Hardenburg, sitting near the glass cases of Indian jewelry and pottery now at the library's entrance. "And the building itself hadn't been properly maintained for years. Volunteers did everything you see here--refinished the ceiling, donated display cases."

And the citizens of Palm Springs gave books by the thousands; the library now has more than 8,000 volumes in its collection-- 5,000 more than the public library had--and more arrive every day. "Every book in our collection was given to us by the people of Palm Springs," Hardenburg says. The library plans to develop an extensive collection of documents and books, including rare and first editions, on the history of California and the West; trustee Barbara Moore, a Palm Springs native with an interest in the region's history, has already given several hundred of her own books as a permanent loan to begin the collection. Jeremy Crocker, president of the board of trustees, credits the "goodheartedness and friendliness" of the Palms Springs people with keeping the library alive.

Citizens in other towns may follow the Palm Springs model, taking their libraries private to save them. When it looked as if Grants Pass, Oregon, might be forced to close the three branches of its public library, Dan Huberty, a building contractor who had moved to Oregon for his retirement, spearheaded a grass-roots effort to privatize the library. Although city officials initially gave his idea a hearing, resistance from the library unions doomed the proposal. (The city ultimately found money to keep the library open.) And in Santa Cruz County, California, members of the Friends of the Library group are looking into privatization as a possible alternative to the threatened closure of the county's public- library system.

For advice, newly privatized libraries could look to Sedona, Arizona--home of world-class artists, New Age worshippers, red- rock cliffs, and a thriving free private library. Back in 1958, Sedona residents decided the infrequent visits from a bookmobile that began its journey in Phoenix, some 100 miles away, just weren't enough. The private Sedona Public Library was up and running within months. A Friends of the Library group was soon organized to raise funds for operating costs and to oversee the library's administration. The group's fund- raising efforts have been so successful that five of the librarian staff positions are now salaried.

The community spirit that made this library possible hasn't ebbed over the years. Although the library now receives some support from the city and county to cover basic operating costs, the library's new \$3.2-million building is being constructed solely with donations from residents and free or discounted labor and materials from local businesses. The 4.2- acre plot of land was purchased with a bequest from a late Sedona resident. An early morning visitor to the building, scheduled to open in early 1994, might see a solitary carpenter high up on the scaffolding patiently staining the beams that span the cathedral ceiling, or craftsmen putting the finishing touches on the stone fireplace in the reading lounge. Signs at the site's entrance proclaim "See History in the Making!" and welcome visitors to take a tour of the magnificent building with Supervisor Steve Miller. "The magnitude of what we are doing without government funding is almost unbelievable," librarian Joan Duke told Sedona Magazine.

WHEN IT COMES TO STARTING A PRIVATE LIBRARY, SUCH ENTHUSIASM is more important than the economic status of the community. Redford, Texas, population 200, lies between ridges of volcanic rock some 200 miles southeast of El Paso in Presidio County. Life here, just north of the Mexican border, isn't easy. The county's median family income hovers around \$13,000 (the national median is about \$30,000), and most of Redford's inhabitants are farmers eking a living out of the dry earth. The town's private library was founded in 1979 by Lucia Rede Madrid, a former schoolteacher. The original collection of just 25 books was housed on a few shelves in her husband's general store. The collection eventually expanded to fill the store, which is now a library with more than 15,000 volumes--or 75 books for each resident. In April 1990 Madrid went to the White House to receive a presidential medal honoring her work in founding and running the library.

Point Arena, a town of about 500 people several hours up the coast from San Francisco, opened its private Coast Community Library in 1990, even as public libraries elsewhere were slashing their hours or shutting their doors for good. Local carpenters built the card catalog and tables, and other volunteers lent a hand with the renovation of a small office building rented to the library for \$1.00 a year by a retired professor. Residents, whose median annual family income is \$21,250, raised money to open the library by selling everything from vegetables to magazines.

The Coast Community Library's book budget is supplemented heavily by book donations: Patrons have given everything from a single volume to an entire estate. Volunteer library staffer Laura Schatzberg says her love of books

and her "disappointment when I moved to Point Arena in finding out that there was no library here" led her to devote many spare hours to the library. It is the dedication of Schatzberg and the dozens of other citizens like her that keeps this private library open six days a week and two evenings--more than many public libraries are open nowadays.

"We're very proud of this little library," Elise Wainscott, a former librarian who is a fund-raiser for the Coast Community Library, told the Christian Science Monitor shortly after the library opened. "It demonstrates what can be done by people eager and determined to have reading material available to everyone in the community without charge. We have received no government funds, we're out of debt, and we've started a building fund."

Private libraries are not unique in seeking voluntary donations. About 10 percent of public libraries have fund-raising offices, according to the American Library Association. When the New York Public Library started its Adopt-a-Branch program in 1991, it immediately received two \$500,000 donations for library branches in the Bronx. After fire destroyed the interior and damaged most books at the Los Angeles Central Library in 1986, the Save the Books project raised \$10 million in donations, including \$2 million from the John Paul Getty Trust and more than \$3 million from ARCO and a telethon campaign. Developer Robert Maguire gave the city \$28.2 million to help finance the building's restoration. Public libraries in smaller cities are also taking advantage of private money: In 1992 the Tucson-Pima Library in Tucson, Arizona, raised \$9,000, with most donations in the \$10-to-\$25 range, to buy children's books and pay for interior improvements.

But while private libraries will accept all the voluntary help they can get, public libraries worry that their fund-raising programs will be too successful, prompting government to give them fewer tax dollars. Anxious librarians point to an endowment fund established at the Dallas Public Library that raised private funds, prompting the city to reduce the library's share of taxpayers' money by that amount. "It is great to get this private money, but there is a danger, too," Edwin Holmgren, director of branch services at the New York Public Library, told the Library Journal. "Some politicians will then try to take away public funding. ...But any private money given to us doesn't relieve the government of its responsibilities."

SUPPORTERS OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR LIBRARIES LIKE TO CITE what 1991 ALA president Patricia Glass Schuman calls Benjamin Franklin's "novel idea, the free public library." Yet the library Franklin established in 1731 was neither free nor public. Franklin's Philadelphia Library was essentially a private club, or what historians call a subscription library. Franklin sought out 50 charter members, mostly tradesmen, willing to pay 40 shillings each for the purchase of books to begin the library collection. Although Franklin's idea was a novel one for the colonists, Franklin was not the first to start a subscription library. They were popular in Europe at the time, and a subscription library was operating in Edinburgh as early as 1725.

Nineteenth-century libraries, both here and abroad, were usually run by church leaders or philanthropists and were often subscription libraries. The annual dues were low and were waived for those who could not afford them. In towns without full-fledged libraries, booksellers and other merchants often filled the void. British booksellers as early as the 18th century offered books for loan, and shopkeepers operated small circulating libraries alongside shelves of liquor, shoebuckles, and hats. Although several thousand rental libraries were still operating in the United States as late as the 1960s, Harvard University urban historian Edward Banfield reports, public libraries eventually drove the commercial book lenders and many subscription libraries out of business.

One of the oldest subscription libraries keeping Ben Franklin's idea alive is the Salem Athenaeum in Massachusetts. Founded in 1760 by 30 prominent townsmen, the athenaeum welcomes all to browse among its shelves, but only the 100 shareholders (individuals paying \$250 each) and subscribers may check out books or magazines. The annual subscription fee is just \$35, so for less than the cost of the average hardcover book (which is \$40 today, up from \$19 in 1977), you can join this private library.

At least 17 other subscription libraries are still open in Boston, Newport, and other cities. New York City is home to two thriving subscription libraries, both of which have recently seen increases in subscribers: The New York Society Library (founded in 1754) has about 2,500 household memberships at \$125 a year (discounts are available for students and teachers), and the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen (founded in 1820) has about 700 members paying \$35 to \$50 a year. The persistence of such organizations, in spite of government-supported competition, suggests that libraries will survive wherever demand justifies them.

IN ARGUING THAT GOVERNMENT HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO FUND libraries, defenders of the current system usually claim that libraries benefit society as a whole by promoting democracy, uplift, and literacy. They also maintain that only public operation can protect library patrons from censorship. But these high-minded goals have very little to do with how public libraries actually work or the reasons people use them.

Without public libraries, warn Anita and Herbert Schiller in a 1986 Nation article, "democratic governance itself is an endangered species." Free, government-run libraries provide equal access to information, they argue, thereby ensuring an informed electorate. More broadly, public libraries (unlike academic libraries) aim not so much to preserve man's wisdom as to improve him. The terminology has changed--in the 19th century it was called uplift, and today it's empowerment--but the goal remains the same. The problem is, you can't improve people without their cooperation. And for every town like Point Arena or Palm Springs, there are others where, despite a few vocal activists, most residents don't notice or care whether the local library is open or closed.

Libraries in Massachusetts have probably taken the most severe budget cuts in the country in recent years, but Bonnie O'Brien, president of the Massachusetts Public Library Association, told City & State, "For whatever reason, the municipalities and the public don't support libraries like they used to." Speaking on a local radio show in Los Angeles, library activist Mafia Stone said her group, Committee to Save Our Libraries, was sending letters to community members "so that we get rid of a little bit of the apathy that we see toward the libraries." Despite the millions of dollars spent on library-awareness campaigns, only a third of adult Americans have public-library cards.

Apathy toward libraries is not new. Historian D.W. Davies writes in Public Libraries as Culture and Social Centers that early librarians believed "there were vast numbers yearning to read and acquire culture." But "in the days of the voluntary [library] societies there was a corrective to this notion. Uplift societies and libraries founded upon the misconception [often] discovered that there was not a significant number of people interested to allow the institution to continue."

This was not the case everywhere, of course, as such centuries-old institutions as the Salem Athenaeum and the New York Society Library show. But today tax dollars provide equal support for popular and unpopular libraries alike.

Even when a library is popular, that doesn't mean it is improving people's minds or making them better citizens. As anyone who has worked in a suburban public library can attest, the most popular titles tend to be the least edifying: best sellers by Danielle Steele and Robert Ludlum, John Grisham and Stephen King. Commenting on a rise in the use of Los Angeles County's libraries during the recession, library marketing director Philip Fleming told the Los Angeles Times: "People are rediscovering the library, looking for free entertainment."

At the Matteson, Illinois, public library, Super Mario Brothers III and over 130 other Nintendo computer games are on the shelves. The children's librarian told the Chicago Tribune she has seen no correlation between use of the games and circulation of books. An ALA fact sheet boasts of the "ever-increasing variety of materials" public librarians offer for loan, including videotapes, compact disks, toys, puzzles, sewing machines, guitars, chess games, cameras, telescopes, and dog-grooming kits.

And the people who take advantage of all these services are not exactly needy. According to a 1990 Equifax-Harris survey comparing people who use public libraries to those who don't, public-library patrons are 87 percent more likely to attend the opera, ballet, or symphony; 85 percent more likely to have a personal computer at home; and 81 percent more likely to belong to a voluntary organization. These characteristics place public-library users solidly in the middle class. "Certainly no one believes that the library is now of any service to the lower class," writes Harvard's Banfield. "By and large, libraries are of the middle class and for the middle class."

Closely associated with the uplift rationale for public libraries is the argument that they increase literacy. "Librarians must assume a front-line position in the battle against illiteracy, a battle which requires inspired troops if any battle ever did," said 1990 ALA president Richard Dougherty in his inaugural address. "We must find a way to insure that all of our children learn to read, and to read well." Of course, this is what the public schools are supposed to be doing. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress finds that only 10 percent of 13-year-olds are "adept" readers and less than 1 percent are "advanced," we should look to the schools, not the libraries, for an explanation.

Supporters of public libraries also argue that government control ensures that a wide range of reading material is available. "The real strength of the public library is that it's an open forum for ideas, where every idea has equal

viability and the opportunity to be read about, and learned about, and heard," Carolyn Noah of the Central Massachusetts Regional Library System said on a Boston radio show last year. "But a private library, where censorship can be unlimited, is a completely different matter."

The reality is very nearly the opposite: Censorship is more of a threat in public libraries than in private libraries. In the last 40 years, virtually all of the cases in which libraries removed books for political reasons involved public libraries. "That couldn't happen in this library," declares Gann Carter, a trustee at the private Palm Springs library. Board president Jeremy Crocker explains: "We're subject to the same market forces as the public libraries. If we don't have the books, people won't come." Laura Schatzberg of the Coast Community Library says flatly, "We do not censor books." She adds that books are removed from the shelves and put into storage only if they haven't been checked out in several years and the library needs the space.

At a private institution, a censorious librarian is accountable to the board of directors and the community. The financial lifeblood of a private library flows directly from local citizens through their money and volunteer time, rather than indirectly through taxes. Popular objections to a librarian who began censoring books would be felt immediately through lost donations and customers.

In fact, the main advantage of private libraries is their responsiveness to the needs and wants of users. By contrast, public funding through taxes isolates the library from the community. And if a community isn't interested in its library, all the inspiring rhetoric about enriching people's lives won't mean a thing.

Andrew Carnegie learned this lesson around the turn of the century. Carnegie had immigrated to the United States from Scotland at age 13 and built a huge fortune as the owner of Carnegie Steel. After retiring some 50 years later, he devoted the rest of his life to philanthropy. Motivated by the Progressive notion of uplifting people by providing them with free books, he donated more than \$40 million (\$324 million in 1992 dollars) between 1886 and 1919 for the construction of almost 1,700 libraries across the United States. The gifts came with one major condition: Each town had to promise to support its library with annual taxes equal to 10 percent of Carnegie's original investment. But the taxpayers in many towns refused to uphold their half of the arrangement--often within the first year after their libraries opened.

The experience of one Texas town, as related by historian D.W. Davies, was typical. After the citizens lost interest in the library, tramps began calling it home. The books that Carnegie thought would help people better themselves were burned for heat. The shelves went up in flames next. Left with the library's ravaged interior, the town council decided to auction the building. The only taker was a barber who wanted it for his shop. After a council member observed that the town might have to give the Carnegie Corp. any money raised from the sale, the council called off the auction and boarded up the building. Similar events happened in so many towns that, after an investigation lasting several years, the Carnegie Corp. decided that lack of interest rather than lack of money was the problem. In November 1919, it stopped the donations.

Carnegie was not the only philanthropist to overestimate the demand for libraries during the last two centuries. Davies writes: "Those interested in the establishment of popular libraries were naturally people interested in books. When they polled their friends and acquaintances, people of similar tastes, they were delighted to find that large numbers of them were also interested in books. In this way the belief was created that a considerable segment of the population was afflicted with bibliophilia."

This sort of enthusiasm can lead to failures like the many unsuccessful Carnegie libraries, but it can also sustain such institutions as Sedona's free private library. "Everyone saw the need for a library, and since it wasn't going to cost the taxpayers anything, there wasn't anything to complain about," Gene Ash, one of the library's founders, told *Sedona Magazine* in 1992. "After all, who doesn't like books and magazines and information? If they don't, they sure are a sorry lot."

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