



"Widow's Mite" and City's Dogs Helped Start Library

When Sarah Richart died in 1901, the marker on her grave at Woodlawn Cemetery was inscribed simply, "Benefactor of the Library." It was a modest epitaph for a woman who had played such a significant and innovative role in the 100 year history of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library.

The establishment of a free public library in Kansas City, Kansas took more than 30 years and involved the support of many people along the way. The full story includes not only Sarah Richart, but also a wealthy steel magnate, a Civil War survivor, and many other interested parties.

In 1855, the "Wyandot Lyceum and Library Association" was established under legislative sanction by William Walker and twelve other men as a center of culture in the "Indian Country." The group stated their objectives as the "mutual improvement of its members in oral discussion and literature, and the establishment of a permanent library."

More support for a library came from Mr. E.F. Heisler, a colorful Civil War veteran who had once been left for dead on the battlefield. During his long career, Mr. Heisler held the titles of educator, county superintendent, county assessor and editor of the old Kansas City Sun. As a delegate to the newly formed National Education Association, he was active in the school affairs of the state and promoted the cause of public libraries.

Meanwhile, the Wyandotte Library Association continued to meet once a month and give occasional "public entertainments" for the benefit of the library. By 1881, interest in a library for the city had grown to the point that a fund raiser was held by the Methodist church. As a result, sixty dollars worth of new books were added to the library.

Ten years later, however, there was still no public library. By 1891, the Wyandotte Library Association had turned over its books to the Public School Library. A total of 241 books, mostly educational and scientific, were housed in the school's boardroom building. A fee of 25 cents was charged for use of the collection during the summer.

The following year, in 1892, the school board appointed a library committee. The committee presented a list of rules and regulations that established the Public Library of Kansas City, Kansas. A nine-member Board of Managers would govern the library and elect a librarian.

The committee stipulated that the library would be supported by donations and the sale of library tickets at one dollar per year.

Two thirds of library money was to be spent on works of history, biography, science, travels, essays and poetry. One-third would be spent for fiction, reviews, magazines and newspapers.

Thus, on May 15, 1892, the Public Library of Kansas City, Kansas opened in a single room of the high school annex. At the request of the library committee, the room was newly papered and painted for the occasion.

The new public library enjoyed great support. The high school hosted a public entertainment to raise funds. The school board donated their office dictionary and the Board of Trade donated 25 books.

The Monday Club, an organization founded only the year before with the purpose of mental improvement and sociability, donated 36 books. (The Monday Club is still active today and occasionally meets at the library.)

A delegation was sent to Topeka to talk to local legislators about measures for school relief and library maintenance. A bill was passed that provided the expenditure of one-half mill of the school dollar, or roughly \$6,000 a year, for the support and maintenance of a public library.

By 1895 the library had out-grown its room at the high school annex and was moved to the second floor of the Court Block on Minnesota Avenue near Seventh Street. The following year, several leading citizens sponsored parties and entertainments for the library. However, it was Sarah Richart who came up with a novel idea to benefit the library.

Mrs. Richart, a former teacher and president of the Federation of Clubs, proposed a tax on the dogs of the city and had herself appointed as "dog enumerator." Instead of pocketing the receipts, as was the previously accepted custom, Mrs. Richart turned the money over to the public library fund.

Sarah Richart's innovative public service was commemorated by a facet of the Stained Glass Windows in the Municipal Office Building. The window shows a dog with a book in the background representing the books paid for by a tax on the dogs of the city.

When she died in Seattle five years later, it was discovered that Sarah Richart had remembered the library in her will. She left between five and six thousand dollars for the purchase of library books, but only if there was a suitable facility to house them.

Enter one Andrew Carnegie, millionaire steel magnate, philanthropist, and patron of public libraries. At the urging of the Mercantile Club, Carnegie offered \$75,000 for the building of a public library at sixth and Minnesota.

The cornerstone of the new building was laid at night under new electric arc lights on September 6, 1902. Three thousand people turned out to witness the event.

Two years later the new two-story library building was opened. Among its many features was a life-size portrait of Mrs. Sarah Richart, a testament, as one contemporary of the times put it, to "the virtue of the widow's mite."