

A storied past

Construction of the Carnegie Library nears completion. When finished, the facility would be about 10,000 square feet and span three floors. Courtesy Wyoming State Archives



As the Laramie County Library System approaches its 125th birthday, many fondly reminisce about a majestic building that once stood in the heart of town

By Josh Rhoten
jrhoten@wyomingnews.com

Before the Carnegie Library fully opened, Robert C. Morris gave a speech to Cheyenne residents on the building's front steps.

Morris, a Wyoming Supreme Court clerk and son of suffragette Esther Hobart Morris, had worked to bring a "proper" library to the area for sometime. At that point, the Laramie County Library System had been operating out of the basement of what was then the Central

Man searches for clues from library system's past A7

School in tight quarters with little resources. When they broke ground on what would become the Carnegie Library, Cheyenne's population was 10,000 people. Today, the Laramie County Library System operates in a city of about 57,000, with satellite branches in Burns and Pine Bluffs.

It employs about 80 people and has a total collection of more than 305,000 items. It also claims the title of oldest continually operating library system in America, dating back to a

time before Wyoming was a state.

In his address, delivered on Feb. 5, 1902, shortly before the building was opened to the public but after it was completed, Morris commented on the status of libraries across America. To him, the future grew brighter with each new one.

But he also warned that those in the community must always be "willing at all times to contribute generously toward the new building, making it a power for good and advancement of all that is best in the community."

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A look back in time



1869 Wyoming becomes a territory

1886 Laramie County Library System established

1890 Wyoming becomes a state

1897 First Frontier Days held

1899 Andrew Carnegie offers \$50,000 toward construction of new library

1902 Carnegie Library opens on the corner of 22nd Street and Capitol Avenue, serving about 10,000 residents

1926 Pine Bluffs Community House finished with the front room serving as a branch library

1928, 1933 New branch library opens in Burns. Circulation is 645

1936 Branch in Albin opens with Frances Smith as the librarian

1944 Total number of volumes in library reaches 70,674. Circulation is 210,636

1948 Mary Carpenter appointed county librarian

1952 Albin branch closed in summer



1976 Bookmobile service starts

1977 Carnegie Library torn down

1979 New Laramie County Library opens at 2800 Central Ave.

2007 The current Laramie County Library main branch opens at 2200 Pioneer Ave.

2009 Wyoming State Library moves into 2800 Central Ave. location

Library: "You felt like you were going someplace very important"

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As the Laramie County Library System turns 125 years old this fall, several Cheyenne residents share their memories of the system as it has evolved.

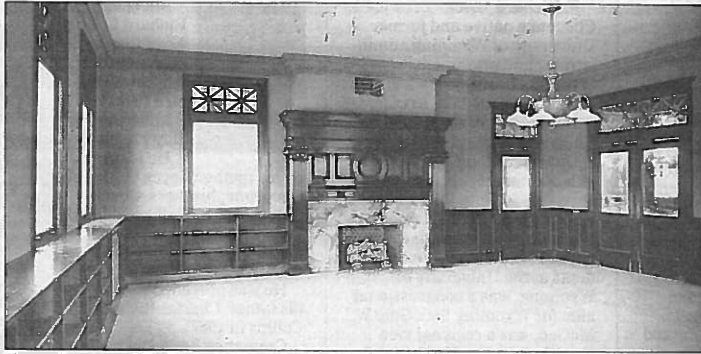
Before the plastic and aluminum

Sylvia Hackl has plenty of recollections about the Carnegie Library, but described the building in just one word.

"It was noble," said Hackl, who first visited at the age of 4. "It was this big and imposing building, and every time you walked in there, you felt like you were going someplace very important."

The Carnegie Library opened on May 16, 1902, on the corner of 22nd Street and Capitol Avenue. It would close 67 years later and be torn down just a few years after that.

While the library system had already been in existence for several years, the new facility drew instant ac-



The reading room at the Carnegie Library is seen here. When plans for a new facility were being drawn up, community members asked specifically for large spaces designated for quiet reading, since there was little space for the activity in previous facilities. Courtesy Wyoming State Archives, J.E. Stimson Collection

claim in the newspapers for its design and usability.

The building was funded with a \$50,000 donation from Andrew Carnegie, who had elected to spend a large portion of his fortune building similar structures across America. He donated the money to the county after Robert Morris, a man with many titles, including private secretary to Gov. Fran-

cis E. Warren and later clerk of the Wyoming Supreme Court, had written him to ask for help in building a library in the most populated city in the state.

At that time, state law provided for county and school libraries, but no library building could be built using public taxes.

In letters to Carnegie asking for funding, Morris also

noted that the current library was operating out of the basement of the Central School, which was only 20 feet by 30 feet and had a ceiling lower than 8 feet high. He also mentioned that only about five people could be seated in the library at one time.

Morris would write several letters to Carnegie before the process was finished. Most detailed plans and informed the philanthropist of the progress. Carnegie had no part in the design and layout of the building, insisting instead that a home-rule ideology was better and leaving the plans for the local commissioners and Morris to settle.

When the new facility, designed by William Dubois, was finally finished, it spanned three floors, with space for meetings and quiet reading. The exterior was dominated by a massive staircase leading to the entry, which many who visited as children still recall very clearly.

"When you walked up that staircase, you just sort of got this majestic feeling, like you were going someplace extremely important," said Leslie Bateman, who first visited the library in 1959.

"It just had a sense of majesty and stability that got lost in all of the aluminum and plastic of the one that came after," Bateman said.

Community connections to the library go deeper than just childhood memories, though.

Kim Mill recently found several old newspaper articles detailing her grandmother, Louise Patterson's, stint as the head librarian in

the 1940s, which she is planning on donating to the system.

"That was a small, but important, part of her life," Mill said of the documents, which come from various sources and offer an inside look at the library's operations around World War II. "I don't have any real plans to do anything with the letters and clippings, but I think I will give them to the library when I am done."

In a speech given before the Carnegie building opened, Morris likened each book to a beautiful painting which, "when kept in a rich man's house may be seen by but a few hundred people. While in a public museum, it may be seen and enjoyed over and over by many. That is the true purpose and need of a library."

The space eventually became crowded as the city's population began to swell. The system began to look at other options in the 1960s. It would eventually move to its new home at 2800 Central Ave. in 1969.

Shortly after the move, it was announced that the Carnegie Library would be torn down. Cheyenne architect Frederic Hutchison Porter said at the time that "it was the most beautiful piece of architecture in Wyoming. It's a classic. It's a museum piece. I could just weep to think we are going to lose it."

The space where the building once stood is now occupied by the Catholic Diocese of Cheyenne. During the construction of the newest main library branch, the choice was made to include some of the building materials from the Carnegie building. Additionally, the outside of the new structure is meant to mimic columns, as seen in front of the old building, stretching toward the sky.

"I think if we had the preservation society and the drive we have now, they wouldn't have torn that building down," Hackl said. "I remember thinking that it was a loss for the community because of the history."

New buildings and old memories

As the 20th century came to a close, it became clear that Cheyenne had outgrown the library at 2800 Central Ave.

The 1990 U.S. Census Bureau report shows the city's population at just more than 50,000 people. The number of patrons with library cards in the system increased 210 percent from 1973 to 2003. Circulation at the building also increased by 179 percent in the same time period.

The facility had become crowded in every sense, made worse by the unexpected demand for computers and materials like books on tape and CD, which the architect had not made space for.

"It got to the point where patrons couldn't walk past each other in the aisles, and

employees literally had to ask each other to move so that they could get out of their desks," Laramie County Librarian Lucie Osborn said. "It was just ridiculous."

While the Central Avenue location, which was about 38,000 square feet, was significantly larger than the 10,000-square-foot Carnegie Library, it proved difficult to add onto. Plans for another level on top of the one-story building would only yield about 17,000 more feet of space — less after the support structure was put in place. Worse, that space would be filled by materials almost instantly.

"It was just not going to work, no matter how we did it, whether it was a bridge across to another location or some other expansion," said assistant county librarian Carey Hartmann. "But that building was really revolutionary for its time when you think about how long it lasted and its overall design."

With the growing space limitations in mind, the Library System Board of Directors began searching for a place to build.

Osborn knew how hard it would be to get a location for the new library. That initial struggle to find a suitable location is the thing that sticks out the most in the entire process for her.

There were plenty of alternatives before they settled on the design at its current location. At one point, she thought the building would be housed on land originally owned by the Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

At another point, separate small branches around town seemed like an option the public wanted. Looking back, there were too many variants to count, too many locations, and too many reasons for and against each one.

Everyone had an opinion. "All of the literature I read going into the building process indicated that the site selection would be the hardest part," Osborn said. "As it turned out, that was exactly the way it happened."

After numerous planning sessions and meetings with the public, it became clear a downtown location was preferred by most for the new facility. The system would eventually win an election where 55 percent of the votes were cast in support of granting \$26.9 million from the special-purpose, sixth-penny sales tax to build a facility.

"We wanted to make sure with this building that we didn't make any mistakes of the last and try to learn as much as we can from other libraries already in operation," Osborn said.

Denise Kelsey served on the board before the construction of the library and was active in the political action committee that supported the new building. She said looking back at the options available at the time, the system picked the best possible location.

"We spent so much time

Library: There's room for expansion, if needed

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looking for a location, but in the end I think where it wound up was the best possible place because it is so centrally located in the city," she said.

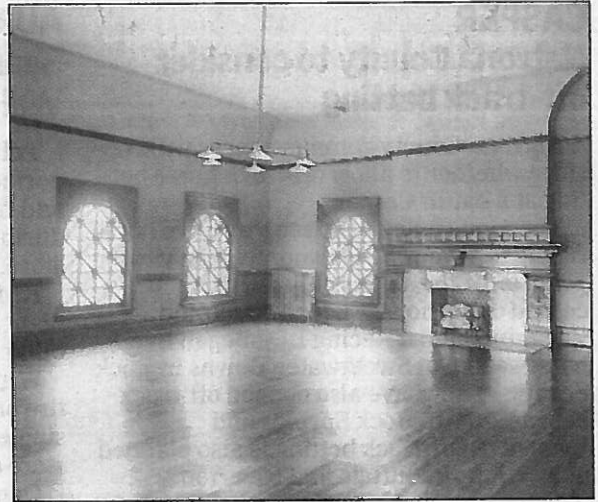
Several homes on the new library site were bought out and removed, clearing a two-city-block area for the building and adjacent parking lot.

At three stories high, with about 100,000 square feet of space, Osborn said the new building was built as a community

center first, meaning numerous meeting rooms were built into the facility. She also said there was space to expand the central building if need be, but she didn't think that would be necessary.

"As it is, we can use this library for a long time, and we are now sort of set up to handle branches throughout the city as well," she said. "That is probably the system we will explore in the future."

"I'll be long gone by the time they need to do any of that though," she said.



The upstairs club room at the Carnegie Library was used for meetings by the community, offering space that had been hard to find for groups previously. Courtesy Wyoming State Archives, J.E. Stimson Collection