

History Comes *Alive!*

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Hynda Rudd
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An interior view of the History Department at Los Angeles Central Library, 1926. The view looks toward the Map Room. Several tall lamps are positioned atop tables throughout the department, as well as at the reference desk. Note the ceiling beams and checkerboard floor. The History Department was previously known as the Reference Room, which was the largest reading room of the library.

Photos from the Security Pacific Collection and the Central Library Photo Archives Collection, Christina Rice, Acting Sr. Librarian.

One of the most respected and largest library systems in the United States belongs to the City of Los Angeles. Its history begins back in 1872, with the founding of a celebrated Los Angeles Library Association established by former governor John G. Downey, Judge Ygnacio Sepulveda and J.P. Widney, founder of the University of Southern California's medical school. The library was founded by ordinance 711 Old Series on March 7, 1878, four years after it was approved by the State legislature. The library was then housed in the City Hall on Fort Street, now Broadway, between Second and Third Streets from 1888 to 1928.

In 1921, the citizens of Los Angeles voted for bonds to erect a Central Library building. This was a first. For six months the press and the public discussed where the building should stand. Sixteen months later, they

decided to build it where the old Normal School sat, on what would become 630 W. Fifth St. By the way, a Normal School was founded in 17th century Europe. The intentions were to train high school graduates to be teachers. Many state universities were founded for that purpose. The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), began as a Normal School.

The original site where the Normal School sat was on a hill. It was lowered and cleared. The new Library Board then had to make decisions about the architecture of the building. Keeping with the tradition of Los Angeles being basically a Spanish community, the leadership purposely chose that design, even though there are influences of ancient Egyptian and Mediterranean revival for the three-story library building.

They appointed an architect with national and international prominence. The man chosen was Bertram G. Goodhue from New York City. He had already proven his expertise by his production of the California School of Technology and the California Building of the San Diego Exposition group. His associate was local Los Angeles architect Carlton Monroe Winslow. The library was built in 1926, at a cost of \$2.3 million.

Most public libraries built during that time were built in an old classical version that was not acceptable for the City of Los Angeles library for two reasons. First, most library entrances were considered dignified, but also felt austere, cold to be exact. Second, the

money was always an issue, and the internal design of the building must incorporate changes that will meet the needs of the public under those circumstances.

The Central Library Board and Librarian designs were as follows: (1) stacks of books relating to individual departments, i.e., history, science and industry, general literature, etc., were housed in each department. Former libraries had the stacks of all books across the entire back of the building; (2) the modern era maintains two special collections on Los Angeles: (a) the History Department, having 80,000 maps and 1,600 atlases; and (b) the Photo Library inherited the Security Pacific Historical Photo collection of 250,000 photos of Los Angeles from 1870 to 1960, with special attention to the community from 1920 to 1950.

The library has three service divisions. They are the central library, branch libraries and technical services. There are several regional divisions and 72 branches, including the many neighborhoods along with bookmobile units. There is often confusion between this City library and the Los Angeles County Public Library. Both have more than 50 branches in Southern California.

On April 29, 1986, an arson fire destroyed 20 percent of the central library collection from water and smoke damage.* How much of the above mentioned History Department and Photo Library material was destroyed is unknown to me. The Fifth Street Central Library was closed at that time. The Friends of the Library ran an enormous campaign to raise \$10 million to replace lost items.

In September of the same year, another fire occurred, destroying the contents of the music department reading room. In an Oct. 13, 1988 news article, arson had been ruled out by the LAFD investigators who determined that a pile of debris was set on fire by lighting fixtures that were cut by torches during the construction of the fourth floor that dropped through a shaft to the basement. Public debate after the first fire considered

tearing down the current Central Library; the discussions definitely continued after the second fire.

Finally, the City fathers decided to preserve the original, standing library. A private development firm, Maguire Thomas Partners, pledged more than \$125 million toward sponsoring the library construction, in exchange for building a Library Tower across the street, whose height exceeded that of city zoning laws. This skyscraper, which housed the Central Library holdings during reconstruction, was eventually named the First Interstate World Center, then renamed the U.S. Bank Tower. Additional funding was raised through corporate and personal contributions under the effort of the "Save The Books" campaign initiated by Mayor Tom Bradley.

Remodeling of the Central Library began in 1988 and was completed in 1993; the remodeled Central Library opened in October of that year. During the renovation, a new eight-story atrium had been added and dedicated to former Mayor Tom Bradley. The eight floors became four stories above ground and four stories below, including a parking garage.

The Richard Riordan Central Library, its current name, has a book collection of approximately 6,393,429 books and periodicals, with a circulation of 18 million. The third largest public library in the country was originally known as the Rufus B. von KleinSmid Library, named for longtime president of the Board of Library Commissioners and the President of the University of Southern California. In 2001, the Library was renamed The Richard Riordan Central Library.

** To this day, I cannot find any information about the solving of the first arson attack on April 29, 1986. If anyone has conclusive evidence that the case has been solved, please contact me at hyndarudd@att.net. I will then make a full report in this newspaper. Thank you.*

The Central Library Story



This 1926 photograph shows construction of the Los Angeles Public Library, located at 630 W. Fifth St. The view is looking at the southwest corner. The structure, which is almost complete, shows scaffolding along a portion of the south side. Several automobiles are parked at Savoy Auto Park, visible in the foreground.



This photo was taken days after the fire at Central Library, April 29, 1986. A staging area was set up in the Rotunda at Los Angeles Central Library. Groups of staff and volunteers were assigned to box the slightly damaged yet salvageable books.