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Writing A History of the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library

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In 1999, the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library celebrated its 100th anniversary and I was invited by the committee planning the centennial celebration to write a history of the institution. I believe there were two reasons for the invitation. I had been extensively involved with the library including membership on its Board of Directors for several years and I am a professionally-trained historian, having been a faculty member of the Department of History of Oregon State University for 30 years. I was given no guidelines as to the scope of the history, nor was I given a deadline for its completion. However, I suspect that what the committee had in mind was perhaps a booklet of 20–30 pages, to be completed within a few months. Instead, almost a decade later, I finally delivered to the committee a book of over 200 pages in length and with 20 chapters. Furthermore, I did not mention the Corvallis library until the end of the fourth chapter.

As a professional historian, I was trained that, if readers are to understand and appreciate the importance of historical events, institutions, or individuals, they must be placed in an historical context. So, the first four chapters of the Corvallis library history address the birth and development of libraries through the 17th century; the evolution of the free public library in the United States from the colonial era to 1900; the arrival of libraries in Oregon; and early libraries in Corvallis from 1870 to 1899. These chapters were based on what historians call secondary (published) sources such as books and journal articles.

For the balance of the book, I relied on primary sources such as minutes, which are extremely time-consuming to consult. These primary sources included the minutes of the Corvallis Library's Board of Directors, Foundation, and Friends; the Corvallis City Council; the Corvallis

Woman's Club (they intended its name to be singular); and the Benton County Court (which later became the County Board of Commissioners). The Corvallis Woman's Club Records are housed at the Benton County Historical Museum. City Council minutes are available in typed form in the office of the Corvallis City Manager; the County Court minutes are available on microforms in the Benton County Courthouse. Minutes of the library's Board of Directors, Foundation, and Friends are housed at the Corvallis library.

The minutes of the Corvallis Woman's Club (1883–1935) were absolutely essential for understanding the first four decades of the history of the library. The club's library, which it founded in 1899, traditionally has been considered the beginning of the Corvallis library. In 1914, members of the club were among the Corvallis leaders who persuaded the Corvallis City Council to establish the Corvallis Public Library; three Woman's Club members were appointed to the first board (one as chair); and the Club library became the nucleus of the new public library's initial collection. For about the first 15 years, the new library was housed in rooms in the city hall; but in 1921, the Woman's Club purchased two lots across the street from what would become Central Park in downtown Corvallis and renovated the house on the property for the library. In 1931, when the city council finally agreed to submit a bond measure to the Corvallis voters to fund the construction of a library building, the club promised that, if the bond measure was approved, the club would transfer the ownership of its two lots to the city as the site for the building. The bond measure passed, the club transferred the two lots to the city, and this continues to be the site of the twice-expanded Corvallis-Benton County Public Library today.

Another extremely valuable primary



source was the *Corvallis Gazette-Times*. This was particularly true during the several decades when Robert Ingalls was the editor/publisher of the newspaper as he was extremely supportive of the library. Perhaps the best evidence of this is the following opinion which he expressed in an editorial in the May 20, 1963 *Gazette-Times* and which is the source of the title of my book:

Of all the marks of an intelligent, civilize and progressive community, an adequate library is probably the most obvious. And the best gift we can give to our children besides first rate schools is a first rate library.

Any history of a library must address the library's building, its original design and construction, and any additions or modifications. Fortuitously, the Portland architect the Corvallis City Council selected to design the library building in 1931 was Pietro Belluschi, who would become one of the greatest American architects of the 20th century. At the time, he was head designer of A.E. Doyle & Associates, the most influential architectural firm in Portland. Belluschi had just finished designing the Hauser Library at Reed College and, thus, was a logical choice to design the Corvallis library. The Corvallis library was a much more modest-sized building than the Reed library, but according to Belluschi's biographer, "Its distinction lay in the warm yet dignified character, simple geometric form . . . [and] subtly textured brickwork" of the building as well as its especially-attractive open-beamed interior (Clausen 1994, 72). As Belluschi's reputation grew nationally so did the architectural importance of the many buildings he designed in Portland and elsewhere in Oregon, including the Corvallis library. In spite of several proposals to move the library from the Belluschi building, major addi-



Oregon State Library's rural services bookmobile, 1958. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OSL0010.)

tions to the building in 1965 and 1992 are architecturally compatible with the original Belluschi design. I included in my history of the library a brief biography of Belluschi, a discussion of his architectural importance, and photos of several of his renown buildings in Portland and nationally.

I had assumed that I would have to spend at least a couple of chapters on the financial history of the library. However, by the time I finished the book, I had found it necessary to devote four chapters just on the financial relationship between the county and the Corvallis library. Two of the chapters concentrated entirely on the unsuccessful efforts of the county to adequately fund the county library services the Corvallis library had agreed to provide. The third chapter on the financial relationship between the county and the city of Corvallis and its library concerned the funding of mobile library services in the county, particularly those provided by a custom-

By 1913, only three Oregon cities with a population over 3,000 did not have a free public library—Corvallis, Grants Pass, and Roseburg.

—McClintock's
"The Best Gift"



built book trailer and a bookmobile. And the fourth of these chapters described the successful effort by the county in 1994 to stabilize financial support of the city library as well as the funding of county library services with approval by county voters of a library service district. I also discussed in considerable detail the Corvallis community's financial support through a very active Friends organization and the library's foundation, which is active in fundraising for the library's endowment as well as for special projects.

In the final chapter, "The Library Enters the Twenty-first Century," I discuss the impact of automation on the operations of the library and on the new services it now is able to provide its patrons. Finally, I closed the book as follows: "In 1999, the Corvallis-Benton County Library was named one of

the '100 Great American Public Libraries' and in 2003, it would be named one of the ten best libraries in the U.S. in its population category. . . . As long as it continues to be blessed with outstanding staff and leadership, adequate and stable funding, and wide public support, the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library should continue to be one of the outstanding public libraries in the state and nation" (McClintock 2008, 214-215). 🌿

References

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Lois Tolbert Sayles, the new librarian at the Arleta Branch of the Library Association of Portland, April 1953. Sayles was the first African-American librarian to work for Multnomah County and became the head of the library at Roosevelt High School. (Courtesy Oregon State University Archives, Urban League of Portland Records.)

