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My Heart Will Always Be with the Library.

*A History of the East San Jose Public
Library's First Years*

By Joelle Mellon

Contents

Introduction	p. 1
Jackson Hatch, Prohibitionist and Library Founder	p. 2
Ladies of the Library Board	p.3
Temporary Quarters	p.4
Liberal Policies	p. 6
Fundraising and Community Support	p. 7
Carnegie Donation	p. 8
Architectural Plans	p. 9
New Building	p. 10
Librarian	p. 10
Annexation	p. 13
Bibliography and Sources Consulted	p. 16

The East San Jose Public Library: A History of its First Years

By Joelle Mellon

Introduction

What is now known as San Jose's East Branch Carnegie Library is Santa Clara county's oldest Carnegie library still used as a library ("Carnegie Library," 1980, p. unknown). Originally the only library in the town of East San Jose, it became a branch of the San Jose public when the town was annexed in 1911. In its long history, space in the East branch has been used by the community for many purposes, from well baby clinic to meeting place for Boy Scout troops. However, since its establishment, it has remained, first and foremost, a library. It must be admitted that the motives of the prominent citizens of East San Jose for starting a library were of a Puritanical nature -- they wanted to give local residents a more wholesome gathering place than the local saloons. However, it was just such Christian missionary zeal that initially caused libraries to be founded all over the country at this time in history, though not all of them have continued to thrive into the present. The East San Jose Public Library's initial success was a testament to the strong support that existed around the turn of the century for public libraries, especially among the elite members of communities.

Jackson Hatch, Prohibitionist and Library Founder

The East San Jose Public Library was established in 1907, the same year in which East San Jose incorporated to become a town in its own right. According to a *San Jose Mercury News* article by E. Mark Moreno (1990), the incorporation effort was led by Jackson Hatch, a prominent East San Jose resident, businessman, and stout prohibitionist. He wanted to rid the area of its five saloons, especially one that was considered particularly immoral because it catered to female patrons. Although the proprietors of this bar had special accommodations for women and kept them separated from the male customers, its existence was still considered an intolerable affront to decency by certain local citizens (p. East Extra, 4).

Moreno (1990) adds, however, that Hatch's desire for incorporation was not entirely fueled by moral indignation. East San Jose's roads required major repairs after the earthquake of 1906, and the area's residents desperately needed a sewage system. Hatch believed that incorporating the area into a town would bring about the most efficient solution to these problems, as well as driving out the immoral saloons. He convinced a group of local businessmen to campaign for East San Jose to become a town (p. East Extra, 4).

The effort worked, and according to a letter written by Jackson Hatch (personal communication, July 27, 1906), East San Jose incorporated on July 20, 1906. Like many prohibitionists of his time, Hatch probably felt that the members of his community needed to be provided with a public gathering place that could serve as an acceptable alternative to the bars -- a library. Only one week after East San Jose became a town, he wrote to Andrew Carnegie, telling him of the town's incorporation and asking for a donation of funds for a public library building. In his request letter, he was careful to point out that the new town was an area in which family values were in place, a

neighborhood where the good people of the community had driven out the indecent saloons. Hatch stated:

East San Jose is essentially a community of homes and has a population of between thirteen and fourteen hundred. ... There was some contest at the [incorporation] election, but it was mainly by the liquor interest, and one of the main purposes which those who urged the incorporation of the community had in view was to have the power to regulate the liquor traffic in the community and also to take every step that the laws would justify and sustain in beautifying the town and making it attractive alike to those who live there already and those who may choose to take up their residence there later on. Mr. H.F. Moon, one of our leading residents, and who is a man of refinement and means, consented to act as the Chairman or President of the Board of Trustees, that being the equivalent of Mayor, and the other members of the Board are equally reputable and substantial. I am acting as Attorney for the new Town. ... Among the utilities we need most is a library building, and we have recognized the public spirit which has prompted you in so many instances to meet this much desired want in various places and have felt that to supply this essential part of our municipal government might be wholly agreeable to you (J. Hatch, personal communication, July 27, 1906).

Ladies of the Library Board

The answer to this request would not come until almost a year later, but in their enthusiasm, the elite local citizens would not wait that long to establish a public library. A document written by H.B. Worcester (personal communication, April 17, 1907), the East San Jose town clerk, states that the trustees of the town appointed a board of trustees to the (then nonexistent) East San Jose Public Library in March, 1907. Interestingly, three of the five newly appointed library board members, Mrs. F.H. Moon,

fourth was Mrs. Jackson Hatch. Only one library board member, Miss Lola Balis, was not married to a local government official. It seems likely that she was the niece or cousin of one of the two East San Jose trustees whose wife was not appointed to the library board.

In an era when women were not trusted to vote, it seems incredible that they would be appointed to the library board of trustees. In their capacity as trustees, these ladies, who probably had no business or even library work experience, would have to manage the finances of the library, raise funds, and act as visionaries for its future. But libraries at the turn of the century were supposed to have a social mission -- to educate those with little opportunity, elevate people's character, and, perhaps most importantly, give them a public place to go other than the saloons.

Respectable middle and upper class ladies of this era in time were thought to be of high moral character -- higher, even, than men could ever aspire to. Such women were considered to be ideally suited to social work and charity of all kinds. It was most likely felt by the town board that nobody could be trusted to run such a philanthropic organization as a library more than the wives of the most upstanding community citizens. Although it seems unlikely that society ladies would prove to be good at overseeing the library, surprisingly, it turned out that the board of trustees of San Jose chose the library board remarkably well. These women were remarkably dedicated and competent top library managers, willing to give selflessly of their time and effort.

Temporary Quarters

There was no building or librarian for the new public library, but that did not keep the lady trustees from opening it. Determined to have one, regardless of whether Carnegie agreed to donate funds for a building, a room in the town hall was set aside for the library. It would open with only 417 books (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, June 11, 1907). A document written by library trustee Lola Balis

(personal communication, April 17, 1907) in April, 1907 states:

The public library of the Town of East San Jose is located in the hall and premises used by the Town Trustees of the said Town, and town officers, and occupies a space in a room in said building, which said space is about fifteen feet one way and eighteen feet the other way; and that there are two suitable and proper cases of book shelves and that the floor is covered with a suitable cork flooring, and that there is suitable furniture in said space, and that there are between four and five hundred carefully selected books ...

Eight months later, when the public library acquired a building of its own, the library board returned the town trustees' favor of allocation of space. The minutes of the January 6, 1908 meeting of the board of library trustees state:

Whereas the basement of the East San Jose Public Library Building for East San Jose is not required for library purposes and the same can be used by the Board of Trustees of the Town of East San Jose for the usual purposes of town government, and thereby a saving of expense be made, now, therefore, be it resolved as follows: That this Board does hereby tender to the town of East San Jose, and its Board of Trustees, the use of its basement and vault of the building for usual town purposes for such period of time as may be needed, subject only to the obligation of said Town to bear its reasonable proportion of the heating and lighting of the building, and such other expenses or repairs as may be made necessary by the occupancy of the basement (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, January 6, 1908).

Trustee Lola Balis was appointed by the library board to serve temporarily as librarian until somebody could be hired to fill the position permanently (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, April 17, 1907). It is probable that Balis was chosen because she was the only unmarried member of the board; she had no family duties to

The trustees almost immediately set about "civilizing" their new space. One of the first things they did in their office was to purchase curtains, "a covering for the floor", and a table for the library room (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, April 12, 1907). The next order of business was to determine the rules of the library and the roles the board of trustees would have in its operation.

The library trustees decided to organize themselves into three committees, each made up of three members of the board: one for "library", one for "finance" and one for "rooms". The library committee supervised the "selection, binding and exchange of books and periodicals [and oversaw] the administration of the library and reading rooms" (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, April 17, 1907). The finance committee was responsible for examining all the bills the library had to pay each month and reporting them to the library board. The rooms committee was in charge of "the heating, lighting, and arrangement of the rooms and the care of the fixtures and furniture" (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, April 17, 1907).

In addition to serving on these committees, the members of the library board of trustees were responsible for paying all bills and presenting the library's annual reports to the town board of trustees and the state library in Sacramento.

Liberal Policies

After specifying their roles, the trustees drew up the rules for patron use of the library. The ladies of the board were remarkably egalitarian in their policies for the time, allowing not only residents of East San Jose to have borrowing privileges, but also non-residents, though it was slightly harder for people who were not community citizens to obtain library cards. Permanent residents only had to obtain a free library card from the librarian in order to check out books. Temporary residents of the town could get borrowing privileges if they obtained a card and the signature of a permanent East San Jose resident. If a temporary resident could not obtain a

signature, he could still be permitted to check out items if he made a temporary deposit of money equal to the value of the book he wanted to borrow. Non-residents could get borrowing privileges by paying a fee of one dollar per year and obtaining the signature of a permanent resident of East San Jose (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, April 17, 1907).

The library board of trustees decided to implement other fairly progressive policies as well. According to the 1909 annual report, the library had a total open stack policy - the patrons could select books themselves from the shelves instead of having to page them. (Only twenty years before, this had been unheard of in any library in the country.) In addition, the East San Jose Public Library was very child-friendly in an era when communities had only recently ceased to be generally hostile to the idea of children in libraries. The board of trustees decided not only that the library would have a collection of children's books but also that the first non-reading related service offered would be a children's pictures and games corner. The 1909 annual report states, "Games purchased -- checkers, dominoes, others. Have found this very successful. The children love to run in for a few moments for a game of checkers" (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, May 11, 1909).

Fundraising and Community Support

On Friday, May 17, 1907, the public library was officially declared open. An opening reception was held in the one-room library, at which the ladies of the board "artistically decorated" the room and served tea and cake and lemonade (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, June 11, 1907). The turnout was not very large, so the trustees decided to hold a second reception the following Wednesday evening. This one, indeed, was significantly better attended, and the board of trustees minutes states that the board members were "well pleased with the results of the reception" (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, June 11, 1907). It even got the following brief

write-up in an unidentified local newspaper:

The reception given by the Library Trustees on Wednesday evening was very well attended. It was an informal reception, no program being had, but delicious refreshments were served. Quite a few availed themselves of the opportunity to procure books. The library will be open until further notice on each Friday afternoon from 3 to 5 o'clock (Collection of San Jose Public Library, clipping file, unknown newspaper).

The library trustees had put a great deal of time, effort, and determination into starting the first library in East San Jose. Gratifyingly, the residents of the community strongly supported it by attending in large numbers not only the reception for its opening but also subsequent library fundraising events arranged by the board of trustees. The library board organized a lecture on Yosemite Valley and a classical music concert to raise funds. According to the library board of trustees' minutes, the hall in which the concert was held was "crowded to its utmost capacity " (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, May 14, 1907) and that the lecture was attended by "a large and appreciative audience" (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, Nov. 12, 1907). The concert raised \$58.10, and the lecture \$41.20.

Individual residents and local associations such as the Mothers' Club also showed their support by giving sometimes substantial donations of books, periodicals and even money (Collection of San Jose Public Library, clipping file, unknown newspaper, June 21, 1907). According to the 1909 annual report, 157 volumes were given as gifts to the library between May, 1908 and May, 1909 (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, May 11, 1909).

Carnegie Donation

It soon became clear that not only local residents were willing to support the prominent community members in their efforts to establish and run a library. A letter

was sent to Jackson Hatch that changed the course of library history in East San Jose -- Andrew Carnegie agreed to fund the construction of a building for the new public library. The letter stated simply:

If the City agree by Resolution of Council to maintain a Free Public Library, at a cost of not less than Seven Hundred Dollars a year, and provides a suitable site for the building, Mr. Carnegie will be glad to give Seven Thousand Dollars to erect a Free Public Library Building for East San Jose (P. Secretary, personal communication, May 2, 1907).

Although the sum was a pittance compared to the 50,000 dollars Carnegie had provided to the main city of San Jose a few years earlier (J. Hatch, personal communication, July 27, 1906), the announcement of the donation caused great excitement in the town. Typical of a Carnegie gift, it had strings attached -- the town had to guarantee that at least seven hundred dollars a year would be provided to keep the library running. This did not seem to present a problem in East San Jose, however. A local newspaper reported that when Jackson Hatch read Carnegie's letter in a town council meeting, a committee was immediately appointed to meet with the library board about plans for the proposed building (Collection of San Jose Public Library, clipping file, unknown newspaper, May 21, 1907).

Architectural Plans

The boards of trustees for the library and the town conferred together and selected noted architect Jacob Lenzen to construct the building Carnegie had agreed to fund. Lenzen's plans were approved by both boards. It was to be a building two stories tall, made up of five rooms. Like the architecture of many other Carnegie libraries, a classical revival style was chosen, featuring a pillared portico in front of the building. A drawing by Lenzen of the proposed building was featured in the September 11, 1907 issue of the *San Jose Daily Mercury*. The brief accompanying article stated that

the building was going to be constructed to look similar to the San Jose Public Library ("Work on East," 1907, p. unknown). Perhaps this resemblance was meant to encourage a sort of town pride in East San Jose residents, a way of reminding them that now their town had a Carnegie library, just like the larger city of San Jose. According to an *East San Jose Sun* article by Tom Gilsenan (1978), it was decided that the Carnegie building would be constructed on a lot located at what is now the corner of 23rd and East Santa Clara Streets, which were called Adams and Alum Rock Avenue at that time (pp. 1, 3).

New Building

On January 17, 1908, the new library building was officially opened to the public. Once again, a reception was given by the ladies of the board, which was, as usual, well-attended by enthusiastic residents of East San Jose. A brief report of the event, presumably written by one of the library board members, stated, "The guests ... expressed their delight over the new library" (Collection of San Jose Public Library, clipping file, unknown document).

Librarian

With great public support in place and a new library building, the only thing that was missing was a permanent librarian. The duties of the librarian had been determined at a library board meeting that had occurred many months before. It was decided that her responsibilities would include: taking general care of the books and other library property, classifying, arranging and cataloging all publications in the collection, and keeping track of all overdue books and fines (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, April 17, 1907).

The library trustees met on October 8, 1907 to choose a librarian and determine how much she should be paid. There were four applicants for the position -- Alta Chambers, Nellie Lawson, Ada Sprague and Mrs. Hicks. The board took a vote and

elected Nellie Lawson to the position, typically choosing the only applicant who was both unmarried and from East San Jose. Although it has not been definitely determined whether she was related to any of the prominent East San Jose citizens, it is likely that she was. She shares a surname with Mrs. T.H. Lawson, one of the women who was on the library board at the time Nellie Lawson was chosen to be librarian. Given the fact that most librarians around the turn of the century came from fairly well-off families, it is probably safe to say that some sort of nepotism was involved in the board's choice.

The trustees determined that the librarian's starting salary would be twenty dollars per month (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, October 8, 1907). She was also given another form of compensation, however -- encouragement and money to take part in professional societies and training. In December, 1907, the board of trustees paid her membership dues of one dollar to the California Library Association (Mrs. J. Hatch, personal communication, December 10, 1907). Nellie Lawson was even given paid leave for two weeks to attend the Library Institute in San Francisco (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, July 14, 1908).

Despite the fact that she was most likely primarily hired because of her family connections, like the ladies of the board, she was very devoted to her library work and gave generously of her time and energy. On May 10, 1908, she reported that she had checked out 448 books in twelve days (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, May 10, 1908). The new library building was initially kept open twenty hours per week and was open all days except Sundays and holidays. In February, 1908, the library board decided to add six more hours to the library's schedule -- it would now also be kept open from seven to nine in the evening on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, Feb. 11, 1908). Nellie Lawson had no assistants to help her run the library. The only other library employees were a part-

time janitor and a man who took care of maintaining the lawn. In addition to her responsibilities as the only librarian, on February 11, 1908 she was elected by the trustees to the position of secretary of the library board (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, Feb., 11, 1908). After this date, all board meeting minutes were recorded by her. She apparently even had some responsibilities outside of the library, doing some teaching.

Like many other women in the library profession, Nellie Lawson burned out quickly. After serving as librarian for only a little over two years, she resigned. Despite being overworked, however, she seemed to bear great affection for the library and the trustees. She also seemed to have generally enjoyed her time working there but to feel that, as hard as she worked, she had never given enough. Lawson wrote in her resignation letter:

Owing to my school duties and other work which calls upon my time, I deem it necessary and admirable to submit my resignation as Librarian of the East San Jose Library to take effect December 15, 1909. The past two years have been busy, but the Library hours have been happy, instructive, and delightful. I have been sorry not to have done everything when and exactly how it should have been done and my greatest regret is that I have not had the time to put in the work I should have liked to have. My heart will always be with the Library, anticipating its possibilities and realizing its limitations. To the trustees as a board and to the individual members I wish to express my sincere thanks for the friendship, kindness, thoughtfulness, patience and help they have shown to me during the time I have been here. Also to the patrons I wish to express my appreciation for their cheerful compliance with all rules and regulations. My aim and wish is to be of any and all assistance I can to the new Librarian or to the trustees (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, December 14, 1909).

A new librarian was chosen only one day after Nellie Lawson wrote her resignation letter (N.M. Lawson, personal communication, December 15, 1909). Her name was Alda Holland, and all that is known about her background is that she substituted for Lawson when she took a two week vacation in the summer of 1909 (N.M. Lawson, personal communication July 13, 1909). Holland's application for the position was extremely simple, stating only:

I hereby make application for the position of Librarian of the East San Jose Public Library. If I am elected to the position I will perform the duties to the best of my ability (A. Holland, personal communication, December 14, 1909).

Like Nellie Lawson, Alda Holland shared a surname with one of the ladies on the board of trustees (Mrs. J.W. Holland) that hired her. She immediately took over as secretary of the library board. In October, 1910, her monthly salary was raised from twenty dollars per month to thirty dollars, but the hours of the library were increased again -- in addition to all its normal hours, it would now be open from 2-4 on Sunday afternoons (A. Holland, personal communication, October 11, 1910). Unfortunately, the increased salary for the librarian did not last. For no known reason, it was reduced back to twenty dollars per month in July, 1911 (A. Holland, personal communication, July 3, 1911). Ironically, the library's hours were increased again only a few months after her pay cut (A. Holland, personal communication, November 11, 1911). Even though she was at the board meetings that decreased her pay and increased her hours, Alda Holland raised no protest to these decisions.

Annexation

According to Moreno's 1990 article, in December, 1911 the town of East San Jose voted to allow itself to be annexed by the city of San Jose. By this time, many of the things that the leading residents had hoped would be achieved by incorporation had come to pass. The sewer system had been installed, and the five saloons had been

abolished (p. East Extra, 4). Gilsenan (1978) states that the East San Jose Public Library became a branch of the San Jose Public Library when the city was annexed (p. 3). The ladies of the board apparently stopped meeting -- no more meeting minutes were recorded. Although its days as an independent library were over, it would outlast the main San Jose library building, which Andrew Carnegie had donated fifty-thousand dollars to build. While the main San Jose Carnegie library was demolished in the 1960's, the East branch still stands proudly.

The support the East San Jose Public Library received in its first years is nothing short of incredible by today's community standards. The small group of society ladies who served on its board of trustees caused the library to survive under initially extremely difficult circumstances -- when there was no librarian, no building available and under five hundred books. Although they probably had no prior experience with the administration of a library, they somehow managed to raise funds, create policies, hire staff and generally make all of the important decisions that library directors with years of education and experience are faced with today. The efforts of the individual members of the East San Jose community, who attended library fundraising events in droves and generously donated books and periodicals, also contributed greatly to the library's survival into the present. Without the boldness of Jackson Hatch and the generosity of Andrew Carnegie, of course, it is impossible to tell how long the library would have languished in a small back room of the town hall. And the surprising devotion to the library of the overworked first librarians who only regretted that they could not do more for their library should not be forgotten.

Today, the San Jose library system is struggling to maintain an excellent level of service while trying to cope with budget cuts and a decreased level of staffing. It is impossible not to wonder what happened to the strong community support that existed for the East San Jose Public Library slightly after the turn of the century. Perhaps it has

decreased partly because there are now extremely few women able to volunteer large amounts of time and effort to any cause. The wives that would once have been appointed to the board of trustees are now in the work force with their husbands.

But it is unfair to condemn the present-day residents of the community of East San Jose. According to a September 13, 1978 article in an unknown local newspaper, as recently as twenty years ago, they rallied strongly around their library. Through the efforts of a grass-roots movement in the community, the East San Jose Public Library was declared a historical landmark in the late 1970's, which kept it from being demolished and replaced by a new building (Collection of San Jose Public Library, clipping file, unknown newspaper). Although it has gone through a great deal of internal remodeling in the last twenty years, on the outside, the building looks much the same as it did when it was originally constructed. Its neoclassical facade still reminds the user of an ancient Greek temple to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Perhaps this similarity is not entirely coincidental.

Bibliography and Sources Consulted

Carnegie library will get a face lift. (1980, February 5-6) . East San Jose Sun. p. unknown. Brief article explaining basic facts about the East branch's remodelling.

Gilsenan, T. (1978, February 15) . Carnegie library restoration set: Reprieve for a piece of history. East San Jose Sun. pp. 1, 3. Interesting article with lots of obscure facts about East San Jose around the turn of the century.

Moreno, E. M. (1990, October 10) . One Carnegie library remains out of 2,400: Group tries to save relics of East San Jose's cityhood. San Jose Mercury News. pp. East 1, 4-5. Well-written piece that explains much about Jackson Hatch and his motives for wanting incorporation.

Work on East San Jose library begins. (1907, September 11) . San Jose Daily Mercury. p. unknown. Very brief piece featuring early architectural drawing of the library.

Note: The vast majority of my sources are unable to be included in this bibliography due to incomplete information or the unpublished nature of the writings. They include correspondence, board of trustees' minutes, library annual reports and a few other documents. These records can all be found at San Jose Public Library, main branch, in the administrative offices or the California room.