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Orange County Chronicle - Newport Beach Edition, May 9, 1976 Pg 1

POSSIBLE HUB OF NEW CULTURAL CENTER

Amidst Fiscal Woes, Huntington Beach Builds Monumental Library

BY SHERRY DOOLITTLE
Chronicle Staff Writer

Huntington Beach's first library was a roofless building purchased for $50 in 1909 and housing 338 volumes. Atop a hill in Central Park sits the city's present library, an awesome beauty sheathed in reflective glass, a work of art.

The 75,400-square-foot structure, completed last year by general contractor Swinerton and Walberg, is a monument to the growth of Huntington Beach, a city of some 150,000 residents today which had fewer than 12,000 in 1960.

Library Director Walter W. Johnson says that his new facility is not simply a place to house books: It is an activities center for people with widely ranging interests. Johnson believes that just "as the sparkling sprays splash from the fountains within and outside the library, so should ideas pour (out) ... in a cascade of new and exciting concepts."

Can any library building measure up to Johnson's lofty standards? Perhaps this one can. Besides its fountains, plants, breath-taking views through its many windows, its striking architecture, and its books, the library has facilities designed to encourage its use as a broad-based cultural center. Though much remains to be added, even now its inventory of resources is impressive.

The popularity of the library has been overwhelming. City Councilman Ted W. Bartlett sums it up by saying simply, "The library is great." Bartlett says he has gotten positive feedback from citizens. "Some of the older folks in the downtown area were upset at first about the main library not being downtown anymore; but once they went up on that hill and saw the new library, they loved it."

When asked if he uses the library personally, Bartlett replied, "I go out there a lot, but with all the material I have to read as a councilman, I don't have the time to check out books to read. I've always liked to read; and some day, when I'm no longer on the council, I know I'll really use the library."

Bartlett feels the library is an excellent facility now; and even though he would like to see new things added, he does not see this happening soon. He says, "If you could tell us how to get a 40% increase in revenue without increasing taxes at this time, I'd love to hear your ideas."

Councilwoman Norma Brandel Gibbs is especially excited about the library and has been involved with the project since it began. She points out that the library was "a difficult thing to erect because of professional differences between the builder, contractor and architect ... There was a time when I said that if I live to see the library completed, that will be the ultimate."

SYMBOL OF A CITY'S GROWTH — Three views of library, near corner of Talbert and Goldenwest, officially called Huntington Beach Library, Information and Cultural Resource Center. Facility has been open more than a year now. Chronicle Photos/Kurt Zinser

Gibbs has seen the completion of the building, but she is upset that the library budget is being cut. She points out, "Everybody likes the library, but nobody wants to pay for it. What has happened is that we've had a 500% increase in space allotment as well as personnel. The civic center came on board in 1974. Then there was the library and the city parks. All this came at the time of the economic recession and inflation, so we were really strapped. Municipalities like ours can't go on a deficit budget like the federal

government, so you have to cut down the budget. So an across the board thing has been that each department cut 10%."

One recent idea to raise more money in Huntington Beach is to impose a trash collection fee. As proposed, the revenue would go into the city's general fund. Gibbs would like to see this fee "all earmarked for the library and parks. It would make me feel jubilant," but at this point it doesn't look like her wishes will be granted.

Besides her involvement in city government, Gibbs is a teacher at California State University, Long Beach. Even with all her activities, when asked if she personally used the library, she enthusiastically replied, "Oh yes, I'm a voraeious reader. I will say my predominant reading is city materials, but I also read about a book a day on top of everything else."

Gibb's feelings about the library are summed up when she describes part of the City Council meeting held on May 10, 1976. "You should have seen the kids who came saying don't cut our library program, and don't cut our parks and rec. programs. It was very heartwarming. None of us really want to cut it; but again, it's how do we pay for it?"

Gibbs feels, "There is nothing that benefits a community more than a library; and there is nothing in our community that has been as good a catalyst, and that the people have been as proud of, as that library."

Johnson is pleased with all that the library currently offers, but points out, "There's a lot more to be done in the long run, but the city is in a very serious economic position. New money has to be found to support those things which all came on board at the same time — the civic center, the parks and the library."

Even though future plans seem somewhat vague at the moment, Johnson is looking forward to library branches to serve other areas of the city. "Right now we have these little annexes that are too small to even be called branches." The annexes are run by volunteers who have put in over 7,500 man-hours in the past year." He would also like to see the library tied into the school library systems. "This would enable the public and the schools to have access to the same buildings, and it would save a lot of money in salaries and duplication of materials."

Another thing Johnson would like to see is a telephone answering service where people could call in on topics and listen to a tape over the phone to get the information they need. Johnson also hopes the future will bring more access to data banks, public use of cable television, and many more art displays and cultural activities. Building additions he hopes will materialize in the future include an auditorium, art gallery, and a learning resource center off the children's area.

To see all this happen would bring a great deal of joy to Johnson and many others, but Johnson points out, "There are some indications now that some people feel we really can't afford a library of this caliber; and I feel there's nothing to indicate that we can't."

He emphasizes that a library "is something people can identify with. It's a wholesome, healthy, and active operation. If you're going to put community funds into something, I can't think of a better place to put them than into a library. It's used by so many people. We have at least a hundred people a day come in here and register for new library cards. Our circulation has surpassed what we thought it would be. The library is used so heavily, I just can't imagine it not being supported."

* * *

Library Director Walter W. Johnson was one of the first people to focus on the need for library expansion to keep pace with Huntington Beach's growth. Planning began in 1967 and the library was dedicated finally on April 5, 1975. During the intervening years, those pushing the project faced many frustrations.

The first setback — almost fatal — occurred in November 1968, when the voters turned down a bond issue designed to fund the project. Though 62 percent favored the $3.15 million library proposal and an accompanying $6.0 million parks program, this was less than the required two-thirds majority.

HUNTINGTON BEACH'S new library is equipped with modern devices, including computers and microprint readers, to assist users and staff alike. Chronicle Photos/Kurt Zinser

Library

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In the wake of this defeat, the City Council moved to reate a Public Facilities Corporation (PFC) to fund the brary and the civic center.

Under state law, such corporations can issue tax-exempt onds for the construction of public buildings. The city's eneral credit is not pledged as security for the bonds' epayment, and two-thirds voter approval is not required.

On September 1, 1972, the PFC sold 25-year bonds in e amount of $5.0 million to finance the library. (Earlier, n January 15, 1972, $11.1 million was raised for the civic enter.) The annual payment on the library bonds is 399,000, and is made from the city's general fund. eyond this, the new library's operating budget is 1,015,900 for 1976. Thus, the library's total cost per apita is about $9.50 a year, for each of Huntington each's 150,000 citizens.

Members of the Library Board then toured recently built braries in California; and after intensive research and terviewing of architects, the Los Angeles firm of Richard nd Dion Neutra was chosen. On October 28, 1972, the round breaking ceremony took place and construction egan.

Neutra describes his creation as "a simple, bold glazed avilion placed at a high point in the park, basically only wo stories in height, sheathed in reflective glass so as to irror the surrounding park landscape, as well as exclude ndesirable sun rays."

The building is impressive at any time, but Neutra points ut that it's "especially memorable at night, when the stack area with its lighting forms the major source of illumination . . . reflected in the foreground waters as seen from the west. The waters of Talbert Lake are drawn closer to the complex by the use of informal ponds, streams and water-filled roofs . . ."

The stack area is located in the center of the building. Architect Neutra felt that "by collecting the book storage at the center of the building, a very compact arrangement has been achieved, saving approximately 30% in the required floor area to be consumed. The main entrance is located at the upper of two major levels with a circular ramp leading to the lower floor and access provided to all principal levels by means of ramps or an elevator."

At present the stacks hold approximately 125,000 volumes, but are designed to house a total of 350,000 volumes. FM listening posts are located throughout the stack area. These are good for kids who can't study unless plugged into music, as well as for those who simply enjoy listening to music.

The library employs 43½ full time equivalent permanent employees and 20 full time equivalent temporary employees; and is the unofficial guardian of a rooster named Melvil, named after the man who organized the Dewey Decimal System of cataloguing books. Melvil has been around since construction of the library began, and it seems he's quite content in his stimulating surroundings.

Many of the operating functions of the library, such as checking out books, overdue notices, and filing are done by a computer made by a Boston firm. At present about 100 libraries in the United States use this computer system, which is designed for libraries. The University of California will be placing these computers in their campus libraries shortly.

Without this computer, the library would have to employ many more people to handle its vast circulation. During March and April, approximately 140,000 items were circulated. During this same two-month period, over 6,000 new library cards were issued, bringing the total of library cards to over 63,000. (Continued on Page 20.)

LIBRARY DIRECTOR Walter W. Johnson

Library

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The Reference Department has four professional librarians to serve the public. The library houses a substantial amount of reference materials and services. For example, there are 700 periodical subscriptions, 7,000 microfilm reels and a pamphlet file containing over 8,000 items.

The Reference Department has access to a state-funded reference center, the Southern California Answering Network (SCAN). This enables the library to quickly locate material not available at its own branch and borrow it from other libraries in Orange County and throughout the state.

Also housed is an Art and Book Shop, run by Friends of the Library. Those who work in the shop are volunteers, except for Marie Sheets, who supervises part time. The shop rents best sellers for 15¢ a day. Sheets says that this is an "extended service of the library, and we have many copies available of current best sellers." When popular demand for the best sellers, decreases, some copies are donated to the library, some are sold for half price in the shop, and the left-overs are sold at the Friend's Book Sale.

Merchandise is also for sale in the shop. "One of the most popular items we've had so far are stone carvings from Russia," Sheets says. Other items available include wooden objects from Poland, zodiac jewelry made of pewter from Sweden, Christmas ornaments from Austria, and wooden log toys from Utah. The shop also carries DeGrazia cards, and Sheets believes, "We are probably the only place in Orange County to carries his cards."

Any profits from the shop will go the library. "So far," Sheets says, "we are just breaking even, but we hope this will change soon."

Unique to the library is the Literary Heritage Garden. It is planted and cared for by the Huntington Beach Branch of the American Association of University Women. The garden was the idea of Shirley Kerins who began research on the project in 1969. "I was involved with herbs at that time, but I was also aware of the many plants in literature," Kerins explains.

She drew up plans for the garden and presented them to Erik Katzmeier, the landscape architect for the library. He revised her plans; but when she presented them to the city, she discovered that even though officials thought she had a good idea, they did not have the funds to help. She finally got volunteers together, as well as some help from the Parks Department for the heavy work, and the garden became a reality.

"The total area of the garden extends from the parking lot down the hill toward the lake. Each tree was chosen for its literary reference," according to Kerins. The central portion of the garden is divided into sections which include English literature, Children's literature, Classical Mythology, Biblical, Oriental literature, American folklore, American literature, and a miscellaneous section of plants pertaining to national emblems and legends.

Kerins emphasizes that "no city funds are involved in the garden. Funds are raised through individual contributions, plant sales, the selling of stationary depicting the garden and plants, and other fund raising activities such as luncheons and speaking engagements."

Councilwoman Gibbs: 'There's nothing in our community that the people have been as proud of as that library.'