

BUILDING A LIBRARY
(The Story of Livermore's First Libraries)
By Gary Drummond

A library where one can borrow books and read periodicals is not a recent sign of culture in Livermore: the community has had benefit of a library since 1875. The citizens of the town at its founding in the early 1870's were both a socially and culturally diverse population. Socially it attracted those who supported four or five fraternal organizations, two fire companies and a town band. And culturally, it ranged from those who preferred a quiet escape into a Victorian novel to those who supported one of the town's 13 saloons.

In April 1875, the Livermore Library and Dramatic Association organized a library whose holdings were kept at Cross' Jewelry Store at First and Lizzie (now Livermore Avenue) Streets. A family membership cost \$3.00 annually, or for \$20.00 one could have a life membership. The local paper reported that there were 250 volumes available with another 75 on order. In December of that year, the library was moved across the street to George Freeman's furniture store in the IOOF building on First Street.

Three years later, in 1878, a successor organization known as the Livermore Public Library Association erected its own building (still standing at 2136 First Street). In 1881, the Association was in perilous state and issued an anxious call for new members. It even offered a "life membership that would entitle the holder and family to all the privileges of the Association during the term of his or her natural life." But by 1887 public interest had diminished to such an extent that the Library closed, and the books stored in the local newspaper office. In its twelve years, the library had never acquired a permanent librarian.

In 1896, the women of the town organized themselves into a Ladies League of Progress of Livermore. Their first order of business was to re-open a public library. Within eight months, the group had formed a public corporation to finance library acquisitions and pay the bills, purchased the old library building and pulled the books out of storage, and selected a full-time librarian. On October 15, 1896, the Livermore Free Public Library opened its doors.

A year later, the Library Board reported that there were 3500 books on the shelves, and in cooperation of the local paper, it published a "wants" list of new books. The reading room was supplied with 36 newspapers from around the state, donated by their publishers. The local drugstore donated day-old copies of the San Francisco papers.

The Ladies League next lobbied the Town Trustees to consider a tax levy for library support. In September 1901, Livermore became the first town in California to take advantage of new legislation that permitted the establishment of a free public library under municipal control and support.

Now, serious discussions were opened in 1908 with the Carnegie Foundation for a library building grant. A condition of a \$10,000 grant was that the beneficiary would provide the land on which the library would be built. After consideration of several sites, the Town Trustees proposed to acquire the block at Third and J streets for \$9,000 and, at the same time, mitigate a nuisance - the site was occupied by a slaughterhouse.

The grant request and the land acquisition were successful. Contracts were let to construct a library building, which officially opened in May 1911. That summer, the Livermore Women's Improvement Club helped finance the landscaping, plant trees, and finish and furnish the basement rooms. The Carnegie Library building was in use for over 50 years, until the new Civic Center Library was opened in 1966. The venerable old building now houses the Livermore Heritage Guild History Center and the Livermore Art Association.

Note: In 2004, the City of Livermore opened the new \$20,000,000 main library at 1188 South Livermore Ave.