

Chapter 18 - The Elusive Library

Throughout the latter half of the decade of the 1950s, there had been considerable discourse in community circles about the locale's growing need for library services. As the town became a city and as the population of the community and surrounding area steadily grew, young families with school-age children began to abound. The need for a local library became evermore evident with the changing demographics of the city. Yet, as the curtain closed on the 1950s, the nearest library to The Village was Oklahoma City's downtown library. The downtown library, built in 1954 to replace the diminutive 53 year-old Carnegie Library, was far from adequate in serving the needs of Oklahoma City, much less the surrounding suburban communities.

In 1963, library services would move closer to The Village with the opening of Oklahoma City's Belle Isle Library at 5501 North Villa. Although a big step forward for residents of Oklahoma City, the new library was far from convenient for residents of The Village.

A glimmer of hope for local library advocates would come not long after the Belle Isle Library opened its doors to the public. In the spring of 1964, community leaders throughout the metro area began discussing the merits of creating a county library system capable of providing library services to all the cities within Oklahoma County.

County library systems had been made possible by a state law enacted in 1960. Pursuant to this Act, voters in eligible counties were allowed to assess a "special annual recurring ad valorem tax levy of not less than one mill nor more than two mills on the dollar of assessed valuation of all taxable property in the county for public library funding."

It had been done successfully in Tulsa and city leaders from all over the metropolitan area, including our own, decided to make the pilgrimage to Tulsa to see the Tulsa-County Library System at work.

Obviously impressed with what they saw, local leaders returned from their fact-finding mission, rolled up their sleeves, and went to work to create our own county library system. When the question was finally put to a vote in 1964, Oklahoma County voters overwhelmingly approved a 1.9 mill ad valorem tax to establish a city-county library system.

The following year, (1965) the Metropolitan Library Act was passed establishing the method of organizing a city-county library system. Under the provisions of the Act, the Metropolitan Library Commission was created as the governing body with the power to establish, maintain and operate the city-county system. Each jurisdiction within the county, including our own, was to have representation on the governing body.

Having successfully navigated the legal minefield and completed all the statutory requirements, the Oklahoma County Library System was finally established on July 1, 1965. A lease agreement between Oklahoma City and the Metropolitan Library Commission brought the five Oklahoma City Libraries (Downtown, Belle Isle, Capitol Hill, Dunbar and Wright) into the library system. The Bethany Library, which had opened earlier in the year at 3510 N. Mueller, joined the system, as did the Del City Library and the Midwest City Library.

With seemingly great foresight, the board of freeholders deftly positioned the City of The Village to participate in intergovernmental library agencies by judiciously adding the following language to the city charter:

“...the council may authorize, or enter into arrangements for, a joint or cooperative library service with other units or agencies of government.”

With the necessary legal framework in place both at the state and local level, The Village gladly and willingly, became an integral part of the new county library system. More importantly, her citizens were ready and eager to begin enjoying all the benefits that the well-funded leviathan could muster. Yet, despite the sensational progress, there was still one notable deficiency, --The Village still did not have a library to call its own.

Regardless of how insurmountable the task ahead might have seemed, the formula for obtaining a library of our own was clearly established by the legislation that brought the county library system to life. The 1.9 mill levy that had been approved for Oklahoma County set out specific procedures for the establishment of permanent and temporary libraries within the new county system. Local officials, led by Mayor Bob Blakeley, wasted no time in organizing an advisory board to work with the metropolitan library board towards the goal of obtaining a library for The Village.

The Library Advisory Board was created in November 1965 by the passage of Ordinance #161 and was comprised of 15 citizens appointed by the Council. Earl Martin, the principal of Sunset Elementary School, was chosen to chair the board while Barbara Woods, who represented Hoover PTA, served as the vice-chair. Mrs. Paul Sprehe and Sam Raltson served on the board on behalf of St. Eugene's School and PTA, respectively. Board member Sizemore Bowlan, represented The Village Lions Club, a local civic organization that had generously offered to raise between \$30,000 and \$50,000 for a permanent library. Also appointed to serve on the board was Marian Dierdorff, the librarian at John Marshall High School. Other members included Scott Nickerson, Ruth Sutton, Mrs. Earl Newton, Helen Fryer, P.R. Kirk, Mrs. L.M. Ulrey, Virginia Harmon, Rex Reynolds and Shirley Rayburn. Some 37 years later, Shirley Rayburn remains an active member of the Friends of the Library. Two ex officio members were also appointed to represent the City of Nichols Hills.

To set the process in motion, the Council then adopted a Resolution calling on the Metropolitan Library System to establish a branch library in The Village. Several months, however, would pass before Mayor Bob Blakeley would report that the Metropolitan Library System had agreed to staff, furnish and provide books for a temporary library, --provided The Village would agree to pay the rent for the facility.

The Library Advisory Board wholeheartedly endorsed the plan and recommended that the city agree to lease a 3,450 square foot space in the far southeast corner of Casady Square. The board implored the Council to act expeditiously as the library system had only approved the creation of three temporary branch libraries and these invaluable repositories of knowledge would be established on a first-come, first-serve basis.

The Council responded favorably to the board's plea and moved quickly to close the deal with the library system. Remodeling of retail space in Casady Square began in April of 1966 and the new "Village Branch Library" opened its doors to the public shortly thereafter in July. After allowing the library staff ample time to settle-in, an open house was held later that autumn. At last, The Village had its own local library! Local bibliophiles could not have been happier.

The euphoria and giddiness, however, did not last long. Less than six months after the opening of the branch library, Barbara Woods asked Mayor Hank Hewitt to consider floating a bond issue to build a new and permanent library facility.

The Council, having recently endured a divisive sales tax election, apparently felt it was a bit premature to begin espousing the virtues of another potentially contentious tax. While the Council's indecision might have seemed a bit pusillanimous to some library aficionados, deferring action on Woods' bold supplication seemed to be by far the most prudent option from the Council's perspective.

Not one to take no for an answer, the tenacious and persistent Woods returned a year later in November 1967 to renew the plea for a library bond issue. Again, the Council seemed reluctant to act. Buying time, the Council bounced the ball back into the Library Board's court asking the board to obtain more information.

Obviously, the Council needed the particulars before it could reasonably assume the mantra of another tax election. Pertinent details such as the proposed size and cost of the new edifice were needed. Whether federal funding might be available to help defray the estimated cost of construction was another important consideration. Yet, all these funding and cost considerations aside, one colossal and troubling hindrance facing the city was the fact that it had yet to secure a site on which to build a new library.

In January '68 the search for an appurtenant library site finally got underway in earnest. A committee appointed by the Council was authorized to approach the Bishop of St. Eugene concerning the bountiful and, then still bucolic, pastureland owned by the Bishop. The almost 160 acres of undeveloped land located on the southwest corner of Hefner and Penn was originally owned by Lewis Hasley and had been bequeathed to the Bishop on the homesteader's passing.

While on the one hand the city naively hoped for a handout, it was prepared, if necessary, to bargain with the Bishop for the purchase a suitable tract of land for the library. Yet, much to the city's dismay, neither of the scenarios would unfold and the city haplessly reached another impasse in its ongoing quest for library land.

Having encountered another dead-end, scant, if any, progress, toward library land acquisition was made again until the spring of 1969. All other plans up to this point had ended in frustration and despair. The Council announced that the time had come for the library board to come up with a new plan of action. Barbara Woods, marching orders in hand, eagerly accepted the call to clarion.

A month later, Woods dutifully appeared before the Council armed with cost figures as requested. While the specific figures presented by Woods are unknown, one might surmise that they engendered a visceral reaction of sorts. As the question of how the city would pay for this new library flashed through the minds of city leaders, one might envision a synapse or two being temporarily short-circuited by the thought. After all, the city, while not destitute, was certainly not blessed with an overabundance of cash.

Despite the looming uncertainty of how this financial miracle might be pulled off, there was still much to do before it would be necessary to swallow that bitter pill. City leaders proceeded to plod ahead under the assumption that the financial bridge could be and would be crossed later. Some more fastidious observers, however, must have been hoping the seemingly insurmountable fiscal hurdle would present itself much, much later indeed.

Having the wind knocked out of their sails had become seemingly commonplace to diehard library disciples. Waiting patiently in the wings, they watched the predilection towards inertia creep in again.

Then, Mayor Hewitt, perhaps hoping to breathe new life into the stalled effort, broached the library site subject with Curtis Lester, a local realtor. Hewitt asked Lester to explore the possibility of the city purchasing property owned by Village Baptist Church. The land, located to the north of the church, would make a perfect site for the long-sought library. Hopes were quickly dashed, however,

when the city was told that the land was not for sale. The land would be needed for overflow parking after the church built its new sanctuary.

Between May 1969 and February 1970 a breakthrough would at long last begin to develop in the attenuated hunt for a library site. Local developers Al Kavanaugh and Wes Finley had somehow succeeded in purchasing some 85 acres of land from the Bishop of St. Eugene. The land extended from the far north end of Village Drive and wrapped around to the east all the way to Penn. Kavanaugh and Finley wanted, however, to build multifamily dwellings on the land in contravention of city zoning regulations.

The Council was adamantly opposed to the idea of an apartment complex and, at first, it appeared that the developer would be hard-pressed to get the nod from City Fathers. Then seemingly out of nowhere came the deus ex machina. In a stroke of genius the shrewd developers approached Barbara Woods with a plan, --a quid pro quo, if you will. They would give the city land for a library site in exchange for a special permit to build the apartment complex.

Anxious and sanguine library supporters sanctioned the concept without hesitation. The Council, however, still had some reservations about the merits of the proposed development. To allay these lingering concerns, Kavanaugh and Finley agreed to a litany of special provisions that would ostensibly engender a high quality development. Satisfied with the concessions, the Council ratified the pact soon thereafter on February 27, 1970.

On May 19, 1970, Kavanaugh and Finley presented the deed for 4.37 acres of land to the city. There were, however, some last minute surprises. In particular, the deed presented was not for the land originally promised to the city. That land had been set-aside for the Hertz Corporation. As it was soon revealed, Hertz was interested in the site for the company's Worldwide Reservations Center.

The site designated as an alternative was located a short distance to the south of the original site and was, fortunately, deemed a suitable substitution by the Council. Yet, from the city's perspective, tank batteries and oil pipelines located on the land rendered the site somewhat more expensive to develop and this became cause for some consternation. Kavanaugh-Finley, not wishing to blow the deal, obsequiously agreed to bear the cost of the tank and oil line removal.

Despite this generous offer, Joe Singer, the owner of the oil field equipment was not inclined to be helpful and it would eventually take threatened intervention by the Corporation Commission to finally clear the property of the encumbrances. This would not be last time the city would butt heads with Joe Singer.

Although, there is no reason to suspect disingenuous intentions on the part of the grantors, the Quit Claim Deed they presented also seemed to raise a few eyebrows. After all, the case of the mysterious park deed disappearance had transpired not all that long before. That unpleasant and deep-rooted memory certainly still lurked in the minds of some, if not all, of the members of the Council. Failure to avoid another similar fiasco would not be looked upon favorably by library supporters and might be tantamount to political seppuku.

Kavanaugh-Finley, still hoping to avoid a meltdown, placated the Council, by withdrawing the Quit Claim Deed and presenting a Warranty Deed for the property in its stead. The grantors, however, insisted on placing a title restriction on the land allowing the property to be used for a library or park, but nothing else. Overcoming a seemingly infinite number of obstacles and last minute contingencies, the long-sought library land had finally been secured.

As it turned out, the grantors of the library land were in much more of a hurry than the city was. While the construction of the Whispering Hills Apartment Complex began promptly in June of 1970, literally no headway was made towards building a new library until much later.

In spite of the well-intentioned regulations imposed on the apartment development, history has shown them ineffectual at best. As the ownership of the complex changed hands over the years, maintenance of the complex faltered. Frequent fires and a relatively high incidence of crime continue to plague the residents who make their home there today. But, --that's another story.

A decade and a half later, the Metropolitan Library System, facing growing demand for library services, expanded the temporary library facility in Casady Square to 5,000 square feet. In keeping with the cost-sharing scheme embarked upon almost two decades earlier, the city agreed to pay the additional monthly rent. The library system held up its end of the bargain by providing the requisite furnishings, books and staff.

Despite this additional investment, Metro Library System Director Lee Brawner, seized on the occasion of renewed interest in the library to re-ignite efforts to secure a permanent library for The Village. Practically, before the paint had even had time to dry on the expanded facility, Brawner began intimating that the library system might be inclined to close the facility if progress were not made soon to obtain a permanent library building. In fact, Brawner's candid remarks at the open house for the expanded facilities said as much.

While it was clear the library system could certainly close the branch if it wanted to, that eventuality was unlikely at best. An audacious act as such would have surely caused considerable commotion. Not only would The Village be affected by the closing, so would most of her affluent neighbors to the south as

well as those to the north. Having said that, far too much was at stake to call Brawner's bluff.

In the final analysis, Brawner's bravado did have the intended effect of galvanizing library benefactors to renew their efforts to secure a new and permanent library facility.

Perhaps burned-out after twenty plus years of frustration, Barbara Woods was no longer leading the fight. That had been left up to Pat Lowther, an articulate, highly motivated and energetic community activist who also happened to be an avid reader and library patron. Lowther was joined in the effort by several other library supporters including original Library Advisory Board member Shirley Rayburn and her husband Dale, Cindy Frankenfield and her mother June, Muff Ford, Robbylee Mitchell, Dr. Charles Cameron and many others.

Also defunct was the original Library Advisory Board. Rather than attempt its revitalization, activists felt it would be better to create another entity to promote the new library. To that end, participants in the process, turned their attention to a group organized for the specific purpose of promoting libraries, -- the Friends of the Metropolitan Library System.

The creation of a special sub-unit of the Friends of the Metropolitan Library System was quickly sanctioned by the governing board of that body thus giving birth to the Friends of The Village Library. As a subsidiary of the larger organization, the nascent "Village Friends" would benefit greatly from the funding and expertise of the larger, more experienced group. Although, the official stamp of approval was not necessary, the City Council gave its blessings to the formation of the group in 1986.

The Village Friends immediately went to work to raise awareness of the library issue, to recruit members and to raise money. The group quickly grew in size and soon had well over one hundred paid members.

The Friends methodically and persistently plodded forward in their effort to pry every picayune penny they could from the hands of library patrons and other would-be supporters. Unfortunately, the many bake sales and other similar fund raising events generated but paltry sums of money. Efforts to seek grant funding also met with disappointment as organizations such as the Oklahoma Community Foundation turned a deaf ear towards funding requests. Something more substantial, something bolder had to happen to keep the process moving forward.

Then came the Miller-Brothers Circus. The idea to host the circus and sell tickets was the brainchild of Cindy Frankenfield, a long-time resident who was as much a circus fan as fervent library supporter. Besides being a way to raise

funds, the circus was seen as a vehicle to raise awareness in the community about the need for a permanent library.

With the permission and backing of the City Council, the circus took place on the still-vacant library land at Penn and Kavanaugh (now Vineyard) Boulevard. Authorization was sought from the Council to erect a sign on the property proclaiming the site as “the future home of The Village Library”.

Perhaps, a little wary of unduly raising expectations, the Council reluctantly acquiesced. To put the Council’s hesitancy in perspective, a similar sign had been placed there a decade and half earlier but, according to Barbara Woods, had succumbed to the elements and neglect.

The day of the circus finally arrived. Like army ants, circus workers scurried into action systematically pitching canvas tents, erecting bleachers and setting up booths. The aroma of peanuts, popcorn, corn dogs, cotton candy and other circus fare soon filled the air as bright-eyed and awestruck toddlers entered the encampment in eager anticipation of the approaching spectacle. Familiar melodies blazoned from loudspeakers summoning those from near and afar to sample the revelry about to unfold. Perhaps songwriters Lennon and McCartney had best captured the quintessence of the carnival milieu in their memorable tune, “Being For The Benefit of Mr. Kite”. The lyrics of that noteworthy composition blithely proclaimed in classic Lennon-McCartney fashion, “A splendid time is guaranteed for all.”

The carnival ambiance was further enhanced by the free gratis appearance of Channel 5’s “Hoho the Clown” who unselfishly agreed to help promote the event. In a sideshow of sorts, library friends, cheered on heartily by Hoho himself, pitted their strength, or lack thereof, against a powerful and portly pachyderm. As if there were any doubt, the long-snouted behemoth prevailed easily in the tug-of-war. Ironically, the humbling defeat was perhaps symbolic of the seemingly insurmountable task that still loomed ahead for the Friends.

By all accounts, the circus was a grand success. Yet, despite the considerable amount of time and effort invested in the project, the event only succeeded in generating \$800, --hardly a fecund effort. Exhausted and disheartened, the Friends commiserated over the meager fruits of their fundraising effort. At this rate, it would take an eternity to raise the funds needed to build a library, -- a sober realization that made it difficult to further equivocate on the matter. It was now abundantly clear that a much more substantial funding mechanism would be necessary if a new library were to be built.

Shortly after the circus, Friends President Pat Lowther paid City Manager Bruce Stone a visit. According to Lowther, the time had come to “either sink or swim.” Lowther argued that the Council should be petitioned to call for a sales tax

proposition on the ballot right away, “while the iron was hot.” Stone, a bit hesitant, agreed that it was probably a propitious time to make the move.

The Friends met to discuss strategy. They knew that it might not be the most popular or judicious thing for elected officials to be seen as the proponents of a tax increase. A show of support was needed. Citizens needed to turn out in force to ask for the tax.

In choreographed fashion, a group of library supporters descended upon the City Council to ask for a referendum on the library issue. Yet, even with the show of force, it was still no easy chore to get the Council to put the proposition on the ballot. Some members of the conservative Council harbored some very deep convictions when it came to taxes.

Most outspoken among the Council was longtime Ward 2 Councilman Roy Carmack. A self-made millionaire in his own right, the enigmatic Carmack assumed the unlikely role as advocate for elderly residents of The Village, many of whom lived on fixed incomes.

Although apparently a library supporter himself, Carmack, in seemingly antithetical fashion, zestfully interposed his anti-tax dogma into the debate by delivering a frenetic oratory condemning the evils of this most regressive of taxes. Becoming more flushed and red-faced with each utterance, the cigar-mouthed Carmack, vehemently argued against an open-ended tax insisting that, if there were to be a tax, it had to be specific and limited. According to Carmack, government would spend every penny they got their hands on.

The diatribe remained unchallenged thereby establishing the theme and tone for further discussion by the Council on the tax question. To some observers the debate might have looked contentious. Yet in reality, none of the other members of the Council seemed to be in substantial disagreement with the recalcitrant *raisonneur* of sorts. Despite considerable pontification by several members of the Council, the Council ultimately voted unanimously to place the matter on the ballot subject to certain stipulations.

The proposition agreed upon called for a temporary, limited-purpose, sales tax to construct, furnish, and equip a new library. To heed Carmack’s call to spend “not one penny more” than necessary, the proposition also provided for the tax to terminate after \$1 million had been collected.

The long-awaited and historic library tax election finally took place in October 1987 and easily garnered the support needed for passage. No recount was necessary, and unlike recent elections of note, the outcome was lacking in polemic. Approximately three out of four voters had cast their ballot in favor of the tax, --an impressive and overwhelming majority. Moreover, the only dimples to be

found anywhere were those that appeared on the smiling faces of gratified and fulfilled library patrons.

Sadly, Bob Blakeley, who had been arguably one of the library's most ardent supporters, did not live to see the magnum opus to its completion. Diagnosed with melanoma in 1988, Blakeley passed away on January 1, 1989, more than a year before the new library would open its doors to the public in April of 1990.

Shortly after Blakeley's demise, a group of citizens, led by Greta Newsome, lobbied the Council to have the library named posthumously in honor of Bob Blakeley. Speaking on behalf of the contingent, which according to Newsome, represented about 200 of Blakeley's friends, Newsome reminded the Council of Blakeley's many contributions to the successful library effort.

Mayor Roy Carmack responded on behalf of the Council telling the delegation that the majority of the Council felt the library should still be called The Village Library.

"It was a major endeavor by The Village people – the money and taxes and contributions of many," explained Carmack.

In an effort to accommodate the assemblage and to give due recognition to the efforts of their erstwhile colleague, the Council agreed to name the new library's conference room in Blakeley's honor. The room, so named, stands as one of the most frequently used meeting rooms in The Village today.

Although his role as part of the cast of characters was relatively minor, the Friends of the Library felt compelled to recognize HoHo the Clown for his help in promoting the new library. To that end, the Friends commissioned the design of a stained glass window bearing his likeness. The window was placed on display in the children's section of the library and remains there today as a fitting tribute to one that touched the lives of so many children throughout his long career.