

was being walked to create an acceptable wording for two vastly differing yet oddly similar views; most of those involved on both sides wanted the issue resolved in arbitration, so certain were they all of being in the right. Finally, there was agreement on one last revision to the letter.

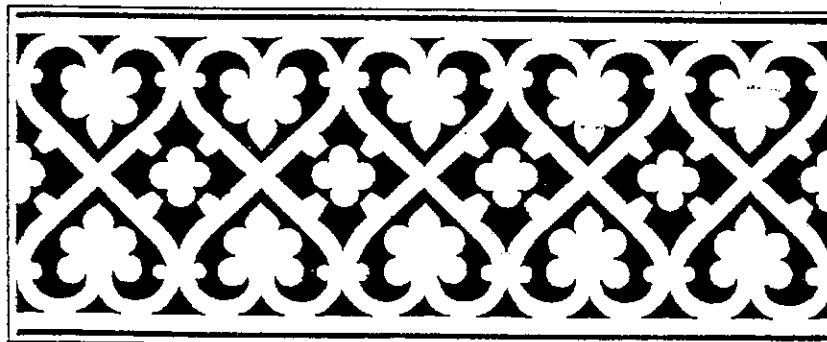
Still, there were further issues to resolve. Since Administration required that all the grievants had to accept their letter in order for the deal to take effect, they asked for a letter from each grievant as a guarantee that all would drop the grievance. Complications arose over the wording of those letters which took time to work through, but after another month or two all the letters from the grievants were gathered and delivered. A few days later, each one received a letter from the City Librarian, and the chapter was completed.

By now, the Central Library departments were well into the next fiscal year, and the STB money was being handled appropriately. The heated and unsettling situation was put to rest, and the compromise was filed along with all the paperwork. Neither side was a pushover for the Wyrrough/Wheeler team, who had to use their best negotiating skills to make the agreement work. Finding the truth about the STB funds accountability was no easy task for those involved, many of whom put their professional standing on the line, proving again the integrity of the LAPL staff.

Postscript: Though this chapter is closed, a new one may be opened soon...Where is all the money being spent that was donated to the burned Junipero Serra and John Muir branches? Who is selecting books and materials for their communities? Are funds really being used to help the minimall owner? When questions like these are raised, does library staff still have the right to request answers from Administration? ■

At the end of May, the temporary Central Library closed to the public and preparations began for the reopening of the renovated and expanded Central Library on October 3, 1993. On July 23, staff moved out of the temporary facility and were assigned to branches for a few weeks until the new Central Library was ready to receive them.

Seven years after the disastrous first fire the new Central Library opened right on schedule, although staff only occupied the building three days before the public opening, and many of the new systems were inoperative. An estimated 50,000 Angelenos gathered to welcome back their Central Library amid a spate of celebrities, music, food, and fun. The outpouring of publicity was unprecedented.



**COMING BACK
HOME,
OCTOBER 3, 1993**

by

**Glen Creason,
History and Genealogy
Department**

"We need not power or splendor; wide hall or lordly dome; the good, the true, the tender, these form the wealth of home."

— Sarah J. Hale

This morning is the grand opening of the rebuilt and revitalized Central Library. It's been a long time coming, and precious few people really understand the epic struggle that was made to get here. There will be speeches by people who never set foot in the old Library, and balloons and brass bands and politicians. Media folks will flock to 5th and Flower to recognize and record this historic event. There will be much talk about architecture, atriums, kiosks, automated retrieval systems, on-line catalogs and such. Cameras will record it all and Los Angeles will see the glittering new building and be very proud.

There is another story; not as glamorous, not as dramatic, but if you look around the edges of the news footage and the photos you might see the staff of Central Library. Through thick and thin they have waited long and labored hard for this day, ever since that terrible day in April of 1986. To the librarians, library assistants, clerk-typists, library clerical assistants, messenger clerks and security staff April 29 was the beginning of a hellish grind that none of them will ever forget. It is a dark scar seared onto their collective psyche. Maybe they don't dream about the fire anymore like they used to; they no longer wake up in a cold sweat trying to catch their breath and hoping it was just a nightmare. The fire wasn't just a civic cataclysm, it was their own personal hell.

There are those who know Central Library intimately: The writers, researchers, film-makers, teachers, businessmen, inventors, architects, engineers, genealogists, artists and literate lunatics of downtown. They know that the staff makes the whole thing live and breathe. The building is gorgeous and a symbol of hope for people visiting downtown, yet for those seeking the truth, the architecture is secondary to the wisdom within. Atop the old building is a hand holding a torch, the symbol of light and learning. The torch reminds us of the psalm which proclaims "a lamp to my feet...a light to my paths." Librarians are there to hold that torch up to illuminate the unique treasures of the collection and to use their experience and wisdom to teach what they have learned in the "university of the people." The work of Central has always been in the trenches, the day-to-day battles to find the keys to unlock the riddles of knowledge. To uncover the truth, to let the torchlight's gleam shine on what is beautiful on this earth.

That is why the staff is proud, too, not just of the building but of themselves because they didn't quit when the going got tough. Today, October 3, is the culmination of seven years of struggle, and it was an uphill climb that no one was prepared to make.

First, there was the heartbreak and horror of seeing a part of themselves burn away as they watched helplessly on the sidewalk of Flower Street. Next came the race to save wet and partially charred books. Librarians not accustomed to manual labor grabbed crowbars to tear water-swollen books from shelves and waded ankle deep in soot, ash and mold to salvage some of the devastated book collection. Middle-aged guys hauled back-breaking loads of books, and women staffers left looking like coal miners after twelve-hour stints in the scorched bowels of Central. Buoyed by the heroic turnout of 1,700 library-loving volunteers, many of them branch brethren, the staff of the entire Los Angeles Public Library system bowed their necks and beat the odds, emptying the building of wet books before the deadline. That was the easy part.

After the TV cameras departed and Central Library was only mentioned in the newspapers in connection with arson investigations, the staff remained, toiling with leaden hearts in the shambles of what had once been their pride and joy. The shell of Central was as dour as the House of Usher, and the unheated, sooty rooms reflected the depression that descended on the departments. In September, another fire, and twenty-five thousand more books were lost forever. Those were the days when the staff "walked with the black dog of despair."

Slowly, they took stock of what they had lost and eventually a spark of hope flared again. After all, the staff still had each other and an occasional hilarious puppet show or talent show reminded them of their camaraderie. Like any family that has endured a tragedy, they became closer but still fought like families do.

There were many suggestions or carrots on a stick for Central Library staff to chase in the next year. Talk of Bullocks and St. Vincent's Square gave temporary hope, but finally the Rio Vista warehouse was found in the industrial hinterlands of L.A. The first relocation of staff was completed by late 1987. Sometimes it was sweltering near 100 degrees and other winter

days clerks worked next to Principal Librarians with knuckles numb from the cold. Eventually, however, the warehouse offered at least a connection to what the library had been. The Pod people (because departments divided into pods) as they began calling themselves kept up the morale with two office standbys: conversation and caffeine. Meanwhile, less hardy workers were sent out to discover the world beyond 5th and Flower, venturing to branches from Arroyo Seco to Venice.

By December of 1988, the cleaning and processing of the book collection was in full swing on not-so-sparkling Spring Street. A temporary processing center was established at the old Design Center in anticipation of the opening of the temporary Central Library at 433 South Spring. The work in the P.C. could only be described as drudgery: Wiping filthy books with industrial sponges, unloading moldy books and painstakingly inventorying millions of volumes with trusty little red check marks. Next came pallet after pallet of old friends: the books of Central that had been resting in another old warehouse, packed in boxes and sealed in plastic. It can be said with no intended maudlin sentiment that librarians shed a tear or two seeing volumes from parts of their own collections emerge from boxes packed hastily back in 1986. Freeze-dried books came, too, twisted and ugly but still useable. Over two million volumes in no real order, seventy-one miles of books and an almost equal amount of shelves now awaited the staff in the temporary. It may have been "dog work", but the Central staff took to it with a vigor that was aided by the sight of old staff pals returning from branches, and by their love for book collections that many of them helped nurture. The exhausting drudgery became a labor of love. As Shelley wrote: "Familiar acts are beautiful through love."

When the Temporary Central opened in May of 1989, those millions of books, magazines, newspapers, government documents, patents, musical scores, microfiche, rolls of microfilm, maps, cassettes, videos, films, LP's and assorted ephemeral collections of all Cen-

BACK HOME (CONT.)

tral departments were in place. They were put there by the women and men of the staff of Central working long and hard for five molasses-slow months. In May they were a real library again.

The Spring Street experience is another story, but in May of 1993 after four years on "Fear Street" the staff was on the road again, heading out to special assignments or branches all over the city while "professionals" moved the books to the "New" Central Library. Even apart, Central folk kept a network like small-townners writing postcards back to old pals. Central is like "Our Town": a small burg where you get to know your neighbor, maybe more than you sometimes want to. The staff recognize each other's eccentricities and tolerate these human frailties just a little more because of what they have been through together. Their hearts have been fired in the crucible of tragedy. They have walked through hell in a gasoline raincoat and come out singing.

These are people who believe in the tremendous value of this library and feel it is worthy of dedication beyond the call of the paycheck. They love the ideal of what Central can be and are striving to reach that goal despite great frustration. What they see is hope: hope for the future of this great library, of this city and in themselves. They believe that literacy is liberating and essential to all of us. They believe that the preservation of culture is a hell of a lot more important than higher yields for stockholders. They believe in the magnificent power of Central Library and all that torchlight's gleam stands for in our society.



When these workers come through the doors on the big day they will do so with great pride but it will also be a bittersweet occasion remembering the women and men who devoted themselves to the great library and didn't quite live to see the promised land. They will remember old pals who once filled these halls with laughter and a few tears: Richard Giannini, Arthur Jean Lowe, Elsie Becker, Christopher Dean, Tom Lippert, Jim Gates, Rita Kort, Charmian Slaughter, Richard Hickman, Loyce Pleasants and many more. In the blink of an eye we will be with them, but Central Library will stand like a mighty oak tree, nourished by the sweat and blood of those who gave their strength to the one hundred years of service this institution has offered to the city of angels.

So today, you might want to tour the gorgeous new building with its state-of-the-art facilities, but don't forget to notice the people behind the desks and don't forget to ask some questions. You might admire the atrium or the murals, or the statue of Lady Wisdom, but if you don't check out the staff you are missing the true Central Library.

Time may eventually destroy even this beautiful new building, but time will never change the spirit of the library. The poet Theodore Roethke said it well: "thought does not crush to stone/ the great sledge drops in vain/Truth never is undone/His shafts remain." ■



The Library Foundation funded Sunday hours during October and then extended them for several months, which occasioned a great debate among Guild members. Some were concerned that members working on Sundays were setting a precedent that could be used to implement Sunday as a regular workday if Foundation money ran out. There were also worries about the quality of the service provided by Sunday substitutes who had received no training, and about the possibility of contracting out for the extra hours. Other Guild members simply welcomed the chance to earn overtime after several years without a raise.

On October 31 the Guild celebrated its 25th anniversary at Grace Simons Lodge in Chavez Ravine.

This brief history of the Guild's first quarter century has necessarily hit only the high spots. Many "minor" issues were of great importance to staff but couldn't be mentioned because of space constraints. The important, tedious and frustrating work of the Negotiating Teams and Health, Safety and Welfare Committees deserve whole books about them. Alas, maybe some other time there will be adequate recognition. ■

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All Guild members are invited to Executive Board meetings, held once a month. Call the NEW Guild telephone number, (213) 484-8300, for directions, date, and time.

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