

## Sedalia Public Library History

**A History of the Sedalia Public Library-**He's the Smith that most Sedalians have never heard of. The legendary George R. Smith is rightfully regarded as the father of Sedalia, because he founded the city in 1860-but another, lesser-known man by the same last name made a contribution nearly as great.

He was D. H. Smith, a local hardware owner, who in 1899 initiated the efforts resulting in his home city becoming the first metropolis in Missouri to get a "Carnegie" library.

It was he who prevailed upon business friends "back east" to ask Andrew Carnegie himself to donate enough money to allow construction to start a new building for the four-year old institution. Carnegie was a self-made man, whose rags to riches story as an immigrant boy from Scotland who eventually presided over the largest steel company in the country remains one of the most impressive in American history. He had recently retired in his homeland after selling his company to Wall Street financier J.P. Morgan, the only man in the country whose stature in the business world equaled his.

Carnegie was one of the wealthiest men in the world when he decided to establish a fund to help finance deserving library projects around the country. This was the program Mr. Smith hoped would save the local library from dissolving.

**The First Library-**The first library in Sedalia was founded in 1871, with 110 citizens pledging \$10 each to support it. However, this private enterprise failed for lack of funding and the books were given to the Queen City Seminary. But in a few years, that school and its books were destroyed by a fire. Several Sedalia women made a second attempt to organize such a service in 1878-1879, but this, too, ultimately failed.

The current library also was incorporated as a private venture in 1893. A total of 2,185 books were bought and the library was established in the courthouse. At first, membership tickets were sold, but the revenue received was not enough to maintain it. Then, in 1894, the apparently novel notion (to library supporters, anyway) of providing steady income through a tax levy of 5 cents was thought of. However, such a measure failed to be approved.

Finally, the measure passed when it was resubmitted the following year, 1895. A new era had begun-it was now a public library, open to all. The development was in keeping with the city's aspirations to enter the approaching new century as a cosmopolitan community, complete with the cultural and educational amenities that status entailed.

For the first four years, the new facility was located in the Pettis County Courthouse. However, in 1899, county officials informed the library board that the facility had to move because of overcrowded conditions. There were some who said the notion of a permanent home for the library was perhaps too great a goal to be realized.

But these were no ordinary times. Elsewhere, developments were converging that would give the Queen City of the Prairies a new, non-frontier nickname-the State Fair City.

It was against this background that D.H. Smith stepped forward and acted decisively. As he hoped they would, Mr. Smith's friends put in a good word for him and his special request when it was forwarded in 1899 to the now-retired industrialist.

The several trains that ran through Sedalia daily did so on ribbons of Carnegie steel and the city's reputation as an up-and-coming railroad city was made known to the famous, self-educated benefactor.

**Grant Awarded**-In the fall of that year, Mr. Smith received a reply from Skibo castle. Not only had Mr. Carnegie approved donating \$50,000 to build the library, but he would do so on less-stringent terms than with most of his other grants. Other cities would have to provide a maintenance fund equal to 10 percent of the grant, but Sedalia's requirement would only be 8 percent, or \$4,000.

The imposing two-story structure with full basement, which was built by the local firm of Dean, Hurley and Mayer, stands on a 270x130 feet tract of land with 75 feet of lawn at each end. It is located on the south side of West Third Street, between Kentucky and Moniteau, just west of the city's officially designated Downtown Historic District. It is also separately listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The lower parts of the exterior walls, the four massive columns at the entrance, the steps and the buttresses are of light stone, while the walls of the building are faced with white terra cotta. Inside, design highlights include antique oak woodwork and terra cotta mantles and a lobby floor made of marble quarried in Carrara, Italy, given as a gift by May Jaynes.

**Library Dedication**-The library was dedicated the evening of July 30, 1901. Guest speakers were F.M. Crunden of the St. Louis Public Library and the building architect John L. Mauren, also of St. Louis.

The building was significant not only for the services it made possible but because it gave permanence to the ambitious dreams of many local leaders at the start of the new century. Also, the fact that Andrew Carnegie himself so deeply believed in this city and its potential bolstered the city's civic pride.

Now, more than a century later, the building still stands as a model of what its founders envisioned: that its holdings serve to entertain, educate and enlighten all Sedalians.

