

In Praise of the Public Library

In 1938 I was a child of eight. I had spent two years on the road emigrating from the Midwest. I arrived in Sacramento without consistent schooling, without social skills, and with the strange language of the road that was not easily understood. I had never had an age appropriate friend, a teacher I could depend upon seeing for more than a week at a time, nor a familiar daily routine.

We settled in Sacramento because my mother refused to go any further West. Early on a summer morning, my mother took me by the hand to explore a world beyond auto courts, fruit-picking camps, and road dust. That day started a long lasting friendship that changed my life forever.

The Oak Park Library in a suburb of Sacramento was less than a block from the resident hotel (two rooms, a kitchen, and the toilet down the hall) where we were temporarily staying. Mom told me that my step-dad would be looking at the Help Wanted ads in the Sacramento Bee, the local newspaper which hung on a rod for all to use free of charge. If work was available we would be staying here. My grandmother was going through the For Sale columns looking for cheap, second hand furniture, and my mother would search for house rentals.

It was the librarian who took me by the hand and led me to the children's books. I thought, "Here is something for me." These were books filled with pictures and a few words. I could recognize some because Mom had been teaching me to read using the Burma Shave signs as material.

During the next couple of months that library became my home and haven. I was provided with a sandwich and a handkerchief and sent to the safety of the library while the adults did "grown-up things."

In September, because of the patience and dedication of the library staff, I started school being able to read well enough not to embarrass myself. She had also taught me that a child did not interrupt an adult, that a child shares popular books with other children, that a child says "please" and "thank you." She also introduced me to the world beyond the backseat of a automobile.

I went to school, but I grew up in that public library. I learned that for a thing to have value it must be earned; therefore, I became a volunteer who worked after school in the library. As I mastered alphabetizing, I used the card catalog and the huge encyclopedias.

The librarian taught me the Dewey Decimal System and I was able to shelve books by the time I was nine.

My step-father disappeared, my mother worked two jobs, and my grandmother ran our boarding house.

I did not become involved in gang activities (oh, yes, Sacramento had gangs as early as the 1940's). I did not because I had responsibilities to the library. I did not "get into trouble" because the romantic novels I read did not predict a "happily ever after" ending for women who did. I graduated from high school, Sacramento Community College, and then UCLA. I did not become a librarian but I did teach for thirty-nine years. For thirty-five of those years I required that each of my students own a library card, as an entry price to my good will.

Budgets short-falls first destroyed school libraries, and now public libraries will be decimated for the same faulty budgetary reasoning. Hitler burned books to keep the people in ignorance. A democratic society that refuses to fund libraries is just as responsible for creating an uneducated population. I was not the only child who, because of the local library, became a productive citizen. As you make those budget cuts, who will speak for the youngsters who are still in need of the help that only the public library can provide?

Vicki Nagel

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