

Mission Hills Library: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

In 1921, San Diego was a sleepy little Navy town with 74,361 permanent residents spread among several small communities. Those residents not associated with the Navy were the early pioneers who settled San Diego.

One of those communities, Mission Hills, was populated primarily by wealthy businessmen and their families, who had gazed at the soft pristine hills and the bay beyond it and decided to make it their home. Some people today still consider zip code 92103 as the most desirable part of San Diego for their residence.

At the same time, the Mission Hills Branch Library was a dream about to come true. The Marston Store in downtown San Diego had contained a library since 1916, and in 1921 needed the space occupied by books. So the books were transferred to Mission Hills, and made up the library's first collection.

The new library occupied one room in the Ulysses S. Grant Elementary School, at 1426 Washington Street on land sold to the city schools by Kate Sessions. Miss Sessions is known as the mother of Balboa Park, but she also was responsible for much of Mission Hills' overall botanical beauty.

Adjoining the school is Pioneer Park, which the schoolchildren today use as a playground. In 1900, it was a Catholic cemetery, where eventually the bodies of 1,650 San Diego pioneers rested. In 1909 half of the cemetery was designated Pioneer Park, and in 1941 the remainder of the cemetery was included in the park. Some ancient grave markers still can be seen there.

Mission Hills had never had a branch library before. Joann Hayward, nee Hawkins, was a page at the library, and remembers the first librarian, Mrs. Meiniffee, fondly. Joann says her work at the library gave her a good start in her professional life.

She recalls that some organization, possibly the WPA, gathered up magazines and cut the monthly serials out of them. They bound them together and put a cover on them to give the appearance of a book; they then donated them to the library. In fact, most of the books were donated by ladies' clubs or private citizens.

Today, the Mission Hills-Hillcrest library is at 925 W. Washington Street, at the corner of Hawk. But it arrived there only after a series of metamorphoses.

Leaving Grant School in 1950, the branch consolidated with the Hillcrest Library, which had been located in a Florence School schoolroom. The new branch, now

named the Hillcrest-Mission Hills Branch Library, moved to 908 W. Washington at the corner of Goldfinch, which is now occupied by the Gathering restaurant. When the branch lost its lease in 1956, it moved two doors down to 914, which now houses retail.

It stayed there until 1961, when the new branch, renamed the Mission Hills Branch Library, opened. Barbara Tuthill was the first Branch Librarian to serve in the new library. She previously had been Children's Librarian at La Jolla, then was assigned to Mission Hills in 1961, working in the storefront across the street for only a week.

She remembers the move to 925. She and Amelia Higdon, clerk, and Bill Weigand, Children's Librarian, loaded the book carts with desk items and files, and walked them across Washington Street to the new location. The city moved the books and furniture by truck. When Bill Weigand left after 2 years, the City Librarian, Clara Breed, arranged a librarian exchange program with the Copenhagen Library in Denmark. This gave Barbara a Danish Children's Librarian for a year.

The building Barbara and her staff moved into encompassed 3,850 square feet and had 10 parking spaces. Today, despite the growth of Mission Hills and surrounding communities, there still are 3,850 square feet and only 9 parking spaces, one designated for disabled patrons.

In 1983 a group of Mission Hills residents organized "The Friends of the Mission Hills Library." Its main focus was to provide books and other materials for the library. By 1988 the Friends included 111 dues paying members.

Today the Friends has 300 members and continues to raise funds that provide needed materials to the library. They also support the library's programs, from a children's reading hour to evening talks by local authors who sign and sell their books. Despite its small size, the library provides many activities for the community, such as two book discussion groups, a children's craft program, a weekly story book reading for 3- to 5-year old children, adult book readings and signings by local authors, and many season-specific programs.

The building, at Washington and Front Streets, has been allocated and paid for by the city, and the first phase of construction, creating the architectural plans, is nearly complete. Branch Manager Philip Detwiler and his staff are looking forward to the new address, which will allow them to more readily serve all of the communities that depend on it: Old Town, Middletown, Park West, Hillcrest, Banker's Hill, and Mission Hills.

We have long advocated for a new library building to better meet the needs of our community, but it may be years before the City can set a construction date because of its current budget problems. With this delay in mind, the Friends intend to liven up the interior of the present building--to make our small and aging library as inviting and serviceable as possible. Improvements to the existing building will be enjoyed by our children and every user of the library, perhaps for several years to come.

To that end, we raised funds to replace the carpet and cheer up the paint and furniture in our building and in December, 2007, the Friends unanimously resolved to make 2008 a brighter, fresher, and cleaner year for our library building. Funds were allocated to paint the library, purchase new carpeting, and for refinishing the solid maple chairs hiding under all that accumulated grime (some have been returned--look for those shiny clean chairs when you visit the library!) This project is going forward with the support and cooperation of the Friends, the library administration, painters from the city's Facilities Maintenance Department, and the San Diego Public Library Foundation.

The Friends paid for these improvements from a treasury built dollar-by-dollar. To raise these funds, our loyal volunteers keep up a sustained effort that includes monthly book sales, wrapping Christmas gifts for tips, sponsoring musical and theater events, selling (donated) books at street fairs, and working to build our membership and encourage donations. Community support for these efforts makes it possible for the Friends to support the library and its programs.

Sources: Breed, Clara. *Turning the Pages*; Mike McLaughlin, *The History of Mission Hills*, 1992 and 1997; San Diego Library California Room.