

WITH THANKS TO MISS EULA JOHNSON
Literary Club – 16 November 2015

On a late August day, this past summer, in what is a somewhat characteristically convoluted Sittenfeldian family choreography, my wife Betsy left me at the Beachwood, Ohio public library, in suburban Cleveland, with the understanding that I was to be retrieved an hour later by our son P.G. In a twist more reminiscent of airport logistics than library visits, this purported one hour connection morphed into a seven hour stay and I passed those hours in a place I had never been, with no one I had ever seen, provided with the opportunity to work, to reflect, and to observe that world.

Libraries, as our family learned long ago, not only locally but in settings around the country, are pretty good places to stop: free entry, proximate parking, clean bathrooms, relative quiet, and a chance to be productive or not as one might wish.

Although I did get some work done, I also became the proverbial fly on the wall: spreading out my papers on a large table and tuning in to the environment surrounding me. First, I observed at an adjacent table what I presumed was a husband and wife, but was actually an older gentleman talking with an older woman. After diligent eyeballing and eavesdropping, I concluded that the fellow was assisting her as a compensated care giver. She was using a box of crayons and creating various designs and pictures. She looked to him every couple of minutes for affirmation: "Isn't that pretty?" "Aren't those colors nice?" "Do you like that green?" Her cognitive disabilities did nothing to dissuade her from enthusiastic pursuit, while he conveyed a lack of interest in the process.

Next, in back of me, which I could hear perfectly, but only visualize by turning around, were another pair: an older man and a young adult male. The older was tutoring the younger in the most basic arithmetic endeavors: "All right, let's start with one plus two?" After much hesitation, the response was two. I thought this was some sorry joke, until I turned around and realized that the tutor, who I believe was a volunteer, was hard at work with the young man and all the while maintaining a level of patience, enthusiasm, and kindness. This interaction went on for an hour and seemed to reward both. The third pair I observed sat in front of me at the table previously occupied by the crayon twosome: two high school age students: one female and one male and both clearly feeling good - by feeling each other. Alas, my adolescent visits to libraries never afforded such a touching opportunity.

That day in the Beachwood library set in motion all kinds of recollections about libraries throughout my life, and it also prompted me to think about how libraries came into existence – and about the role that one person, Andrew Carnegie, played in establishing them in the United States and around the world.

So where and how and why did libraries begin? The Mesopotamian culture boasted one of the earliest recorded libraries dating back 8,000 years. Clay tablets were written

on with a wedge-shaped stick called a cuneiform: this is the basis of their writing, which we know as cuneiform. Their tablets were baked and customarily placed inside clay envelopes to protect them. They were stored in palaces and temples, and arranged by subject.

Subsequently, early Egyptian libraries were supervised by priests and volumes were written on sheets of papyrus wound in long rolls around knobbed sticks and placed in chests or on shelves. The best known of all ancient libraries was the one in Alexandria established about 300 B.C. That collection aggregated as many as 700,000 papyrus rolls which were catalogued and classified in what are reputed to have been 120 different categories.

Julius Caesar is credited with developing the first public libraries in Rome. Wealthy citizens, in addition to collecting books themselves, assisted in the establishment of libraries open to the public. By the 4th century, there were 28 public libraries in Rome itself. Increasingly, churches and monasteries assumed a leading role in generating and maintaining libraries with monks reading and copying books on vellum, a parchment made from calf skin. When the great cathedrals were built near the end of the Dark Ages, small libraries were included in them. By the time universities began to collect books, volumes were so difficult to make as well as so valuable that they were protected by being chained to the walls.

England's University of Oxford began its library around 1400, and the Bodleian there remains the largest university library in the world.

One would not have predicted, based on the modest circumstances of his birth and early years, that Andrew Carnegie would eventually do more than any other individual to establish a lasting legacy of libraries. Over his lifetime, Carnegie funded more than 2,500 libraries. Nine of these libraries are part of our Hamilton County-Cincinnati system.

Young Andrew was born in 1835 in Dunfermline, a historic medieval city in Scotland that was, by the 19th century, a center for the production of textiles. When industrialism rendered hand-done weaving obsolete, workers such as Andrew's father Will Carnegie were unable to support themselves and their families. Therefore, Carnegie and his wife, Margaret, and their sons, 5 year-old Tom and 13 year-old Andrew, immigrated to the United States and settled near Pittsburgh. Almost immediately, young Andrew Carnegie was employed in a cotton mill: carrying bobbins to the workers at the looms and earning \$1.20 per week. A year later, he became a messenger for a local telegraph company where he taught himself how to use the equipment and was promoted to telegraph operator. Next, he secured a job at the Pennsylvania Railroad, where he was promoted to superintendent at the age of 24. Ambitious by nature and eager to learn, he took advantage of the generosity of a fellow Allegheny, Pennsylvania citizen, James Andrews. Andrews shared his personal library with local boys. Carnegie remembered: "It was from my early experience I decided there was no use to which money could be applied as productively as the founding of a public library."

When Carnegie was 20, his father died and he became responsible for supporting his family. Even as a young person, his intellect, imagination and work ethic enabled him to excel and, credited with his innovative ideas such as keeping the telegraph office open 24 hours a day, he was soon promoted to management and oversight of the rail expansion.

Carnegie's initially unsuccessful effort to build a bridge across the Mississippi River at St. Louis, failed because of the weight of the materials required. Steel turned out to be the only substance adequately strong and viable, but the production expense made it implausible. Eventually, working with the English inventor, Henry Bessemer, Carnegie focused on the more effective production of steel and, in collaboration with others, reduced the time needed to fabricate a single rail from 2 weeks to 15 minutes. By 1873, he successfully opened the St. Louis Bridge. To persuade potential users of its safety, he addressed the myth that elephants do not cross unstable structures by having one walk across it on opening day.

With this success in hand, Carnegie raised substantial capital and built his first steel plant. When Carnegie's perpetual competitor for the role of richest citizen, John D. Rockefeller, stopped transporting oil by railroad, Carnegie's investment was threatened. However, by that point, Carnegie's mills were producing 10,000 tons of steel a month. He also concluded that in New York City, the best alternative to purchasing costly additional real estate was to build vertically and the consequence was skyscrapers erected with Carnegie steel. He next partnered with Henry Frick and their profits accelerated further.

Frick, headquartered in Pittsburgh, built a gentleman's fishing and hunting resort near Johnstown, Pennsylvania's South Port Dam to entertain himself and his peers. When the dam was lowered to make it possible for visitors to navigate the top easily, the water level rose greatly, the dam burst, and 2,000 people were killed. 16,000 homes were destroyed and the result was the worst man-made disaster in American history prior to 9/11 in 2001.

Carnegie, feeling a shared responsibility for the Johnstown disaster, inaugurated his massive philanthropy commitment with large grants intended to help rebuild the community. At that time, he relocated back to his native Scotland, but invested heavily in the Homestead, a then-struggling mill outside of Pittsburgh. Carnegie allowed Frick to increase employees' working hours and reduce their wages. When the newly formed union rose in opposition to the 12 hour days and six day weeks demanded, Carnegie agreed to Frick's request to crush the strike. Frick hired the Pinkerton Detectives, a private army which at that time actually employed more men and owned more guns than the U.S. military, while 2,000 workers barricaded themselves within the plant, and stopped production. The detectives fired on the unarmed workers and killed nine.

After these two calamitous disasters, Carnegie was approached by J.P. Morgan to purchase his mills. He agreed and received \$480M, which is estimated to be the

equivalent of \$310B today: the largest personal fortune ever amassed to that point. He spent his remaining years giving away more than \$350M, but the tragedies of Johnstown and Homestead stained his reputation through his life. Further, the rivalry between Carnegie and Rockefeller became increasingly acrimonious and the two exchanged taunting Christmas gifts for over a decade. As an example, Rockefeller once sent a cheap cardboard waistcoat to Carnegie, belittling Carnegie's immigrant ancestry. In response, Carnegie gifted a bottle of fine whiskey to the non-drinking, devoutly Baptist Rockefeller.

As the *New York Times* noted as recently as a week ago yesterday, Carnegie published in 1889 "*Gospel of Wealth*" which is viewed as the initial outline for contemporary philanthropy.

In the context of many philanthropic initiatives, libraries became Carnegie's greatest focus and proudest legacy. His first gift of a library was to his native Dunfermline in 1882. Along with space for collections of books, Carnegie library buildings included, among various possible amenities, bowling alleys, indoor swimming pools, basketball courts or other athletic facilities; music halls, and meeting rooms. As noted, Carnegie eventually funded a staggering 2,507 libraries throughout the English-speaking world: including 1,689 in the United States. Cincinnati remains a splendid beneficiary of Carnegie's largesse. Eight grants in 1902 and a ninth in 1904 led to the building of branches in Avondale, Northside, the East End, Hyde Park, Walnut Hills, Norwood, Corryville, Price Hill, and the West End. The first to open was Walnut Hills in 1906 and all were open by 1913.

During the last years of the 19th century, there was general understanding of the importance of free public libraries, but the desirable design of them was a subject of heated debate. Donors often preferred buildings with elegant staircases, grand vistas, and reading rooms dominated by a portrait of the donor. The New York and Chicago main public libraries remain examples of that model, but many librarians themselves considered this design too expensive to maintain and too inefficient to utilize effectively. Carnegie played a central role in defining both library philanthropy and design. His usual configuration was a style dubbed Carnegie Classic: a rectangular T-shaped or L-shaped structure, with stone foundations and low-pitched roofs focused on function. Carnegie's libraries served not only as free collections of books, magazines, and papers, but also as classrooms for school districts, stations for Red Cross chapters, and meeting spaces. Carnegie's philanthropy also extended to the building of 108 libraries for colleges and universities.

The financial arrangement for grants was consistent. Carnegie assigned coordination to his private secretary, James Bertram, but the ground rules became standard. Carnegie would give the amount needed to construct the library building if the community requesting it provided: one, a building site; and two, the commitment of annual tax revenues for the library's maintenance and services equal to 10% annually of the capital granted. Locally, Carnegie had a prominent role in what has evolved into our city and county system. Initially, a then-incumbent library trustee, James Albert Green, a

Literary Club member elected in 1901, went to New York to visit Mr. Carnegie. Green knew that Carnegie had once been a clerk in a Cincinnati railroad office and Green reported that Carnegie "asked me if Mount Auburn was still as beautiful as ever. Of course, I told him how lovely were our hilltops." Green's initial objective was to secure a grant of \$180,000 to expand our main local library building. Carnegie countered with the offer that the same amount of money could build six branches, and the grant led to six and finally nine of what is now our extraordinary system of branch libraries throughout our region. All of this is recounted in the volume "Free and Public" written by John Fleischman, which details 150 years of our public library from 1853 until 2003.

Carnegie's approach squared with his belief that wealth should be distributed for the benefit of society, not in the form of charity, but rather as stimulus for every community's responsibility for its own welfare. While most prospective recipients predictably embraced the library opportunity enthusiastically, some did not. As examples, in Richmond, Virginia, the city council rejected the offer, in what was reported to be a combination of aversion to taxes, fear of modernization, and concern that Carnegie would require the admission of blacks to the library. In Wheeling, West Virginia, union leaders blocked acceptance of his offer, and in Detroit, because of the tragedies in Homestead and Johnstown, the offer was refused because it was "tainted money." Nine years later, the Michiganders managed to overlook the taint and the grant was accepted.

Andrew Carnegie's opinions, vigorous and eagerly shared, drew much attention. As an example, still timely today, at an annual gathering of an educational group in New York in 1903 presided over by Isidor Straus, of Macy's fame and later to go down with the Titanic, Carnegie expressed his strong opposition to regulating or restricting immigration, instead praising the capacity immigrants had for assimilation.

Carnegie also had an extended interest in the seemingly trivial subject of simplifying spelling, and lent his personal name as well as his dollars to support that goal. Encouraged by Melvil Dewey, inventor of the Dewey Decimal System and founder of the first school to train librarians, Carnegie believed that such simplification was not only part of the development of language, but also a step on the road to world peace. Parenthetically, his enthusiasm is said to have been enhanced by his reputation as a notoriously poor speller. He felt that f should replace ph; that u should be dropped from such words as honour and labour; and that silent e's should be banished forever. Even President Theodore Roosevelt endorsed the concept. However, as virtually every supporter gave up on this pet project and returned to conventional spelling, Carnegie refused to capitulate. Indeed, Carnegie's friend, Samuel Clemens, concluded "he's got us all so we can't spell anything." Carnegie finally relented explaining: "I think I've been patient long e-n-u-f."

A continuing secondary charitable interest of Carnegie's was the donation of 7,000 church organs. Another of the most important and certainly the most enduring Carnegie initiatives was the beginning of a Carnegie Trust project to provide income pensions for retiring professors. The focus was only to assist employees of public institutions and

avoid any church related colleges or universities. The development and evolution of the present TIAA-Cref is a direct result of what he started.

Despite his extraordinary philanthropy, Carnegie realized that he would not give away all or even most of his fortune. Therefore, in 1911, he established the Carnegie Corporation in New York, "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding." One of our country's oldest grant making foundations, it has focused for the last 104 years on international peace and the advancement of education and knowledge. The leadership, following Carnegie, has been impressive and has included such luminaries as Elihu Root, James Angell, John Gardner, and Vartan Gregorian. It has been and continues to be in the vanguard of modern innovative grant-making.

Carnegie bequeathed not only money but also flexibility: he gave future trustees of the Carnegie Corporation of New York the authority to change policy as they saw fit, asserting that "they shall best conform to my wishes by using their own judgment." Thus, he encouraged successor generations to determine the most compelling then-current goals and strategies.

At a personal level, my sister Ellen, my only sibling, and I grew up in Kansas City in the 1950s. Our family life was probably not a great deal more functional or dysfunctional than most. One consistently successful shared activity was regular and frequent family visits to the branch Library, contiguous to Paseo High School. My father and mother were enthusiastic readers, although what became interesting to me in retrospect is that my father only purchased books which he had already read and determined were worthy of ownership. His enduring commitment to reading and book collecting is reflected by the 7,000 volumes he had accumulated when he died.

The Paseo library had a separate entrance, and a small children's section. At each visit, I went to the desk of the children's librarian, Miss Eula Johnson. With a welcoming smile, she would cheerfully report: "Paul, I have the most wonderful book for you." Son of a gun, she always did. Her enthusiasm combined with her skill at selecting, energized and motivated me. I remember her face, and I remember her kindness, and I remember her love of reading and learning, which directly informed my own. Even more than my first grade teacher, Mrs. Hammond, or my parents, who encouraged reading, Miss Eula Johnson, is where, for me, it really began.

Another random recollection about libraries include standing in my day school library ready to check out a book at the end of lunch period on a blustery November Friday of my junior year when the librarian said: "Did you hear that the President has been shot?"

The years of my most concentrated use pivot around Firestone Library at Princeton University: endless days and nights studying - and dozing if not soundly sleeping especially during the months of drafting my all-too-forgettable senior thesis. Much of the building was subterranean: an oppressive and dreary venue. Literarians, past and present, inevitably have their own Firestone memories: Messers Gatch, Geier, Dehner, Kremzar, Carey, Prince, Wadsworth among them. Princeton also afforded another

library connection. A mentor there who remains a lifelong friend is Russian history scholar James Billington. He retired this September after 34 years as the Librarian of Congress.

I'm not sure exactly why or how, but my adult life, courtesy of relatives, biological and acquired, has been similarly book and library infused. My wife, Betsy, taught art history at Seven Hills School here in Cincinnati for 36 years and was also its middle school librarian for 22 years. She is a voracious reader and all of our four children enjoy reading and writing and one is a novelist. Her husband is a professor of journalism and communication; another son-in-law teaches American History and Environmental History at a secondary school; another daughter and son-in-law are college teachers; and our son, an English major, has two graduate degrees in literature.

Perhaps these many connections lead to why I reacted with interest when I read eight years ago in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* that a Trustee of the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Public Library System was soon to be appointed. I decided to apply for that position. This was the first and only time I have asked to be considered for a publicly appointed post and even the process was illuminating. At that time, there were two Democrats and one Republican on the Hamilton County Commission which has appointing authority for a portion of the members of the library board; the others are selected by local judges. With the support of then-incumbent commissioner David Pepper, I was chosen. As a resident, as a reader, as a citizen, as a consumer of library services and as a believer in the libraries' goals and objectives, I felt qualified: arguably not more than most and certainly less than many. However, I didn't think much about why I was given the nod and, as is clear now, it was a consequence of who I knew rather than what I knew and that is why I've come to believe that publicly appointed boards are prone to miss the best candidates. David Pepper is someone of intellect and integrity. For those reasons, I had come to know him as a friend and as someone whose candidacy for various offices we have supported. However, neither admiration for nor dollars directed to an elected official are qualifications to be appointed to anything but, inevitably, I was the beneficiary of both.

My service on the Board and as its Chair is now concluded. Our library is excellent. Its consistently top ranking is a tribute to its remarkable history and to its present day level of effective service. Our system began in 1814 and is recognized by any of a number of standards as one of the best in the country. We have, in addition to our main downtown library, 40 branches which offer learning, pleasure and opportunity to people throughout the region. There are over 600,000 card holders and the library, under the accomplished professional leadership of Kimber Fender, continues to anticipate new needs and to respond with innovative offerings. From the most traditional book lending to computer services, on-line educational offerings, employment opportunity resources and hands-on counsel, and virtually endless technology equipment, our libraries are there as needed.

Which brings me back to Andrew Carnegie and his rich legacy, of which our community is one of many, many beneficiaries. Carnegie articulated his objective as to “try to make the world in some way better than you found it.” There is no doubt he achieved this meaningful and enduring goal.

I won't guess what either Miss Eula Johnson or Mr. Andrew Carnegie would think of the chap to whom I will grant the final word on the importance of libraries and the books they house. That goes to Groucho Marx, who observed: "Outside of a dog, books are man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it is too dark to read anyway."

Thank you.

Paul G. Sittenfeld