

THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

ORIGINS OF LIBRARIES IN BOULDER, CENTRAL CITY, COLORADO CITY, COLORADO
SPRINGS, AND DENVER DURING THE PERIOD 1860-1905

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On February 8, 1860, while Denver was yet in its infancy, a group of citizens organized the Denver and Auraria Library and Reading Room Association.¹ Among those present was A. E. Pierce, who had established a circulating library and newsstand in Denver as early as 1859.² The meeting also included six merchants, two physicians, a lawyer, an engineer, a realtor, an educator, a legal clerk, and another newsstand dealer.³ The purpose of the Association was to be the improvement of the minds of its members, as well as to encourage conversation and social enjoyment.⁴ In a series of meetings, the group resolved to include ministers and newspaper editors as honorary members, elected officers, and appointed a committee to purchase newspapers and magazines from Pierce.⁵ Although enthusiasm ran high initially, it did not endure, for within a few months most of the members had ceased to pay their dues of fifty cents a month, and one, John Shear, was unfortunate

¹"Organization of the Denver and Auraria Library and Reading Room Association," Denver Weekly Rocky Mountain News, 15 February 1860, p. 1 (Hereafter cited as WRMN).

²Jerome C. Smiley, ed., History of Denver, with Outlines of the Earlier History of the Rocky Mountain Country (Denver: 1901), p. 764 (Hereafter cited as Smiley, History of Denver).

³S. W. Burt and E. L. Berthoud, The Rocky Mountain Gold Regions (Denver: 1861); Denver City and Auraria, the Commercial Emporium of the Pike's Peak Gold Regions in 1859 (reprint ed., Denver: 1970); J. E. Wharton and David O. Wilhelm, History of the City of Denver from its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time, by J. E. Wharton, to which is Added a Full and Complete Business Directory of the City by D. O. Wilhelm (Denver, 1866).

⁴Smiley, History of Denver, p. 764.

⁵"Organization of the Denver and Auraria Library and Reading Room Association," WRMN, 15 February 1860, p. 1.

enough to be executed for horse thievery.⁶ The Association met its demise about the same time.

In its inception and promotion, the Denver and Auraria Library and Reading Room Association presents a microcosm of library development in the Colorado communities of Boulder, Central City, Colorado City, Colorado Springs, and Denver during the period 1860-1905. The Association's hope of improving the mind was typical of the altruistic motives which exercised library founders. Its leadership of professional and businessmen was similar to the leadership of other library movements. In this respect, the Association's inclusion of editors and clergymen as honorary members is significant, for they were to be vociferous library boosters later. The Association's means of finance, collection of a fee from library users, meant that anyone willing to pay could use the library, thus lending it a quasi-public status. In the future, most libraries, despite being founded by private organizations, would be open to the public, either free, or upon payment of a fee.

Although the motives of library founders varied, several themes can be discerned, among which was a spirit of boosterism, typified by editorial statements in the Rocky Mountain News. As early as 1872, the News praised the Denver Library Association, a group of private citizens, for its efforts to organize a library. Calling a library ". . . one of those necessary adjuncts to a civilized community," the newspaper said it would be ". . . a credit and an honor to the city."⁷

⁶Smiley, History of Denver, p. 765.

⁷"The New Library Rooms," Denver Daily Rocky Mountain News, 15 December 1872, p. 4 (Hereafter cited as RMN).

However, the efforts of the Association failed, and by 1875, a visitor to Denver could be found writing a letter to the editor of the News, expressing his surprise that the city had no library, adding that probably every city in the east of the size of Denver had a circulating library.⁸ Sporadic efforts to found a library having come to nothing, the News waxed indignant and in 1879 appealed to the millionaires of the city, asking them to donate enough money to form a library of twenty to thirty thousand volumes.⁹ Two years later Horace A. Tabor rose to the occasion by producing a plan for a three story building containing a library, lecture hall, and art gallery.¹⁰ Only a few months later this grandiose scheme had apparently collapsed and nothing more was heard of it.¹¹

Sentiments similar to those of the News were echoed in other Colorado communities. The Boulder Daily Camera in December, 1899 labelled Boulder as the Athens of Colorado and called for the establishment of a library worthy of the city's lofty reputation. The editorialist stated that

A fine library building would be an ornament to the city. Its very presence here would say to the stranger within our gates, "here is the residence of intelligence. Here resides love of the arts and sciences. This must be a city of homes and a center of culture."¹²

⁸"How it Looks to a Stranger," RMN, 22 September 1875, p. 4.

⁹RMN, 9 September 1879, p. 8.

¹⁰"Tabor Library," RMN, 28 January 1881, p. 4.

¹¹"No Library as Yet," RMN, 4 August 1881, p. 8.

¹²"Library We Must Have," Boulder Daily Camera, 13 December 1899, p. 2 (Hereafter cited as Camera).

When interest in library efforts flagged, the Camera raged against the local business community for its lack of support of any cause not "personally material," and blamed the prevailing apathy upon the lack of a board of trade or similar business organization to direct worthwhile civic projects.¹³

Editorialists were not alone in their expression of the thought that libraries were an example of civic pride. Judge Horace G. Lunt, tracing the history of the library movement in Colorado Springs, voiced the opinion that the citizens of the town were so much above the average in intelligence and initiative, that their desire for a library was hardly surprising.¹⁴

If the idea of a public library as a sign of civic pride was prominent among library promoters, so was the idea of the library as a refuge for those attempting to avoid dens of vice. The Rocky Mountain News in particular was concerned because young men had no resort for entertainment other than saloons, gambling dives, and bawdyhouses. In 1872 an editorial bemoaned the fact that the haunts of vice were well attended because young men had no other place to go and suggested that a library or reading room would be a useful alternative.¹⁵ The same theme reappears nine years later. Pointing out that Denver lacked a public library and very few places of ". . . respectable amusement and

¹³Camera, 11 December 1899, p. 2; "Library We Must Have," Camera, 13 December 1899, p. 2.

¹⁴Free Public Library of Colorado Springs, Colorado, Dedicatory Exercises (Colorado Springs, 1905), p. 7 (Hereafter cited as Colorado Springs, Dedicatory Exercises).

¹⁵"A Library and a Reading Room," RMN, 18 August 1872, p. 2.

and entertainment. . .," the News concluded that the lack of such places was ". . . a great cause of drunkenness and immorality. . . ."16

By the same token, the newspaper reported that the libraries formed during this period of time would serve as an alternative to saloons. In 1877, the News recorded that the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) was maintaining a library ". . . where young and old are made welcome to spend their leisure time, instead of spending them in saloons and other haunts of dissipation and vice. . .," while the St. Patrick's Library, organized in 1884 by a Catholic association, was also seen as a refuge from the liquor establishments.17

Others shared the concern of the News for the moral welfare of young men. A striking instance was the activity of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) in establishing reading rooms containing refreshments, presumably nonalcoholic, and temperance literature. Such reading rooms were founded in a number of Colorado communities, including Denver, Boulder, Pueblo, Ouray, and Colorado City.18 The Boulder W.C.T.U. chapter first took the idea of opening a reading room under consideration on November 8, 1881, and, after deciding to undertake the project, opened the reading room on March 13 of the following year.19 Although one of

16"A New Club," RMN, 24 October 1881, p. 7.

17"A Year's Work," RMN, 17 July 1877, p. 4; "A Worthy Work," RMN, 3 June 1884, p. 1.

18William Elliott West, Dry Crusade: The Prohibition Movement in Colorado, 1858-1933 (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1971), p. 144; "The Woods Free Library!" Colorado City Iris, 11 January 1896, p. 1 (Hereafter cited as Iris).

19"Constitution and By-Laws of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Boulder, Colorado, August, 1881 to February, 1886," W.C.T.U. Papers, Western History Department, University of Colorado Library, Boulder, pp. 22, 29 (Hereafter cited as "W.C.T.U., 1881-1886").

the features of the room was Sunday afternoon Bible classes, the material available in the collection was not confined to temperance and religious literature; an attempt was made to secure local newspapers and to obtain an encyclopedia.²⁰

Yet another reason advanced for the foundation of libraries was their value as an educational and intellectual institution. As early as 1867, the Y.M.C.A. reading room in Denver was regarded by the News as ". . . a benefit to the mind and intellect. . .;" several years later the Denver Library Association was viewed as a place where one might keep in touch with the news and broaden one's cultural background.²¹ In 1880 the Young Men's Catholic Club of Denver set about organizing a reading room. The Club hoped to cultivate among its members ". . . a taste for library pursuits and to foster a desire for intellectual development."²² In 1885, when agitation for a public library seemed to hit a peak in Denver, Reverend Myron Reed gave a sermon on the worth of books. A public library was a place where rich and poor met, where ". . . those who can . . . help those who can not." In short, "A public library is a civilizer of men, and humanizes them."²³

Similar sentiments were expressed elsewhere in Colorado. The Miners' and Mechanics' Institute of Central City, founded in 1866, had an ambitious program to educate its members which included not only a library, but also lectures, debates, essays, and the promotion of the

²⁰Ibid., pp. 31, 37.

²¹RMN, 9 April 1867, p. 4; "The Denver Library Association," RMN, 12 March 1873, p. 4.

²²"Another Reading Room," RMN, 4 April 1880, p. 8.

²³"Worth of Books," RMN, 16 November 1885, p. 3.

mechanical arts.²⁴ G. W. Woods, speaking at the dedication of the Woods Free Library in Colorado City, pointed out that the availability of printed matter had contributed to the progress achieved in the nineteenth century. Anyone could gain knowledge, with books as the means, and, of course, the books could be found in the library.²⁵ Judge Lunt summed up the educational value of a public library to Colorado Springs: the library was an influence on children; it supplemented the public schools; it provided contact with other minds through the medium of books; it enabled the present to learn from the past; and it made good citizens by educating those who had had to leave school early.²⁶

Another, but somewhat less important reason given for the establishment of libraries was their usefulness as centers of recreation and entertainment. The Boulder County News suggested in 1871 that libraries or reading rooms be opened as a means of entertainment or of social gathering. Otherwise there would be little to do during the long winter evenings.²⁷ When the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society, as mentioned before, opened its library in 1884, it announced that ". . . games of amusement, singing and literary exercises. . ." would be available at the library during the evenings.²⁸ Shortly thereafter it was reported

²⁴Nelle Frances Minnick, A Cultural History of Central City, Colorado, from 1859 to 1880, in Terms of Books and Libraries (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1946), p. 41 (Hereafter cited as Minnick, Central City).

²⁵"The Woods Free Library!" Iris, 11 January 1896, p. 1.

²⁶Colorado Springs, Dedicatory Exercises, pp. 15-17.

²⁷"Reading Room Needed for the Winter," Boulder County News, 27 October 1871, p. 2 (Hereafter cited as County News).

²⁸"By Order of Committee will Open a Library," RMN, 1 June 1884, p. 4.

that young men were swarming into the library to play checkers, cribbage, and euchre.²⁹ Later, after some hesitation, the Boulder W.C.T.U. also decided to allow chess, checkers, and backgammon to be played in the reading room.³⁰

Just as a variety of reasons was given for the founding of libraries, so was there variety in the kinds of libraries founded. Usually a distinction was made between a circulating library and a reading room. A reading room generally contained periodicals such as magazines and newspapers; occasionally books were included also. In either case, reading had to be done on the premises. A circulating library might contain both books and periodicals, but its intention was to make books available, usually at a fee, for use outside the library. Libraries and reading rooms were sometimes combined in the same establishment.

One of the more common types of libraries or reading rooms was that which was founded by a group of private citizens for the use of the general public. Those wishing to take books from the library often had to pay a subscription fee. The first library of this type in Denver was the Denver and Auraria Library and Reading Room Association, which, as was mentioned in the introduction, enjoyed a brief existence in the early months of 1860. This initial effort was followed by the ubiquitous Denver Library Association of the 1870's. The Association was organized as early as 1870, but apparently did not open its doors until December 16, 1872.³¹ Following the financial collapse of this

²⁹"The St. Patrick's Catholic Library," RMN, 15 June 1884, p. 7.

³⁰"W.C.T.U., 1881-1886," p. 72.

³¹RMN, 1 December 1870, p. 4; "The New Library Rooms," RMN, 15 December 1872, p. 4.

group in 1875, a second Denver Library Association sprang into being but met the fate of the first within a few years. In 1878 its books were donated to the East Denver High School library, which ultimately became the Denver Public Library.³² A vigorous public library movement began in January, 1885 and included private citizens, various literary clubs, the Catholic Literary Association, and the Burnham Library Association.³³ These interests formed the Denver Library Union, which was a fund raising group rather than an actual library, and which decided to throw its support behind the Chamber of Commerce's mercantile library plan.³⁴ On November 1, 1886, the Mercantile Library opened, temporarily satisfying the demand for a public library. Despite its name, its collection was general in nature, rather than being confined to business books, and was open to the public upon the payment of a fee.³⁵

Similar libraries of a quasi-public type also existed briefly in Boulder. A reading room association, funded through subscriptions, was formed in 1869 but expired in 1870.³⁶ Another library of this type came into being in 1895, when the W.C.T.U. chapter and a number of other women's groups joined to create a library and reading room. This cooperative effort resulted in a reading room which was ". . . a settled

³²"The New Denver Library," RMN, 17 November 1875, p. 4; "Donated to the City," RMN, 20 April 1878, p. 4.

³³"A Public Library," RMN, 13 January 1885, p. 5.

³⁴"Looking to a Library," RMN, 13 January 1885, p. 5.

³⁵"Opening its Doors," RMN, 2 November 1886, p. 2.

³⁶County News, 7 December 1869, p. 3; "Reading Room Needed for the Winter," County News, 27 October 1871, p. 2.

fact. . ." by April 16.³⁷

Colorado Springs had some sort of circulating library as early as 1863, but it survived only two years.³⁸ The next major effort occurred in 1875, when the El Paso County Library Association opened a library of two hundred volumes. At first interest was high, but as enthusiasm waned the library was moved from place to place until it finally closed in 1881 after having failed to secure financial support from the city.³⁹ Interest revived in 1885, when the Colorado Springs Social Union, which was composed of private citizens, and which received donations of books from the libraries of Mrs. M. A. Garstein and the Y.M.C.A., was founded. Displaying remarkable durability, the Social Union library, which had its name changed to the Free Library and Reading Room Association in 1890, served the town until the Carnegie library was opened in 1905.⁴⁰

Colorado City (now a part of Colorado Springs) was the beneficiary of a public library donated by Mrs. G. W. Woods in 1896. Mrs. Woods was no newcomer to the business of founding libraries; earlier she had founded a library in Humboldt, Nebraska as a memorial to her first husband, then deceased. The Woods Free Library, as it was named, endured until Colorado City, like Colorado Springs, received a Carnegie library.⁴¹

³⁷"Woman's Christian Temperance Union, June 19, 1894 to March 2, 1897," W.C.T.U. Papers, Western History Department, University of Colorado Library, Boulder, Entries for January 1, 1895 and April 16, 1895.

³⁸Colorado Springs, Dedicatory Exercises, p. 6.

³⁹Manly Dayton Ormes and Eleanor R. Ormes, The Book of Colorado Springs (Colorado Springs: 1933), pp. 178-181 (Hereafter cited as Ormes, Colorado Springs).

⁴⁰Colorado Springs, Dedicatory Exercises, pp. 6-9.

⁴¹"The Woods Free Library," Iris, 11 January 1896, p. 1.

Just as public libraries founded and operated by private citizens were important in nineteenth century Colorado, so were libraries and reading rooms founded by non-denominational Christian organizations. The W.C.T.U. and the Y.M.C.A. were chief among these. As mentioned before, the W.C.T.U. organized reading rooms in Boulder, Denver, and Colorado City, among other places. The Boulder W.C.T.U. reading room may be taken as an example. The room was opened on March 13, 1882, when library resources otherwise appear to have been lacking in the town. The women made a valiant effort to keep the enterprise functioning despite a chronic lack of funds, and even considered adding a circulating library.⁴² Unfortunately, their financial difficulties proved too great to overcome, and the reading room was closed early in 1886.⁴³ Although the W.C.T.U. assisted in opening the public reading room in 1895, it was not part of their organization.⁴⁴

Along with the W.C.T.U., the Young Men's Christian Association was active in the maintenance of reading rooms in a number of communities, including Denver, Boulder, and Colorado Springs. The Denver Y.M.C.A. reading room had an especially long life. Supplied with newspapers from across the United States, it was in existence by 1867.⁴⁵ Apparently it became defunct for a period of time after that, for the Rocky Mountain News reported that the Y.M.C.A. had been formed again on December 30, 1875. By 1877 it was in charge of a library containing

⁴²W.C.T.U., 1881-1886," pp. 65-66, 91.

⁴³Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁴Camera, 23 September 1899, p. 4.

⁴⁵RMN, 9 April 1867, p. 4.

books rather than newspapers.⁴⁶ The Y.M.C.A. underwent a reorganization in 1881 and managed to keep its library open at least until 1885.⁴⁷ The efforts of the Boulder Y.M.C.A. began almost as early as in Denver. There, an attempt was made to raise funds for a library in 1875.⁴⁸ In Colorado Springs, the Y.M.C.A. library effort met with defeat ultimately. A library was opened sometime in the 1870's; when it collapsed the Y.M.C.A. at least had the satisfaction of donating its collection to the Social Union library, which proved to be a lasting success.⁴⁹

A third type of library which appeared was that of private organizations which maintained libraries or reading rooms primarily for the benefit of their members. As such, these libraries differed from those discussed previously in that their membership was limited rather than being open to the public at large. Some were aimed at the members of a particular occupation. The Miners' and Mechanics' Institute, organized in Central City in 1866 by citizens of that community and which included a library among its activities, was intended to aid miners.⁵⁰ Mining literature was also the specialty of the Miners' Headquarters Reading Room, opened by the Teller House in Central City.⁵¹ In Denver, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad opened the Burnham

⁴⁶"A Year's Work," RMN, 17 July 1877, p. 4.

⁴⁷"A Public Library," RMN, 11 January 1881, p. 3; "Y.M.C.A.," RMN, 11 June 1885, p. 2.

⁴⁸County News, 17 December 1875, p. 3.

⁴⁹Colorado Springs, Dedicatory Exercises, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁰Minnick, Central City, pp. 38, 41.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 56.

Library for the benefit of its shop employees in that city.⁵² An Apprentices' Library was functioning in Denver in 1884, and the Knights of Labor had plans to open a reading room in 1885, modeled upon the Y.M.C.A. reading room.⁵³

Libraries founded by or for public servants were another type to be found in the category of private organizations. Firemen's libraries were probably the most common. In Denver, Hook and Ladder companies Number 1 and Number 2, and Woodie Fisher Hose Company Number 1 either had libraries in the 1870's or were attempting to acquire them.⁵⁴ About the same time, the armory of the Governor's Guard opened a reading room containing newspapers and military journals.⁵⁵

A fourth category was that of libraries founded by churches or by church denominations. Unlike those of private organizations, the libraries founded by religious groups often welcomed the general public to the premises. Thus, the St. Patrick's Society library welcomed non-Catholics.⁵⁶ Other Catholic groups were also active in the library field. In 1880, the Young Men's Catholic Club of Denver attempted to raise money for a reading room, while several years later the Catholic Library Association was almost in competition with the St. Patrick's Society

⁵²"An Anniversary," RMN, 30 March 1884, p. 2; "The Burnham Books," RMN, 19 April 1884, p. 4.

⁵³"The Apprentices Library," RMN, 9 March 1884, p. 3; "Lifts for Labor," RMN, 1 May 1885, p. 7.

⁵⁴"The Coming Firemen's Ball," RMN, 7 May 1876, p. 4; "Maennerchor Hall," RMN, 13 April 1877, p. 4.

⁵⁵RMN, 1 April 1877, p. 4.

⁵⁶"A Worthy Work," RMN, 3 June 1884, p. 1.

in its efforts to create a library.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the Protestants were not idle; the Congregational Church in Denver opened a reading room in 1879.⁵⁸ The Protestant denominations were particularly active in organizing Sunday school libraries to provide reading material for children. At least twelve such libraries were in existence in Colorado by 1866, but their value to the adult reading population is doubtful.⁵⁹

A final category consisted of libraries operated by individuals for the public. These were, in effect, small businesses. A. E. Pierce's newsstand and circulating library, mentioned before, was the first of these, providing reading matter for the citizens of that city during the first year of its existence. L. D. McCormick had plans for a circulating library in 1872, and Wall & Witter's maintained a library of its own at the end of the decade.⁶⁰ In Colorado Springs, Mrs. M. A. Garstein operated a library of this type in the 1880's before donating her collection to the Social Union library.⁶¹ Similarly, Mrs. W. A. Farnsworth opened a circulating library in Boulder in the mid-1870's.⁶²

Both the reasons given for the founding of libraries and the varieties of libraries founded have been examined thus far; an examination

⁵⁷"Another Reading Room," RMN, 4 April 1880, p. 8; "A New Catholic Library Scheme," RMN, 3 June 1884, p. 8.

⁵⁸"Opening a Reading Room," RMN, 26 September 1879, p. 8.

⁵⁹"Proceedings of the Sunday School Convention," RMN, 15 June 1866, p. 1.

⁶⁰RMN, 16 December 1871, p. 1; RMN, 12 September 1879, p. 8.

⁶¹Colorado Springs, Dedicatory Exercises, p. 7.

⁶²County News, 5 November 1875, p. 5; County News, 21 July 1876, p. 3.

of the occupations of library founders, officers, and donors is now in order. Newspaper accounts often give the names of library founders; these names, in turn, can be checked against the city directories of the period to determine occupations. The occupations have been categorized according to Stephan Thernstrom's occupation classification scheme.⁶³ For the purposes of this study only the broader Thernstrom categories of white-collar and blue-collar workers have been used. Altogether, of the individuals who took part in the library movements which were examined, 197 were white-collar, 11 were blue-collar, 23 were women who did not fall into any occupational category, and 2 were students. Of the 197 white-collar workers, 57 came from professional occupations.

It can be readily concluded that library founders in early Colorado were interested in establishing libraries partially as an alternative to the saloon, the gambling hall, and the brothel as a place of recreation and entertainment. Libraries would not only be a recreational outlet, they would also serve as a moral agency, for literature supposedly possessed an uplifting quality lacking in saloons. Furthermore, libraries would serve an educational purpose by enabling the user to broaden both his practical knowledge and his cultural background. Later, as life on the frontier became more settled, emphasis was placed upon libraries as a civic asset and a source of local pride.

The varieties of libraries established tend to bear out these conclusions. For example, it is hardly coincidence that libraries were

⁶³Stephan Thernstrom, The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1973), pp. 290-292.

touted as alternatives to saloons and that the Woman's Christian Temperance Union became active in organizing reading rooms. While groups like the Miners' and Mechanics' Institute of Central City, the Y.M.C.A. and the Woods Library of Colorado City aimed their libraries at different segments of society, they all had the partial goal of increasing the educational opportunities of their readers. In addition, the variety of libraries founded indicates that the lack of a public library was felt by a number of groups, each of which attempted to fill the gap by establishing its own library. As a result, many small libraries were functioning in the place of one general public library.

On the other hand, no matter how diverse the aims of these groups were, their leadership tended to be drawn from the same occupational level of society. Library founders, officers, and donors were overwhelmingly white-collar in occupation. Professional workers in particular, including clergymen, lawyers, physicians, and newspaper editors, played an active role in the library movement.

In short then, the study presents few surprises. Libraries in early Colorado were founded by those with the education, the wealth, and the leisure necessary to indulge in such activities. Their motives were a mixture of altruism and the desire to prevent moral decay in the society of the day. The Carnegie library movement, which reached its peak during the first decade of the twentieth century, simultaneously provided most Colorado cities with library resources and brought to a close the private library efforts which had marked the settlement of the state.

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APPENDIX II. CITY DIRECTORIES

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