

The Early History of the Monrovia Library

Kiri L. Wagstaff
LIBR 280
San Jose State University
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Abstract

The small community of Monrovia, California, created its first library in 1894. As one of the first in southern California, Monrovia's library provides insight into the methods by which communities founded, supported, and expanded their library services. Monrovia was the beneficiary of a \$10,000 Carnegie grant, which enabled the construction of an independent library building. The history of the Monrovia library also highlights challenges faced by small western libraries in the late nineteenth century, including public health issues, funding limitations, and the need for trained librarians, not just community members, to manage the collections.

Monrovia, California, is a small community of 36,590 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) nestled up against the San Gabriel Mountains near Los Angeles. It was one of the earliest communities to be incorporated in Los Angeles County, following Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and Pasadena in late 1887. Within just a few years, the community conceived of and formed a free public library that was supported by "a small tax levy, aided by courses of lectures and entertainments" (Harvey, 1897, p. 3). A growing collection and volume of circulation led the Library Board to petition Andrew Carnegie for funds to construct a library building. At the same time, Monrovia hired its first trained librarian, Ellyn T. Hill. She served as librarian from 1907 to 1916. Among other activities, she conducted a training school whose pupils included Anne Crews, who replaced Hill as the regular librarian in 1917.

This paper provides a close survey of the origin and growth of the Monrovia Public Library from its creation in 1893 through 1920. Many issues common to small libraries in this time period emerge from the library's historical documents, including the fumigation of books for public safety, the need for a trained librarian to catalog and manage a growing collection, how best to provide services for children, and, of course, how to fund the library and grow its collection. Examining the historical record provides an intimate look into how public libraries in the West were created and cultivated as a public resource for their communities.

The Library's First Home and Early Years

The Monrovia Public Library owes its existence to the energetic brainstorming, lobbying, fundraising, and service of the Saturday Afternoon Club, a local charitable organization of women that was founded in 1891. By 1904, the club consisted of 91 women from Monrovia and neighboring towns Duarte and El Monte (Hoag, 1904, p. 329). Women's clubs of this nature existed throughout the country and had a widespread although uncoordinated impact on the

creation and growth of public libraries (Watson, 1994). Members commonly believed firmly in “the importance of books in improving the quality of life” (Watson, 1994, p. 235) and helped organize both traveling and permanent libraries.

The women of the Saturday Afternoon Club first began agitating for the creation of a library in 1892 (Wiley, 1927, p. 82). In January, they went before the city board of trustees to request support for the project. In 1893, they received a donation of books and \$150 in cash to support the creation of a library. They also held a fundraising tea in which attendees were encouraged to bring books for the price of admission. “Some fifty volumes were donated, the collection becoming the nucleus for Monrovia’s present library” (Davis, 1957, p. 48).

On April 8, 1893, the City approved Ordinance No. 71, stating that “a free public library and reading room is hereby established in and for the City of Monrovia” (Monrovia Municipal Ordinance 71, 1893). The ordinance created a separate Library Fund and called for five elected trustees that would serve without salary. The women of the Saturday Afternoon Club were naturally eager to serve in guiding the library’s direction, but they were not permitted to run for election. Women could not even cast votes in California until Proposition 4, which became Senate Constitutional Amendment 8, was passed in 1911 (California Senate Constitutional Amendment 8, 1911). Yet it seems that everyone felt that they would serve the library best, so a legal loophole was exploited. “While the board had to be elected primarily, yet the council had the power to fill all vacancies” (Wiley, 1927, p. 83). Therefore, in April 1894, five men were elected to the new Library Board of trustees. All five promptly resigned, and the city appointed five women to fill their positions.

After two years of being housed in various board members’ homes, the Library received its own space in July of 1895. The city paid \$2.50 per month to rent a room in the Granite Bank Building (Wiley, 1927, p. 84). The Library Board immediately put the space to good use in what would be the Library’s home for the next 12 years.

The Library Board and Activities

It is evident from reviewing the handwritten minutes of the Library Board’s meetings that the board members involved themselves directly in library operations from the beginning. During their first meeting, on May 7, 1894, they decided that they would alternate who opened and cared for the library and to order supplies consisting of two lamps, a can of oil, a broom, five keys, a table, matches, and a dust pan (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 33). Four years later, on May 31, 1898, they designated one person, Mrs. Addie Shrode, as the regular librarian (p. 35) and agreed to pay her \$1 for each day that the Library was open (p. 36–37).

They discussed which books and magazines should be purchased and how to deal with patrons who were chronically late returning their books. They planned lectures such as one on Robert Burns, discussed in the April 4, 1899, meeting, “the proceeds to be used in purchasing new books for the Library” (p. 40). They also sold 237 tickets to a lecture by Mrs. Emma Greenleaf, a popular lecturer and member of women’s groups in Los Angeles, that was held on March 18, 1907 (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 22). Tickets cost 50 cents each, yielding proceeds of \$118. The topic of the lecture is given elsewhere as “California, old and new,” and the event was organized “for the benefit of the library furnishing fund” (Shannon, 1907a, p. 146).

The Board discussed a policy for “tourist” use of the Library and on November 5, 1901, they decided to charge a small fee, “a practice quite generally followed in Southern California” (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 54). The fee was 50 cents per month for the first three months and 25 cents per month after that. The monthly nature of the policy indicates that

tourist visits tended to be much longer than they are now; today the Monrovia Library offers guest (tourist) computer use for a day but encourage longer visitors to obtain a library card.

By 1897, as reported by the *Monrovia Messenger*, the Library collection had grown far beyond its initial size:

[The library's] nucleus was the private library of the Saturday Afternoon Club, consisting of some seventy-five volumes. Money and books were liberally given, and now, after only three years' growth, we boast of a library with nearly three thousand volumes. (Harvey, 1897, p. 3)

There is a slight discrepancy between the *Messenger's* characterization of the collection's beginnings and the version (cited above) related by Davis 60 years later, but they agree on the humble size of the initial holdings. Managing a collection of 3000 volumes would have been a large job for any single person. In addition to managing the purchasing and circulation of books, the librarian also had to contend with concerns about public health and safety.

Fumigation of the Collection

At this time in American history, there was grave concern about the spread of disease, with communities experiencing waves of scarlet fever, smallpox, and tuberculosis. Many people, including some medical experts, were concerned that contaminated library books could transmit diseases (Greenberg, 1988). In keeping with common practice at the time, Monrovia conducted an annual fumigation of its book collection (Brayley, 1901). This practice was later discredited, but a 1922 survey of 56 California libraries showed that if a book had been "exposed to contagious and virulent diseases," 33 (59%) destroyed the book, 15 (27%) fumigated it, seven (13%) allowed it to be handled by patients or "contagious wards," and one did nothing (Ahern, 1922). However, policies varied according to local perception of the severity and transmissibility of a disease. Minor contagious diseases "such as measles" were more likely to be fumigated (33) or untreated (13) than to be destroyed (4). Books used by tuberculosis patients were fumigated (16), untreated (27), or destroyed (6).

The first mention of fumigation in the Monrovia library records is from January 15, 1901, in which "Mrs. Shrode described the method in use in the Pasadena library. In the opinion of the board the fumigation of books was a necessity" (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 53), although the reasons for that conclusion are not given. Six months later, on June 10, the Board discussed creating a fumigation closet in which formaldehyde would be employed (p. 54), but in November they instead decided to "see Mr. Cronenwette in regard to an apparatus owned by him, and by means of which the library and all the books could be fumigated at once" (p. 54). In September 1902, the board met to "prepare the books for fumigation. . . . Fumigation having begun the meeting adjourned" (p. 58).

The link between disease and the practice of fumigation appears concretely in the Library Board's records from January 1909, revealing policies consistent with the majority of California libraries of the period.

[Librarian] Miss Hill reported 4 books having been returned from a family where scarlet fever had existed and asked for advice in regard to such cases. . . . The books from the scarlet fever case were ordered destroyed, [and] the health officer was requested to notify the city librarian of every case of contagious disease so that she might properly regulate the distribution of books. (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 84)

By late 1902, the Library was outgrowing its home in the Granite Bank Building, and the Board began working on its biggest project to date: obtaining a Carnegie grant to construct a building devoted exclusively to the Library's needs.

The Carnegie-Funded Library

Andrew Carnegie was a philanthropist who made his fortune through the steel industry. Between 1893 and 1919, Carnegie funded the construction of 1,689 public libraries across America (Jones, 1997, p. 2), including 142 in California (p. 128). This program had a staggering influence on the spread of free public libraries; approximately half of all public libraries created in this period were funded by Carnegie.

By the turn of the century, the process of application for a Carnegie library grant was well established. “[Carnegie’s] library giving [had] become systematized by 1901, with standards established and a routine procedure to handle all requests efficiently and promptly” (Wall, 1970, p. 828). The requirements for a grant were that the community have a demonstrated need for a library, provide the building site, and commit to sustaining the library with annual tax funds equal to 10 percent of the grant amount (Jones, 1997, p. 26). James Bertram, Carnegie’s personal secretary, managed the library grant program. However, the application process proceeded neither smoothly nor promptly for Monrovia, as the Board minutes indicate.

The Monrovia Carnegie Grant

The Library Board first discussed applying for a Carnegie grant on November 4, 1902 (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 59). Davis (1957) suggested that “procrastination on the part of the City Trustees delayed action toward this goal” until 1905, when they finally obtained a response (p. 49). However, perusing the Library Board minutes indicates that this was an ongoing effort throughout the intervening three years. Initially, “Mrs. Wheeler was chosen [sic] a committee of one to write said request [to Mr. Carnegie]” (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 59). The notes do not indicate what gave the Board this idea, but by that time 29 libraries in California, including four in southern California (Riverside, Santa Ana, Pomona, and San Bernardino), had received Carnegie grants (Jones, 1997, p. 132–133). It is likely that the Board members were inspired by their neighboring libraries which had already benefited.

Initially the Board’s plan was to request funds to support purchasing the Granite Bank Building, but by June of 1903 the plan had changed to propose construction of a new building instead (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 63). In October, the secretary was instructed to “again write Mr. Carnegie [sic] soliciting aid in procuring a Library building, and setting of the fact that the citizens are willing to pay 600 dollars per annum, toward maintaining the Public Library” (p. 64). There is no official record of that commitment, nor whether there was a response to the letter. The next May, the Board members met with the mayor of Monrovia, Mr. Walker, asking him to intervene and write to Mr. Carnegie himself (p. 70). This either did not happen or was not fruitful, since in December 1904 the Board decided to “write to the Librarian at Long Beach in regard to methods used to induce Mr. Carnegie to give them a Library building” (p. 84). The Long Beach library did not receive their grant of \$30,000 until January 1905 (Jones, 1997, p. 132), but perhaps their negotiations were far enough along in December 1904 to serve as an example for Monrovia. The Library Board may have looked on impatiently as other southern California libraries received Carnegie grants, including libraries in Santa Monica and Whittier.

Their efforts paid off in February 1905, when they learned that Mayor Walker had received an offer letter from the Carnegie Foundation (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 87) (Davis,

1957, p. 49). The letter contained this wording:

If the city agree by resolution of council to maintain a free public library at a cost of not less than \$1,000 per annum and provide a suitable site for the building, Mr. Carnegie will be glad to give \$10,000 to erect a free public library building for Monrovia. (Wiley, 1927, p. 93)

Carnegie library grant amounts were “loosely computed” at “\$2 to \$3 per area resident,” using the most recent census figures (Jones, 1997, p. 28). The 1900 census reported Monrovia’s population as 1205, so either Bertram was more generous than usual in his grant offer for Monrovia, or the city may have inflated its numbers, as happened in several communities seeking Carnegie support (p. 31). \$10,000 was also the most common grant amount given out (p. 128). Adjusted for inflation, the \$10,000 grant would come to \$250,000 in 2012 dollars (Friedman, n.d.).

Preparing for Library Construction

However, the Library Board’s work was not yet done. The Carnegie grant came with a crucial condition: that the City provide the land on which the library would be built. To raise the funds needed to purchase the land, they had to get a bond measure passed by voters. The Board apparently assumed that this would succeed and in the next month, March 1905, began requesting and reviewing architect proposals for floor plans for the building (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 88). They also approached the individual land owners and negotiated purchasing agreements (p. 89).

Meanwhile, the City proceeded with plans for the bond issue election, meeting with the Board in August to discuss numbers (p. 95). Further, the Board members went out into the community to “interview as many voters as possible and appeal to them to give their assistance in favor of coming bond election” (p. 95) and in September delegated members to “write an article each week for the papers on the bond issue” (p. 96).

Curiously, the outcome of the election, which took place in October 1905, is not recorded in the Board minutes. Wiley states that it took two elections for the measure to pass, with redoubled efforts by the Library Board, the Board of Trade, and “over 175 merchants and other prominent citizens” (Wiley, 1927, p. 96–98). Ultimately, the voters approved two bonds: \$8,000 to purchase the existing Granite Bank Building and and \$18,000 to buy the land on the rest of the block (Wiley, 1927), or a total of \$654,000 in 2012 dollars (Friedman, n.d.).

Both bond issues carried by overwhelming majorities, and the evening after the election, the civic battlers celebrated at the Grand View Hotel with an oyster supper where oratorical felicitations flowed freely. (Wiley, 1927, p. 98)

The City purchased these lots between 1905 and 1907; copies of the deeds are on file today at the Library. The Board continued to review building proposals and in April 1906 selected Mr. W. J. Bleisner as the architect for the new Library (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 114).

To prepare for moving to the new building, the Library Board ordered that 12 boxes be made to store the books (p. 118). The boxes were 8 inches deep and 12 inches wide and either 10, 12, or 14 inches tall. The total volume of the boxes was just 7.6 cubic feet, yet the collection at that time was between 3000 and 5000 books. Perhaps not all of the books were stored in these boxes. In July 1906, the books were moved to the City building until the Carnegie building would be ready to receive them.

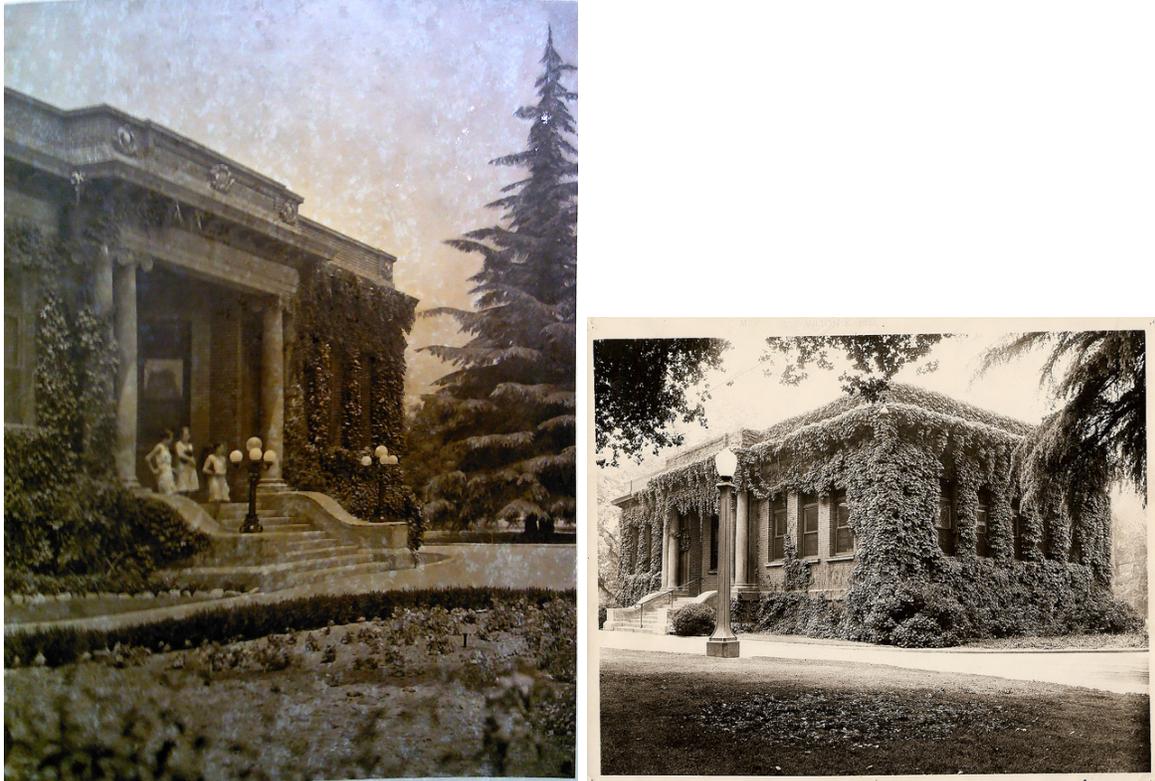


Figure 1. Two views of the Monrovia Public Library's Carnegie building, which opened in 1908, shown circa 1929 (left) and undated (right). Images courtesy of the Monrovia Public Library.

The Carnegie Building

The Carnegie Building was designed by Bleisner in the Classical Revival style, which was common to 25% of Carnegie library buildings (Jones, 1997, p. 61). These stately libraries, designed from the start as proud landmarks, employed a thick pediment to elevate the library and vertical columns. A flight of stairs led up to the entrance as a physical analogy to the elevation of the mind one could experience inside. The Carnegie Library is shown in Figure 1.

The Carnegie grant provided funds only for the construction of the building. The furnishing of the interior was paid for by the city at the cost of an additional \$1,000 (). The books were once again fumigated (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 57).

The Library opened to great fanfare on January 27, 1908. The local newspaper provides us with a glimpse into what it was like to walk into the Carnegie Library, as residents called it:

The visitor is ushered through broad, heavy doors that are reached from the graveled walk by wide easily graded steps and open into a roomy apartment which becomes the central point in the arrangement of the building. This room contains the large delivery desk—at which books are received and given out and the chief business of the institution is transacted—and is lighted from the domed windows above. All the inside finishing is of handsome Oregon pine, the beauty of which is enhanced by the beautifully tinted walls in green with curtains of the same shade. (“Public Library: Opening of Monrovia’s new temple of the Muses”, 1908)

The two-story building employed electric lights. It also featured an adult reading room, a reference room, a children’s room, and a committee (meeting) room. It was a point of pride

with Monrovia's that a local craftsman, Mr. C.A. Goodale, created the furniture (shelves, tables, and desks) for the new library ("Public Library: Opening of Monrovia's new temple of the Muses", 1908).

The inclusion of a separate children's room in the library was a relatively new but progressively more common design choice. The first library to have a separate room designated for the use of children was the Denver Public Library, in 1894 (McNamara, 1986, p. 65). Other libraries followed this example, but most, including the Monrovia Library, did not have separate professional staff for the children's room (p. 66). The Monrovia Library permitted children as young as eight to obtain a library card (Hill, 1909). The same year, Charles Lummis, the City Librarian for Los Angeles, argued for removing his library's age limit (which was 10 years), claiming that "The matter of age rather regulates itself. Some children sixteen years old are not fit to use a library. Those children are not likely to *try* to use it. Some children eight years old are perfectly qualified to profit by our juvenile department" (Lummis, 1908, p. 19–20). He then reported on having surveyed 50 libraries across the country, of which only nine had an age limit for their borrowers, "though these include the venerable examples of Boston, Cleveland, Louisville, and Jersey City" (p. 20). Monrovia's policy, therefore, was more permissive than the Los Angeles Public Library's, but more restrictive than the majority of public libraries at that time.

The new library opened with a single librarian who was in charge of services to all patrons, adults and children. Wiley (1927) noted that "Miss Evelyn Hill, a trained librarian, was in personal supervision of the library" at this time (p. 106). Davis (1957) also referred to the librarian as Evelyn Hill (p. 49). However, scrutiny of primary documents instead reveals that her name was Ellyn T. Hill.

Ellyn Thirza Hill, First Librarian at the Carnegie Library

As noted above, the Library Board had designated Mrs. Addie Shrode to be the librarian starting in 1898. She continued in this role until ill health descended in April 1906, leading them to elect Kittie Watters as substitute (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 115–116). Watters was formally elected Librarian in November (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 11).

Hiring a Trained Librarian

During the next year, the Board began to discuss the need for a "trained" librarian. The book collection continued to grow, and it was decided that they needed to construct a reliable catalog. They appealed to the Los Angeles Public Library for guidance in tackling this project and received informal instruction from "Miss Jones of Los Angeles Public Library" in January, 1907 (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 15). Mary L. Jones had been removed from her position as City Librarian of Los Angeles two years earlier, and it is not clear whether she was the Miss Jones who visited Monrovia. Ultimately, the Board hired Charlotte M. Brown (or Browne) to conduct the cataloguing effort, paying her \$50 per month (p. 29). She started on the project June 1, 1907 (p. 32).

However, the Board was not satisfied. On August 8, they called a meeting specifically to discuss their need for a trained librarian, not just a community member, to oversee the library. "Already one hundred dollars has been paid once for cataloguing and the work is unfinished. New books are being added constantly and our present Librarian though earnest, honest, and a worker has never been trained to Library work is unable to meet these demands" (p. 40). Mrs. Marshall reported having talked with Dr. Jones, the Director of Study and Research at the Los Angeles Public Library, about possible candidates. He recommended Miss Ellyn T.

Hill, who “would like a position in a small library” (p. 40). The Board minutes do not further detail her training or credentials, beyond noting that she “presented a satisfactory letter of recommendation from the President of the Board of Providence R.I.” (p. 40). She had previously served as the librarian of the Edgewood Free Public Library in Cranston, RI (Shannon, 1907b, p. 322). There is no discussion of any competitors for the position, and Hill was engaged to start as librarian on October 1, 1907.

Ellyn Hill’s Background

Ellyn Thirza Hill was born on December 24, 1866, in Minnesota (*California death records*, 2012). She would have been 40 years old when she accepted the position in Monrovia. Details on her life are sparse, but I was able to piece together a few highlights from the period before she joined Monrovia’s Library. As was common for middle-class women of the time, she involved herself in charity work. In Rhode Island in May 1898, she and four men founded the Mary Hopkins’ Rescue Mission “for the purpose of carrying on the Lord’s work in the slums” (State of Rhode Island, 1898).

I have been unable to determine whether she attended library school, although she is characterized as a “trained” librarian. She was active in the Rhode Island library community, and her interest in small libraries manifested before she learned of the Monrovia Library position. On November 21, 1904, she presented a paper titled “The problems of the small library” at the annual meeting of the Rhode Island Library Association (“State Library Associations”, 1905, p. 35).

We are left to wonder at the circumstances that led her to leave Rhode Island and move to California. There is evidence that she had already been living there for a few years before she applied for the job in Monrovia. The Oceanside Free Public Library reported in July 1906 that “Miss Ellyn T. Hill has been engaged to classify and catalog the library” (Shannon, 1906, p. 114). Given that she stayed at Oceanside for at most one year, she may have served as one of the “itinerant librarians” that were then spreading out through the United States (Passet, 1990). These librarians were often hired on an intentionally temporary basis to set up the library and then hand off its daily operations to others, once trained. According to Passet (p. 17), 1906 to 1910 was the peak period for the Pacific Coast in terms of numbers of libraries that were catalogued by itinerant librarians. Since the Oceanside notice focused on the classification and cataloguing tasks, rather than describing her as the new librarian, it is likely that Hill would be classified as among this group. Her experience at Oceanside may have been what brought her to the attention of Dr. Jones at the Los Angeles Public Library.

Hill may have been a relative of the Rev. Benjamin Fay Mills, who also lived in the area. Her death record indicates that her mother’s maiden name was Mills (*California death records*, 2012), and she attended a wedding in November 1908 between Rev. Mills’s son Charles Howard and Bertha Knight (“Society Column”, 1908). Born in 1857, Rev. Mills was only nine years older than Hill. He was a social reformer and evangelist turned socialist who in 1904 founded the Los Angeles Fellowship. If they were related, she may have traveled to southern California when he did. However, this is circumstantial speculation and I have not yet found any documents linking the two.

Like the Oceanside Library, the Monrovia Library Board identified cataloguing as one of Hill’s primary new responsibilities (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 40). However, in employing her as their Librarian, they seem to have had a more permanent position in mind. They also asked her to organize the newly constructed Carnegie Library to prepare for its opening a few months after her start. Finally, they instructed her to conduct a library training

class, but then allowed her to defer this class until after the cataloguing had been completed (p. 45).

Salary and Raises

The starting salary Hill received was \$45 per month, which was \$5 less than the cataloguer, Charlotte Brown, had been paid. How did this wage compare to that of other area librarians? Watters, without any formal library training, had received only \$30 per month (p. 41). In 1906, Charles Lummis, the newly appointed City Librarian for Los Angeles, found that “the attendants in this library were underpaid by comparison with those in other public libraries in the United States” (Lummis, 1906, p. 26). He raised their minimum salary from \$30 to \$35 per month, but they were still among the lowest-paid employees of the library. Salaries ranged upward for heads of departments and reached \$100–125 for First Assistant Librarian. The next year, Lummis noted that he considered a living wage to be at least \$65 per month and pleaded that the attendants’ salaries be raised to at least \$40. “From the financial standpoint, I fear this is the best we can do; I am convinced that from the administrative standpoint, it is the least we can decently do.” Despite financial constraints, “we cannot afford to make this a sweat shop” (Lummis, 1907, p. 48). Hill’s salary of \$45, therefore, was also not enough to live on independently. She received a series of raises that brought her salary to a peak of \$100 in 1913 (Monrovia Library Board, 1921, p. 106), but a subsequent reduction to \$75, apparently necessitated by the Library’s financial situation, contributed to her decision to leave the Library in 1916 (p. 147).

Ellyn Hill’s Responsibilities and Achievements

Hill was organized and ready to begin her new work immediately. At her first meeting with the Board, on September 30, 1907, “Miss Hill stated that she wished to begin her work in a systematic business like way and wished to keep a record of circulation of Library also a record of borrowers” (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 44). The ledger of circulation records that she began has been preserved (Monrovia Library, 1915).

The Board seems to have been pleased by Hill’s work with the Library. Soon after opening the new Carnegie building, in February 1908, they moved that “a vote of thanks be given Miss Hill for the efficient manner in which she conducted the moving of the library” (p. 61).

At the same meeting, Hill proposed keeping a collection of newspaper clippings that mentioned the library. The Board instructed her to purchase a scrapbook for this purpose. This small black scrapbook, which covers library events from January 10, 1908, to November 9, 1914, exists today in the Library holdings. Each clipping is carefully pasted onto a page of black paper and annotated with the date in her hand. Could she have foreseen that her efforts would be so valuable for a library science student 114 years in the future?

Hill also published lists of new books in the newspaper when they arrived, a practice that highlights the value of individual books at the time. For example, the list published on February 7, 1908, includes “China and American Today” by A. H. Smith, “Seven Dreamers” by A. T. Slosson, “Emma” by Jane Austen, and 13 other titles for adults, as well as 13 books for “young people” (“The Public Library: List of new books that have been recently received”, 1908). Later these lists were expanded to include brief summaries of the books. For example, “The Secret Garden” by Mrs. Hodgson Burnett was described as “a charming story of children and English high life” (“Late popular fiction added to public library”, 1911).

She expressed a dedication to serving the community by suggesting that the opening hours be increased or adjusted to better accommodate patrons’ schedules. She made a perennial

plea for funds to support buying more books or growing the collection through donations. In November 1910, the Library issued a direct call for donations from the public. Some citizens responded by contributing books, but others were upset because “the library was supported out of the city taxes and that it was not right to expect individual contributions” (“Library Board requests books to meet the increased demand”, 1910). The paper responded that “a good book rotting upon private shelves and dusty from disuse is like a light under a bushel. It smothers in an obscure and vain existence” (“Library Board expresses thanks, appreciate book donation”, 1910).

The Monrovia Library Training Class

Hill served as the only Monrovia librarian for most of 1908, but her training class efforts paid off in August. “Miss Haines, who has been in training with the librarian, was engaged as a regular assistant, from September 1st” (“Library Board Meeting: Librarian reports biggest month’s business—Assistant appointed”, 1908) at a salary of \$30 per month (Hill, 1909).

There are few details available about what the training class covered, but the term “training class” was used primarily to describe in-library programs that provided apprentice-like training (Bostwick, 1910, p. 332). I infer that they were more likely to consist of shadowing and mentoring during regular library operations, rather than separate classes or lectures. The newspaper advertised the class, noting that it would be taught by “Miss Ellyn Hill, the competent librarian, who has had a large experience in this work” (“The new Library: Will be occupied before the month closes—Books called in”, 1908) although it is unclear whether her experience was in teaching library-relevant topics or simply in the duties of a librarian (probably the latter). The training class was something for the community to be proud of: “Tuesday a training class was organized and it is the aim of the board and the librarians not only to put the Monrovia library on a par with other small libraries but to raise its standard above theirs, realizing that not failure but low aim is crime” (“The Public Library: Phenomenal growth in circulation—Training class organized”, 1908).

The class seems to have been popular with aspiring librarians from other Los Angeles communities. In November 1909, Hill “reported having received application for training privileges from Whittier, Los Angeles, and Glendale” (Monrovia Library Board, 1921, p. 6).

In November 1910, after the Library received several applications to work at the library, the *Monrovia News* (likely informed by Hill’s own opinions) reported that the duties of the “twentieth century librarian” went well beyond “stamping and labeling the books”:

The librarian must be ably conversant with the histories of the civilized nations, with the history of science, literature, the drama, education and what not. The examinations which it is necessary to pass in order to qualify for the work in the city libraries would prove an eye opener to the general public. (“Some of the knowlege required of a Twentieth century librarian”, 1910)

Connections with the Community

Despite her previous temporary work at Oceanside, Hill was hired on a permanent basis in Monrovia. She stayed at the Library for nine years, becoming involved in the community in areas outside of the library as well. In 1909 she was elected to the board of directors for the Monrovia Humane Society (“Humane Society of Monrovia Reorganized”, 1909).

Professional Activities

Hill attended meetings of the California Library Association (CLA) and the American Library Association and reported back to the Library Board after each trip. She was in the audience at the Sixth District Meeting of the California Library Association on November 12, 1909, when State Librarian James Gillis announced his new County Library Law. At issue was the County Free Library Law, passed the previous year. Members present at this meeting of the CLA felt that the existing law would “endanger the freedom of our existing city libraries, greatly increase our taxes and plunge the libraries of the state into spoils of party politics” (Shannon, 1910, p. 88) and apparently were swayed by Gillis’s proposed amendments to the law, which permitted city libraries to choose whether to join the new county library systems or not. An unidentified attendee summarized the meeting: “He spoke of the inadequacy of traveling libraries in the outlying districts, and the advantages to be gained from the new system” (Shannon, 1910, p. 87–88). Hill reported these proceedings to the Library Board at their next meeting, but her specific comments are not recorded (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 6).

Hill submitted a typewritten report, which has been preserved, of her attendance at the Long Beach CLA meeting in April 1910. It provides a chronicle of individual talks and events. Hill identified some as being of particular interest, including a paper on the history of the typewriter, about which she commented that “sufficient time was not left for its careful consideration” (Hill, 1910b). She also noted that “Mr. Lummis gave very dramatically, some of his earlier poems.” The meeting also provided an update on the County Library Law, which Hill carefully reported as applying only to suburban regions. She also noted the new requirement that all employees of the County Library system, including the County Librarian, pass “a Civil Service examination.”

Hill resigned from the library in September 1916 (Monrovia Library Board, 1921, p. 147). Concrete reasons for her departure are not recorded in the Library Board minutes, but it is likely that money was the primary concern. No negative comments about her performance are recorded. One year earlier, in July 1915, the Board reduced her salary from \$100 to \$75 per month and reduced the Library’s open hours, probably to save money. She offered her resignation two months later, but the Board “requested [her] to reconsider her resignation and remain as Librarian at the necessarily reduced salary \$75 per month. Upon consideration of this request, Miss Hill consented to remain for the present” (p. 132). Perhaps she was unable to make ends meet or felt that the compensation was not appropriate given her qualifications and experience. She may also have been ready to consider retiring from the workforce entirely, as she turned 50 that year. There is no record of her taking a position at another library, although her name appears with different addresses in the Los Angeles City Directory through 1936 (*Los Angeles City Directory*, 1936). She died on August 20, 1958, in Los Angeles (*California death records*, 2012).

Ellyn Hill was succeeded at the Monrovia Library by Anne Crews, another of her training class students, in 1917 (Davis, 1957).

Early Library Services

The Monrovia Public Library offered various services to residents of the community, some of which (circulation and lectures) have already been mentioned.

Table 1

Monrovia Public Library monthly circulation records for selected months

Category	October 1907	February 1908	December 1915	December 1920
Non-fiction	83	~190	~310	~390
Fiction	624	832	1015	1796
Juvenile non-fiction	30	~40	~60	~90
Juvenile fiction	190	334	495	558
Magazines	293	291	407	502
Total	1220	1691	2381	3618

Library Circulation

Early circulation records are available going back as far as October 1907 (Monrovia Library, 1915). The handwritten ledgers break monthly circulation figures into the following categories: “Dewey” (non-fiction), fiction, juvenile Dewey (non-fiction), and magazines. Table 1 shows the circulation numbers for selected months, including the earliest month available (October 1907), the month after the Carnegie Library opened (February 1908), the end of 1915, and the end of 1920.

Adult fiction was by far the most popular category, consistently making up roughly half of the total circulated volumes. Juvenile fiction was the next most circulated category, aside from October 1907, when more magazines (293) than volumes of juvenile fiction (190) were checked out. Total circulation shows a strong upward trend from 1220 items borrowed in October 1907 to 3618 items in December 1920. Information about the Library holdings, by category, would aid further interpretation of these borrowing patterns. If the collection contained far more fiction than non-fiction items, then the preponderance of fiction checkouts would be less surprising than if those books constituted a smaller fraction of the collection.

The popularity of fiction was a national phenomenon and one that worried or angered many prominent librarians. William M. Stevenson, head of the Allegheny Library, in 1896 acknowledged that “overworked” people might well benefit from some “light reading as a recreation,” but

It is certainly not the function of the public library to foster the mind-weakening habit of novel-reading among the very classes—the uneducated, busy, or idle—whom it is the duty of the public library to lift to a higher plane of thinking. (Stevenson, 1896, p. 468)

The “taste elevation” theory that readers might start with low-quality fiction but naturally begin to demand more challenging and sophisticated fare was unsupported by actual patron habits (Stevenson, 1897, p. 133). He was particularly concerned about the impact of children’s fiction: “As long as the vulgarizing books for the young are within their reach, they will prefer them to those which ennoble” (p. 134) and once again appealed to duty: “Is it not the duty of the public library to supply boys with books which will make them wish to be honorable citizens rather than cowboys or Indian killers?” (p. 135).

There is no evidence of concerns about the prevalence of fiction borrowing at the Monrovia Library. In fact, there is evidence that the Board went out of its way to acquire fiction that patrons would want to read. One way to balance the demand for fiction with concerns about funds spent on “entertainment” books was to charge a fee for their circulation.

Library Pay Shelf

In June 1905, the Library Board instructed the librarian to subscribe to the Booklovers' Association of Los Angeles, which provided 50 books, 12 of which were exchanged for new titles each month (Monrovia Library Board, 1906, p. 92). A year's subscription cost \$75 in 1905 and went up to \$100 in 1906 (Monrovia Library Board, 1909, p. 1). These books were placed on a "pay-shelf" and patrons were charged 1 cent per day or 5 cents per week for their use. It is not stated that these were exclusively fiction works, but it seems probable.

The Library eventually canceled its subscription after the Booklovers' Association failed to deliver new books two months in a row. However, the pay shelf inspired a new idea. In August 1911, the local paper reported that "Speaking of fiction and the insatiable thirst for new books that is never slaked, the library people had a bright thought" to purchase "late fiction" and rent it at "one cent per day until the volume has paid for itself, when it is placed on the regular shelves and the money reinvested in another book" ("Public Library grows apace: Patronage increasing rapidly", 1911). This investment-style acquisitions policy proved very successful. While other libraries instituted rental fees for fiction in an attempt to reduce their circulation, the Monrovia Library instead leveraged patron interest to provide the desired materials while "no appropriation out of the regular library funds is made for the purpose" ("Public Library grows apace: Patronage increasing rapidly", 1911). It was a clever solution that aimed to satisfy patrons, the Library Board, and taxpayers.

Children and Youth Services

In 1910, children constituted 316 (33%) of the Library's cardholders, and the bulk of the collection (3623 volumes, or 83% of the total holdings) were children's items (Hill, 1910a). Children younger than eight, who were not issued individual cards, were also treated to a Story Hour that ran during the summer starting in 1912.

The Story Hour does not seem to have been initiated by the Library Board or by the librarian. Instead, in June 1912, Clara Buckland approached the library and volunteered to conduct a story hour, without compensation (Monrovia Library Board, 1921, p. 68). Buckland was not a librarian, nor was she studying to become one. Instead, she was a student at the Los Angeles Normal School (which later became UCLA), studying to become a kindergarten teacher.

Children aged five to seven were invited, and "two score juveniles" showed up for the first Story Hour offering. According to the local paper, the event was wildly popular: "The youngsters so delight in the hour that they follow their teacher and question her instantly if she fails to account for the dramatis personae of the narrative" ("Children with eager eyes hear the story teller", 1912). I could not find a record of the event being offered in 1913, but on April 25, 1914, Story Hour started up again for the summer, drawing a record crowd of 117 children, which overflowed the library building ("Story hour popular with Monrovia kiddies", 1914). Attendance stabilized around 40 the next month, to everyone's relief.

The Library also supplied "deposit libraries" for grade schools, which contained three to 25 books for student use ("Public library and local schools", 1914). The librarians also provided significant reference services for high school students, helping them with their graduation essays.

Conclusions

The early history of the Monrovia Public Library provides a case study of the inception and growth of small town public libraries in the West. The two major factors that enabled the

Library's establishment and expansion were the energetic dedication of the Saturday Afternoon Club and the generosity of Andrew Carnegie. As such, the Library serves as a testament to the power and impact of 19th century women's clubs with missions of social improvement, and it is a demonstration of the success of the Carnegie model of paying for the building while expecting the community to furnish it and pay for annual operations.

One of the central figures in this library's history is, necessarily, the librarian. Like other communities, Monrovia initially assigned the position to an interested community member. As the collection grew, they realized that the job instead required specialized training, particularly in the matter of cataloguing. At the same time, the propagation of dedicated library schools, initiated by Melvil Dewey's School of Library Economy in 1887, increased the availability of trained librarians and made it possible to meet such needs. Monrovia hired Ellyn T. Hill not only to operate the library and catalog the collection but also to conduct a training class so her expertise could be shared, further increasing the corps of sufficiently trained librarians.

Hill seems to have been a competent library manager, if not especially innovative. If she was inspired by the leading Los Angeles female librarians of the day, such as Mary L. Jones, there is no record of it. Neither did she experience the sexist attitudes and personnel problems that led to Jones's termination (Hansen, Gracy, & Irvin, 1999). Hill attended professional meetings and reported on the proceedings but did not initiate reforms or changes of her own. Her training class was popular and ultimately produced Hill's successor at the Monrovia Library, Anne Crews.

Despite its support from the Saturday Afternoon Club, the city trustees, and Andrew Carnegie, it is clear that the Monrovia Library could not have succeeded without the commitment of the community as a whole, in paying taxes as well as book donations and event patronage. This is still true today. When the time came to construct a new library building in 2006, three successive appeals to the State for funds to cover the demolition and reconstruction costs failed. Undaunted, the city placed Measure L on the November 2007 ballot to allow the community to fund the library itself. Echoing the 1905 vote over 100 years earlier, the \$16 million parcel tax measure passed with 69.5% approval (League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, 2007), and the new Library opened in May 2009. Monrovia's Library remains one of the community's most cherished features today.

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