

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ERECTION AND
ESTABLISHMENT OF OUR BEMIDJI PUBLIC
LIBRARY BUILDING

I have been repeatedly asked to write a short history of the securing and erection of the Carnegie Library building in this city. This, in order that some erroneous ideas and impressions may be corrected and a reliable account may be preserved. Were I asked to give an account of the founding of the library in this city I should be compelled to throw up my hands and ask you to ask someone else.

Being City Superintendent of the public schools at the time of the erection of the library building and for some time prior to that time of the need of something of that nature was probably more highly impressed upon my mind than upon the minds of the majority of the citizens of this city. I had heard of the erection of Carnegie Library buildings in other cities so the thought struck me that it might be a good thing to have one for Bemidji. Unattended I called upon the City Council and placed the proposition before them. This was late in the winter of 1907. The council not being accustomed to contributing to the support of libraries, the proposition fell upon deaf ears.

It was clear that in order to secure help or support from the council that a little campaign of education was necessary. The proposition was presented to several and found ready support in Mr. W. B. Stewart who was at that time County Superintendent of schools also J. M. Richards then of the Crookston Lumber Company, and many others. Both of these men were later, as you shall see, placed upon the first library board. Later in the Spring of 1908 the first letter was written to Mr. Carnegie asking for instructions as to how to proceed. During the month of June or July, I received a letter from his secretary in Hoboken, N. J. stating that Mr. Carnegie had been erecting library buildings in some cities that could qualify. He enclosed a lot of questions to be answered, among them was the population, assessed valuation rate of taxation, industries, etc. for the past ten years. He noticed that there was an unusual large increase in valuation about the year 1898 and wanted to know why. It was explained to him that it was caused by the Crookston Lumber Company locating here. Well, after several letters had passed with a month or more time between each, he stated that he would give us \$10,000 if the City Council would furnish a site and pass a resolution to appropriate not less than one-tenth of that sum each year for maintenance.

We now had a definite proposition for the council. A few changes in the personnel had occurred and they stood ready to pass the resolution but did not seem willing to furnish a site. It was then up to someone to secure a site. Mr. W. A. Gould and myself assumed the responsibility. We drove all over the city and found a number of sites but had no money. At length the present site was decided upon. It being in the street (the end of 5th) we could get it for nothing if we could get it vacated. So we set about to have it vacated. This was no easy job, as it required the signatures of the majority of the free holders within a quarter of a mile of the location and not one of the residents bordering the park would sign. I think but one of those residents remain at this writing. Another obstacle was that the city engineer was opposed to vacating the end of the street to the lake. At last he agreed that that part of the street might be vacated, but that the south side should not be vacated. This accounts for the building standing on the north side and not in the center of the street. This has been an eye sore to me ever since.

Well, as I have stated, there was some changes in the council and a library building was a possibility. A library board was appointed by Mayor J. P. Pogue, consisting of W. B. Stewart, J. M. Richards, Rev. S. E. P. White. By the terms of the charter the mayor and the City Superintendent of schools are members, so the full board consisted of J. P. Pogue, W. B. Stewart, Rev. S. E. P. White, J. M. Richards and A. P. Ritchie.

J. P. Pogue was elected President and A. P. Ritchie, Secretary. The board then secured Haxby & Gillespie, Architects. Plans and specifications were made and bids called for. No bids being within or means, all were rejected and Mr. Carnegie was applied to for additional funds. The board asked for an additional \$5,000 making a total of \$15,000. Word was received in the usual time stating that he would give an additional \$2,500 providing the council would pass a resolution to raise \$1,250 per year maintenance. This was done and the addition of \$2,500 made available. The board again called for bids and Thomas Johnson of this city being the lowest bidder was awarded the contract for the sum of \$11,300. This contract was let August 7, 1909 and was to be completed by January 1, 1910. The board was insistant that there should be two reading porches facing the lake but this was vetoed by the donor as being superfluous. However the board had the doors put in the walls hoping that some time someone would see the point and make the necessary donation.

The building progressed and was finished in due season, occupied during the winter and was dedicated the following June.

Respectfully,

A. P. Ritchie

This building now is being occupied by the Beltrami County Welfare Board