



The Minnesota **Preservationist**

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BEMIDJI
CARNEGIE LIBRARY

Bemidji Carnegie Library

By Drew Heiring

Close on the intersection of MN State Highway 197 and 5th Street NW stands a mute testament to the aspirations of Bemidji three generations ago, and to the generosity of a philanthropist who never set foot in the town. The Bemidji Carnegie Library, built in 1910 to the designs of W.D. Gillespie, provided our grandparents and great-grandparents access to a wealth of knowledge previously unavailable. It stands today a symbol of a culture's belief in the potential for anyone, through education, to become as great as the self-made man whose wealth made the construction of this building possible. Though no longer in use as a library, the building is an irreplaceable touchstone for Bemidji's history, a reminder of a time gone by and of a dream, a belief in the intrinsic power of humanity, which America has never given up.

By the time A.P. Ritchie wrote to Andrew Carnegie in 1908 to request funds for the library's construction, the library movement in Bemidji was well underway. In the immediately post-Civil War era, women's clubs, perhaps growing out of the societies formed by women on the home front during the war to produce bandages and other necessities, became increasingly interested in founding public libraries. Teva Scheer, in a 2002 article, estimates that women's groups prompted the founding of 75-80% of America's public libraries in this period.¹ Such was certainly the case in Bemidji. The Bemidji Ladies Library Society collected 600 volumes in 1903, and opened the first town library in a room in the courthouse in 1904. The collection continued to grow, with 1400 volumes by 1907, and new quarters were needed.

By 1908, Andrew Carnegie had long secured his fortune, and was busily dispersing it. With an estimated net worth equivalent to \$298.3 billion in today's dollars,² he had the means to support a wide variety of causes. His offer to supply the construction funds for a library in any town which met his qualifications resulted in the construction of 2,509 buildings between 1883 and 1929. The requirement: that a city demonstrate the need for a public library, provide the building site, ensure that maintenance be paid for by public support, and provide free service to all, were easily satisfied by Bemidji's



Figure 1

application. \$12,500 was granted, designs drawn up, and the new library opened on May 10, 1910. It served its original function for more than 50 years, until the structure became inadequate for the needs of Bemidji residents. A new facility was constructed a few blocks away, and the Carnegie building has been occupied by a succession of governmental and non-profit tenants since.

When first constructed, the Carnegie building stood proudly as the focal point of a tree-lined, landscaped boulevard, closing a vista just as any substantial Neoclassical building ought (*fig. 1*). Over the intervening century, increased automobile traffic and commercial development have dramatically altered the Carnegie's surroundings, and while it may not terminate an axis with quite the aplomb it once mustered, this is still an imposing building.. In truth, it is not the alterations to 5th Street which are of most concern, but the changes to the cross street, now State Highway 197. What was formerly a modest road is now a 5-lane highway, and the increased width came primarily at the expense of the Carnegie. With the lawn now buried under asphalt, visitors to the building are "literally at risk of falling into traffic when exiting the building's stairs" as one description put it.³ Even the building itself is under assault from the highway. With only 5 feet of space between the curb and the Carnegie's walls, the building spends the winter half-buried in slushy drifts thrown up by the snowplows, and road salt is rapidly eroding the stonework of the façade (*fig. 2*). This damage, coupled with decades of

Photo courtesy of Save the Bemidji Carnegie Library

deferred maintenance, is the primary contributor to the Carnegie's current state of disrepair.

Even in this state, the Carnegie building is still a notable piece of architecture. What's more, beneath its pleasant surface runs an undercurrent of symbolic meaning, as is frequently the case with buildings designed in the Victorian era. The Victorians were a particularly symbolic race, and took meaning from visual cues which go largely unnoticed, or perhaps un-deciphered, today. Examine, for a moment, the front façade of the building (fig. 2). The design scheme is Neoclassical, intended to evoke the architectural feats of Ancient Greece such as the Parthenon. This is particularly clear in the use of Ionic columns to frame the porch, and the, albeit modified, temple-front-type arrangement of pier, column, and pediment. This allusion to Greek architecture is probably clear even to the lay observer, but what may not be so obvious is the meaning which the Victorians took from it. In the Victorian mind, Greece and Rome represented the epitome of cosmopolitan civilization. The Ancient World of art and science was contrasted against the Dark Ages of repression and loss. And in America, Grecian architecture symbolized not only the pinnacle of civilization and art, but the spirit of democracy itself. As the cradle of democracy, Ancient Greece was a powerful imagined precedent for the "great experiment." Furthermore, Jefferson himself



Figure 2

Photo courtesy of Save the Bemidji Carnegie Library

claimed, "the cornerstone of democracy rests on an informed electorate." For a building designed to produce an educated electorate, could a more appropriate style than the Grecian be chosen?

Further symbolic elements at work in this façade are, perhaps, more subtle. The pediment, in keeping with Classical tradition, frames a sculpture group. Here, a wreath of laurel rests on a pair of cornucopias. The cornucopia is still a familiar symbol, representing abundance. Laurel wreaths are generally symbolic of victory and achievement, usually in the military and the arts. The specific reference evoked here is likely the awarding of laurel wreaths to honor scholastic and literary prowess, particularly at the completion of a university degree. Italian universities revived this ancient practice during the Renaissance, and it persists there to this day. The pediment sculptures are, essentially, advertising the presence of an abundance of scholarship within the building. The flight of stairs leading from the street to the front entrance is common to many Carnegie libraries, and is meant to symbolically suggest that simply by demonstrating interest in the contents of the library you have begun to elevate yourself. The pursuit of knowledge, in and of itself, raises you a step higher. Another common feature to Carnegie libraries, though no longer present here, is the inclusion of lamps above or near the doors (historical photographs indicate the Bemidji Carnegie library once placed two on the low plinths on either side of the front staircase). In reference again to the Greeks, these were meant to evoke the mythical lamp of knowledge, which once kindled could never be extinguished. Again, a most appropriate

Welcome New Members!

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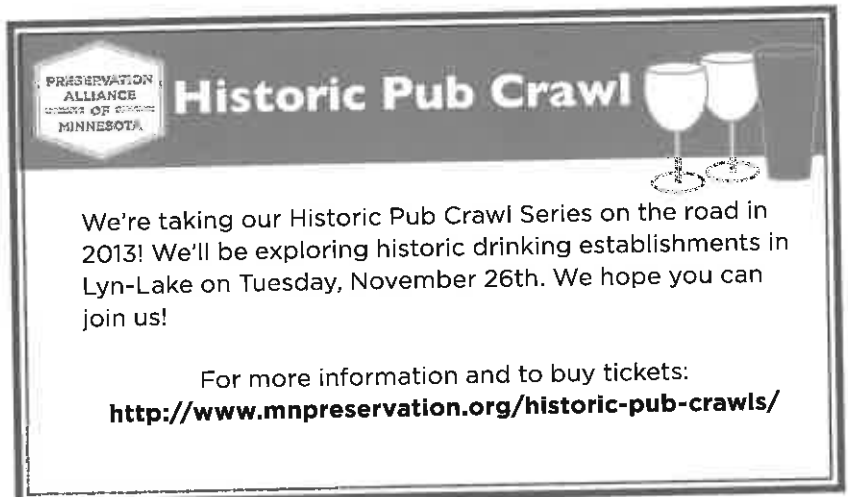
selection for a building designed as a repository for the accumulated knowledge of a civilization.

The citizens of Bemidji have long recognized the remarkable confluence of history, culture, and aesthetics present in the Carnegie building, so when the City Council voted to demolish the structure in September 2011, protest was immediate, fervent, and widespread. Preservationists and local residents recognized that the building had its problems: dangerously and destructively close to a major highway, in disrepair, and virtually impossible to make ADA compliant, but the majority of citizens felt, and stated, that demolition was certainly not the proper course. A social media campaign, including a series of YouTube videos in which citizens discussed why the Carnegie mattered to them, rallied the community, and in March 2012 the Council reversed its decision. They stipulated, however, that the building must be moved away from the road, deeper into the park, and brought up to code.

Fundraising efforts are underway. Volunteers are collecting donations at community events, and staging events of their own as they strive to reach the needed \$1.6 million. Half a year after the start of the fundraising campaign, more than a third of the funds has been collected. Contributions large and small have been received from private donors, charitable institutions, and state and local public sources. Contributions are still being eagerly sought, to preserve and restore this cornerstone of Bemidji's cultural past.

The Moorhead firm of MJ Burns, Architects completed a building assessment in 2012, and drew up preliminary plans for an addition to the structure to resolve the ADA issues (fig. 5). The Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, in recognition of the outstanding work by local preservationists and the importance of the structure, named the Bemidji Carnegie Library the first entry in their Sites Worth Saving program. Staff members are aiding local advocates with grant applications and publicity for the project. Current project timelines suggest that construction work, slated to begin in the spring of 2015, will be completed by late fall that year. Hopes are high, and the citizens of Bemidji firmly believe that their Carnegie library, having just completed its first century, will be in prime condition to celebrate a second one.

If you'd like to learn more about effort to Save the Carnegie Library, consider visiting SavetheCarnegie.org.



PRESERVATION ALLIANCE OF MINNESOTA

Historic Pub Crawl

We're taking our Historic Pub Crawl Series on the road in 2013! We'll be exploring historic drinking establishments in Lyn-Lake on Tuesday, November 26th. We hope you can join us!

For more information and to buy tickets:
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