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## THE CARNEGIE LIBRARY REVISITED

By H. David Vuckson

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April 2013 marked 50 years since Collingwood's Carnegie Library at the corner of Second and Maple Streets was destroyed in an arson fire.

The building, opened in 1904, was the gift of Andrew Carnegie, wealthy American philanthropist. The land it sat on was the gift of Thomas and John J. Long, just one of several such expressions of generosity given to Collingwood by these prominent pioneering business men in town.

Collingwood's Carnegie Library was one of 2,509 Carnegie Libraries built in over a dozen countries, 125 of them in Canada. The protocol for having such a facility involved making application to the Carnegie Corporation which, if the application was approved, would fund the building, while the applicant was required to provide the land and to guarantee the funds to stock it with books, and to staff it and maintain it. Collingwood's application was approved in 1901. Together with a later, second, smaller grant the total gift amounted to \$14,500.00.

[Less well-known is the fact that Carnegie, an evolutionist, and no friend of Christianity, nevertheless had a passion for the pipe organ, and provided funding for organs to churches of various denominations in the apparent hope that the music of the organ would distract the congregation from the preaching! Between 1901 and 1919, the year of his death, he donated funds for 7,689 church organs, 124 of them in Canada according to one account. The protocol for these donations was different than that for the libraries: churches applying for this gift had to supply 50% of the required money and then the Carnegie Corporation would match it.]

It has been said that Carnegie demanded imposing entry stairs to his library buildings “to symbolize readers’ striving for knowledge”. We certainly got them in Collingwood—18 steps from the Second St. sidewalk up to this temple of knowledge. In 1904 no consideration was given to access for those with mobility issues and, therefore, “striving” was out of the question for the elderly and handicapped. Once at the top of those imposing steps we entered through two sets of massive tall, double wood and glass doors leading down the centre of the building to the beautiful, gracefully curved circulation desk in dark woodwork while overhead were the murals painted in 1910 by Miss Elizabeth Annie Birnie (1850-1921).

Annie Birnie was a spinster public school teacher who was an artist in her spare time. It is remarkable that she painted these murals depicting the “Indian, pioneer and industrial periods of the town” at the age of 60. Unlike today, 60 was considered an advanced age in 1910 when the average life expectancy was between 47 and 52. She must have been agile to be able to climb ladders and must also have had no fear of heights. Annie also painted historical murals in the Penetang

Carnegie Library including one of Lady Sarah Maitland playing with her three pet lap dogs, Tiny, Tay and Floss, after whom three townships of Simcoe County were named.

I still remember my library card number from my public school days: "421 B". I never knew what the "B" stood for, perhaps "boy". One of the times we got to use our library card was when, from time to time, our public school class from Victoria School on Maple St. would go to the Library of an afternoon for "Storytime" when Mrs. Art Bull would read us stories with great dramatic flair. When this was over we were free to explore the building including the Huron Institute Museum on the ground floor. Down there, time stood still in more ways than one. Inside the ground level entrance to the Museum stood the Father Time statue, carved in 1878 from a pine log by David Fleming, the brother of Sir Sanford Fleming, originator of Standard Time. The hands on the wooden watch held in the hand of Father Time point forever to 3:38. This watch is correct twice a day even when we switch to Daylight Saving Time. Father Time, having suffered the ravages of time itself, received a new lease on life in 2010 with extensive restoration work and he continues to greet visitors to The Museum on St. Paul St. (especially at 3:38 p.m.).

The Huron Institute contained a vast collection of artifacts from the early history of Simcoe County. The stuffed birds were of no interest to me but what always fascinated me were the hundreds of photos on the walls. Here again, time stood still. Frozen in the camera's eye was the history of Collingwood: the railway, ships in the harbour, the Shipyard, landmark buildings, street scenes, etc. David Williams (1869-1944) whose name equals the words "Huron Institute" and whose handwriting adorns the front of so many old Collingwood photos,

claimed in 1935 that, “The Library, in which the Museum is housed, I may say is the most fireproof building in Collingwood”. It appears that Williams, despite his work as a famous historian, had forgotten one tragic lesson of history, the sinking of a famous “unsinkable” ship in 1912. Nevertheless, it was merciful that he did not live to see the event of Thursday, April 11, 1963 when an angry teenager broke into the building through the ground level Museum entrance and then made his way upstairs and set fire to papers in a drawer at the circulation desk.

Newcomers to Collingwood may find it incredulous that in 1963 we still had manual telephones. On picking up the receiver, a female voice (named “Central”) would say, “Number please”. On April 11, 1963 an alert operator at the Bell Telephone building, corner of Hurontario and Third St., noticed a switchboard light for the Library go on at an early hour. She couldn’t know at the time that fire had burned through the telephone wire, but it was certain that no one was borrowing a book before 6:00 a.m. She called the Police Dept., Telephone 123 (then located in the Town Hall) who dispatched a constable to investigate. On discovering the fire, the Fire Hall on Ste. Marie St., Telephone 100, was contacted. That switchboard light was an early equivalent to a monitored alarm system of today.

The fire occurred just prior to what was then known as the school Easter Holidays, now called Spring Break. I had a look through the damaged building in the next couple of days. The fire had burned right through the floor in the area between the circulation desk and the reference room. Here, a portion of the floor had collapsed down into the Huron Institute above the glass cases containing models of ships, fortunately sparing the glass. On the Library level, the smell of smoke and charred wood permeated everything. Parts of Annie Birnie’s

murals were still there but blackened by smoke. I saw the devastated look on the face of Mrs. Brown, the head librarian as she came down the back stairs to the Museum level. The custodian, Mr. Russell Thomas who showed me and a friend around, was equally devastated.

As the water from the fire hoses ran down into the Huron Institute, the countless photos on the walls suffered water damage. Under the direction of Ruth Gibbons, David Lunan (1947-1990) and I spent much of the week we were off from school taking photos out of their frames and laying them out on blotting paper to dry. We also helped move boxes of salvaged books one block east to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of Dr. McFaul's old house at the corner of Pine and Second Streets, a building which, more recently, had served as the home of Branch 63, Royal Canadian Legion. Here, in this once grand house, it was hoped to set up a temporary library location. The walls of these upstairs rooms displayed a more modern type of murals compared to the 1910 work of Annie Birnie: Playboy Magazine centerfolds left over from the Legion days. I suspect that these were removed before the temporary Library opened for business.

Had the Carnegie Library survived to the present day, eventually changes would have had to be made to the layout of the structure. (From the beginning, there was a caveat that the building was to be used as a library in perpetuity.) The reading rooms may have had to give way for more stacks of books, requiring strengthening of the floor joists and an elevator would have been needed for handicapped access. The Library may even have needed to displace the Huron Institute to another location as more space was needed. The new, modern, one

level/ground level building that replaced the Carnegie Library on the same site in 1964, itself had to have an addition as space requirements increased.

In its time, the Carnegie Library was a beautiful landmark building and those of us who climbed its many front steps and admired the massive entry doors, the elaborate woodwork, the beautiful murals and such, will eventually pass from the scene and newcomers to town will only know the current Library at Ste. Marie and Simcoe Streets. May those of us who remember it treasure the memory of both the long-gone building and the generosity of Andrew Carnegie and the Long Brothers who made it possible.

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