

Author Played Key Role In Founding of Library

Ex-Newspaperman Tells Story Of Fight

By JOHN HAMLIN

In the fall of 1898 the First Battalion of Nevada Volunteers, myself a sergeant of its Company C, was mustered out of service. This was a disappointment to me. I had hoped, by becoming a hero in the Spanish-American War, to offset the disgrace of being flunked out of my class at the University of Nevada. I had failed in English, the subject in which I had majored. Prof. T. W. Cowgill, head of the department suggested that I switch to the mining school in which scant attention was given to literature.

Not wishing to trail my class of '99, I didn't return to the University. Instead, I decided, in spite of the professor's adverse opinion, to continue the study of "literature." With this goal in mind I hung about the office of the Nevada State Journal, Reno's morning daily. I'd had scarcely time to become a nuisance when William McClure Gottwaldt, the one reporter on the paper, practically hurled me into journalism. He accosted me at the foot of the rickety stairs leading up to the sanctum sanctorum.

Goes to Work

"Take my job! Now, understand, John? Two dollars a day in it. Hang on till I get back!" After delivering these verbal explosives he sprinted down the street, leaving me too breathless to enthuse over the job I had coveted. I climbed the stairs nervously and reported to Mr. William Webster, owner and editor of the paper. He looked at me blankly, being deep in the throes of composing a two column editorial. Then, spurning tobacco juice at the tall wood stove, he again lost himself in his ponderous message. I groped my way into the composing room. The typesetters knew me but didn't know that I had suddenly become one of the staff.

"Where did Gottwaldt go?" I asked.

"Go! Has he gone?" One of the men pushed back his eyeshade and blinked at me.

"He told me to hold his job till he got back," I said.

"That crazy hombre!" A sniff of disgust. "Somebody found some silver and he's gone loco. Here's a note he left. Rustle up the story. We're needing copy damned pronto." He brandished a stick of type at me.

Wedekind Mine

So, my first newspaper assignment was reporting the discovery of silver a few miles east of Reno. A piano tuner by name of Wedekind had picked up the float, had it assayed and then filed his claim. Gottwaldt ferreted out the fabulous returns on the assayed specimens. He was in the vanguard of the stampede which spread over the sagebrush hills. The silver strike made headlines for a few days only since Reno was, and still is, a fertile field for sensational news. Even at that time gambling flourished in every saloon, garish "palaces" were so thickly interspersed throughout the business blocks that every other door swung on loose hinges. From behind these doors issued the click of poker chips, the rattling of roulette balls and the seductive lure of craps, Klondike and faro. Prize fights to the finish were legalized and pools on the pony races were posted in

The Author



John Hamlin, who dug into his scrap books and diary and his memory to provide the story of the launching of Reno's free public library, is a native of Verdi, a graduate of Reno High School and a former student at the University of Nevada. Eminent as an author of books and short stories, Mr. Hamlin served as a reporter on the Nevada State Journal at the outset of his writing career. His story of the Reno library tells of that phase of a busy life. His home is now in Los Gatos, Calif., where he writes juvenile and other books as well as magazine articles. The current issue of Who's Who in America lists him as one of the better known writers and authors. Two of his juvenile books, "Flying Horses" and "By Paddle Wheel and Pack Train," are being widely used as supplementary readers in the schools and last year the rights to the two books were purchased by Hutchinson & Co., one of the big London book firms. He has a contract for two more books now in the making from the London company. Hundreds of Reno people remember Mr. Hamlin as the busiest man in a lively community back in 1904 when he was laying the foundation for the Reno library, now the Washoe county library, then housed in a brand new building near the Virginia St. bridge and the south bank of the Truckee river.

the gambling places. Freshly divorced Californians were flocking to Reno to circumvent interlocutory decrees. Forerunners of a later influx of the unhappily married.

On His Own

Now, with the discovery of silver at the edge of town, Reno took on the color and excitement of a boom camp. My problem wasn't so much a lack of news as a matter of selection—which stories had the widest appeal. Mr. Webster, editorials his passion, had neither criticism nor suggestion to offer about my work. The typesetters did that.

Linotypes were yet to be installed. Despite the jibes of the typos I was thrilled with being a reporter. At odd moments I studied Gottwaldt's racy method of building a story. Soon there was less criticism, but no praise, from those grim type stickers.

One story which has to do with the main subject of this article, broke while Gottwaldt was still prospecting. To me it seemed of vital import to our bawdy little town. It was a project, backed by a young attorney, Frank H. Norcross, to establish a free public library in the town. He called a meeting of the people and a bill was drafted under which free libraries could function in any town of the state if a majority of the taxpayers signed a petition to that effect. I interviewed Mr. Norcross. His enthusiasm was contagious and when I finished the article I rated it the best I had yet hung on the copy hook. But the hook was soon jammed with stories I had composed after Gottwaldt's bombastic pattern and the library item was scrapped by the typesetters.

Sells a Story

The next day Gottwaldt returned, having staked out a claim. He paid me for my two weeks' work and said that he might call on me again. The Wedekind Mine produced richly for a time, was purchased by Nevada's Governor John Sparks, and shortly afterwards went into borrasco. Before it did and while Wedekind was still in possession, I wrote the story, not for the Journal, but on a free-lancing venture. The old piano tuner was an odd character, his discovery of the mine unusual and

His Idea



Judge Frank H. Norcross, now retired, launched the movement for the establishment of a free public library in Reno at the turn of the century. John Hamlin, who was the librarian when the library was opened, tells of Judge Norcross' efforts in his interesting account of Reno's "venture into culture."

IN THE CENTER of a beautifully parked area on the south bank of the Truckee River, near the Virginia St. bridge, Reno's first free public library building was erected in 1903. It was financed by the Carnegie Foundation and was called at one time the Carnegie Library. The picture, taken from the collection owned by Dean Stanley Palmer, shows the library building in 1908. It was torn down in the late 20s to make way for the new Reno postoffice building. It had long since outlived its usefulness as it was too small and the library was moved to the new state building to become the Washoe county library.



my story savored of yellow-journalism. It sold on its first trip, to the San Francisco Call. It was published in the Sunday supplement and the photographs I had taken used for illustration.

I was elated. With no regular job in sight I tackled other stories. My second one was based on an earthquake which disrupted the activity of a geyser, for years a phenomenon of Steamboat Springs, located ten miles south of Reno. I gave this tale a humorous twist and the title "Belzie A Washoe Canary." The San Francisco Argonaut bought it, asking for more stories in a similar vein. It appeared within a month of its acceptance. I dispatched a copy to Professor Cowgill, author's name heavily pencilled. I did this because the Argonaut was rated the best literary weekly of the West. Professor Cowgill ignored this none too subtle coup, nor did he acknowledge a copy of the letter which the corresponding editor of the Youth's Companion wrote, asking me for stories with the humorous slant of "Belzie."

I often dropped in at the Journal office, and on one of these visits Gottwaldt called me to account for shelving the prospective bill for a free library. "But I didn't," I replied. "I hung it on the copy hook and it disappeared."

"Well, there's more news breaking about that plan," said Gottwaldt. "Enough taxpayers signed the bill, a law was drafted and presented to the legislature. Through some political jockeying, it was passed—with a flaw in it. Too many benighted so-and-sos were against it. They don't realize that a public library would give Reno a cultural uplift she sadly needs."

"Then we're not to get the library?" I asked.

"That's what I want you to find out," said Gottwaldt. "I've got assessment work to do on my claim. You take over and get an interview with Norcross p. d. q."

I did. No, indeed, Mr. Norcross hadn't given up the fight for a library. The flaw had been extracted from the initial bill. Norcross, himself was to lobby it through the next session of the legislature.

He succeeded and the bill actu-

Knew Books

Prof. Thomas W. Cowgill, who was assigned the task at first to launch Reno's first library, started the work but ill health forced him to retire before the library was opened. He was one of the early day teachers of English and history at the University of Nevada and, as Mr.

Hamlin says, was not particularly impressed with young Hamlin's ability as a student and particularly a student of English. However, the hand of fate or something, brought the two men close together and Mr. Hamlin took over in launching the Reno library at the point where ill health forced Prof. Cowgill to retire. Prof. Cowgill, a Harvard graduate, "lived a life of austere simplicity among his books," says Prof. S. B. Doten in his history of the University of Nevada, "and though misunderstood by many of the students of that period, was destined to have a lasting good effect upon the minds and characters of scores of young men and women before ill-health forced his retirement from the faculty in 1899."

ally did become a law. Another petition was duly circulated and a majority of Reno's taxpayers signed it. The petition then had to be sanctioned by the county commissioners. To quote, in part, a contemporary item appearing in the Journal: "That august body (the county commissioners) has no use for free libraries. Each is

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