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Library Legacies: Building the University Library

Joseph Cummings Rowell



Joseph Cummings Rowell

Throughout its 135-year history, the Library of the University of California has benefited from the loyalty and generosity of alumni and friends.

Its collections have grown and its services expanded as a result of the recognition of the crucial role the Library plays in the lives of students and faculty. One significant alumnus devoted his life to the institution and the library he loved.

On September 22, 1870, Joseph Cummings Rowell entered the freshman class of the University of California, beginning a relationship that would last more than 68 years. From the moment he began his studies that fall until his death in November, 1938, the life of Joseph Rowell and the life of the

University were intertwined. He knew every President of the institution personally and watched the faculty grow from 18 to nearly 1,000-and the student body grow from 78 to over 17,000. At the same time, he witnessed the Library grow from a collection of several thousand volumes with one employee (himself!) to a collection of over one million volumes with a Library staff of 68.

Rowell's Class of 1874 consisted of thirty-two men at a University that occupied four blocks of land on the outskirts of Oakland. Classes were held in the morning with requisite military drill from 4:00pm to 5:00pm each day. Some of Rowell's time was devoted to baseball, as he was a star on the college baseball team and played against such local teams as the Wideawakes, the Phoenix, and the E. & O. E. (Errors and Omissions Excepted). But most of his free time was devoted to reading in the tiny college library.

In July of 1874, Rowell graduated with 22 others-the second graduating class in the history of the University and the first to have received instruction on the Berkeley campus. At graduation Rowell was appointed Recorder of the Faculties, Secretary to President Gilman, and Lecturer in English, certainly indicating that a University degree in the 1870's did translate into immediate employment. The following year, he received the entirely unsolicited and unexpected appointment as the first full time University Librarian. [Five years earlier the position of Librarian, with the rank and salary (\$3,600) of a full professor, was offered to Francis Bret Harte, whose reputation as an author had begun to grow. Harte declined the position and left the University to continue his stories of the lawless, burly life of early California mining camps.]

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For the next sixty-three years, Joseph C. Rowell and the UC Berkeley Library were inseparable. Under Rowell's care, the Library grew from a small, 13,000-volume collection into its current place among the foremost libraries in North America. On his first day of work as University Librarian, Rowell entered the library located on South Hall's first floor in a well lighted, cheerful and airy room that measured 36 by 50 feet. The room contained black-walnut bookcases installed to form alcoves, five bronze busts of ancient nobles surrounding the two reading tables, thirty chairs, and the desk for the librarian.

Rowell said, "I sat down at the librarian's desk and saw pen, ink, and pencils, and pulled out a drawer, where I found a catalogue, a narrow quarto volume, with the entries written on the right-hand page, alphabetically arranged." As a student Rowell had wandered among the books he knew and loved so well, but he had never considered the idea of a catalogue. He immediately realized he had no knowledge of how libraries worked. Rowell had no idea how to organize the library or how to keep track of new acquisitions.

Determined to find out, he took out a life insurance policy, borrowed funds against it from a friend and ten days later started a ten-week tour of eastern libraries to absorb all "matters relating to administration and all details in the handling of books and the preparation of them for use."

On his tour Rowell found several classification systems being used. In Chicago, books were grouped together by the physical size of the volume, while in New York, the collection was grouped alphabetically by author. He also learned that Cornell, Harvard, and Boston Universities all had card catalogues. He returned to South Hall with two convictions: that the fixed location of books, then generally in use, should be replaced by the grouping of books by subject; and that a card catalogue should replace the old style of entry into huge volumes. He quickly went to work and in two weeks, without any help, had shifted and rearranged in a more rational order the entire collection of 13,000 volumes!

Next Rowell tackled the need for a catalogue. He recalled that when faced with cataloguing his first book, he was uncertain as to whether he should write the author's last name to the right or to the left of the faint pink vertical line on the card. By 1878, he had completed, by himself, a double catalogue-an alphabetical short-title list, and a full-title catalogue by subject-of the entire library.

In 1879, Henry Douglas Bacon, a self-made man and prominent Oakland citizen, feeling that the library in South Hall was inadequate, gave \$25,000 to the University for the construction of a separate building, subject to the State providing a similar amount. The Legislature complied, later appropriating an additional \$10,000 for furnishings. The Bacon Library was then built. It was designed as a semicircle topped by a dome with alcoved galleries and iron stairways at each end of the arc. Rowell's flat-topped desk was under the dome. His author catalogue was in a card cabinet on one corner of the desk and his index on the other. Here he sat day after day, serving as the loan and reference desk librarian, as well as the ordering and cataloguing departments. He mixed his own paste and mounted bookplates and date slips, and affixed the call numbers to each volume. In a large ledger book, he entered new volumes as they came in.

The University was not about to waste any precious space in the new building. In the Bacon Hall basement, with an earthen floor, dim lighting, and low

temperature, was the wine cellar for the viticulture division of the College of Agriculture.

During the last week in May 1884, the Regents authorized an exhibition of printing, illustration and binding to be held in the library. The items on display were selected from private and public collections and surprised viewers who thought it impossible that such items could exist in the wild and uncivilized West. A rumor circulated that there was a book bound in human skin (a rumor that continues today), which brought many curiosity seekers. When Rowell showed them that the book was bound actually in alligator hide, they left disappointed but satisfied that such a gruesome item did not exist. Rowell, feeling some anxiety about his curious visitors and their potential to do mischief to this first Library exhibit, decided to spend his nights sleeping on the bare floor, wrapped in a blanket-a book for a pillow, and a loaded revolver in his hand. This was not the image one had of a librarian!

By 1884, the size of the collection had doubled, but regular funding for acquisitions still was only provided from the Michael Reese bequest. Without sufficient funding, Rowell found himself turned beggar and borrower. He began soliciting exchanges with foreign and domestic societies and academies. By 1911, nearly one-third of the entire library was acquired as the result of gifts or exchanges with other institutions. In 1887, the Legislature finally made its first appropriation of \$10,000 for the purchase of books. In 1891, the Regents also began to budget funds (\$5,500) for the same purpose, thus giving the University Library a relatively meager but regular funding source.

The turn of the century marked the beginning of the development of the library into a great institution. The new UC president, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, in his first report to the governor of California in 1900, stated "Here a great library should be founded and maintained as a citadel and refuge for the creative scholarship of the Pacific Coast." The need for a larger building for the Library was met temporarily by an addition to the Bacon Library Building, completed in 1903, providing space for 80,000 more books and six rooms for graduate seminars and classes. The following year brought the unexpected and most welcome bequest of Charles Franklin Doe for the construction of a new library building. The Doe Library Building was begun in 1908 and completed in 1912, accommodating an unbelievable collection of 1.5 million volumes. As the collection continued to expand to meet the needs of the growing University, the Doe Library also grew. A reading room for students was added, and more space for library stacks was built. Then followed more offices and workrooms for the staff, and map and seminar rooms, giving the Doe Library Building its present configuration by 1917. [The Doe Annex Building that houses the Bancroft Library was eventually built immediately to the east of the original Doe in 1950.]

On June 30, 1919, the day following his 66th birthday, Rowell voluntarily resigned. Harold L. Leupp, who had served as the Associate Librarian for seven years, then became only the second full time University Librarian. But Rowell's connection with the Library did not end then. For



The staff of the University Library, 1914.
(Joseph Rowell, top row left, Harold Leupp,
the second University Librarian, middle front).

nearly twenty more years, he served it as the first University Archivist, tending to the acquisition and arrangement of materials relating to the history of the University and to the activities of its faculty, alumni, and undergraduates.

For forty-four years Joseph C. Rowell had been the University Librarian. He had seen the collections grow from some 13,000 to some 400,000 volumes. It had grown thirty times larger than it had been when it came into his hands in

the little room in South Hall. The Library had been moved twice during those years, first to the Bacon Library Building, in 1881, and then to the Doe Library Building, in 1911. But ever modest Rowell stated that his career was "just a succession of years devoted to the upbuilding of the library." During his continued service as Archivist, he would see the collection expand to a million volumes by the time he died.

On Charter Day, March 23, 1935, the University honored itself and its esteemed Librarian by bestowing on Joseph Rowell the degree of Doctor of Laws. One of the oldest living alumni of the University at the time, he also became one of its most recent degree holders. In conferring the degree, President Robert Gordon Sproul said of Rowell, "Son of this University's youth; her patient and faithful servant during two generations; transformer of a college library into a great university collection; exemplar of selfless devotion to the cause of higher education in California; a modest man who speaks ill of no one."

by Wendy Hanson, Class of 1980

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