Carrie Westlake Whitney

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In 1873, Kansas City was beginning to move away from its image as a town of the Old West astride a Civil War fault line. Jesse James and Cole Younger still roamed the surrounding countryside, and occasionally ventured into the city, and their loyal fan John Edwards still ran the *Kansas City Times*. But civic leaders envisioned a different future. They not only wanted to beautify the place but also to bring culture and learning to a wild, wicked town.

They did not have a lot to work with in terms of facilities and environment. In outward appearance, Kansas City was mostly a place of mud, muck, dust, saloons, bordellos, and the like. Trying to create a city atop the limestone bluffs was daunting. It is difficult to imagine its being undertaken except by people who were unusually tenacious, drunk, or running from the law.

PHOTOS: This was Main Street looking north toward Third Street shortly after the Civil War.

Some Kansas Citians, or those passing through, still used covered wagons. Here is a scene at Second and Delaware.

By 1869, efforts were underway to tame the bluffs by grading; this scene looks north along Delaware from Third Street.

This house above Delaware Street in those years does not appear to be a place for a tranquil night's sleep.

By 1871, a few refinements had arrived, including the Coates House Hotel and Opera House at 10th and Broadway.

END PHOTOS

The raw, young town was beginning to image a future of rapid growth and development, but the entire nation was in the midst of one of the worst economic depressions the country had then known. The Wall Street Panic of the fall of 1873 was to be followed by more than five years of economic contraction. But the Kansas City school board could not have foreseen that when it decided in 1873 to add a library to the fledgling public school system. The school superintendent was James Greenwood, a Civil War veteran who would achieve national educational prominence by the early part of the 20th century. He considered a good library to be "a fountain from which all might drink and in drinking not be impoverished."

PHOTO: At first, in 1874, the library and school offices had space in the building in the foreground of this view at 8th and Main. This picture, taken a few years later, shows a circus parade along Main Street.

The library project languished at first, probably because of the depression, and school leaders struggled to raise a few hundred dollars to buy the first books and bookcase. By 1878, after additional donations had topped $1,000, the collection had expanded a bit, and the library and school offices moved into space at 546 Main. The school superintendent still checked out the books himself, and high school girls helped in the cataloging, but growth was rapid, leading to a decision to hire a full-time librarian.

In March of 1881, a young woman then known as Carrie Westlake Judson was hired for that job. In her words, she would also perform “such other clerical work” as the school superintendent should assign her. Her starting salary was $30 a month.[1]

PHOTO: This is the earlier of two photographs known to exist of Carrie Westlake Judson Whitney. It appeared in the Kansas City Journal and was probably taken some years after she began her library work.

Not a lot is known about Carrie Westlake’s life before that time, nor about how James Greenwood found her. She was born in 1854 in Fayette County, Virginia, an area that became part of West Virginia when the breakaway state was formed in 1863. Her parents -- Wellington and Helen Van Waters Westlake -- had at least one other daughter and at least two sons. By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 her family had moved to Missouri and settled in Pettis County near the town of Sedalia.

Although she did not speak or write a lot about herself, Carrie cultivated the image of having had a genteel southern upbringing. She said that, in the southern tradition, she was educated “privately” around Sedalia, then attended schools in St. Louis, where she lived with relatives. No information could be found on where she studied, nor how far her formal education went. Her record as librarian shows that she was well-read, well-spoken, and could write both prose and poetry.[2]

In 1875, at age 21, she was married for the first time to Mr. E. W. Judson in Sedalia. When she was hired for the Kansas City Library job six years later she signed her name as Carrie W. Judson. It is not clear whether they were still married. No records could be located of a divorce or his death.[3]

We also don't know how she came to Kansas City, but it is logical to assume that she took a train from Sedalia, and in that case she would have arrived at Kansas City's by-then respectable looking train station in the West Bottoms.

PHOTO: Ttrain platform, Union Depot, West Bottoms 1880.

Most of Kansas City at that time was far less polished. Looking at photographs of the time you get the impression that people were often still mired in mud or dust. The bumpy streets look almost like open air tunnels through the bluffs. To compound the problems, Kansas City was visited by floods the year Carrie began her career.

PHOTOS:

This view of West Ninth Street shows the 1881 flooding.

Here are some other scenes of Kansas City life in the decade of the 1880s:

Cable Car work west along Twelfth Street indicated a strong desire for modernization.

The adjacent residences of the Loose Brothers on Independence Avenue reflected early elegance.

In 1887, President Cleveland spoke to a crowd before the Federal Building at Ninth and Locust Streets, across from where a library would be built ten years later.

END PHOTOS

The city to which Carrie came had a population, in the 1880 census, of just over 55,000 people. That number would not have included the populations of Independence, Westport, Kansas City, Kan., Liberty, and the small settlements in Johnson County, places now considered integral parts of the metropolitan area. With those areas, this may have been a community of 75,000 at that time.

What Carrie found at the library, which was still in the offices at 546 Main, was a modest, but rapidly growing collection. One bookcase of books six years earlier had grown to about 2,000 catalogued books, plus about a thousand volumes of government documents, reports, and periodicals. These are numbers from her first annual report, a few months after she took over. It was then a subscription library. Patrons paid $2 a year for the right to check out one book at a time for up to two weeks. During her first year subscription payments totaled $201.35. She finished the year with $46.44 on hand. [4]

Despite her relative youth -- she was 27 when hired -- Carrie Judson started out with some clear ideas on what a library should be. “One of the special needs of the library is a more commodious reading room, furnished with tables and seats. A reading room should be quiet, pleasant and attractive. To consult books and periodicals is as much the function of a library as to circulate them. The library is an educational center for the general as well as for the special reader.”[5]

She also promised to increase the number of subscribers to at least 300, maybe 400, and said the additional income would be used exclusively to buy new books, magazines, and quarterlies. With $500 for acquisitions, the best works could be acquired as they were issued.[6]

She cautioned, however, that great care “should be exercised in selecting books, otherwise the ends for which a library is founded may be entirely defeated. A large number of persons who frequent libraries and reading rooms have no definite or prescribed course of reading marked out, and it is therefore the librarian’s duty to help such in making proper selections to read.”[7]

Then she turned to what would become almost a crusade during her three decades at the helm of the library, lamenting what she called “the national taste for reading trashy literature.” She said, “The same desire for knowledge, if properly directed, would lead to an appreciation of our best authors, more cultivated tastes, and a higher literary standard generally. A nation is elevated only as all the people are capable of passing into higher planes of social and intellectual enjoyment. In the man we look for determination, will power, decision of character, firmness, truthfulness, honesty, uprightness, and if he has not these nobler qualities we refuse him our respect; and while these qualities are not exactly the ones that most please us in the child, nevertheless the whole training should be such as to give him strength of character, and a sturdy self –reliance. Every quality that man or woman has is incipient in the child and needs development and exercise. The reader, whether he be a child or an adult, should be made to think as well as feel. Sensational literature is addressed to the feelings, and this is chiefly the reason why it perverts the taste and darkens the judgment.”[8]

To help in Carrie’s plans for the growth of the library, a school principal went door to door in a horse-drawn cart in the summer of 1881 collecting book donations. In addition, agents were hired to sell subscriptions on commission.[9]

After her second year on the job, in 1882, she could report that some 1,800 books had been added to the collection and the number circulated had more than doubled. Noting that a public library might be considered “the people’s college,” she reported that reading clubs were springing up around the city, some of them literary and some scientific, and that many of them turned to the library for books. It satisfied her that users of the Kansas City Library did not check out nearly as much fiction as patrons of other

libraries. “In nearly all public libraries,” she said, “from 75 to 90 per cent of the works drawn is fiction, while less than 50 per cent of fiction is drawn here. Perhaps no similar record is found elsewhere in the United States.”[10]

There was constant concern about finding enough space for the library’s growing collection and its broadening role in the community as a place where people came for knowledge and enlightenment. Three years after Carrie was hired, library and school offices moved to a building on the northeast corner of Eighth and Walnut, where they shared the second floor. Just five years later, in 1889, the library and school offices moved to their first independent building, a basic two-story box building, constructed for about $10,000, and located at Eighth and Oak. Almost as soon as that building was occupied the talk began of needing a larger, better structure.

During these years, Carrie also married again, in 1885, to James Steele Whitney, about whom little is known except that he was a newspaperman. But Mr. Whitney died of tuberculosis less than five years after they married.[11]

At the library, one of Carrie’s early missions was to involve it more closely with the schools and the way in which children were being taught. She admonished teachers to go beyond textbooks to interest children in reading and not just educate them to answer test questions. She told them to begin with light fiction if that was the only thing they could get the children to read, and even brought up the name Tom Sawyer. And she advised teachers to read children’s books themselves, which she said “keeps the heart young, sweetens the disposition, and leads the teacher to a better understanding of the pupils.”[12]

She may not have endeared herself to teachers when she complained that they were failing to instill a love of reading in children. She thought teachers should not be certified or licensed if they could not demonstrate a familiarity with literature. Nevertheless, at the beginning of 1892, Carrie moved forward on what she called the "experiment" of allowing all high school students free use of the library, as the result of which 837 "tickets," or library cards were issued. Admitting to being rather skeptical as to the unrestricted use of books by the pupils, she kept records of what they checked out. She found that the students checked out a total of 9,580 books, of which 5,765 were fiction. She was clearly disappointed in the high rate of fiction reading but thought this could be corrected by "a little judicious guidance by parents and teachers, a little more care on the part of the Library force." [13]

The following year, 1893, sixth and seventh grade students were also given free access, and by 1897 paid subscriptions were ended entirely and all city residents were accorded free library rights.

In 1894, the school district began planning construction of what board President R. L. Yeager called a "suitable library building." Voters authorized $200,000 worth of four per cent 20-year bonds, and a lot was purchased at Ninth and Locust.

Various architectural designs were considered, including this French Renaissance-style proposal.

PHOTO of French Renaissance drawing.

What Kansas City ended up with, when completed in 1897, was this more classical concept.

PHOTO of exterior at Ninth and Locust.

It had two stories plus a daylight basement, with ionic pillars and balustrades, and the names of beloved writers around the top under the eaves. The reading room in the old library was closed on July 15 in order to complete the move to the new structure by the grand opening on September 1. Because of the beauty of the new building Carrie wanted the books themselves – now numbering about 30,000 – to look presentable. They were individually inspected and cleaned, rebound, relabeled as needed. Then, they were taken down shelf by shelf, carried to wagons, arranged in four layers, and driven to the new building.[14]

The doors of the new library were thrown open on September 1, and an estimated 20,000 people poured through them during the two-day grand opening. That seems a remarkable turnout in a city that then had a population of about 150,000. From 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. each day, Carrie and the school board members and their wives greeted the public, which circulated amidst palms and cut flowers as soft music was played in the background.[15]

A broad vestibule led to the rotunda, at the back of which was the delivery desk,. Opening into the Rotunda were the reading room, children's room, public room, stack room, reference room, catalogue room, reception room, and offices for the librarian and reference librarian. [16]

PHOTOS:

BC10004881 – Rotunda and Delivery Desk

BC10004883 – Reading Room

BC 10004906 – Children's Room

BC 10004891 – Public Room

BC 10004901 – Stack Room

BC 10004897 – Cataloging Room

BC 10004882 – Fireplace in Rotunda

On the second floor, there was a special reference room for high school students, a women's club room, several adult reference rooms, and a newspaper room, shown in this 1915 photograph: BC 10004884.

The second floor also housed an art gallery for the collection of prints and reproductions that William Rockhill Nelson was in the process of giving the library. In time, it became, the foundation of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. In the basement, along with a fully equipped bindery, was a museum housing the collection of artifacts gathered by a long-time government Indian agent, Colonel Dyer.[17]

The Kansas City Star reported that visitors to the new library "marveled at its beauty and grace, at the substantial way in which it is built, at its elegance and convenience, and at the good taste shown in the arrangement of the rooms. In fact, they saw one of the handsomest, most convenient and most modern library buildings west of the Mississippi River."

That same year, by virtue of the city's annexation of the town of Westport, the library acquired its first branch, then the brand-new Westport Library, which we now know as the Allen Branch.

As the 19th century drew to a close, Carrie must have felt a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as she surveyed her elegant and growing domain from this pleasant office in the new library.

PHOTO – BC 10004898 - Librarian's Office

The following year, in 1898, despite her continuing skepticism about the value of most fiction, Carrie established what was called the “pay collection” in order to pay for popular fiction. In other words, patrons paid a rental fee for recently released fiction. By 1899, the library staff had grown to 28 adults, plus nine pages – high school boys who wore bright green and gold uniforms and performed such tasks as running errands and exchanging books on shelves. That year, the name of Frances A. Bishop first appears on the library roster as assistant librarian. Miss Bishop would become Carrie’s loyal friend and figure prominently in her life for the remainder of her days[18].

Meanwhile, Carrie had become active in state and national library groups, traveling regularly to gatherings in distant cities. She was often a speaker at these events, putting forth her ideas on the role of libraries and ways to interest people in books. There was sometimes a certain “controlling” attitude in her views on what people ought to read, especially children, reflected in these thoughts in an essay published in a New Orleans newspaper on Dec. 12, 1895: “When school-life begins, great care should be taken with both boys and girls. One unwholesome book will contaminate an entire school.” But, she said, “Never tell a child that he should not read a book, that it will have a bad influence on him; most boys would immediately want to try the experiment.”

As for girls, she said, “The natural taste of the majority of girls is for light literature; they want a simple little love story. Who would deny them that pleasure?” … “As a dessert,” she said, “this reading and dreaming is not objectionable; if however the mind is to gain strength, it must have healthful exercise.” And she lamented that “the girls who will read science, history and politics are in the minority …”

In 1901, after 20 years as librarian, Carrie reached a professional pinnacle when she and Kansas City were hosts to the annual meeting of the Missouri Library Association. As the gathering at the Coates House drew to a close, Carrie was elected president by a large majority. One has to wonder if she felt any sense of foreboding about the fact that the dynamic founder of the St. Joseph, Mo., library – a gentleman named Purd Wright – was also gaining stature on the state and national scene. He led a discussion during the meeting on the topic of "Popularizing a Library."

Carrie continued to have difficulty accepting the public's love of novels, which she said led to the publication of books that were "frothy and uninteresting." Most of them "written to sell," and written "hurriedly and carelessly." While declaring that she seldom read novels, she said "one strong novel" had been written the previous year – in 1901. That, she said, was "The Crisis," by Winston Churchill, the St. Louis-born writer of historical fiction who shared the name of the famous British political leader. "The Crisis" is set mainly in St. Louis before and during the Civil War and is worthwhile for its descriptions of the north-south tensions that gripped Missouri in that era.[19]

Carrie delved further into the matter of the public's taste in literature when she wrote an article for the public library quarterly complaining of the popularity of condensed literature. "This is an age of condensation, especially in literature. Anything beyond one volume in history, literature or art, is looked upon with alarm," she said. It worried her that almost nobody read a book clear through "in the way children were taught to read twenty years ago." But that had been a different time, she said, when books were fewer and children more obedient.[20]

She decried the fact that people were reading the great operas in outline form and that they went to performances just to hear the music. She judged much of the supplementary reading in the schools to be "only worth a place in the waste basket." She admired anyone who still read three-volume English novels and remembered with affection the eight volumes of a novel called "Clarissa Harlowe." New novels, she declared, "are light as thistle down. They are frequently stupid, not always quite proper, but eagerly read."[21]

The result of all this, she concluded, was that people's brains were being condensed.[22]

Carrie must have been putting in very long days at her desk because at the end of 1908 her three-volume opus on the history of Kansas City was published by a Chicago firm. Titled "Kansas City, Missouri: Its History and its People," the books trace the development of the city and its institutions back one hundred years to the construction of Fort Osage by William Clark in 1808. The second and third volumes are devoted to biographies of several hundred community leaders, overwhelmingly male, but including about a half-dozen women, Carrie among them.

This was not the first history written of the city, but the Kansas City Journal, on Dec. 27, 1908, declared that the author had been "more thorough in marshaling her facts than any of her predecessors."

This is the photograph of Carrie used during those years. (PHOTO of the older Carrie)

Further indication that the library, with Carrie at the helm, had achieved great status in Kansas City came in October 1909 when its beautiful rotunda was selected as

the site of the lying-in-state of Colonel Thomas Swope, who had died in mysterious circumstances at his mansion in Independence. His casket stood between two marble columns, and the area was draped in black with black streamers running from the columns out to the building entrance. Carrie prepared a display board listing Colonel Swope's many gifts to the city, including Swope Park.

Seemingly, things could not have been better when she presented her 1909 annual report to the board and declared that "a library should be a local college, a part of the educational facilities for the entire community." Tastes and interests had changed in the nearly 30 years she had been librarian. A "wide-awake" librarian now must secure the best material on such subjects as reinforced concrete, steam turbines, airships, wireless telegraphy, gas engines, fuel alcohol as well as the usual range of subjects from the fine arts to gardening. [23]

It had been only twelve years since the new library was occupied, yet it seemed to be bursting at the seams. "The library has become a 'civic center,' in itself, a grouping of all classes of people in search of all kinds of information," she said. Additional space was needed, and she suggested constructing an extension to the building. The library, of course, still housed the art gallery and the museum, each with two curators.[24]

As confident as Carrie sounded in her reports and statements, something must have been going wrong because sometime during 1910 the board downgraded her title from librarian to assistant librarian and made her friend Miss Bishop second assistant and reference librarian. The Kansas City Journal said she had been "deposed," a strong term suggesting that she had been abruptly brought down from a lofty place. The Journal further said that the board thought the position should be held by a man.[25]

This action was followed by a search for a new head librarian, which led back to Purd Wright, the founder of the St. Joseph library. He had been making waves as president of the national library association and from that position had been recruited to lead the public library of Los Angeles. His arrival in Los Angeles in September 1910 was greeted with big headlines and long articles in the Los Angeles Times extolling his many skills. Less than a year later, the president of the Kansas City school board sent Mr. Wright an effusive telegram inviting this wandering son of Missouri to come home and take up the reins of the Kansas City Library.[26]

Purd Wright accepted and arrived in Kansas City in May 1911, again to lots of news attention. Whatever the circumstances and reasons for Carrie's demotion, it is difficult not to like Purd. He was a good speaker and writer, a natural public relations man, and had great yarns to spin, some of which make you wonder if he was given to exaggeration. For instance, he claimed to have sat beside Jesse James' mother on a short train trip as a boy. When he left the train he supposedly delivered the scoop to waiting reporters on everything she had told him. Starting his working life as a printer, he came to know Samuel Clemens, the future Mark Twain, whose books he collected by the hundreds.[27]

We can only wonder about what occurred when Purd showed up to take the reins at Ninth and Locust, where Carrie and Miss Bishop were presumably still occupying the two librarian offices in the building. Did Carrie and Miss Bishop make room for him?

We get a sense of the problems at the very next board meeting when Purd asked for – and received -- authorization to buy a desk, chair, typewriter, and various other items, and to hire a stenographer. It seems clear that the library was not a great working

environment in those days and weeks. In his first annual report, a few months after taking charge, Purd commented that he had little to report "under existing circumstances." [28]

A tense time ensued until September 1912, when the board decided in executive session to immediately terminate Carrie, paying her through the end of November, and to banish Miss Bishop to a branch library. This followed an all-day investigation at the library by two board members, who interviewed all the library employees and decided that there was too much friction and that harmony could only be restored by removing Carrie.[29]

Purd must have suffered in all this, too, because he immediately took himself off to the spas and waters of Excelsior Springs for a respite.

Carrie was 56 when she was replaced by a man who was 51. The newspapers often described him as youthful. It wouldn't be the first time a woman of 56 was considered over the hill and a man of 51 in his prime – if that were the case. Perhaps she was having a rough time with menopause in the days before hormone replacement, but she had produced a commendable history of the city during those years.

What seems most likely is that the board simply decided that the library she had taken over in its infancy and nurtured and developed to a rather splendid adulthood was now so big that only a man could handle it.

After her firing, and until her death in 1934 at the age of 80, Carrie lived an almost reclusive life in a home she shared with Frances Bishop at 48th and Holmes. Was she bitter? Undoubtedly. But she had effectively composed her own epitaph in the short biography of herself that appeared in her history of the city, and it showed that she had a clear sense of what she had accomplished. These were her words: "Mrs. Whitney's

biography is the history of the Kansas City Public Library." In other words, she considered the two life stories – hers and the Library's – to be virtually the same.

At her death the newspapers remembered her as the "mother" of the Library. She had guided it from little more than a dream to a highly regarded institution of its time and place. That should have given her great satisfaction in those last quiet years.

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[1] For a discussion of the earliest history of the Kansas City Library see *A History of the Kansas City Public Library From 1873 to 1893*, by J. M. Greenwood, Rigby-Ramsey Printing Co., Kansas City, Mo., 1893.
[2] Biographical information on Carrie Westlake Judson Whitney comes from information she herself supplied while at the library, also from her death certificate, filed with the Missouri State Board of Health, April 10, 1934, and from references to her parents on Ancestry.com.
[3] The International Genealogy Index shows that Carrie Westlake was married to E. W. Judson on June 1, 1875, in Pettis County.
[4] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1881.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Greenwood, Op.cit.
[10] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1882.
[11] Application and License to Marry in Jackson County, Mo., Dec. 1, 1885; Missouri Death Certificate, Feb. 27, 1890.
[12] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1891.
[13] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1892.
[14] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1898.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *Kansas City, Missouri, Public Library, 1873-1973, An Illustrated History*, compiled by William H. Hoffman.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1899.
[19] Quoted in *Kansas City Journal*, April 2, 1902.
[20] Quarterly article condensed in Kansas City Journal, April 12, 1902.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1, 1909.
[24] Ibid.
[25] *Kansas City Journal*, Sept. 6, 1912.

[26] Information on the hiring of Mr. Wright, his experiences in Los Angeles, and his arrival in Kansas City comes from articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, on Sept. 25, 1910, and the *Kansas City Star* on May 30,

1911, and the author's conversation with Purd Wright III, Mr. Wright's grandson, who possesses the telegram sent to his grandfather.

[27] Mr. Wright's comments on his ties to Mark Twain appeared in the *Kansas City Star* on Oct. 3, 1913; his description of his encounter with Jesse James' mother appeared in the *Star* on Feb. 24, 1923.

[28] Annual Report, Board of Education, July 1911.

[29] Resolution and minutes of the Board of Education, September 1912; also see *Kansas City Journal* article of Sept. 6, 1912.