



## **The Story of Us: The Creation of Friends of the Modesto Library**

By Maree Hawkins



There is a link between a June 1973 US Supreme Court 5-4 decision to tighten obscenity laws and the January 1974 formation of the Friends of the Modesto Library. A month after the court decision, The Modesto Bee reported that the ruling had no perceptible impact upon Modesto's two adult bookstores, a sex film house, the Modesto library or regular bookstores. In the article, County Librarian Oscar Smaalders said he was concerned about a return to censorship and a siege of book banning, adding there had been complaints concerning nudes in a library art display and four-letter words in a song book. The decision did not establish national standards but allowed local community judgment. Modesto Mayor Lee Davies asked the city attorney to determine the city's ability to regulate pornography under the court's decision.

In November 1973 the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors considered forming a library selections review committee after hearing complaints about materials, particularly a photo exhibit of farmworkers in the Modesto Library. The complaint said the exhibit favored the United Farm Workers union and Cesar Chavez over growers. Public reaction was immediate. Within a week the Board of Supervisors received a petition signed by 104 people, spearheaded and delivered by Peggy Fields (now Peggy Gardiner), one of our founding members. The petition read, "We do feel there is no need for any type of censorship in our library system and no need for a review committee." Concerned citizens increased pressure on the supervisors with letters to the editor and attendance at board meetings. The result: the two supervisors dropped the idea of a library review board. But County Librarian Smaalders had a plan to build on the coalition of citizens who responded to the initial threat of censorship. The first meeting of the Stanislaus County Library Auxiliary was called to order by Acting President Peti Taylor on Jan. 14, 1974, in a library conference room.

During our 50 years we've also been known as Friends of the Stanislaus County Free Library, Friends of the Modesto-Stanislaus Free Library and, since 2008, as Friends of the Modesto Library. In a Bee article the day after the organization's first meeting, Smaalders said, "It will be nice to have a group of people who really know what's going on in the library." He also had no fear the new group would be usurped by ultra conservatives or the book burning element. "There are more people concerned with the library as a free institution than otherwise."

Fifty years in business adds up to hundreds of board meetings! And if you happened to read 50 years of minutes, you quickly realize that officers and directors often serve for years, often in double-digit years of service. When did incoming board members realize that their initial commitment could turn into a lifelong experience? Friend's member Mark Heinzinger, who was president in the 1990s and the early 2000s, recalls that back then all the board members joked that they would all be on the board at least 10 years.

When you commit to take the lead on a Friends project, you are quickly considered an expert. Anne Britton, who moved to Modesto in 2001, soon joined the Friends. In 2005 Anne proposed hosting a Scholastic book sale. Those spring and fall Scholastic Book Sales have raised a lot of money as well as put thousands of books into the hands of children. The minutes show that Anne did try to extract herself from the sales once—she even had a replacement in mind. Evidently that didn't work out since Anne is now in her 19th year of Scholastic Book Fairs. She says she is very happy for the great support she has from all the volunteers.

The minutes also reveal that the topics of discussion tend to remain consistent through the years. A perennial topic is that we need more members and how do we attract them. Fundraising is another evergreen topic. That first board determined that used book sales would be good fundraisers and a natural fit for the Friends of the Library. Their first effort was a modest used book sale that included books being discarded by the library. Then in November 1978 they were informed that the library could not donate its used books to the Friends. Friends' representatives approached the board of supervisors at a meeting and received what was described as a scolding from a supervisor, who said in an "irritated and loud voice," "...county counsel says we cannot sell books bought with county funds nor can Friends store or sell books in the library." This led to some spirited discussion at the next Friends board meeting; one board member wanted to discontinue Friends' book sales, while another voiced the opinion that the Friends are not primarily a money-raising group.

Nevertheless, book sales continued more or less annually through the late 1970s and into the '80s and '90s. For a time in the 2000s there was no mention of a used book sale until 2010 when member Clare Noonan said, "Let's get it going again." She became the book sale expert for the next seven years. Books were sorted at her house until member Cathie Peck offered us a small sorting space at Beard Land Development. In the years since, Beard has graciously provided a larger, well-organized space. The used book sale is an "all hands on deck" event, and our most visible fundraiser.

Book sales—both used books and Scholastic—have been a primary source of funding over the years. A few years ago, we began partnering with Barnes & Noble Booksellers and that gives our bottom line a nice little bump. We even dangled our feet in retail from 2010 to 2017 at the library with The Little Shop. The Little Shop closed when the library needed the space.

What do we do with all the money we raise? Give it to the Library, of course! In the early years, our annual operating budget was usually less than \$5,000. Today, it is five to six times that amount. Each year, library staff presents a list of funding requests, and we do our best to fulfill them, usually to the tune of \$15,000 - \$20,000. Since 1974, our investments in the library include the fish aquarium and its several replacements, film projectors, a noon travel club, a microfilm reader, a clock, bulletin board, newspaper racks, staff training, holiday events like the Harry Potter Yule Ball, author visits for children and adults, sponsoring programs such as Popcorn and Poetry, funding the children's story hour when it was cut from the budget, an elocution contest, summer reading programs and a children's dinner theater. We also co-

sponsored with Modesto City Schools two appearances by children's book author and illustrator Tomie dePaolo in 1990 and 1992.

In our early years we even bought a projector and record player for the Turlock Library. It wasn't until 1993 that Friends groups began forming at other libraries. Today, almost all of the library's 13 branches boast Friends groups.

Throughout the years the county librarians have always kept the Friends informed on the ups and downs of the library budget. And there have been many lean times. The 1978 passage of Proposition 13, a property tax-reducing measure, radically reduced the revenue available for library services. In 1984, the year the Friends became an official 501(c)(3) charity; state budget cuts in 1985 forced the library to cut its budget by 50 percent. More reductions happened in 1992-93 due to the state shifting funds to education. By 1994 the Modesto Library was open just 27 hours per week and the smallest branches were open only 10 hours per week.

In 1993, the Stanislaus County Free Library Advisory Board was formed to develop a recommendation on how to fund the county library system. The group recommended to the Board of Supervisors that library services be restored to an acceptable level funded by a 1/8-cent sales tax. This dedicated sales tax, now the library's primary source of revenue, was first approved by voters in 1994 for a period of five years, then again in 1999, 2004, 2012 and most recently in 2017. The current tax has a sunset date of June 30, 2030.

Friends of the Modesto Library has played an important part in each of those elections. Legally we are able to contribute as much as 20% of our operating budget to each renewal campaign, and we regularly do so. Just as important, our members have volunteered with the campaign, walking precincts, phoning voters, and talking to everyone they meet about the importance of our county library system.

We are proud of our 50 years as Friends of the Modesto Library. Our goals are still to raise funds and friends for the library and support the Modesto Library in any way we can.