

Too Quiet for Comfort

At Paterson Libraries, Harsh Steps to Balance the Books

By WILLIAM E. GEIST

Special to The New York Times

PATERSON, N.J. — Leo Fichtelberg is a librarian, but never in his most irascible moments did he want to see the library this quiet.

The Paterson Library and all its branches have been temporarily shut for lack of funds, and Mr. Fichtelberg was commenting on the eeriness of it all as he walked through the main reading room and up the marble steps to his office, where small stacks of dollar bills held together with paper clips and rubber bands sat on his desk.

"The libraries were to have closed in September," he said, "but the people managed to keep at least a couple of them open part time almost until the end of the year with their donations of dimes and dollars."

The office was cluttered with paintings and empty wine bottles from a recent fund-raising art exhibition at the library.

The library's most valuable painting, "In the Park," by the 19th-century American Impressionist William Merritt Chase, was not among them. Two months ago, to raise operating funds, the library tried to sell the painting, which has been valued at between \$175,000 and \$500,000.

But a day before the painting was to be sold, a citizens group got a court order barring its sale. Now Phillips Sons & Neale Inc., which had featured the painting on the cover of its catalogue of offerings, is holding the painting in lieu of a penalty payment of about \$34,000, a sum the library cannot pay.

The libraries had remained open on almost a day-to-day basis, thanks to the contributions of local merchants, collections by children and others in the neighborhoods, fund-raising shows, athletic events and dinners as well as the passing of a hat in at least one local tavern.

"The library is the mainstay of any culture," said Ron Paladini, owner of Paladini's Tavern, who was himself a mainstay of the citizens' fund-raising campaign that collected about \$83,000 until finally, on Dec. 20, the money ran out and all branches were closed until next Monday, when some are to reopen.

While Mr. Fichtelberg greatly appreciates their efforts, he finds something immensely troubling in people rattling cans on street corners for money to operate the city's libraries.

"In Paterson, the state and the nation," he said, "libraries have become a rather low priority with elected officials. It does not speak well for the values of this country. It speaks of an impoverished culture. It is becoming a national tragedy."

He said that, while the plight of the Paterson library system stemmed in part from the troubles of this aging industrial city, the situation here had to be viewed in the broader context of the troubles of libraries across the country. Many of these are staying open less, buying fewer books, operating with fewer staff members and eliminating programs. Cutbacks in local, state and Federal funds are at the

core. "A matter of priorities," Mr. Fichtelberg repeats.

State aid to Paterson libraries was cut this year by 8 percent, municipal financing by 40 percent, and Federal aid was cut entirely. The Paterson City Council initially cut the library budget from \$646,000 to \$200,000, before increasing it to \$375,000 when library officials acceded to the Council's demand that an attempt be made to sell the Chase painting.

"Counting out \$150 in pennies in the church basement isn't my idea of fun, but some good has come of it," Mr. Paladini said. "Paterson has had a lot of problems, and this has brought thousands of good people out of the woodwork. I hope we have sent a message to elected officials that libraries are important."

The Mayor, Frank X. Graves, who is credited with spearheading the fund-raising drive, said he was deeply troubled by the situation and would propose an \$800,000 budget for the library next year. Whether the budget will be approved is another matter.

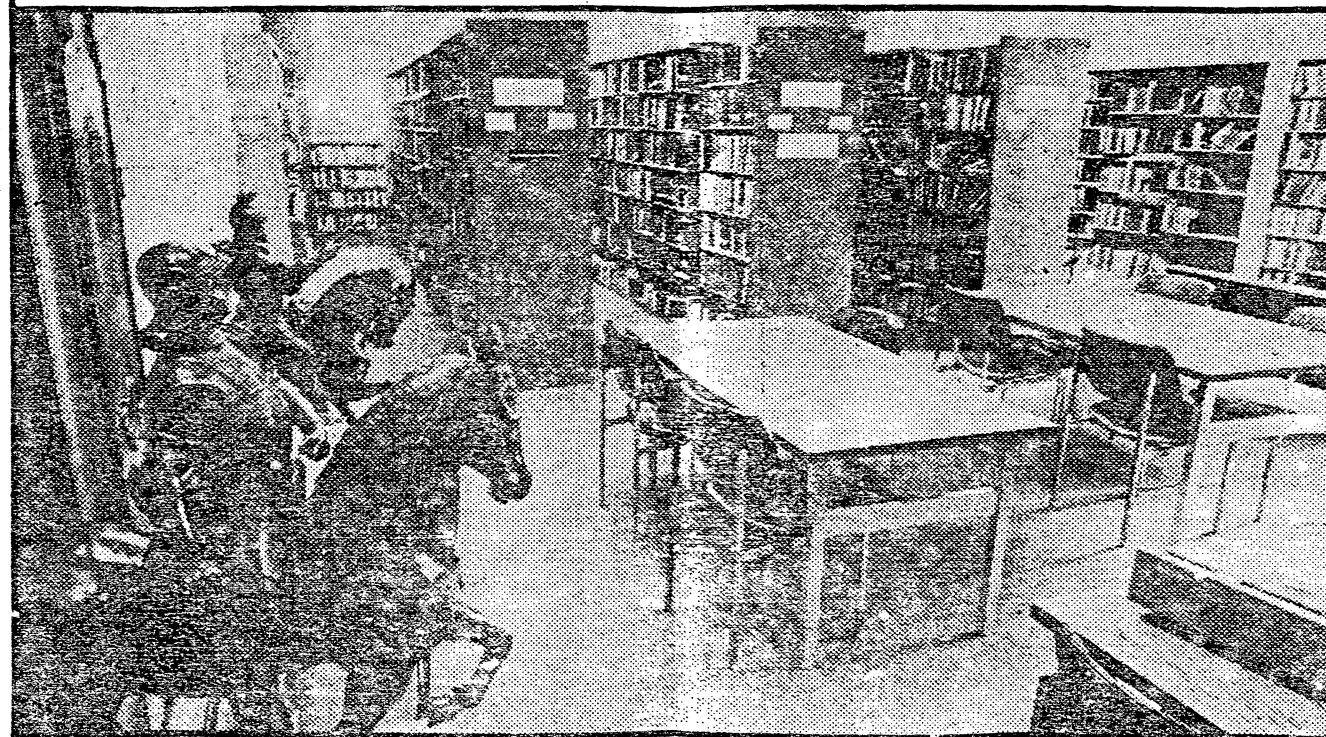
"Closing libraries is a big blow to the morale of a community," he said. "We are a city on the way back, attracting some new businesses. Who will come here if we don't even have libraries?"

All was quiet in the upstairs reference room, in the main reading room on the first floor and in the children's story room in the basement. There were posters encouraging people to read more books and posters down-

Leo Fichtelberg, a librarian at the main branch of the Paterson, N.J., library, discussing the shutdown of the system because of a lack of funds.



The New York Times / Edward Hauser



stairs drawn by Mrs. Busnar's third-grade class in School No. 28 pleading that the libraries not be closed. One

said, "Libraries Help Us Get Answers."

Mr. Fichtelberg sat down at a table

on the main floor and reminisced about the time, just 14 years ago, when he arrived and the library was open seven days a week, there were over 100 staff members and opera, jazz and other events were held in the library.

"We opened this year," he explained, "before the real troubles began, with a staff of 55. So you can see, it's been a long slide."

Bank Your



City of Cambridge

1.

IN CITY COUNCIL

January 10, 1983

COUNCILLOR WYLIE

- WHEREAS: The New York Times on December 29, 1982 reported the closure of libraries in our sister city of Paterson, New Jersey; and
- WHEREAS: President Truman said "if freedom means anything, it means the right to think, and the right to think means the right to read..."; and
- WHEREAS: Terrence Cardinal Cooke said "America's greatness is not only recorded in books, but it is also dependent upon each and every citizen being able to utilize our public libraries"; and
- WHEREAS: The source of freedom in America today is the strength of its human spirit and that spirit must be nurtured by books and ideas; and
- WHEREAS: Books and libraries are essential to an informed citizenry and vital to the democratic process; and
- WHEREAS: The City of Cambridge recently has experienced financial threats to its own library system, as have many Massachusetts cities; now therefore be it
- RESOLVED: That the Cambridge City Council supports Mayor Frank X. Graves of Paterson, New Jersey in his efforts to reopen the libraries of Paterson, and of all cities to join in changing the priorities of our nation so that education and culture will return to their proper place in American society.

In City Council January 10, 1983.
Adopted by the affirmative vote of 7 members.
Attest:- Paul E. Healy, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Paul E. Healy", is written over a horizontal line.

Order # 1

S -16

C. Wylie re: resolutions in support of
Mayor Frank X. Graves of Patterson, N.J. in
his efforts to re-open libraries in Patter-
son.

In City Council,

January 10, 1983

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QW
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Truman