

Carnegie's gift stands the test of time

Andrew Carnegie was born in Scotland and immigrated to the United States in 1848 with his family at the age of 13.

He came from a relatively underprivileged background but at an early age he understood the importance of an education through books. He went on to be one of the most successful businessmen in history and started the first billion dollar corporation. When he sold his shares of the Carnegie Steel Company in 1901 for more than \$400,000,000 he became one of the richest men in the world.

It was known that he would give away a substantial portion of his wealth because of his strong opinions about poverty relief. Carnegie strongly believed that ignorance was the root of problems of the poor and he vowed therefore to give grants to communities to build free public libraries.

He declared, "I believe that it outranks any other one thing that a community can do to benefit its people. It is the never-failing spring in the desert."

One of many grants

Carnegie grants were responsible for building 125 libraries in Canada and a total of 2,509 libraries world wide.

The Smiths Falls Public Library has the distinction of being the first library that Mr. Carnegie visited in Canada. In March of 1906 the board learned of his approaching visit to open the new library in Ottawa and promptly sent him an invitation to tour the Smiths Falls Library. He declined the invitation as he often did but the board wasn't discouraged and another letter was dispatched urging him to reconsider. They assured Mr. Carnegie that since his train would be traveling through Smiths Falls they would "pick him up at the station and deliver him again and in all ways he would be looked after."

He consented to come and the Smiths Falls Board minutes record that Mr. Carnegie went through the new building from top to bottom, was delighted with it, and declared it a first prize library. He showed the most unaffected pleasure with everything. He thought it was a beautiful site and he was genuinely pleased with the library as the proverbial boy is supposed to be with a new top. He said we had got more for our money than any building he had ever seen in his life that was built in the regular way without labour or material being contributed, and he further said we had the handsomest small library he had ever seen.

In connection with this it might be said that Smiths Falls had the honour of showing him the first library that he had seen in Canada. He had seen many of the libraries that he had given in the United States but this is his first visit to Canada and ours was the first library he had seen in this country...On the mantel in the reading room of the library there was a photograph of him in a frame. He noticed it and offered to put his autograph on it. In an instant it was out of the frame and borrowing a pen he wrote: "A rare pleasure to visit a library I have given. Success to Smiths Falls."

The autographed picture was lost to the library for many years and after an exhaustive search was rediscovered during the 2002 restoration project. The portrait now hangs of the wall in the library to commemorate his visit.

Article from: Smiths Falls Public Library 100th Anniversary Program