Up Front

Braddock Carnegie Library
Braddock, Pa.

Carnegie Library of Homestead
Munhall, Pa.

It’s pleasant to surf a laptop in the comfort of home, but it just isn’t as bracing as climbing the steps of the local library. There, seated at a burnished wooden table, among a community of readers—dust motes dancing in the light from the reading lamps or the sunlight beaming in from the windows—we experience the knowledge embodied amongst the shelves of irreplaceable books.

We are rich in historical libraries in the Pittsburgh region, and two of the three that Andrew Carnegie built for his mill workers over 100 years ago are still in use. Traveling to one in Braddock and the other across the Mon in Munhall makes for a historical self-guided tour. You can check out a book while there with any Allegheny County library card.

When Andrew Carnegie dedicated the Braddock Carnegie Library in 1889 for the employees of his first major steel mill, the Edgar Thomson Works, he stated that it would be a center of light and learning for generations to come. The building housed a library, public baths, bowling alleys, a billiards room, music hall, gym, and swimming pool. It was a true community center.

For more than three quarters of a century, the Braddock Library served area residents, but as working and living patterns changed, the library’s use declined. In 1961, the Braddock School District took over operations. However, due to financial constraints, the library closed in 1974, one year after receiving designation as a National Historic Site. By 1979, the building—deteriorated and vandalized—was placed on the borough’s demolition list.

David Solomon, a former librarian, recruited volunteers and purchased the building for $1. He formed the Braddock’s Field Historical Society to raise money for its restoration. Their first success was opening a children’s library in 1982 on Saturdays only, heated with kerosene in the winter. By the 1990s, the reading and reference rooms, circulation areas and offices were reopened. Today, there is a fully-functioning library, a French & Indian War museum, a clay studio in the former bath house, a computer lab, and music hall. David Demarest, a member of the Braddock’s Field Historical Society Board and editor of From These Hills, From These Valleys believes that Braddock is second only to the Pittsburgh Point in local historical significance, considering that the first settler’s cabin was located there and that Pittsburgh’s first major steel mill, the Edgar Thomson Works, opened in 1875 and still operates today.

“As Carnegie’s first library in the United States, we will always remain a library,” says Vicki Vargo, executive director of the Society. “However, what worked in the last 100 years in this building won’t carry us into the future. We are transforming certain areas to meet 21st-century needs while preserving the building’s historic charm.” She is optimistic about the potential of the computer lab, the clay studio, and music hall. “In the past, many of the programs offered here were recreational and physical activities,” she notes. “Today, we are focusing on a variety of cultural and literacy-based programs, which complement the library and support Carnegie’s ideal of lifelong learning and self-sufficiency through a creative approach.”

Across the Monongahela, the Carnegie Library of Homestead overlooks both Homestead and Munhall, in which it is located. It is a magnificent building in the French Renaissance style, and has held up well for its 110 years. Kate Grannemann, the executive director, recalls her first visit to the...
Braddock Library housed a library, public baths, bowling alleys, a billiards room, music hall, gym, and swimming pool when it first opened in 1889. Brian Butko.
Homestead Library was built by Carnegie for his workers 110 years ago. Bette McDevitt.
library when she applied for her position. “When I came up Eighth Avenue and saw the library—I had not been here before—I was stunned. I had to stop the car and wipe tears from my eyes. I parked the car and walked all around the building. I fell in love with it.”

On my own first visit, I entered with a group of people who were going swimming in the 100-year-old pool. Grannemann thinks it may be the oldest indoor pool in the U.S. still in use. The library’s popular fitness center has state-of-the-art equipment. People can join for $35 per month. The restored music hall is available as a rental.

Carnegie purchased the site in April 1892, but before the library was built it played a part in history that very summer. Following the Homestead Strike and subsequent lockout by Henry Clay Frick, the strikers routed the Pinkertons, but the victory was short-lived. Mary Leon Solomon, in Legacy to a Mill Town, Carnegie Library of Homestead, writes, “The state militia intervened a few days later and succeeded—where the Pinkertons had failed—in retaking the steel works. The militia remained in Homestead while the Company reopened the mill with replacement workers. Ironically, the militia was encamped on the very site where the Carnegie Library now stands.” Six years after the strike the community got its library.

“What I love about the library is that it is the center of community life,” Grannemann says. “It’s a very busy place. People come here to find out something they need to know, take care of some business, have fun on the computers, or take home movies and books. Children do a lot of art work here, read, and use the computers. The athletic facility is a center for health, and the only fitness club in the nearby area. Crowds enjoy the same wonderful hall that Andrew Carnegie built 110 years ago.”

The original $1 million dollar library endowment was transferred by the U. S. Steel Corporation to Homestead when Duquesne Library was demolished and Braddock temporarily closed. The endowment still doesn’t meet their needs, however. According to Grannemann, “We intend to have a capital campaign to double the endowment so that this place is here for the next 100 years.”

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<th>Braddock Carnegie Library</th>
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<td>419 Library Street, Braddock, Pa.</td>
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<td>Phone: 412-351-5356</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hours: Mon.-Thurs. 2 p.m.-7 p.m.; Sat. 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; closed Fri. &amp; Sun.</td>
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<th>Carnegie Library of Homestead</th>
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<tr>
<td>510 East 10th Avenue, Munhall, Pa.</td>
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<td>Phone: 412-462-3444</td>
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<td>Hours: Mon. and Fri. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Tues.-Thurs. 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.</td>
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<td>Sat. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun. 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.</td>
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Bette McDevitt previously wrote the feature articles “Love Letters from a Chauffeur,” “The Thomas Merton Center: Changing Lives One at a Time,” and “Showstoppers” for this magazine.