

WHAT LIDA WANTS LIDA GETS
How Monroe Got Its Public Library

Excerpted from the forthcoming book,
Folks Round Here: A Midwest Chronicle
by John Evangelist Walsh

One of Monroe's classiest personalities at the turn of the century--not this one, the other one--was a woman with the lilt-ing name of Alida Ludlow. A beauty, too, with a sort of a regal touch to her face and manner. Smart, too, and educated, and always on fire to raise the town's social and intellectual level. If you lived here in say 1904, the date of this little tale, you knew about Lida.

It didn't hurt that she was the daughter-in-law of our richest man and leading citizen, Arabut Ludlow, wife of his son Henry. The large, sturdy house they lived in, Lida and Henry, is still

there, with its wide, sweeping porch, over on 22nd Avenue. I pass it when I go to gas the car. You can't miss it because it sits right next to a Monroe gem, the big, rambling old Chenoweth place, a true Victorian classic if there ever was one. The year before my wife and I got here in 1990 it was on the market. Went for \$112,000 that'll tell you how out of the way we are here. That same house in or near Madison, only an hour or so to the north, would go for three or four times as much. Near Chicago-- I can't imagine.

Lida being who and what she was, it didn't surprise anybody when they heard what she'd done about the new library, how she'd beaten out that billionaire Andrew Carnegie, the steel king, who gave free libraries to towns that needed them. Here in Monroe old Andrew's money wasn't good enough--and that's the only time he'd ever been turned down. By then he'd given, they say, about 2,800 libraries to small towns, without making a dent in his bank account. They say he didn't get over the shock he got in Monroe for a year.

This is farm country, which means hard work and outdoor living, so maybe you wouldn't think that folks around here do a lot of book reading. But we do, always have. We weren't a dozen years old after those first cabins were built, when there was talk about getting up a reading room. Pretty soon the Young Men's Literary Association filled a room in a building on the Square with any books they could find, buy, or borrow, and called it a library. After that, as we grew, our library jumped around to

~~Monroe, Louisiana~~
bigger rooms with more and more books in some building or other. It was Lida Ludlow--she was Lida Conde, then, a single girl--just after the Civil War, who set up the first real good library in Monroe, housing it in the Universalist Church basement, a block north of the Square.

That's where she met and fell in love with, and married Henry Ludlow, so she always after that had a soft spot for books and libraries. Said a library was the life-blood of a town, showed that it believed it had a future.

It was forty years after that, after the Universalist Library opened for business, that she tangled with Carnegie--no, let's not put it that way, not tangled exactly, and it wasn't only libraries she had on her mind this time. Here's what happened.

In 1904, if your town had grown to a size where it was embarrassed about not having a regular public library with a nice building with piles of books, and a budget for staff and for getting more books each year, there was one place you could turn. By then everybody'd heard about Carnegie donating whole libraries to towns, including money for a building. He thought giving libraries to folks was the best way to spend his great wealth, and you know it really was a good idea. He was serious about it, too, taking a personal interest in who got what, and how it was used.

When Carnegie was young, a poor boy, libraries had meant a lot to him. Now he wanted to do the same for other boys, and for girls of course and just everybody. It was the one thing he did with his money that made him happiest, they say. Every re-

quest that reached him, and there were dozens each year, as you can guess, he looked at himself. Then he'd make the final decision yes or no, and he'd turn it over to one of his assistants.

In the summer of 1903, the Monroe City council decided we couldn't hold our head up any longer unless we had a spanking new library in town, with everything up to date. So the City appointed what they called "a library Board of Directors," and told them to see what they could do about old Andrew sitting there in his big office back east in Pittsburg. Collin Wright, the board's president, wrote the letter telling Carnegie how much we wanted and needed one of his libraries, and it must have been a good letter. Mr. Carnegie personally wrote back the OK that we could have one, under the usual terms, which we'd be hearing about from the assistant.

The sum to be provided, he explained, was \$12,500. What that'd be today I'm not sure, but back then you could put up a very nice building for that much. An ordinary, two-story house with a porch, for a comparison, wouldn't cost much more than a couple of thousand.

Pleased, Collins boasted that he'd "personally bought the first postage stamp used in the Carnegie correspondence," but that he'd bear the cost of the stamp himself, and not bill the Council. Knowing him, some of the Board members weren't sure it was meant as a joke.

From there it looked like smooth sailing. The terms of the gift weren't hard to fulfill: The City must pass an ordinance providing money annually for the library staff and upkeep, and to

buy more books. Came to about a thousand dollars a year in total, which was easily done. Then a site in town must be provided for the building, and the exact design of the building settled. The whole package must be submitted to Carnegie for approval, but that was always more or less automatic.

Then the trouble started. For a whole month everybody was at the other man's throat over the question of the site, of all things, and over who'd get to run, to control, the library, the City or the school board. It got so bad that old friends were slanging away at each other. You wouldn't think that grown men could act like that. What it was about a library that set them off the way it did, I have no idea.

The old library, the one we'd had for years, wasn't much more than a couple of rooms in an old government building at the corner of Payne and Jackson, a ~~few~~ block off the Square. It was run by the School Board, and everybody agreed that that site would be a good one, the best. Tear down the old building and put up the Carnegie gift. Simple. But then the School Board got cute.

They'd donate use of the site, they offered, but would keep title to the property. And of course the school Board would continue to run the library, as they'd been doing for so many years.

Not on your life, responded some City Council members. A public library should be run by the city, not by the school as if it were meant only for kids. If they couldn't get the old site, well and good. The city'd buy a new site somewhere on or near

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the Square. Well, in about two shakes you had half a dozen places suggested or offered, which soon went down to three. All near the Square, these were the Nance corner, the Wells corner, and the Steiger corner. After a whole lot of wrangling at Council meetings, pretty nasty at times, the vote was taken, and the Steiger corner won, 4 to 3. Then the Council went right ahead and accepted Belle Steiger's offer of the property for \$3,800, which the Council asked for promptly, "so that the actual erection of such Library Building may be done before spring opens up."

That sounded final, all right, but it wasn't. The fight had only just begun. Now it was the Old Sifers, against the Steigers, splitting the town down the middle.

Led by the three Board members who'd voted no--Parker Treat, John Bolender, and Fred Schwartz--the Old Sifers all insisted that if the School Board wouldn't hand it over, then a legal way might be found to seize the old site property and deed it to the city for the new library. They also charged that the Steiger site had hidden defects, for one thing it was "low and subject to overflow with every thaw or rain." Also, hadn't it been on the market for more'n a year, maybe two? That made old Belle pretty mad, of course, She swore she'd lived there all her life and the cellar under her house had always been dry as a bone. Only when the water backed up along the sidewalk was there some little trouble about it, like lots of other streets. If the city put in new tiling to carry the excess across the street it'd be OK. And no, the property had not been on the market. She'd expected to end

her life there! She sold only when the Council came and asked her.

In their turn, the Steigers, now that they thought about it, were able to find a good deal wrong with the Old Site. For such a prominent and expensive building it was too far off the Square. It'd be lost, thrown away. Then too the location was "too near one extreme edge of town," a charge that left most folks more than a bit puzzled. And what about all those old complaints about the walks and pavements being bad and at places real dangerous? How much would all that cost to fix up?

It got personal, too, as each side began suspecting that the other had a hidden purpose. When the Evening Times reported what was being said, mostly in private, by opponents of the Steiger site, lots of folks just nodded. It put squarely on the spot the four Council members who'd voted yes:

...of course Messrs Bennett and Wright, members of the Committee, will be able to sit on the front porches of their homes and look over at the new building. The new library may be altogether too convenient for Mr. Twin-
ing when he gets into his new Commercial and savings Bank [then being built on the Square]. And Mr. Ruegger may have some other interest by which he was influenced to favor the Steiger site, all of which has ^{not} been overlooked by the opposition, which is very free to charge that selfish motives entered into the matter of purchasing a site.

With that, the Old Sifers sent their lawyers digging into the statute books to see if the Library Board actually had the authority to spend city money on buying property. Then the Steiger lawyers piled in, and soon you had a situation so tangled that folks began to worry that maybe Monroe would never get its library, that the warring town fathers'd make old Carnegie so disgusted that he'd give up on us.

Here's where Lida comes in, maneuvering her way in the background like some wily member of Congress.

By now, after thirty years of marriage to Henry, Lida was as much a Ludlow as any of them. For the family patriarch, old Arabut, in particular, she had a great admiration. The story of his rise from itinerant pedlar to the richest man in I don't know how many counties or states, fascinated her. His sturdy, generous character, she also like^d a lot, his easy, giving ways, his native shrewdness as to life in general. Those last few years before he died in 1896 she'd been especially close to him, looking in on him each day to talk and keep him company. Ever since then she'd been looking for a way to honor his memory, some public way to recognize his importance in the history of the region. A library for the town in his name was one of her ideas. Already standing only a block away from the library was the magnificent Hotel Ludlow, unusually grand for a small town, put up by old Arabut twenty years before. With the library and the hotel together as reminders, folks wouldn't soon forget their one-time itinerant pedlar! Then the city had taken her by surprise and beaten her out by applying to and getting one from Carnegie.

Now, with the whole library business up in the air again, she saw her chance and she moved fast.

Persuading her husband and his two brothers, Will and Ed, to put up the money for a memorial for their father wasn't hard. It had to match the Carnegie offer, of course, \$12,500, a very considerable sum then, but that didn't make them hesitate. It's like that old song, what Lida wants, Lida gets, whether it was a Ludlow family matter or not.

The first sign that something was going on came when the papers reported a rumor that "the Library Board had been approached and told in confidence that local parties were ready to advance the money for the library, if the Board would agree to place it on the old site." That was the other part of Lida's plan, to have the new library built right where the old one stood, which meant it'd be run by the School Board, not by the city.

The story in the paper was only a little off. Lida's offer, made in confidence through a spokesman, wasn't to the library Board. It was made directly to the Union School District, which controlled the old library. No conditions were attached to it, only that the new place'd be officially named the "Arabut Ludlow Memorial Library," that precise phrase to be cut in stone prominently over the front door. Also, the offer would take effect only after the Carnegie arrangement had been cancelled. Lida didn't want any rivals for the monument she erected to her revered father, ^{-in-law.}

For a couple of weeks the city's Library Board fought back.

They got the state's attorney general to rule that since the Carnegie deal had been legally accepted, and because ordinances had been passed in support, it couldn't be canceled or declined, or repealed, whatever way you want to put it. The Carnegie library must be built as agreed, and on the Steiger corner as already planned and legally purchased. No way around it, firmly declared the attorney general (a friend of Twining and Ruegger, the Board members, Henry Ludlow pointed out).

Well, Lida of course just went and found herself a high-powered lawyer up in Madison--Burr Jones was his name--to say the opposite: Monroe certainly could abrogate its ^a agreement with Carnegie, stated Jones, and he backed it up with a sheaf of legal argument. That opinion made all the papers, just like the attorney general's position, so it looked like a big court battle was next.

It didn't happen. Once Burr Jones pointed out that the Carnegie money had not yet been received, and the Carnegie offer had been made by an assistant to the steel mogul, not in his own official hand, Colin Wright did the rest. It was Wright who'd begun the whole thing with Carnegie, and now he was fed up. Lacking an official offer in writing from Carnegie, ruled Wright, that left the way open for other interested parties. If the Ludlows cared to submit their offer in an official document, and without delay, that should do it. By that same afternoon a letter from the brothers was in the hands of the school district's secretary. It was



signed by the three Ludlow brothers. Very short, it named only three conditions: 1) the library be built "on lots 132 and 133 of LyBrand's Donation, City of Monroe, now occupied by the present library;" 2) "That the Carnegie offer be not accepted;" 3) that the library "be called the 'Arabut^{Ludlow} Memorial Library,' with appropriate tablet at the main entrance."

That was that. When the news was sent to Carnegie that his money wasn't needed, but thanks anyway, a telegram came back from his assistant reading simply, "Mr. Carnegie is only too glad to give place to your and your brothers' offer, and he congratulates you on your benevolence." I guess by now old Andrew'd had enough of Monroe politics. On the same day as the telegram was sent, the papers reported that with his wife and daughter he'd sailed for a vacation in France.

On a May afternoon in 1905 the Arabut Ludlow Memorial Library

opened for business. A large crowd piled in, resulting in a record check-out of books for a single day in Monroe, no fewer than 246, marveled the Times. "Most attractive and inviting," was the crowd's verdict on the interior arrangements. Chiseled in large letters on a big slab of granite spread atop the front door was old Arabut's name, and just inside the front entrance hung a huge head-and-shoulders photograph of the man himself looking young and friendly and with a scraggle of beard under his chin. Standing to admire it, a few of the older patrons smiled and said that Lida's portrait should be up there too.

Of course it didn't last forever. Almost a hundred years. Then in 20?? the library moved again, setting up nearer the Square in a big old building that used to be the Monroe Clinic. Has about five times as much space. The old Ludlow building is still there, still with old Arabut's name carved over the door, except that now it's the Chamber of Commerce. Even Lida couldn't have stopped that change. The old place had been spilling over for years.

But she got her money's worth, you can say that much.

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