

## **‘Political Courage’ After Libraries ‘Go Dark’**

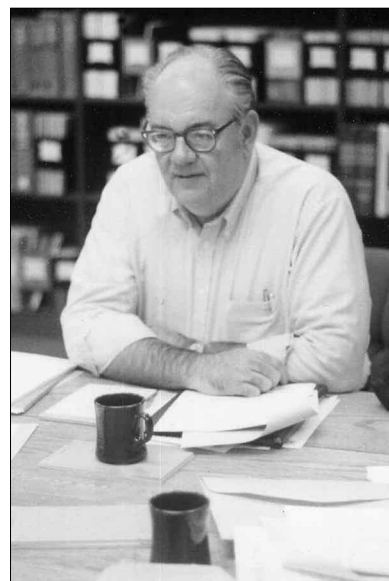
The 1980s began with a new funding dilemma that escalated into a full-blown crisis by the middle of the decade. Much to the distress of board members and staff, hours of operations were cut, forcing libraries to “go dark” when normally they had been open for business, recalled then-Library Trustee C.R. “Dick” Spielman.

In November 1980, the Board of Trustees additionally had proposed cutting 21 library staff positions, but the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners intervened with a directive that no layoffs should occur. The trustees, instead, imposed a hiring freeze in addition to the reduced hours of operation at libraries. It was not enough. Money problems continued.

Exacerbating the Jefferson County shortage, Denver Public Library announced it was closing its doors to everyone but Denver residents, and in September 1981 Denver announced it would withdraw from the reciprocal borrowing program that had helped Jefferson County extend its book offerings.

“Starting in 1981 and 1982 we began to freeze hirings and cut costs,” Knott recalled, adding there was nothing left to cut without damaging the core of the library, so increasing funds was explored as an alternative.

The law allowed for the county library tax to rise to 2.5 mills. “But even that wouldn’t have been enough,” Knott said. It was decided the state-imposed ceiling needed to be raised. Fortunately, the entire Library Board had good connections, especially political connections, Knott observed. Library trustees at the time were Conrad E. Gardner, chairman; Karen Farrar; Elena Grissom; Kathleen Klepetko; Suzan Rickert; W. Howard Smith; and Spielman.



Library Trustee C.R. “Dick” Spielman praised the courage of the Library Board to launch a campaign for improved funding.

*Timeline continued*

**1969**

• Arvada Library on West 57th Avenue and Dover, which was opened by the city of Arvada in 1966, affiliates with Jefferson County Public Library.

**1970**

• New Golden Library opens.

**1971**

• New Evergreen Library opens.



Elena Grissom, former Library Board chairwoman, led a two-year legislative battle to raise the state-imposed ceiling on library mill levies.

Out of this powerhouse board, Grissom emerged as a champion of the state battle for more funds. A politically savvy woman with good business sense, Grissom served on the library board from 1983 to 1995, and was chairwoman from 1989 to 1991.

In a September 2002 interview, Grissom said an attempt by the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners in 1984 to impose a library card fee “put the fire in my belly” to kill the proposed fee and to get the library its own mill levy. The fee died in a 2-2 tie vote, with Grissom, a staunch Republican, joining forces with the only Democrat on the board, Marilyn Lane, to kill it.

*It wasn't the politically safe thing to do, but I decided we shouldn't have any library fee. Underlying education is the library system, open to everyone free of cost. Anyone can learn there. All people can improve themselves. So I surprised everyone and voted against the library fee, and it died. But the dire need for money didn't go away, so the course was plotted. We had to go to the Legislature and then to the voters of Jefferson County—all against the wishes of the board of commissioners.*

*Poor Bill Knott, right in the middle, with politics swirling all around. There I was. I didn't know any better than to cross people. I grew up on a ranch in Yuma County, and my father and mother taught me well: You do what you think is right. You don't cave. You need to be true to yourself.*

Knott remembers the political effort well and with much appreciation for his board:

*Elena had good connections and was active and well-respected in the Republican Party. As a matter of fact, five of the seven Board members were Republican district captains. So with Elena's good connections around the state and my connections in libraries, we went to the Legislature and got the law changed. It took two sessions, but House Bill 1033 was signed into law June 2, 1985, which authorized a mill levy of up to 4 mills with voter approval.*

Although the state ceiling had been raised, the next step was to convince the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners to put a county library tax increase on the ballot. The Republican commissioners were not eager to do that, but the Library Board pressed hard, saying, according to Knott, “You guys don’t have to do anything. Put it on the ballot and we will do the rest. And we did.”

The library board asked for 3.5 mills, which the commissioners agreed to place on the ballot in 1986.

Next, it was Rickert who stepped forward to champion the county effort as campaign manager. Rickert described the situation as follows:

*In 1985, the Jefferson County Public Library was caught in a funding dilemma. Costs were increasing by 7 percent annually; revenues were growing by only 4 percent. Hours had been cut. The library system...was open only four and one-half days a week; staff had been cut 30 percent; the book budget was the same as in 1974.*

The tax increase was endorsed by the *Denver Post*, *Rocky Mountain News* and every Jefferson County newspaper, as well as numerous community and civic groups.

“With the media coverage of the ‘lights out at the libraries’ and Elena and her friends’ support, the mill levy increase was approved by voters 60/40,” Knott said. With the approved tax increase, “Libraries went to seven-days-a-week service, the book budget tripled and staff was increased by two-thirds,” Knott said.

Additionally, plans for three new libraries went into high gear—for Evergreen Library, a library up north that became the Standley Lake Library and for a new Columbine Library to replace the one located in the Columbine High School.

Trustee Spielman, who was appointed in 1979, the year after the board was increased from five to seven members, judged the fight for more funding as being “courageous.” In a July 2002 interview, he said:



*Timeline continued*

**1976**

- New Lakewood Library opens on West 20th Avenue.

**1979**

- Wheat Ridge Library opens in its current location.

- Jefferson County Public Library was the first public library in the state and one of the first in the nation to offer an online public catalog for patron use.

**1986**

- Jefferson County residents pass a mill-levy increase to build new libraries in high-growth areas and to improve library service in existing facilities.

**1987**

- The Edgewater Library becomes the first "new" facility for JCPL after the referendum. The library doubles its size by moving into totally remodeled space in the Edgewater Town Hall.



Trustee C.R. "Dick" Spielman at the opening of the Columbine Library

*It was because of the politically smart people on the board who said, "We can do this," and because of Elena Grissom's fine leadership that the board succeeded. We had to work very hard, very hard.*

*But it is one of the things I'm proud of. As a result of the increased funding, the building of libraries started, and we were able to really enter the computer age with an automated circulation in 1984. It was a marvelous job. When we were done, boards around the state recognized what could be done, and we became the envy around the state.*

Spielman served on the board until 1992, with multiple terms as chairman.