

The Mabel Zoe Wilson Library

Reading Room

“We lined up in the Main reading room to receive congratulations of a large crowd assembled from the entire countryside. The evening sun streamed across the floor & through the large windows. Splendid clouds could be seen ascending. All profuse in praise and no indication of any disapproval.”

Thus did Carl Gould, architect of the library for the Washington State Normal School at Bellingham, describe in his personal diary the conclusion of ceremonies held on June 5, 1928, dedicating the splendid new building. More praise was soon to follow, especially of the Reading Room. “Following the walls in an unbroken line are 20,000 books,” enthused *The Washingtonian*. “Lifting the eye to the ceiling, one receives a delightful surprise in a color scheme that has taken into account the decorative aspirations of Egyptian and American Indian artists. Brilliant colors have touched the beams and the intervening spaces. In each of the large windows is a single colored panel modeled after the Aztecs. Such is the room that houses twenty-five times as many volumes as the Normal possessed shortly before Miss Wilson began.”

For her part, Mabel Zoe Wilson, librarian since 1902, viewed the books themselves as “the most decorative effect of this room.” The new library, she declared, and particularly the Reading Room, with its 30 ft. high ceiling and space for 300 readers, would serve as “the student’s workshop,” inspiring them to ever greater accomplishments.

In its essentials, the Reading Room today, although worn and mellowed by time, closely resembles the space that so

overwhelmed visitors in 1928. The original built-in oak bookcases still line the walls, and the heavy, quarter-sawn oak tables and chairs continue to serve students and others who quietly read and study here. The painted ceiling is as it was in the earliest days (it has never been cleaned or retouched). The original doors—popularly supposed to be covered with whale skin—still grace the entryways. Carpeting was installed, and the walls painted a rosy hue, in the 1990s.

The most significant changes to the Reading Room since its opening day have all involved lighting. Originally, the sole source of electric light was a double row of elaborate, art-nouveau style hanging fixtures. Although beautiful, the lamps were the object of constant complaint by users of the Room. In 1947, one study table was outfitted with fluorescent fixtures as a trial, but this solution was not adopted in the end.

In 1958, the Board of Trustees engaged architect Paul Thiry, who had designed Haggard Hall, then under construction, to solve the problem of relighting the Reading Room. All the original lamps were removed (and presumably destroyed) and replaced by a functional, modernistic grid of suspended fluorescent tracks. At last, “the illumination the students had been crying for,” applauded the campus newspaper *The Collegian* in January 1959. Although practical, the grid was not a thing of beauty and its

unremitting “buzz” drove readers to distraction. However, it was not until 1995 that the grid came down and fixtures more in keeping with the room’s period atmosphere were installed. At this time too, shelf lighting was added as well as table top study lights.

Although primarily a study area, the Reading Room has seen many uses over the years. The building that seemed so spacious in 1928 was, twenty years later, severely taxed to accommodate both growing collections and ever-larger student enrollments. Freestanding shelving units were added to the Reading Room in time and, until completion of a minor addition to the adjoining book stacks area in 1948, books were also “shelved” on the floor of the Room. Completion in 1962 of the first major addition to the library considerably relieved crowding of both books and library users and in the decade that followed, the Reading Room became home to the newly formed Education-Curriculum Library.

During the 2nd major renovation of the library which took place during 1970-72, project architect Fred Bassetti sought to underscore the Reading Room’s attractions by creating views into it from above—through windows cut into it the upper corners of the south wall. In the years following this renovation, the Room was returned to its earlier purposes when the Education-Curriculum Library relocated. But, it was pressed into service once more as a holding area during the asbestos abatement projects of the mid-1990s, when most of its floor surface was turned into a vast horizontal “stacks” for books and journals transiting in and out of sections of the library under abatement.

Today, except for occasional service as a venue for a special event, such as the President’s annual dinner, the Reading Room is generally quiet, belying its long, active history as the very heart of the library. Generations of students have studied here, proposals of marriage have been made here, gossip exchanged, exam deadlines faced, term papers drafted. The Reading Room has nobly served, as Mabel Zoe Wilson foresaw, as “the student’s workshop.” It remains a pleasing place, an authentic “library” space for reading, learning, quiet contemplation, and even—sshhh—hushed conversation.

We hope you enjoy your visit to the Mabel Zoe Wilson Library Reading Room. If you would like to help us restore the Reading Room to its original luster, please contact Béla Foltin, University Librarian, 360-650-3051, or by email: Bela.Foltin@wwu.edu.

“With these new facilities of beauty and utility it is hoped that students may double and magnify their creative work.”

Mabel Zoe Wilson
August 12, 1927

