

Little library that could



Photo by Kurt Ellison

Volunteers Bertha Johnson, left, and Inez Edwards work several hours a week at La Selva Beach branch library.

Volunteers save La Selva Beach branch

By CANDACE ATKINS

BUREAUCRATS were wise to let the ladies from La Selva Beach Library Guild have their library back. Guild members made it clear that until the library was reopened, they would be a part of Santa Cruz County officials' lives, like it or not.

That was more than six years ago.

In 1978 La Selva Beach Library was a casualty of Prop. 13, but library users refused to see their beloved library die.

"We felt abandoned," said Ann-Marie Martinez, current president of the guild. "They (library system officials) took the books off the shelves and they took the shelves, too. That really hurt."

The library hours had been cut right after passage of Prop. 13. But without warning, guild members said, the shelves were stripped and the doors locked.

A week later, the guild was organized and members began appearing with annoying regularity before the county supervisors.

"Oh, we didn't always talk, but we announced ourselves every meeting as representatives from La Selva Beach Library," said Martinez. "Week after week after week. They met at 7 in the morning and we'd be there. It was a different board then, and those meetings were something."

Before its closure, La Selva branch had a number of volunteers. But the proposal the guild made to the county was to allow the library to be run with no paid staff.

"They expected us to fall on our faces," said Dorothy Allen, the current volunteer branch manager.

"But we've never missed one hour," said Martinez. "We've even added an hour to the original schedule."

In exchange for volunteers operating the library, the Santa Cruz City-County Library System pays the rent and furnishes supplies and books. The La Selva Beach Recreation District owns the building, and provides most of the maintenance.

Library volunteers say the project would have failed without the help of Harriet French, who was librarian for the La Selva Branch

before it closed. She agreed to come out of retirement and do for free the job that only months before she had been paid for.

"We depended heavily on Harriet," said Martinez. "All we (volunteers) had experience in was how to use the library (as patrons) and how to dust shelves."

French worked for three years at the library before

'We never gave up ... we wanted our library.'
— Ann-Marie Martinez

retiring a second time — this time with no pension.

"The volunteers deserve the praise," she said. "Of course I would hire them (if she were working as a librarian). They are so loyal."

One of the volunteers, Dorothy "Dot" Allen, has taken over French's job. Every week, she spends 20 hours doing what she calls "behind-the-scenes" jobs. She is also a part-time paid staff member for the library system.

In addition to Allen, there are 11 other volunteers, including five regular staff members. Between them, they keep the library open 16 hours a week (1 to 5 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays and 1 to 5 p.m. Fridays), offer story hours for children, book discussions, book displays, a summer reading program and special holiday activities. They accept special requests and take books and tapes to elderly shut-ins. None are paid for their work.

Martinez said the library is a smooth operation because of what she calls "tremendous community support." Doubting officials at the county have been convinced, and even the library system is beginning to realize, she said, that the La Selva branch is here to stay.

"We never gave up," said Martinez. "We felt orphaned off, but that didn't stop us. We went door to door for support, we spoke our piece

at the board of supervisors' meetings and one person even went to Sacramento. Nothing short would have worked.

"They wanted to give us Bookmobile service. That wouldn't work. We didn't want the Bookmobile, we wanted our library."

La Selva branch library has a history of struggle. It was started in 1950 by the Women's Club — a temporary affair of rolling bookshelves and about 400 donated volumes.

The library was a volunteer operation located in the La Selva Beach Women's Clubhouse. On library days, shelves were rolled out to the main room, and on other days the library's collection was put in the closet.

The Women's Club petitioned the library system for a paid staff. Three women who served as librarian are now members of the Library Guild, Harlaine Rome, Dorothy Conrad and French.

In 1967, a proposal was accepted by the library board for a larger building at La Selva Beach. The library was moved to its present location, an annex of La Selva Beach Clubhouse, and was opened in October 1968, with French serving as librarian.

For the next 10 years, the library served the community of La Selva Beach. Patronage was steady and circulation was strong, said volunteers, but the Prop. 13 mentality called the library (and other small libraries in the local system) "fat," and its demise seemed inevitable.

That was before the Library Guild came on the scene. French and Allen say people like Martinez, Rosemary Dempsey and Bertha Johnson, who have offered their time for the past five years, are the reason why La Selva Beach residents don't have to drive to Watsonville or Aptos to check out a book.

Volunteers say they will continue to run the branch, but would love a paid staff.

"We no longer feel like orphans of the system," said Allen. "We are successful. They found out we weren't going to go away. When we (recently) received four boxes of new children's books, it told us we are really a part of the library system. But it would be wonderful to have a paid staff out here."