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FEB - - 2009

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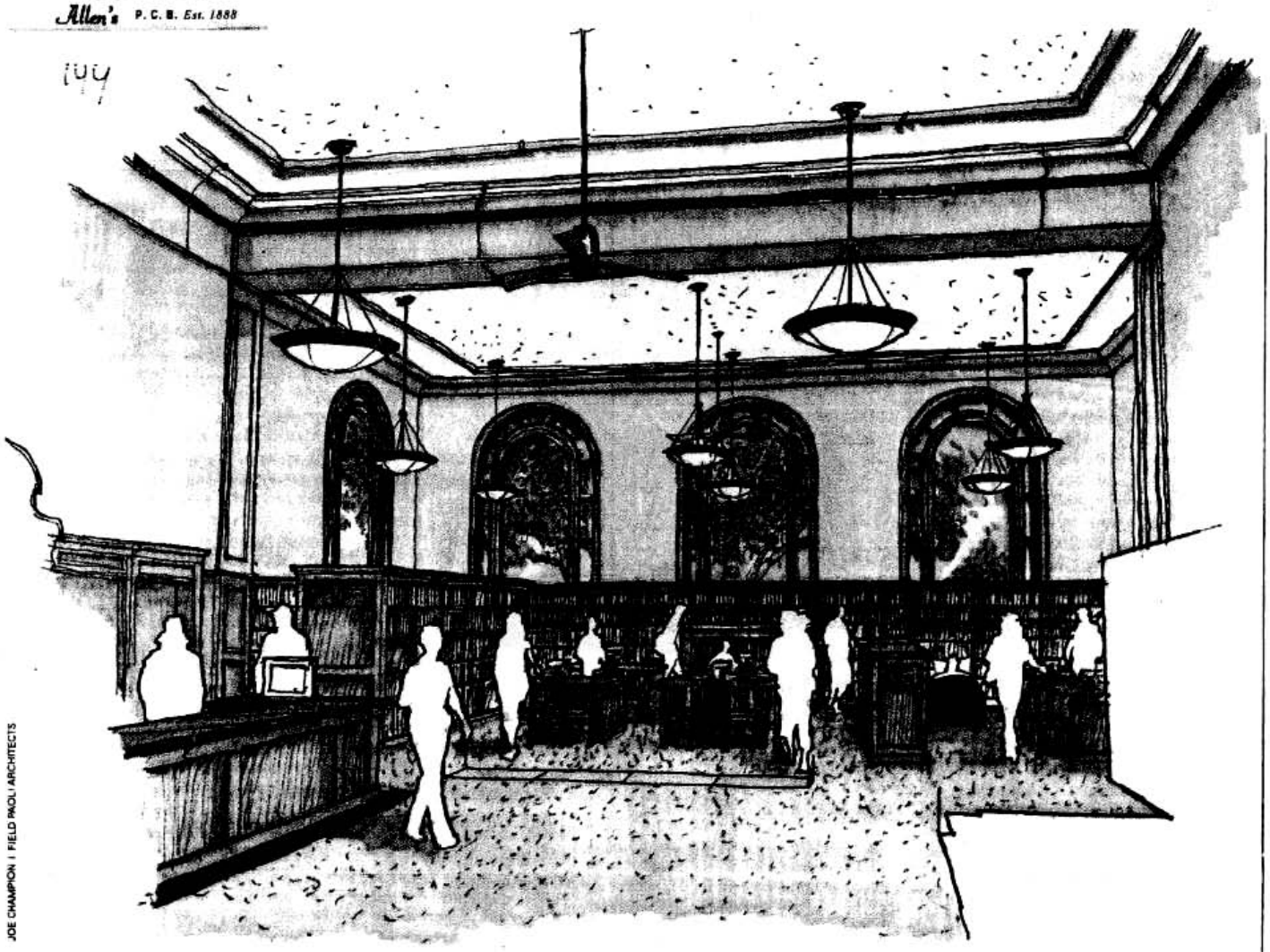

JOE CHAMPION | FIELD PAOLI ARCHITECTS

The library on Sacramento Street is soon to be renovated. Now there may be room to honor novelist Richard Brautigan, a one-time neighbor, who set one of his stories in the

Library of Unpublished Manuscripts

In its literary star turn, the Presidio Branch Library, at 3150 Sacramento Street, was transformed into a fictional repository for unpublished manuscripts placed on the shelves at all hours of the day and night directly by the writers themselves.

In its more ordinary everyday life, it sits back from the street behind classical columns and arched windows, a historic Carnegie library that has been serving local readers since 1921.

And it shows. Although the library was seismically upgraded and made accessible to the disabled in the early 1990s, it otherwise remains in its original condition. There are signs everywhere of wear and tear and maintenance that has for decades been deferred. The surrounding grounds — designed by no less than John McLaren, who also created Golden Gate Park — are more often used by dogs than by people.

And except for one easily overlooked display case near the check-out desk, there is no evidence the library was often used by noted Bay Area writer Richard Brautigan, who incorporated it into his novel, *The Abortion*, and described it in great detail as an imaginary place, with a librarian always on the premises, for writers to place their unpublished manuscripts.

Now all of that is about to change.

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By Richard Brautigan

This is a beautiful library, timed perfectly, lush and American. The hour is midnight and the library is deep and carried like a dreaming child into the darkness of these pages. Though the library is "closed" I don't have to go home because this is my home and has been for years, and besides, I have to be here all the time. That's part of my position.

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I don't want to sound like a petty official, but I am afraid to think what would happen if somebody came and I wasn't here.

I have been sitting at this desk for hours, staring into the darkened shelves of books. I love their presence, the way they honor the wood they rest upon.

I know it's going to rain.

Clouds have been playing with the blue style of the sky all day long, moving their heavy black wardrobes in, but so far nothing rain has happened.

I "closed" the library at nine, but if somebody has a book to bring in, there is a bell they can ring by the door that calls me from whatever I am doing in this place: sleeping, cooking, eating or making love to Vida who will be here shortly.

She gets off work at 11:30.

The bell comes from Fort Worth, Texas. The man who brought us the bell is dead now and no one learned his name. He brought the bell in and put it down on a table. He seemed embarrassed and left, a stranger, many years ago. It is not a large bell, but it travels intimately along a small silver path that knows the map to our hearing.

Often books are brought in during the late evening and the early morning hours. I have to be here to receive them. That's my job.

I "open" the library at nine o'clock in the morning and "close" the library at nine in the evening, but I am here twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to receive the books.

■

An old woman brought in a book a couple of days ago at three o'clock in the morning. I heard the bell ringing inside my sleep like a small highway being poured from a great distance into my ear.

It woke up Vida, too.

"What is it?" she said.

"It's the bell," I said.

"No, it's a book," she said.

I told her to stay there in bed, to go back to sleep, that I would take care of it. I got up and dressed myself in the proper attitude for welcoming a new book into the library.

My clothes are not expensive but they are friendly and neat and my human presence is welcoming. People feel better when they look at me.

Vida had gone back to sleep. She looked nice with her long black hair spread out like a fan of dark lakes upon the pillow. I could not resist lifting up the covers to stare at her long sleeping form.

The cover of Richard Brautigan's novel *The Abortion* — now republished along with two other stories he wrote — includes a photograph of the author taken on the steps of the Presidio Branch Library on Sacramento Street.

A fragrant odor rose like a garden in the air above the incredibly strange thing that was her body, motionless and dramatic lying there.

I went out and turned on the lights in the library. It looked quite cheerful, even though it was three o'clock in the morning.

The old woman waited behind the heavy glass of the front door. Because the library is very old-fashioned, the door has a religious affection to it.

The woman had a look of great excitement. She was very old, eighty I'd say, and wore the type of clothing that associates itself with the poor.

But no matter . . . rich or poor . . . the service is the same and could never be any different.

"I just finished it," she said through the heavy glass before I could open the door. Her voice, though slowed down a great deal by the glass, was bursting with joy, imagination and almost a kind of youth.

"I'm glad," I said back through the door. I hadn't quite gotten it open yet. We were sharing the same excitement through the glass.

"It's done!" she said, coming into the library, accompanied by an eighty-year-old lady.

"Congratulations," I said. "It's so wonderful to write a book."

"I walked all the way here," she said. "I started at midnight. I would have gotten here sooner if I weren't so old."

"Where do you live?" I said.

"The Kit Carson Hotel," she said. "And I've written a book." Then she handed it proudly to me as if it were the most precious thing in the world. And it was.

It was a loose-leaf notebook of the type that you find everywhere in America. There is no place that does not have them.

There was a heavy label pasted on the cover and written in broad green crayon across the label was the title:

GROWING FLOWERS BY CANDLELIGHT
IN HOTEL ROOMS
BY
MRS. CHARLES FINE ADAMS

"What a wonderful title," I said. "I don't think we have a book like this in the entire library. This is a first."

■

The library came into being because of an overwhelming need and desire for such a place. There just simply had to be a library like this. That desire brought into existence this library building which isn't very large and its permanent staffing which happens to be myself at the present time.

The library is old in the San Francisco post-earthquake yellow-brick style and is located at 3150 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, California 94115, though no books are ever accepted by mail. They must be brought in person. That is one of the foundations of this library.

■

This library rests upon a sloping lot that runs all the way through the block down from Clay to Sacramento Street. We use just a small portion of the lot and the rest of it is overgrown with tall grass and bushes and flowers and wine bottles and lovers' trysts.

There are some old cement stairs that pour through the green and busy establishments down from the Clay Street side and there are ancient electric lamps, friends of Thomas Edison, mounted on tall metal asparagus stalks.

They are on what was once the second landing of the stairs. The lights don't work any more and everything is so overgrown that it's hard to tell why anything ever existed in the first place.

The back of the library lies almost disappearing in green at the bottom of the stairs.

The front lawn is neat, though. We don't want this place to look totally like a jungle. It might frighten people away.

Excerpted from The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966 © *1970 by Richard Brautigan*