

## Author/photographer gives fascinating presentation at library

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Community members who gathered at the Merced branch of the public library on the evening of Feb. 25 were treated to a talk by author Robert Dawson, entitled "Library Road Trip, Photographing Knowledge."

It marked the beginning of the Spring 2020 Author Series at the Merced County Public Library, and this presentation was organized by UC Merced and co-sponsored by the Merced County Library and the Friends of the Merced County Library.

Dawson is a photographer who also teaches Photography at Stanford University.

In 2014, he published *The Public Library: A Photographic Essay*, a book he wrote based on his 18-year survey of the essential role of public libraries throughout the United States, which includes the photographs he took and also contains 15 essays by various authors.

During his talk, Dawson displayed slides of the fascinating photographs he has taken of libraries throughout the United States as well as in three foreign countries, Italy, Greece and Israel.

The buildings ranged from those which were grand and showed a rich cultural heritage, like the New York Public Library, to one-room libraries like the Tulare County Free Library, to libraries no longer in use, such as one

in Detroit which was closed and was demolished soon after its photo was taken.

Dawson told the Times, "When a library closes, it closes the opportunity for something else to happen. Libraries are a repository of collected knowledge and human thought. Libraries are places of knowledge, experience, history and opinion — quite remarkable places."

Describing the Tulare County Free Library, he said, "Some people who were no longer slaves and hadn't been slaves for decades wanted to find a better life and built the library. One was Colonel Allen Allensworth, who was born a slave but was the highest ranking Black officer of his time upon his retirement in 1906. They started Allensworth, which was founded as an agricultural community, and the library was an important thing for them. The site where the library stands today is called Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park."

### Interest in national libraries

He told the Times, "This area of interest of mine began 25 years ago."

"Different parts of my journey have been funded in different ways. The 18-year photographic survey project between 1994 and 2012 was self-funded. I received a Guggenheim Fellowship at the end of the national library project for that, but it was also to start the Stockton and

San Joaquin Library Project.

"The Guggenheim grant out of New York and another grant, the Creative Work Fund from the Haas Foundation which is San Francisco-based, allowed my wife [Ellen Manchester] and I to do the work in Stockton, which we're still doing.

"My son was in college in 2011 and 2012, and we took two trips which were self-funded. The first trip was 11,000 miles, and the second was 10,000 miles. We were interested in demographics and what it meant to the libraries. So we wanted to see the most conservative, most liberal, most Black, most Hispanic communities, and we went to see what their libraries were like.

"We discovered from researching demographics that Abilene, Texas was the most conservative place in voting pattern in the year we went there. We thought that they might dislike governments, being that they were Conservatives, but they all loved their libraries. I came to believe libraries are what we have in common and we could use them as a starting point for conversation on what brings us together instead of what divides us.

"My 2016 trip to Europe was self-funded, but the 2018 to 2019 trip to Europe was funded by the Fulbright Global Scholar award I received from the U.S. Department of State."

### Highlights of Dawson's talk

Highlights of Dawson's photographic "library road trip" at the Merced County Public Library included a photo of a library in Cass Lake, Minnesota. The photo showed the library's bookshelves bearing the photos of local beauty queens. The population was 50 percent White and 50 percent Native American, and the photos revealed the demographics.

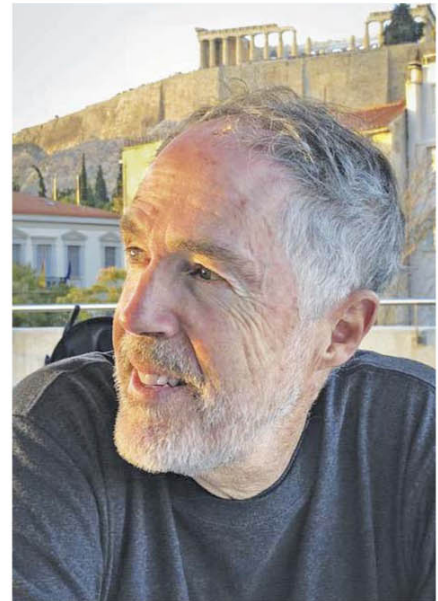
Dawson told the Times, "The library was a form of civic memory, and in many libraries, that is where community memory resides. It's so interesting how people take pride in their communities, and it is reflected when you see that people care about their libraries. It seemed to be pretty universal around the country that people like their libraries and agree the library is a good thing."

Another highlight was the photograph of a library in Pennsylvania which had a pool, track and basketball court. It was built by Andrew Carnegie, a well-known steel maker.

Dawson explained, "There were a lot of labor conflicts in Carnegie's steel mills. He wasn't a bad man, but when the laborers wanted a decent wage, he wasn't going to do it because he wanted to be rich. In his later life, he decided to put libraries in different communities all over the country. The library building campaign in the early twentieth century doubled the libraries. My theory is later in life he must have had a guilty conscience about how he treated the laborers. The first library he built, he put all those other things in it besides books to help the workers. Today, he is considered a controversial figure because of his labor policies."

There were also many highlights from the photographs shown of libraries in foreign countries.

Dawson explained, "After World War II, Americans were isolated, and the Fulbright Global



This portrait of author/photographer Robert Dawson was created in 2018 by his wife, Ellen Manchester, in Athens, Greece.

Scholar award was a good way to get Americans to talk to each other. It's an amazing program. The U. S. Government has done it since the 1940s.

"Through the scholarship, my wife and I visited three countries, Greece, Italy and Israel, and we photographed libraries in each of them, and were sponsored by the national libraries of each of those countries. It's good because libraries are so local and there's so much you could understand about the communities they're in.

"In Europe, the stories are different because histories and time lines are different. What's interesting is the libraries in Italy are 1,000 years old, and in Greece, they are 2,000 years old. In the United States, an old library is 200 years old."

Dawson showed a photograph of the well-funded Greek National Library.

He said, "It is spectacular, open, and has lots of glass.

"The National Library in Naples, Italy used to be the king's palace."

There were many spec-

tacular photos of libraries in Greece, Italy and Israel, too numerous to mention.

Dawson also talked about the libraries he saw during his 2016 self-funded trip to Europe.

He said, "One true story is about a woman, Wiborada, who was a nun around 900 A.D. in Gall in Switzerland, near the border of France. A gang of Magyar marauders took over the convent as well as the library, which was in one of the earliest monasteries in that area.

"Libraries were something people would plunder because books were valuable, and they could sell them.

"Wiborada tried to stop the gang at the door of the library. She got an axe in the middle of her forehead. After her death, she became the first female saint in the Catholic Church, and later became a patron saint of libraries and books.

"The library in Switzerland was one of the first I photographed in 2016 in the global library study to see what libraries were like on a global scale."

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## Shelly Duane Haase, Sr. of Atwater, at 65

Shelly, an entrepreneur and resident of Atwater, passed away on Feb. 25, at the age of 65 surrounded by family.

Shelly is survived by his wife, Connie Haase; his children, Shelly Haase, Jr., Vin-

