Richard Russo, Pulitzer Winner,

Tells Gloversville Library Thanks for the Memories

Steven Greenhouse The New York Times March 24, 2015

GLOVERSVILLE, N.Y. — In 1904, Andrew Carnegie donated $50,000, then a princely sum, to this upstate community so it could build a new library. Now, 111 years later, that stately, domed [Beaux-Arts](http://architecture.about.com/od/periodsstyles/g/Beaux-Arts-Architecture.htm) structure has fallen on hard times, much like the black-and-blue, blue-collar town that surrounds it.

The century-old boiler sometimes breaks. Some of the dark-wood shelving looks as if it barely survived World War I. The library is without wheelchair access and, lacking air-conditioning, it once had to close when the heat index inside soared to 113.

In recent decades, town leaders have started three drives to raise funds to modernize the library, but those efforts foundered, largely because Gloversville, a city of 15,000 that once produced 90 percent of the nation’s dress gloves, back when leather gloves were [de rigueur](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/de%20rigueur), remains mired in its own Depression.

Gloversville’s economy collapsed and many of its factories were closed when American women stopped wearing leather gloves during the 1950s (the industry enjoyed a brief upsurge in 1961, after Jacqueline Kennedy wore gloves to her husband’s inauguration). Nowadays, the town’s finances are so battered that it has had to shut the public pool and the recreation department, both blows to Gloversville’s children.

Still, the city harbors hope for its library. With visions of a cheery new children’s section with atrium windows as well as a gleaming reading room, the town has started a drive to raise $7 million for a renovation. It has raised $2.4 million so far.

“This time we’re not giving up,” said Barbara Madonna, the library’s executive director, whose office features a 1904 photo of a 10-foot-tall replica of the library, built of 20,000 spools of thread. “We need to do this renovation for the kids. A library is so important for them. And we need to do this as a catalyst to lift the whole town.”

To help reach its goal, Gloversville has turned to its most famous son, Richard Russo, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, to serve as honorary chairman of the drive.

Mr. Russo, now 65 and living in Portland, Me., has mined Gloversville’s color, its characters and its woes for novels such as *Empire Falls*, *Nobody’s Fool* and *Mohawk*, even when the books were set in a fictional somewhere else.

Mr. Russo grew up going to the Gloversville library, one of the nearly 1,700 built with Carnegie money. “I have such fond memories of the place, going there Saturday mornings with my grandfather or mother, who would wait forever for me to pick books,” he said in a telephone interview. “I just have this feeling that if it weren’t for the Gloversville Free Library that I probably would not be a writer.”

Before getting involved in the campaign, he had not spent much time in Gloversville in many years.

“I have invented so many fictional Gloversvilles,” he said. “Going back to the real place, there was something really odd about it. I just felt the way that Faulkner must have felt about his fictional county, probably the way Joyce felt about Dublin. It just behaves much better in my mind than in reality.”

The library, with its majestic 35-foot-tall lobby, is one block from the Four Corners, the town’s once-thriving main intersection. One corner is now an empty lot where a fire-damaged hotel was demolished. On Main Street, the Kasson Opera House closed long ago.

Gloversville’s mayor, Dayton J. King, hopes that a library renovation might spur a hoped-for renaissance downtown.

“When people see the library is changing, it looking and feeling totally different, it will increase people’s confidence that this is not a bad place,” Mr. King said.

Attracting about 9,000 visitors a month, the library is already a gathering place. Parents take their toddlers to story time on Thursdays, while older users hold reading and knitting groups there. For teenagers, the library sponsors “Off Line and Unplugged,” an effort to get them to talk and play board games without their cellphones and computers.

If the renovation proceeds, there will be bright, ample spaces where high school students can tutor younger students, chamber music concerts can be held, and the unemployed can use computers for job searches. Children will still be able to discover books the way a young Rick Russo came upon Jules Verne and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

“One reason Mr. Russo is so interested in the renovation is there’s very little place for children these days outside of school,” said Elizabeth Batchelor, a chairwoman of the fund-raising campaign. “For many kids, a library can be a ladder out of poverty.”

Vincent DeSantis, a retired city court judge, said that back in Gloversville’s heyday, “the captains of industry lived in the community and supported the community.” But now, with so many factories abandoned and so many businesses run by distant executives, he said, “we have to do it ourselves.”

He hopes that a renovated library, together with the new Mohawk Harvest food co-op, which offers locally produced meat, cheeses, jams and apple butter, will create the momentum to turn the community around. The co-op, which contains an art gallery and a cafe, draws patrons from miles around.

“This is a move to revitalize the downtown as the front porch of the community,” Mr. DeSantis said, making a pitch that Gloversville, with its rock-bottom rents, handsome stone buildings and proximity to lakes and the Adirondack Mountains, would be an ideal site for young artists and craftspeople.

But revitalizing the town could be a long shot, some residents acknowledge.

Mr. DeSantis, like other residents, voiced dismay at how Mr. Russo depicted Gloversville in [*Elsewhere*](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/books/review/elsewhere-a-memoir-by-richard-russo.html), a memoir about his mother in which he describes the bustling, friendly downtown of his boyhood but also the horrors of the glove-making industry, with its corrosive chemicals that sometimes caused workers’ skin to peel off. His mother often described Gloversville and other places she lived as “awful.”

Mr. Russo said that *Elsewhere* was the first time he had written anything negative about Gloversville, but he said he was channeling his mother’s, not his own, views. “I wondered whether I burned a bridge in writing that book,” he said.

Some residents say his involvement in the library campaign is an effort at redemption. But Mr. Russo — whom many view as a hometown hero — said: “Redemption might be a bit of a strong word. I don’t see it as a redemption, but as a homecoming. If there was anything to forget or forgive, it’s been forgotten and forgiven.”

He said Gloversville has suffered the same fate as many American mill towns, adding that it was “at the epicenter of my imagination.

“I do think I have a debt to pay, and I’m happy to engage now in paying it back,” he said.

In a recent speech, Mr. Russo spoke about his debt to Gloversville’s schools and library, declaring: “I’m a product of public education, government-backed [student loans](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/student_loans/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier), and publicly funded institutions like the Gloversville Free Library. If you’ve lost faith in them, you’ve lost faith in basic democratic principles.”