

# ENGINEER TO QUIT OLD LIBRARY HOME

**Brought Up in Big 5th Avenue Building, Fedeler Recalls His Non-Literary Childhood**

**PLAYED BALL AMID BOOKS**

**But Pigeon-Trapping Business, Set Up on Roof, Failed When ASPCA Man Appeared**

By MEYER BERGER

After 10 o'clock at night when the green-shaded lamps in the Central Public Library reading room are snapped off, a weird quiet settles over that cavernous chamber. Passing cars send ghostly light streaking up the high walls and across the great ceiling. A little boy's footsteps set up echoes, and the thinnest whisper returns as a phantom voice to the ear.

John H. Ephraim Fedeler, whose resignation as the library's chief engineer was announced yesterday, was telling what it was like to live in the vast library, as he did, through most of his boyhood; how he trapped hundreds of pigeons on the library roof, how he and companions played at war in the library's sub-basement, and how they fled from the library's legendary red-bearded ghost.

Life With Father in the Fedelers' spacious seven-room apartment on the Central Library's mezzanine floor, was a curious existence, as young Fedeler remembers it. It set the Fedeler children apart from all other midtown moppets. They were looked upon with awe in midtown public schools and were wooed and fawned upon by kids who lived in more conventional places.

### Father Is 80

Father was John H. Fedeler. He is 80 years old now and lives in Miami, Fla., still intent, as he was all the days of his library existence, in thinking up new inventions. He moved into the Central Public Library in July, 1910, ten months before the building was officially opened on May 23, 1911. He was the first chief engineer.

John H. Fedeler Sr. had lived excitingly. He had sailed before the mast in the South Pacific as a cabin boy. He deserted from a Swedish four-master at a Twenty-third Street pier in 1884, knocked about the city as a bootblack, clean-up boy in a Bowery saloon, and then went into the Navy as a seaman on the U. S. S. Minnesota.

In the Spanish-American War he won a Chief Machinist's Mate rating and turned professional diver. In 1903 he entered Harvard, but after a little less than two years in engineering courses lit out again and worked for Thomas A. Edison as draughtsman and designer. In 1905 he married Cornelia Dingley, a Greenwich Village girl whose father was an engineer in the old Broadway cable car power house downtown. Father was one of the IRT's first subway electricians.

### Lived in Red Tower

In 1905 he was taken on as chief engineer for the Produce Exchange. He lived in a twelfth-floor apartment in that old red brick tower. Young John was born there on Nov. 12, 1906, in total darkness. Something had gone wrong with the lights a few minutes before he came into the world and father was down in the sub-basement tinkering with fuses and wiring. An aunt was there to help his mother.

Edouard, young John's brother, was born in the Produce Exchange, too, on May 13, 1908. Viviani Joffre Fedeler, his sister, was born in one of the four bedrooms in the Central Library apartment on May 8, 1917. She was named for Marshal (Papa) Joffre of France and M. Viviani, members of a foreign war commission who were library guests that day. She was the only child ever born in the library.

The Fedeler apartment faced on the library's central court. At night, when all the library lamps were dark, father would sit in the great armchair in the great living room, telling of his sailing days. He tried to keep the children out of the reading rooms with a story about the red-headed ghost that walked the library attic above the reading room, and sometimes between the reading tables. The red-whiskered ghost became very real.

### Library Cost Ten Lives

Young John said: "There was some basis for the legend. Ten men died in the nine or ten years it took to build the Central Library, and the reading room ghost was one who had fallen from scaffolding when they were putting in the reading room ceiling; at least that's the way father told it."

More real and frightening was the bag man in the library. Actually he was a big porter who went about, after lights out, picking up scrap paper and discarded newspapers and magazines. Father always told the children that the bag man was a cannibal and that he would just as soon pop little John, or Edouard, or Viviani Joffre into the bag if he found them roaming the forbidden halls.

The children were sometimes allowed to bring playmates to the library apartment. On days when the building was closed the boys would pick big books at random from the reference shelves, set them out as bases, and would whoop and holler at soft-ball games just as if the reading room were a sand lot. Father or one of the watchmen would usually break up the game.

There were few skyscrapers around the library in young John's boyhood. Along Fortieth Street and even along Forty-second Street there were rows of brownstones. The Fedeler children went to different public schools in the neighborhood—one on Forty-sixth

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Street between Sixth Avenue and Broadway, then to one on Forty-second Street between Second and Third Avenues. Many of the other boys were sons of chefs in midtown hotels. Carol Case, son of Frank Case of the Algonquin Hotel, was young John's classmate. He often played in the library.

Bobby Hoffman, whose father was engineer in the old Mechanics and Tradesmens Institute next door to the Tennis and Racquet Club, was young John's best boyhood chum. One winter day they rolled a three-foot snowball over the institute cornice, thinking it would make a lovely splash in the areaway between the Tennis and Racquet Building and the institute.

"We didn't know about trajectory," John said, a little dreamily. "That giant snowball went through the club skylight, ten floors down, and smashed up the club's kitchens. We were frightened by the glass crash. Lucky no one was killed by it."

He wondered where Bobby Hoffman might be now. He said: "Last I heard he was engineer for the New York Life Building. Haven't seen Carol Case in many, many years."

One day Bobby Hoffman and young John trapped 300 pigeons on the library roof with a wire cage fitted with a hinged end. They thought they could make a fortune selling the birds around town, but some lady who worked in an office building across Fifth Avenue called the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. An agent came up to the roof and turned the birds loose. Father was very stern and extremely vocal about it at dinner that night.

There were wonderful Thanksgiving and Christmas parties in the library apartment, but there could be no singing or romping for the children until the administrative offices upstairs were empty.

Each of the Fedeler children had to have a library card, just like other kids, but their interest didn't run to books much. Edouard was the only bookish one. The most secret place in the Central Library, though few knew it, was father's private laboratory in the sub-basement. Father dabbled in plas-

tics there long before the word got into the dictionary.

Young John remembered how a stamp thief concealed himself somewhere in the Central Library one night, intent on getting away with a rare library collection worth more than \$10,000. Stumbling around in the dark, though, the thief broke his leg against one of the exhibition cases. The roundsmen found him and he was arrested. Another time, about ten years ago, some crank attacked another library patron with a hatchet. Things were more exciting than most outsiders could have guessed.

Mother died in a taxicab between the Grand Central Station and the library one day in 1934. Seven years later the whole family moved out of the apartment because the building needed the space. The old kitchen is a mimeograph room now. One of the bedrooms houses the library telephone switchboard. In another, the library preparations division is sorting out two collections — French Revolution and World War I. The other walnut-paneled chambers, where the Fedelers lived and romped are rest rooms and smoking rooms.

Young John Fedeler, round-faced and balding now, and genial behind silver-rimmed spectacles, seldom talks now about his library boyhood. He is resigning to get into process engineering. He now lives out in Ridgewood, N. J., not far from his sister's place.