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Prescott Public Library Celebrates Our 50th Anniversary: A wagon of books starts our history

By PAULA FORTIER, Special to the Courier
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Paula Fortier, assistant director at Prescott Public Library. (Courtesy)

						
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The culmination of our 50th Anniversary comes 5 to 8 p.m. May 30, with our Fest in the West celebration! We will feature live music and performances, food vendors, a Touch the Truck area, lots of youth activities on the back lawn from 5 to 7 p.m., a resource fair, and a large book sale hosted by our amazing sponsor, the Friends of the Prescott Public Library. This month, as part of our celebration of our library, I am welcoming guest writer, Kristen Kauffman, to fill you in on some of the library's history. I also invite you to visit the library Viewerie in May to see the great exhibition of our history. Now, over to Kristen:

Prescott had a library since its inception; as the story goes, Territorial Secretary Richard McCormick rode into Prescott in 1864, his wagon loaded with 300 volumes of books ranging from geography to law (several of which from Governor Gurley's personal library).

But these books could only be checked out by governmental officials. As early as 1870, The Prescott Library Association formed for the citizens of Prescott — but they banded and disbanded as they rode economic waves. At one point they rented a place inside the Bashford Building, facing the Courthouse Plaza on Gurley Street, and at another time they were in an old schoolhouse on Cortez Street with the gift of three years' rent paid. The Palace Saloon hosted a reading room for a short time, and in 1891, The Masonic Lodge advertised their intention to open a reading room to the public and would accept donations to support such a space.

Everything would change in 1895 when The Monday Club began. This group of educated women began a literary society in Prescott with the intention of bringing in sophistication and civic betterment. Because there was no library in town, these women started first by meeting in each other's homes. In 1897, The Monday Club became the Prescott Library Association and appointed a board of directors. By 1899 they moved back to the Bashford Building —this time with a library of 556 volumes.

In 1899, Julia Goldwater, president of the library board, wrote to Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie — at one time the richest man in America—had grown up an impoverished Scottish immigrant and devoted his retirement to building as many libraries as he could.

Goldwater said, "In no place could such a room be more needed than in Prescott with its large floating population of young men, many of whom can not afford to keep their own rooms lighted and heated, and therefore have no resource but the saloons and dives, for there are no

innocent amusements in the town." Carnegie said that he would give the latter \$4,000 to a \$8,000 project, and The Monday Club accepted.

But then the fire devastated everything. On July 13, 1900, fire swept downtown Prescott, burning down much including the Bashford Building –and everything The Monday Club had collected. According to The Prescott Weekly Courier: "Now that places of amusement and recreation are in ashes, the Library Committee is determined to put up the building as soon as possible for the cheer and comfort of the public. Since every new building will be a betterment on that which it replaces, the Library must be good — worth of the risen city."

It would be three years before the Carnegie Library would be completed; meanwhile, the Bank of Arizona on Gurley and Cortez allowed them to rent space temporarily with the mining exchange in the basement.

When the Carnegie Library opened its doors November 23, 1903, there were 1,300 books in its collection. The stained-glass window on the second floor was crafted by Edwin Weary of Chicago and dedicated to Mrs. E.B. Gage who died in the previous year. There was no paid librarian on staff until 1914; until then, The Monday Club staffed and ran the library. The Monday Club continued to take in donations of books from the citizens of Prescott, and to host fundraisers such as balls and operas. In 1906, a chain gang from the nearby jail was commissioned to pave the sidewalk out front.

The collection at the library continued to grow to 17,000 items by 1958, and then once the Yavapai County Bookmobile was purchased in 1968, The Carnegie Library was the central hub of book distribution to the Yavapai Library District. It was a good problem that The Carnegie Library was outgrowing its space –but it was a problem that needed a solution.

Next month, we will look at this solution as the Prescott Public Library moved to the corner of Goodwin and Marina Streets.

Contact Paula Fortier, Assistant Director, at paula.fortier@prescott-az.gov with your questions or suggestions for Prescott Public Library.

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