

Prescott Public Library looks back on 50-year history with Goodwin Street

By PARKER JONES, The Daily Courier
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The Prescott Public Library as seen in 1975 after opening its current location at 215 E. Goodwin St. (Prescott Public Library/Courtesy)

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The Prescott Public Library is celebrating its 50th anniversary on Goodwin Street this year. Though the library has been around for more than a century, this celebration will mark the five decades of the building at 215 E. Goodwin St.

The library is hosting “Fest in the West,” an after-hours celebration at 5 p.m. Friday, May 30, with a plethora of activities and events for kids and adults alike.

Adult Services Librarian Kristen Kauffman also put together an exhibit showcasing much of the library’s history on Goodwin Street over the past five decades. She also touched on the history of the library before the current building existed.

Before Goodwin Street

Prescott’s first permanent library was established in 1903 as a Carnegie Library at 125 E. Gurley St., which is now home to financial services businesses. Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie founded thousands of public libraries in the late 1800s and early 1900s, including four in Arizona.

The original Carnegie Library remained as the library’s home until 1975, when the Goodwin Street location opened.

Much of Prescott’s library history is intertwined with The Monday Club, a group of women who wanted to improve literacy in Prescott and worked to host book clubs and a library association as early as 1870.

"They wanted to insist they weren't suffragettes; they were just cultured women who were a little surprised at how 'wild' our wild west town was," Kauffman said. "They wanted to bring in art and music, and they would bring operatic groups in and they would have lectures, and they essentially started the first book club, if you will."

The Monday Club wrote to Carnegie to petition for the original library and independently funded and operated it once it was built. Kauffman noted that they didn't have a paid librarian on staff until 1914. The club ran the library until around 1917, when they deeded the building and the library to the City of Prescott.

The Prescott Public Library hosted its 100th anniversary — for when it became a city-run library — in 2017. Lead Librarian Sarah Willadsen said this was the last time the library had a big celebration, and that "Fest in the West" will likely be the largest event the library hosts for some time.

"It's been a while, and we wanted to celebrate that we're here and what we do for the public, and just get people excited about coming to the library and put us back into the zeitgeist of conversation," Willadsen said. "So in talking about that, we thought, 'Maybe let's do something a little different than we normally do.'"

The library provided books and services to the public until the early 1970's, when the city recognized the need for a larger literary home. After a co-led fundraising campaign between the citizens and the City of Prescott, the Goodwin Street library broke ground in 1974.

The public weighs in

Like any city project, the construction of the library saw some obstacles and public concerns. Kauffman said the city was debating whether to construct the new library at 215 E. Goodwin St., or where the current Yavapai County Sheriff's Office is at 255 E. Gurley St.

The city also considered delegating the Goodwin location for the future construction of a middle school, which was eventually moved to what is now the Prescott Unified School District hub at 300 E. Gurley St.

Kauffman said she found lots of old records and letters from the Sharlot Hall Museum, as well as newspaper articles that described some of the public opinion back then.

"They ultimately chose [Goodwin] because even though the library was a million-dollar project, I found a budget sheet from the junior high that would have been \$1.5 million to renovate. And so ultimately, even though the other place would have had more parking and more visibility, I think this was, in the long run, a more fiscally responsible option," Kauffman said.

The Goodwin Street location — back when Goodwin Street was still a dirt road — was originally occupied by a small home with a yard and a few other small buildings. Presently, much of the neighborhood around the library still exists in the same layout.

"One guy wrote a letter like, 'Well, in all of my experience as a contractor, I think the Goodwin and Marina property is terrible, because of all the rundown houses around it,' which was kind of funny," Kauffman said.

Nevertheless, the project went on, and the Prescott Public Library opened on Goodwin Street on May 18, 1975. However, the library as it exists today is quite different from the building that originally opened, due to multiple renovations and upgrades to its services.

Renovations to present day

The first renovation of the library was in 1985. Since its construction, the library building used to house a parking garage on the ground floor with access to Marina Street. This was changed during the library's 2005 renovation, which Willadsen said is still the biggest update project to date.

"There was what we call the Lucy room, which is the check-in room — she's our automated machine — that was still down there. It was pretty much just an elevator that went down to there, and so there wasn't anything for patrons down on the bottom," Willadsen said.

Now, the first floor exists to house the children's reading and activity center, as well as shelves of DVDs to check out and other resources.

The 2005 renovation also made changes to the upper floors of the library, including removing a few rooms and making the second story more of an open-floor concept. In 2008, the library also renovated and added its Teen Center.

Since then, the building has seen a few standard updates like re-carpeting and repaving the parking lot last year. However, most of the updates since then have been to the programs and services the library offers, Willadsen said.

Every year, the library runs its summer reading program, which is now available for both youth and adults to sign up. This year's summer reading theme is "Color Our World," Willadsen said.

Outside of books, both Willadsen and Kauffman emphasized the non-literary resources that can be checked out, including their "library of things" which offers hiking kits, pickleball kits, color blind glasses and travel telescopes, among other items.

They also noted the importance of technological services the library offers, and the impact this can have on Prescott residents.

"There was an older man who came in here, and his daughter was graduating from college, and he was so excited. All she had told him was the name of her college and that it was available online for him to watch. He didn't have an email, so she couldn't send him a link, and so she told him, it's available online, go to the library. They will help you," Willadsen said. "He had never been to the library before...We got him a laptop, and with the information that he gave me, I was able to find the live-stream of her graduation. He got to watch her walk across the stage, and he cried and said how thankful he was that he got to see that, and how proud of her he was."

Memories and more

Ahead of its 50th anniversary on Goodwin Street, the library invited local residents to get involved in the celebration by sharing their memories and stories online.

As featured on the library's website at prescottlibrary.info/your-library-stories, some residents shared memories back to the 1970s, while others have only recently visited.

"As a poor, struggling nursing student in 1974, I desperately needed a job to support my meager lifestyle. I was fortunate enough to be hired to work at the Prescott Public Library in a work/study program," wrote resident Linda L. "This time was precious, and I fell in love with the staff and ambiance of our beautiful public space where all were welcomed and nurtured in a safe environment. I not only was able to complete my degree but also gathered a wealth of experience that enhanced my education and love of books to this day."

"In the 1990s, I came to the library after school to do homework and wait to get picked up by my parents. My friends and I learned sign language from some books we would borrow after school," wrote resident Cori B. "I still remember my library card number. I bring my 11-year-old to pick up books now from the teen section!"

"I still remember the first time I stepped foot into this library, that was four years ago. The towering shelves felt endless. I spent countless hours bundled up in a booth reading to my heart's content. As I grew it became a sanctuary, a place where I discovered my love for books," wrote resident Dani D. "It's more than just a building- it's a home for imagination, learning and connection. I am forever grateful for its presence in my life."

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