

## A Community's Traditions in Reading

By Evan Strickland

What does the slogan, “Once upon a time, a town loved a Library,” mean to you? Does it remind you of the community support that helps sustain our libraries? Does it get you thinking about the origin of the libraries and beg the question of how the district’s libraries began, and what their stories are? In either case, you might be left with more questions than answers. Here, we will answer those questions, with hopes of offering information, generating curiosity, and maybe even bringing back memories. Libraries are of great value to their communities, though it’s not uncommon for some to overlook, or not be familiar with, exactly how much of a service they provide. Through their various programs and resources, Libraries play pivotal roles in bringing communities together. Libraries hold a purpose that is unique, practical, insightful, and somewhat sentimental as well.

In 1886, when the Town of Grants Pass was only two years old, a group of local women wanted a shared library for social and educational purposes.

This group, known as The Ladies Library Association, was led by Mrs. C. M. Stone, the wife of a local druggist, and Mrs. J. K. Pigney, the wife of the town blacksmith. They established a small lending library in part of the Stone’s drugstore, which was located on Front Street (now G Street). In 1899, they relocated to the City Hall and rented a room for \$2 per year. In the 1904 elections, the people voted whether to accept a



*Old City Hall and fire station, now the Golden Rule building on 6th street.*

\$10,000 Carnegie Foundation grant, that was offered to fund the construction of a public library in Grants Pass. However, though the local citizens agreed to accept a new tax that would be imposed upon them for the library's operation, the city council voted against it, for they were more focused on constructing a hospital, rather than a



*New City Hall and Fire Station. It was reportedly the first fire department in the state to use a fire truck*

community library. Nevertheless, the offer remained open to the city. Ten years later, in 1913, the City Council appointed thirteen individuals to serve as members of a library board, which began collecting books. That same year, the library was moved to occupy two rooms on the second floor of the new City Hall on 4th and H Streets. In 1917, the library extended its services to Provolt, Almeda, Waldo, Hugo, Holland, and Kerby.

In 1920, sixteen years after the Carnegie Foundation offered \$10,000 in funds to build a library, the offer had increased to \$12,500. However, the time limit was about to expire, and the Carnegie foundation had sent a dispatch to Grants Pass Mayor Charles Demaray notifying him of its impending expiration. Unfortunately, there were no qualified officials currently in town who



*Carnegie Library. Notice the new library in the background, built in 1959.*

could authorize the agreement. Not wanting to miss this opportunity, Demaray signed his own formal letter of acceptance and rushed to the station to dispatch it with the evening train. Then, as the train pulled up to the station, County Court Judge C. G. Gillette stepped off the train. Mayor

Demaray approached the judge, briefed him on the situation, and had him sign the letter as the train waited for them so it would be dispatched on the evening's shipment. As a result, in 1920, the library received a \$12,500 grant and relocated to the corner of 5th and B street, opening its doors in the early 1920s as the Carnegie Library, under the joint management of both the city and the county court. It consisted of two stories, the lower of which was used as a children's room. By 1959, the library was, as the Daily Courier put it, "bursting at the seams," and the current library on C Street (that is used today) was constructed across the street from the old building.

About thirty miles southwest of Grants Pass, at the junction of Caves Highway and Redwood Highway lies the "Gateway to the Oregon Caves," known as Cave Junction in the Illinois Valley. This key location helped carve out the foundation for a community whose support was owed largely in part to the hordes of travelers visiting the Redwoods to the south, and the Oregon Caves to the east. This area, however, was without a library until the early 1940s when a local teacher named Irene Cribb started a branch library in the nearby town of Kerby. She chose a small building which had been used as a barbershop. Several years later, in 1948, after library

supporters and personnel had been on the lookout for a larger building, they relocated to the Masonic Temple building (constructed in 1907) in Kerby, which still stands today and is located on the West side of the highway. The library remained in operation for about ten years until 1958, when the 2,500 square foot Illinois Valley Branch Library building was completed and opened its doors on

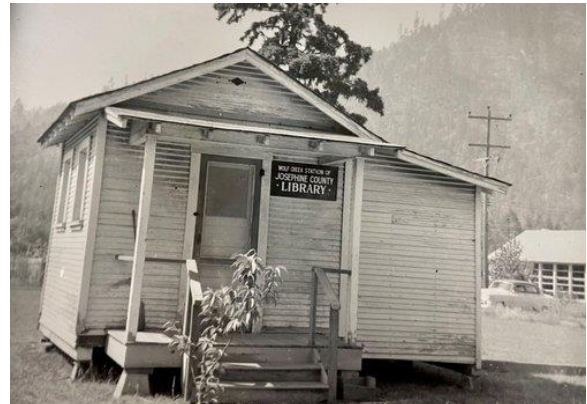


*Masonic Temple; constructed in 1907, fully restored and remodeled.*

the 22nd of April. The library was renovated in 1978, and again just recently in 2024 when 1,700 square feet of meeting space was added.

About twenty miles north of Grants Pass is the small town of Wolf Creek, home of the Wolf Creek Inn (built in 1883). It was also originally home to several settlers and their families, dating back to the 1850s.

The establishment of the first Wolf Creek branch library in 1957, was the undertaking of librarian Florence Moberly. The County School Board provided a small plot of land for the project, and an old 144 square foot weather station building was moved on skid logs to the site. The Josephine County Library provided funds to install wiring,



*Wolf Creek Branch library/former weather station.*

heating units, and carpeting. The library operated for a few decades along Main Street where there now stands a classroom building for the Sunny Wolf Charter School, which served as a library itself after the original was retired in 1977. The current library was constructed across the parking lot in 2002, and the land upon which it stands was donated by a family who previously owned a homestead on the property.

The Williams branch library is the newest of the branches. The area is rich in history predating the American Civil War and was the home of many settlers, including the Davidson family, whose son, Elijah Davidson Jr, discovered the Oregon Caves.

The Williams Library first opened in the fall of 1970, in the basement of the Williams Grange (established in 1909). The first librarians included Mrs. Lucy Fitzpatrick and assistant Mrs. Irene Shampain, who were paid the minimum wage of about \$1.00 an hour. It was open two hours a day for three days out of the week. In



*Williams Grange Established: 1909*

1978, the library moved to its building on 20695 Williams Highway and opened its doors on December 15th. In the early 1980s, it became the only library in the county with a hitching post, on request of customers who frequently arrived on horseback, who before had been tying their horses to the librarians' vehicle.

The library remained there for about fifty-five years. During that time, the 864-square-foot building, (which was a clone of the modular unit that had replaced the original Wolf Creek one year prior in 1877) had no indoor bathroom or running water. These and various other necessities came when the library relocated to its present site in 2023 at 158 Tetherow Road, next door to the Williams Grange. The library building, used to be an automotive garage, was upgraded by the mayor and sold to the library district. It has been nicely remodeled and equipped, and its resources are conveniently available for use by the public.

In more recent history, the library's closure in 2007 marked the end of county support for the county library system. This came about as a result of Oregon State Measure 50, when tax dollars that would have gone to support the library went to the sheriff's department instead. After many unsuccessful attempts to keep the library open as a nonprofit enterprise, a few of them had to temporarily close their doors. When this happened, the libraries began projects to raise their

own money, and community donations came pouring in from people wanting to help get the libraries back on their feet. Many locals voluntarily offered their support and services. The library in Williams regularly held a book swap in the Williams Elementary School parking lot. A former librarian named Kathryn Roether opened a library in the Straw Bale studio that operated until the Williams Library reopened. Meanwhile, largely due to local support and funding, the Wolf Creek library was dubbed the “little library that could,” after having remained open during the closure of the other library branches. In the meantime, the Grants Pass Daily Courier wrote an editorial challenging everyone who voted yes for the measure, to donate what they would have paid in taxes, to the library. After a couple of attempts by the library to put forth a county-wide tax, a noncontiguous tax district was finally approved in 2017. The story of the library continues.

It is important to respect a retain historical tradition by educating the public about our libraries, for they have created relationships within our community in ways that no other organization can do, motivating people to visit the library and learn more for themselves. When checking out a book from your local community library, or utilizing another of its many other recourses, you are profiting from the roughly sixty dollars of yearly taxes that you pay if you live in the district. One can only hope that the resources and inspiration that people can get from visiting a library do not, like many other things, become another piece of missed history.

*Authors note:*

*Thanks to extensive research conducted and documented throughout the decades, much has been recorded on the history of the libraries and of their communities. However, these materials and fragmented records are generally not out for circulation, and thus not easily*



*accessible to the general public. Inaccuracies do arise and can be resolved by cross-reference with other sources when it's possible. However, in my efforts to access this information, visiting each branch, speaking with staff, examining library files, and files in the Historical Society, my experiences have shown that each of the library staff members are happily ready and willing to assist in providing for educational endeavors on an individual, as well as a community level. I would especially like to thank Leonard Pugh (Wolf Creek Library Volunteer), Amber Guient (Williams Branch Manager), Roberta Lee (Illinois Valley Branch Manager), Madeleine Angstadt (Former Grants Pass Library Volunteer), and the Josephine County Historical Society, for assisting me in gathering and compiling this information.*

