

How the city of Palm Springs got its library

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The first written reference to a library in Palm Springs appears 1919 in "Our Araby," where J. Smeaton Chase recorded the presence of "a minute Public Library housed in a quaint little hutch of adobe, which, half a century ago was the Stage Station ..."

Henry Weiss, the city library decades later noted that before the town had a telephone or a single paved road, it had a tiny library.

Almost two decades before incorporating as a city in 1938, Palm Springs invested in having a library. Mr. Weiss points out that having a library was one of the highest priorities of early pioneers, since it preceded nearly every other municipal service by many years. Weiss described the "unabashed reverence" the citizens had for their public library throughout the 20th century and traced its history.

Welwood Murray arrived in the empty desert that would become Palm Springs and opened an hotel in 1886. His personal book collection was available for his guests and he generously offered loan books to any interested local resident, of whom there were precious few.

Murray would read from his collection of Shakespeare to entertain guests for the evening. The need for such amusements added continuously to his offerings. After his death and the demise of the hotel, his collection was moved to the rear of the former stagecoach station at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.

Nellie Coffman continued the practice of maintaining a library for guests and loaning books to locals at the Desert Inn starting with her inaugural season in 1909.

There were several locations for the diminutive lending library in the early days. Donated private book collections and the occasional tome left by a forgetful traveler making up the available titles. There was no funding for a librarian, so the honor system was employed. Borrowers filled out a card, and left it on the desk after choosing a book to take home.

Raymond Cree came to Palm Springs in 1919 to restore his health and found the little lending library in the back of



This is the interior of the Welwood Murray Memorial Library, with its circular reference desk. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Welwood Murray Memorial Library is seen circa 1950.

the stagecoach station. Impressed with the idea, he also began to loan books from his real estate office, developing a reading room in 1920. Cree's collection was comprised of discarded books from the Riverside County Library.

In 1923, a wealthy visitor, Martha Hitchcock arrived in Palm Springs hoping the arid climate would cure her sister Alleine from tuberculosis. Alleine did not survive, but Martha had been charmed by the village and its little lending library and decided to endow it. She donated the handsome sum of \$200 to make a memorial library in honor of her sister. Administered by the Presbyterian Church board, the library was also given 25 shares of Oahu Sugar stock to cover operations.

A Library Board of Trustees was ap-

pointed by the church elders and the Alleine Memorial Library opened in late 1925. The board was composed of Raymond Cree, J.O. Wilke, M.D., J.J. Kocher, M.D., (who would commission Albert Frey to design him a building after Frey was recommended by his brother A. Lawrence Kocher in New York) and Reverend F. H. Hixsell.

1925 was an auspicious year as Thomas O'Donnell moved to town. O'Donnell loaned Nellie Coffman the enormous amount of \$350,000 to improve her Desert Inn in exchange for her building him an house on the mountainside behind the hotel.

The Board of Library Trustees industriously set about raising funds, organizing books, renting space, and hiring a real Columbia-educated librarian all

while moving around to several different locations, including at the plaza.

Francis Crocker was appointed to the library board in 1934. Crocker kept watch on the little library from his office across from the church. He began to dream about a proper public library. He was an engineer who had helped develop the water system, electricity network and 30 years later would be instrumental in creating the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway.

In summertime of 1939, a little more than a year after becoming a city, Palm Springs established the public library as one of its first legislative acts. The independent library board would have to be integrated into the city's operations in order to create a true public library.

Fundraising began in earnest so that an august building, worthy of a city library could be commissioned. John Porter Clark was engaged to design a building that would sit on land donated by Welwood Murray's son, George, with the provision that the library be named for his father.

Immediately, Tom O'Donnell donated \$10,000, nearly half the anticipated building cost. Alvah Hicks, the head of the water company, who had coincidentally also been staked to that business by O'Donnell, donated \$1,000. The Desert Inn and the El Mirador Hotel, and other prominent citizens, including Fred Markham of Smoke Tree Ranch each contributed \$1,000. Julia Carnell, builder of the Plaza and Carl Lykken, owner of the general store donated \$500 each. In all, they collected \$26,500 for the cause. And Cornelia White donated an additional strip of land adding to the site.

John Porter Clark delivered the Welwood Murray Memorial Library at some four thousand square feet in 1941 quite literally at the center of town, on what is now Tahquitz and Palm Canyon.

The elegant design was formal but not off-putting. The building was, (and is) proportioned perfectly, topped with terracotta tiles, and punctuated with large windows affording a gracious light inside by which to read.

The library was embraced by the citizens and was exceedingly well used and even more loved. It expanded its collection and professionalized its offerings, serving the city for the next three decades.