

California Outback Report: A Citizenry That Loves Books Celebrates a Library's Centennial

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Note: I am delighted to introduce you to a new feature on A News Cafe.com, California Outback Report, stories from California's high desert area by journalist H.A. Silliman. Please join me in welcoming him. – Doni

The 16-mm projector clattered to life; with a bit of fussing the light came on, and the film started seemingly midway through—there was no introduction—just a small square in color crooked in the center screen of a forest ranger wearing a big Smoky the Bear hat guiding visitors around the Lava Beds near Tule Lake and title cards identifying the scenes. Showing was the travelogue produced in 1938 by the Modoc Chamber of Commerce on the sights (no sounds, though) of Modoc County.

Yes, it seemed ironic that a film was showing at the [Modoc County Library's](#) centennial celebration—but as a home movie of sorts, it was that iconic activity for an anniversary party.



Library staff member Kris Anderson dug the old movie and projector out of the library's archives for a show-and-tell on how technology changed over the last 100 years: Hand-signed check-out cards, a book of metal plates with 365 return dates, an old microfilm reader that didn't make copies.

The movie came at the end of the celebration, and the crowd of 50-plus who had gathered last Thursday added friendly bits of narration to the title cards while the movie stuttered on—“Logging and the railroad, that’s what brought the population to Modoc County,” offered one guest, while grainy images showed men hand-sawing massive trees in the forest.

The first library in the area opened in 1906 as the Women’s Improvement Club Reading Room. [Modoc County Free Library](#)—established in Alturas by [Modoc County](#) Board of Supervisors decree on July 15, 1915—debuted in a new Carnegie Foundation building, one of 2,509 built with money from Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. That grand building, declared unsafe in 1947 by the board of supervisors, made the library relocate to its current “temporary” headquarters, a brick-façade building on Third Street that once belonged to the county transportation department. Though a humble building from the outside, inside library patrons are literally enveloped by the stacks of books and atmosphere that is and not to be cute—cozy.



Modoc County Library - Alturas, California

It serves a population of about 9,686 (the 2010 census figure, but that number may be dropping according to one source)—the 1910 census, in comparison, found 6,191 residents. With 73 percent of the county’s territory belonging to the federal government, population density sits at about 2.25 persons per square mile. Remote, yes, but the library does have Internet access and the cool Zip Books program of the California State Library, where the library buys a book it doesn’t have, and Amazon.com ships the item directly to a reader’s home.

Admittedly, the centennial recognition held May 18, 2016, is a half year off, but as County Librarian Cheryl Baker introduced the evening’s speakers said with tongue-in-cheek: “We do reading—we don’t do math!”

But really, they do the math pretty well, for in 1988, Baker reminded guests that money in the county budget didn't add up, and the library faced closure until citizens voted to tax themselves \$18 a year per individual property owner for a special assessment to fund the county library—which includes branches in distant towns of Adin, Cedarville and Lookout.

What came next in the anniversary celebration were the usual dignitaries—including the chair of the board of supervisors, chair of the Library Advisory Board and president of the Friends of the Library making their remarks. They were, concisely, short love letters to the library and to the power of books. Alturas Mayor John Dederick related how 60 years ago a second grade teacher (Betty Reed, he still remembered her name) introduced him to the wild adventures that awaited him in books about trappers and explores, a safari with Teddy Roosevelt and other excitement for a young boy.

Former supervisor Patricia Cantrall (wearing a name badge with “Women of Year 2002”) told fond stories of getting her first library card as a child, but needing an adult card—and her father's permission—to check out Perry Mason books; of the time she took 15 books on a trip, but their return became delayed by lost luggage, so she paid off fines after school by coming in to dust books and clean shelves. And then there was this: A remembered short graduation speech where school official Mr. Carver said, “If any of you can read and understand half of what you read, you can become anything you want in the world.”

County Administrative Officer Chester Robinson—still looking a bit of the youngster himself—checked into the celebration, too, and remembered growing up in Cedarville and visits with an aunt to the branch library there. He called the public library yet a “relevant institution” and wondered why some communities had failing libraries while Modoc's endured. The reason: Passionate volunteers and a public who loved the library. What will keep this legacy moving on for the next 100 years, he asked, and set down a challenge, “Who are you bringing to the library?”

Before the movie played, Baker asked the audience to share their memories, too, and with folks seated mostly in folding chairs in a few rows and some standing up among the stacks, the next part became a bit like a church service with “testimony”—but this on how good books improved lives: A newcomer family to Modoc, relocating from Irvine, fell in love at being able to walk among the stacks of books; a young women with dyslexia who escaped hard times at home and school through reading. “I can go anywhere in the world... That's why I love to read and love to come to the library.”

The most poetic, though, came from a man, with longish white hair, who offered just a bit of biography that he had worked in the tech world.

“There is something about the touch,” he began, reaching to a nearby shelf and uphanded a thick tome—on close inspection, the works of William Shakespeare. “It's the smell,” he continued, letting the book fall open. “The promise of what's here...that is part of my life...that is why books will not be allowed to drag me into the 21st Century electronically—but this is where I live,” he concluded, offering up the book to his audience, as if it were a Bible.



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