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Yakima Valley Libraries

Celebrates 110 Years of Carnegie Libraries in the Yakima Valley

On Wednesday, April 26, Yakima Valley Libraries will celebrate the 110th anniversary of the first Carnegie Library built in the Yakima Valley, an event that, eventually, led to the formation of today's Yakima Valley Libraries district.

Kim Hixson, Executive Director of Yakima Valley Libraries, will kick off the celebration at 1:00 p.m. with a welcome address, followed by a short presentation by Archives Librarian Terry Walker, and tours of the Yakima Central Library. Historical photos will be on display for the public, who are also invited to enjoy refreshments.

The legacy of Carnegie libraries in the Yakima Valley is a fascinating, but little-known historical footnote, despite the fact that these libraries helped to shape the cultural and educational landscape of our region. It's a local story that, interestingly enough, begins back East. Between 1886 and 1919, Scottish-born industrialist Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest men in American history, donated more than \$40 million to aid communities throughout the U.S. in building public libraries. In addition to being a shrewd businessman and generous philanthropist, Carnegie's donations for the establishment of public libraries also highlight his role as a pioneer of education and civic engagement.

Prior to Carnegie's donations, libraries operated more like private clubs, instead of as the public forums and community gathering spaces we're used to today. These early libraries often required membership and the payment of monthly dues. In addition, books were shelved in a separate room in the back of the library, requiring a library user to ask the librarian to bring out a

specific book. Carnegie libraries changed all of this by implementing open stacks, where library users could browse the shelves for books. Carnegie libraries also introduced innovative services such as bookmobiles, fiction collections, and books especially for children.

Carnegie strongly believed that libraries should serve everyone, regardless of social class or standing. He made it a requirement that Carnegie libraries be governed by a board of trustees who were appointed to serve the public interest. Under their guidance, public libraries across the United States developed as agents of public education and civic improvement. All told, Carnegie's donations helped to build 1,679 libraries throughout the United States. Forty-three of those libraries were constructed in Washington State, but only two were built in Yakima County—the North Yakima Public Library and the Sunnyside Public Library.

- **The North Yakima Public Library**

In 1903 the North Yakima Library Association applied for and received a \$10,000.00 Carnegie grant for the construction of a free public library in North Yakima.

In 1904 North Yakima passed an ordinance to finance the library with public taxes, and land for the building was purchased on N. 3rd and A Street. The library was designed by the architectural firm of Bebb and Mendel, who employed a restrained, Neo-classical style for the building's exterior, which promoted function and utility. The main floor provided 2,133 sq. ft. of space and, typical of Carnegie libraries built in the early 20th century, the North Yakima Public Library featured a flight of stairs and a prominent light at the front entry, symbolizing elevation and enlightenment through learning.

The North Yakima Public Library opened in 1907 and, by 1919 was so well-used that an additional 1,156 sq. ft. were added to the building.

By 1957, with library use continuing to outstrip the building's size, the original North Yakima Public Library building was demolished and replaced by the current Yakima Central Library building, which was extensively remodeled in 2012.

- **The Sunnyside Public Library**

In 1910, the town of Sunnyside received a \$5,000 Carnegie Library grant, and construction of the library building began in earnest. The Sunnyside Public Library opened in 1911 at 621 Grant

Avenue. The style of the library reflected the evolving design restrictions of Carnegie library grants, which were put in place after 1909. The broad, overhanging roof and high vaulted ceiling with a ventilated cupola, was designed to moderate the temperature inside the building.

In 1956, the Sunnyside Library became affiliated with the Yakima Valley Regional Library and, in response to community needs, a new facility was built on the same site in 1965. In 2004, the Sunnyside Library was annexed to the Yakima Valley Rural Library District, which eventually came to be known as Yakima Valley Libraries.

In 2015, the Sunnyside Library underwent a major remodel, updating the decades-old building to include new windows, an improved workspace for staff, a reading room, an expanded children's area, and study rooms.

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