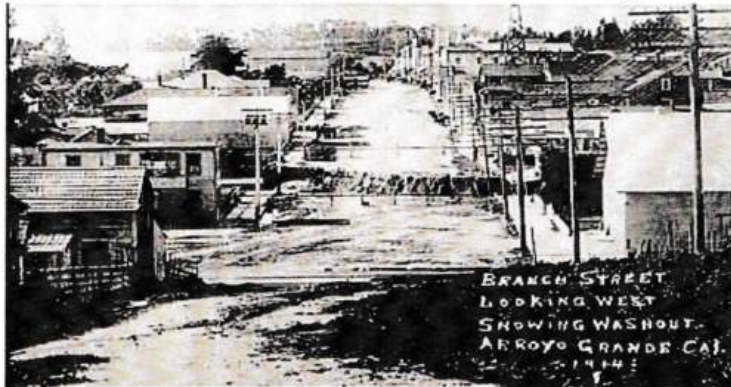


ARROYO GRANDE

When the San Luis Obispo County Library system officially began on July 1, 1919, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the first branch would be established in Arroyo Grande the next month. It was on August 5. It was (and is) the nearest large population center to the main office in the County Seat. However, this reasoning doesn't explain the founding of the remote La Panza Branch on the same day. While the latter was discontinued within a few weeks, the Arroyo Grande Branch continues today with an enthusiasm for literacy seen well before the County inaugurated its own library system.

The citizens of the little town – especially the Improvement Company and the women – had long before decided a local spot for free reading material was an essential community function. In this respect, there is a sharing of community sentiment with the opening of the first community library in San Luis Obispo in May of 1894. "The old adobe, which is so ancient as to be historical," commented the *Arroyo Grande Weekly Herald* in May 1896, "has been renovated to great extent this week..." The adobe was located on the south side of Branch Street near the creek. The structure was indeed historical having been built by George Robbins, an early town merchant, as his home. There were 61 contributing members with most books donated by the residents. The hope was the library would remain a "fixture" of the rural community. A familiar requirement for any library was the need to find funds for on-going operations using minimal county taxes. A flower festival followed the opening on May 18. Indeed, the community had many struggles as it forged ahead to develop a municipal identity. Mother Nature was not always helpful as seen in an old postcard above. Nonetheless, literacy was not to be stopped by any flood or most anything else.



Indeed, before beginning a countywide library system, there were books available in schools for student use. In *Library News Notes (LNN)*, the official publication of the California State Library begun in 1906, Arroyo Grande High School is listed as a branch as early as January 1910. With three teachers serving 62 pupils, Principal Charles H. Woods is listed as the librarian for 720 books. This number undoubtedly was primarily text books. The only other local high school libraries so listed at this time were in San Luis Obispo and Paso Robles with Templeton added in a few years. Rural elementary schools were also part of the County system until 1948. In rural "stations," books could be used by non-students for a small fee. It is not clear if these high school collections were available for use by the public.

In 1924, the first high school branch in the County reported a new library adjoining the study hall. Mildred M. White, the librarian, reported having the collection in one room and an adjoining room for textbook storage. An innovation was offering a "library science class" for ten girls who met twice

weekly with the librarian for instruction. The teacher was pleased as the girls had done “splendid work” and had assumed the duty of cataloguing the collection. The teacher’s innovative thinking reflected a tradition that service in a library was considered a viable alternative for females wanting responsibilities outside – or in conjunction with - more traditional home duties.

For the first County Librarian, Margaret Dold (1919-1921), headquartered in three rooms of the San Luis Obispo Women’s Club building, it was a busy time...and would continue with the establishment of both community and school branches. When she went on a leave of absence (never to return) in late 1920, there were nine community branches and 32 in schools. She had one assistant originally from Arroyo Grande.



Establishing branches was not a haphazard affair and Dold was undoubtedly bombarded with communities wanting their own icon of “progress.” Most all, including residents of Arroyo Grande, had petitioned the Board of Supervisors in 1915 to establish a countywide system and again in 1919 to hire a librarian when the budget was sufficient to supply personnel, books and supplies. Now, they wasted no time informing the new leader of the county system they wanted a branch in their community.

Dold received a letter dated July 19 (she officially began working on the first of the month) from W. H. Smith, owner/editor of the *Herald-Recorder* inquiring as to “what steps” would be needed for a community branch. As encouragement, he added: “We already have a location and the promise of a librarian.” Dold was encouraged even paying \$2.62 to take the stage to visit the community to develop plans for a branch. While she is never listed as such in the *LNN*, the volunteer librarian was Mrs. R. M. (Muriel) Bennett who promised “club members will act as librarians until it proves unsuccessful which I don’t think will happen.” She was right. Typical for the time, local residents assumed responsibility for any collection with little – if any – compensation. Additionally, the county was extremely reluctant to incur any expense for rent or furnishings. Fortunately, Bennett had “odds and ends of lumber” donated for shelving. Even though she made her promises in late August, *LNN* reports August 5 as the official opening date for two libraries...one in Arroyo Grande and one in La Panza. These are the very first branches in the new County system. Today, a local street is named after her and her successor in a thoughtful community gesture of appreciation.

Besides the two branches, three others: Atascadero, Halcyon, and Templeton were the first inaugurated but all in October as was one in the Arroyo Grande Grammar School District on October 7.

For the new branch in a rustic Arroyo Grande (Branch Street shown below @1910), by September, there were 69 cardholders with a circulation reported at 200 books. Within a year, *LNN* lists the new branch as being open four hours weekly and located in the Get Together Club room in the Newman Building. While to date there is no documentation as to her first day on the job, Ethel "Etta" Jatta was the librarian – or then referred to as a "custodian" – beginning a career that lasted over thirty years. However, on whatever day she began in a community of about 750 residents (probably in September 1919), the 28-year-old staffer wrote requesting supplies and wondering if donated books should be processed just as were the purchased ones. In a 1980 branch history, former manager Bernice Kitchel states Jatta's salary was \$7.50 per month increasing by \$5 the following year. By the end of its founding year, the library counted 221 cardholders with a circulation of 254 for December.

Typical of the pioneer guardians of books, Jatta was from a literate family. One sibling, Bertha, began her library career in the San Luis Obispo Public Library with her married name Harpster but transferred as "second assistant" to Dold in 1920 and would continue serving in the County system for decades. She remarried in 1927 and is best remembered as Bertha Franklin.

Usage increased rapidly as within a year of its founding, Jatta reported 381 cardholders and a brisk circulation of adult and juvenile books totaling nearly five thousand volumes. Not a surprise, there were those who did not return books on time resulting in a reported total of \$1.17 in fines. The stock was about 500 books. The usual procedure for exchanging books was for them to be transferred from one site to another requiring the manager to travel to headquarters or vice versa for the selection and exchange of stock.

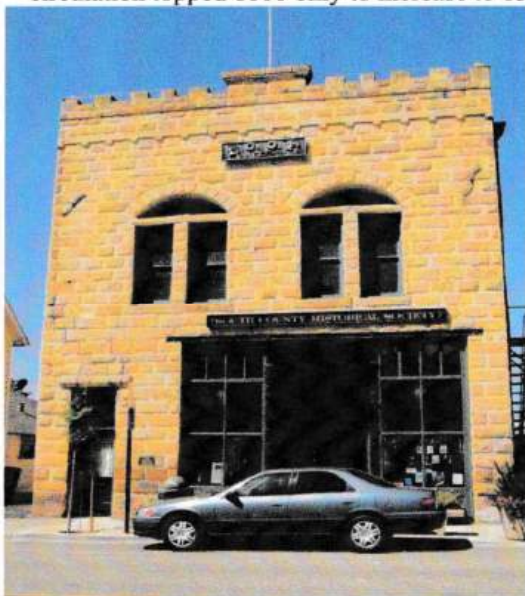


It should be noted here that having a "library" simply meant having a collection of books somewhere... a home, the post office or store...even a roadside fruit stand as in Garden Farms. The idea of a separate structure to house books was not even part of the discussion. Thus, other than a small structure in Nipomo, the first structure dedicated to a library (and not totally at that) was built as the South County Regional Center in 1980. While located in Arroyo Grande, the library by the same name – along with several others - was discontinued. Normally, until more recent times, the demands of space and rent

resulted in libraries moving from place to place in most communities. Arroyo Grande was no exception ...although not the most difficult to track.

There can be doubt that the pioneer years of the County system were one of rapid expansion within communities but schools as well. At the tenth anniversary of the Arroyo Grande Branch, the County system – population about 30,000 – now had an income of over \$16,000, counted nearly 50,000 books with 27 community branches and service to 71 schools. Circulation was reported at nearly 75,000 among 5152 cardholders. The four County staff members paid 62 visits to branches and assisted in book selections during 872 visits of custodians and teachers to the main branch. Reading was (and is) a brisk business.

Moving the collection was always more than a remote possibility and in early June 1920, Jatta reported to headquarters that the Get-Together Club wanted to transfer the library to the back of City Hall with no rent. However, she cautioned, the Club was moving anyway and the entire room could be a library. It was not a unique arrangement for libraries – often simply a few shelves or cabinets of books – to share space with a women's club as in Templeton. Her assessment was correct as by the following year, the library was still located in the Newsom Building on the north side of Branch Street. Some rent was expected by the owner. Within a year, the building was sold to J. L. Strickler who bluntly told the occupants in April of 1921 they either paid an increased rent from \$5 to \$7.50 a month...or move. Records indicate payments started the following September undoubtedly to the consternation of the new County Librarian Florence "Flo" Gantz (1921- 1928). By that time, cardholders neared 650 and circulation topped 8000 only to increase to 836 and nearly 10,000 respectively a year later.



Paying rent was not a popular choice for the new county system – thus the many branches located in homes and post offices with minimal rent, if any. If rent was required, space available was the next consideration. With a budget of under \$17,000, the County system had to be frugal. In a report to the State Library published in January 1923, County Librarian Gantz reported the Arroyo Grande Library had moved into the Odd Fellows Lodge building praising the location as “an attractive room...fronting the main street.” It was a fortunate location as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows was a pioneer in the State in offering free books to its members. Rent was \$8 a month. Many years later, old-timers recall the unpainted building as “quite dark and dreary with the smell of dampness” with an uneven floor that “swayed.” In 1922, however, the goal was to improve the mind; comfort was secondary.

The stay was not long. On the corner of Branch and Mason Streets and originally a skating rink for the town of almost 900 residents, the intrepid Jatta moved her books and services to a growing population into new quarters in mid-1923. The “long narrow building” was constructed of galvanized sheet metal. In the summer, the sun beat down on the corrugated metal roof. Open windows and doors (and, undoubtedly, inviting curious flies) provided the only ventilation. Outside noise interfered with any

quiet environment in the “unbearably warm” room. The reverse weather conditions prevailed in the winter. Having a library – let alone working in one – was a community’s commitment to “progress” and literacy; not luxury. Of course, furnishings depended upon the generosity of donors. It remained so for two decades. As a young patron, future librarian Kitchel recalled years later, the library had:

“...two old fashioned light bulbs in the ceiling. And in the winter, the wind and rain would blow in under the door and condensation would form on the windows and steam down, wetting the curtains and the walls. There was an open-flame gas stove for heat and the odor was terrible.”

Yet, everyone persevered...it was their library and the quest for enlightenment and entertainment was not for the faint of heart! Besides, a \$10 monthly rent was within the meager budget to support a circulation of slightly over 12,000 while open 40 hours a week. Salary had grown substantially to \$37.50 a month. As if the miserable facility and enduring both heat and cold in order to serve were not heroic enough, Jatta suffered from a broken thigh that hadn’t healed “straight” and was hospitalized for three months.

Owned by Pacific Gas and Electric Company, the location served for twenty years. It didn’t take County Librarian Walter A. Sharafanowich (1952 – 1958) long to bluntly assess the library serving an expanding population. When he reflected on his speech to the local Rotary Club, he decided: “I don’t think they liked very much my rather pointed reference to the shabbiness” of the branch. If the police and City Hall buildings had some amenities, he made a point of noting, why not the library? It must have seemed an even stranger comment then than now. While the word “ambiance” was in usage, it came into the library lexicon more recently. By then, health issues, especially arthritis, began to assault the persevering Jatta who asked for a leave of absence by mid-1953...never to return. Truly a pioneer contending with meager resources but with plenty of personal fortitude, Jatta had shepherded the collection for a community that had nearly tripled in size during her years of service. The 1950 Federal Census counted 1723 residents. She passed away in 1965. Sadly, in a lengthy local obituary, there was no mention of her pioneering years working in the library.



Previously, during her absences, Bernice Kitchel substituted for the 62-year-old Jatta and continued to serve for about twenty years after being hired permanently on September 1, 1954. Walter was pleased with the new guardian commenting the library was kept “with a wonderful new crisp

quality to it...so different from the musty fussiness Miss Jatta had kept there.” One wonders how “fussy” Walter would have been after enduring the challenging years of Etta’s – at the very least, courageous - tenure? Kitchel quickly instituted a summer reading program for children plus increasing

availability of new stock. With circulation increasing, the library was open for 18 hours weekly. Statistics from the time report 2305 books in stock serving 1260 patrons with an average of 821 books a month in circulation. Kitchel was positive it would improve if there were no televisions to distract readers.

The local Business and Professional Club had other reasons as in a letter to the Board of Supervisors in November 1954, they complained about the library emphasizing the poor condition of the facility: "heating is obsolete, the lighting is poor, (and) there is no ventilation." Conditions are so shabby, they continued, that students were forced to travel to the Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo Libraries for help with reference materials. The Arroyo Grande Woman's Club reiterated that the library needed to expand as the present facility was "much too small and inadequate" along with an unsafe heating system. There was no mention that circulation was undoubtedly assisted by greater selections by Bernice's extra effort to travel weekly to the main office for new stock. "Up until this time," she recalled in her branch history, "all books, even special requests, were brought to the branch...at five-week intervals."

Inevitably, in response to the community's concern, another building was found...or more accurately, moved for the library. In September 1956, a home in the path of freeway construction was to be repurposed as the library. With all interior partitions removed, it was a decidedly improved facility with better heating, new lighting, tile floor and a fresh coat of paint (Bernice and Walter personally selected the color scheme) at a cost of \$1750. Even the Boy Scouts helped by planting a tree in front. The new location was not exclusively for books as space also was shared with the welfare office.

Wisely, in late February 1957, Kitchel advised patrons to check out "double the usual number of books" and return them to the new library. There would be no late charges. Fewer books made the move easier and the new library with almost double the floor and wall space opened on March 2 at 415 Orchard Avenue. It stayed there for almost ten years.

Located behind the American Legion Hall, Kitchel considered it was "not exactly the ideal spot" and "rather hidden." One annoyance was cars parked in the front driveway by those attending a Legion function. However, it was close to schools and circulation rose substantially. Those dedicated to reading found the library's front door no matter how obscured by buildings. Indeed, in addition to the more casual reader, there was also a great demand for reference material to address increased adult classes as by 1960 over 3200 called Arroyo Grande home. Nonetheless, she enthusiastically shared her pleasure in having "real shelving, tables and chairs." Of course, having a restroom was almost an unheard-of luxury only exceeded by a telephone installed in the fall of 1957. While the former amenity is today simply considered a basic health requirement, branches to more recent times were fortunate if there was nearby running water.

Possibly Bernice's assessment of its location was responsible for a "poorly attended" one-year



anniversary celebration although cardholders were just two shy of 700 and the 600 square foot branch was the busiest in south county. Kitchel's husband volunteered to address small repairs and her daughter who worked in the main branch volunteered to help closer to home during rush times. For the 1960/61 calendar year, circulation topped twenty thousand books. The community of 1950 counted 1723 but grew to 3291 ten years later and rapidly expanded. Understandably, the barely 600 square foot library was rapidly overwhelmed. Statistics from the fall of 1965 counted 1730 borrowers and

circulation at 23,320 for a population now over 6800. Success, however, had a price. In the library world, that meant packing up the stock.

County library life in the mid-twentieth century was rarely static as the patrons visit, hordes of children embrace story hours and thin, vividly illustrated stories, books need shelving, questions answered and the inevitable annoyances of the everyday descend upon the facility. Throughout, there was one constant: growth.

With both a growing community and brisk usage, soon the call became the familiar one of finding a new location. There were even some of the nearly 7000 residents who wanted to form their own library and not as a branch of the county system. It was not a new thought in the County system as patrons contended with the bureaucracy of convincing others to find sufficient funds to address a local need. Library Director, Lois King Crumb (1958-1970), was able to soothe secessionist thoughts and the library continued to serve as a county branch...but in a new location.

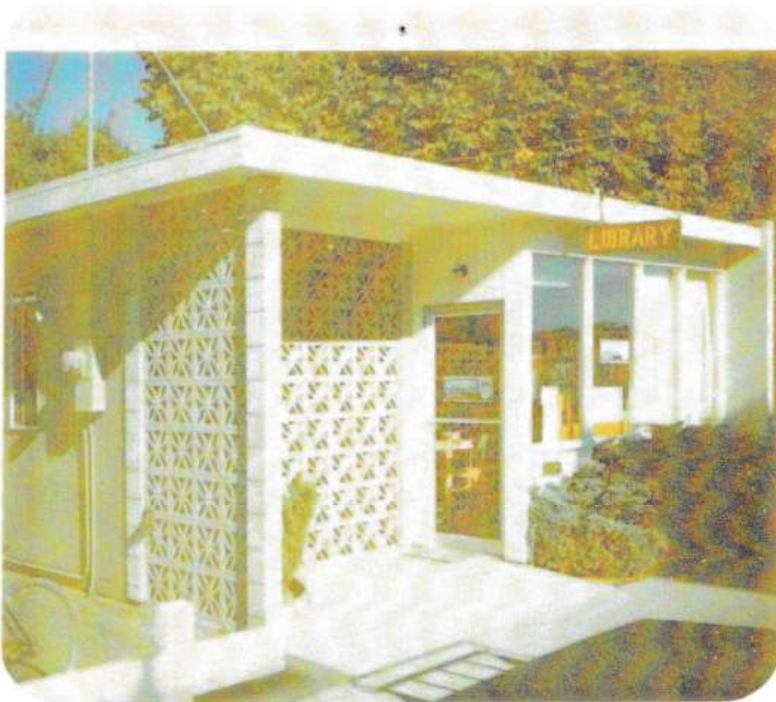
Once again, patrons and circulation required another move for the 3000 plus books. There had been various possibilities considered by Library Director King. In her notes, she mentioned two in March: one a city owned building that would require remodeling but rent was fixed at \$1 a year. Another building owner would charge \$40-\$50 a month but the city would remodel. Residents wanted to start from scratch and build a library. This option would eventually occur...but not for over another decade. Again, the city offered to buy a former barber shop with two rooms in the back for the library. Crumb decided the 800 square feet too small and continued looking. Finally, a "big old place" once used as a hardware store became the choice.

Not located on the main street but with a rent of \$75 monthly, in late November 1966, 127 Bridge Street became the library's home for the next 14 years. Close to 1000 square feet and with a five-year lease, Crumb organized the move of locations using the "sheriff's crew" (jail residents) and library maintenance men in a one day. Move. The local newspaper complimented the shift as occurring "without missing even a minute of service." No mention was made that Crumb had to travel to Santa Maria to buy drapes for the facility. Furthermore, the article explained, the former location was cramped for space, annoyed by noise from the freeway and contended with the noise from the American Legion Hall. The new facility had "better lighting, more space for books and work area" and better parking "half again as large" as former location. Open 28 hours weekly, there was now space for nearly 5000 books, weekly deliveries, more reference material, "a round table," and a special children's section. By the end of the decade, in the community of almost 8000 residents, there were 3500 card holders with a yearly circulation slightly exceeding 37,000.

Kitchel now had a 40-hour weekly assignment and her assistant, Kathleen McNeil had a 30 hour a week contract. Within a year in the new location, it became the busiest branch in the south county. Kitchel was able to enjoy the new home for six years. Even at the opening, the bigger branch produced little confidence it would be sufficient for the anticipated increase in patronage. Five years later, owners, Leo and Minta Brisco, added to the building. Another luxury was added...carpeting... the first use in the county system.

There was no mistaking the advantages of living in the small community that had grown by 126% in ten years counting nearly 7500 residents. For the library's guardian, it had been both a dynamic and an

exhaustive tenure. Undoubtedly physically taxed by the moves and the increased patronage and responsibilities, the 65-year-old Kitchel retired in 1972 and was succeeded by her long-time associate Kathleen McNeil who had recently married James Thompson. For Bernice, she may have left her post, but she did not forget to record her memories in a brief, informative history of the branch written in 1980. Writing was (and is) a required task for any manager, and Bernice was accustomed to submitting monthly reports to headquarters. Begun in 1957 until her retirement, the reports are more than statistical accounts as each provides insights into both the community's and library's life.



First hired in 1966 before the move into the Bridge Street building, Thompson assumed the shepherd's role in the growing enterprise. Problems old and new followed the succession. With cardholders now well over 4000, a circulation of over 55,000 volumes and 9500 reference questions yearly, the new guardian pleaded for assistance as there were only three part-time employees to assist her. The nearly 1700 square foot facility, she reminded all, was indeed "too small and extremely overcrowded." This time, the library was not moved to a larger facility...but closed.

Closing a branch is not like closing a business. For many, it is akin to shuttering the family home. There are too many memories of generations passing through the different doors and locations, pursuing the increasing yards of shelves and thousands of books. On the pleasant treadmill pursuing enlightenment or entertainment, for many, part of a community's heritage is locked away when the doors are closed for the last time.

For Arroyo Grande, May 21, 1980 was just such a day. The librarians present and remembered spent a good deal of their lives and efforts to serve the population – especially the children – catering to a casual visitor or a regular patron. Tens of thousands of readers, hundreds of thousands of books, mega- millions of words captivated too many minds to simply look at the building without more than a twinge of remorse. This time, however, looking back required all to look forward. With an official population that year of 11,290, Arroyo Grande didn't simply close its library forever but traded it for a newer, grander one with a different name.



One week later, on May 30, the Arroyo Grande Branch Library opened under a new name: the South County Branch Library. It really was more a matter of semantics than reality as eventually the official name of the branch would return to its community identification. Regardless its name, it was the first ever built in the County for the exclusive use (*almost*) as a library. Not only was this a grand beginning for patrons in the south county but heralded in a period of unprecedented library construction elsewhere in the county unmatched to this day.

Today, few remember the South County Library except as the one in Arroyo Grande. Since the idea was a regional library would provide more books and services than smaller, parochial facilities, there were casualties in the decision to build. Decision makers had either forgotten or ignored the tradition of

libraries as local facilities...still experienced throughout the county. Of the other casualties for the regional facility, Pismo Beach and Halcyon are today fading memories, Oceano was reestablished after years of near-heroic efforts, and Grover Beach is an all-volunteer effort. Each will have a bit of its history remembered but for the folks of Arroyo Grande, not a new story but a new chapter began in May 1980 and continues to make headlines to this day.

LIBRARIANS

1919-1919: Muriel Bennett
1919-1953: Ethel "Etta" Jatta
1954-1972: Bernice Kitchel
1972-1980: Kathleen (McNeil) Thompson
1980-1983: Linda Elliott (Johnson)
1983-2008: Deborah Schlanser
2008-2022: Rosalyn "Roz" Pierini
2022-Present: Margaret Kensinger-Klopfer

COUNTY LIBRARIANS

1919-1921: Margaret Dold
1922-1928: Florence A. Gantz
1928-1932: Lilian Sabin
1932-1948: Marion Fechet Kilburn (Bertha Franklin, Interim)
1949-1951: Lila G. Adams
1951-1952: Bertha Franklin, Interim
1952-1958: Walter A. Sharafanowich
1958-1970: Lois King Crumb
1970-1993: Dale Warren Perkins
1993-2013: Brian Reynolds
2013-Present: Christopher Barnickel

Joseph A. Carotenuti
August 1, 2015

Amended by Vince Petrie, 9/9/2026