

# Books for All: The Multnomah County Library\*

*Bibliotecas para todos: la Biblioteca del Condado de Multnomah*

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Grace Renata Zivny

Language Hunters, Portland, Oregon  
g.zivny@gmail.com

## Resumen

The Multnomah County Library is an important cultural establishment with a rich and unique history. With its founding in the new western state of Oregon, it is the oldest American library west of the Mississippi River. This paper takes an in-depth look at the history of this award-winning library. Beginning with its inception in multiple private libraries and the roles of prominent businessmen in its founding, the paper will then address the impact of a professional librarian, Mary Frances Isom, in laying the groundwork for the future operations of the library when it became public at the turn of the century. Furthermore, it will detail the contemporary efforts and priorities of the library, its successes, and its context as a valuable institution in not only its community but in the United States. The Multnomah County Library has built on its early glory and become an important cultural resource in an overwhelmingly literary population: the Portland metropolitan area.

**Palabras clave:** History of Library, The Multnomah County Library, Community, Librarian.

## Abstract

La Biblioteca del Condado de Multnomah es un establecimiento cultural importante, con una rica y única historia. Fundada en el nuevo estado occidental de Oregón es la biblioteca estadounidense más antigua al oeste del río Mississippi. Este artículo analiza detalladamente la historia de esta galardonada biblioteca. Partiendo de su creación en varias bibliotecas privadas y de los roles de prominentes hombres de negocios en su fundación, el artículo aborda el impacto de una bibliotecaria profesional, Mary Frances Isom, al sentar las bases para las futuras operaciones de la biblioteca, una vez se hizo pública con el cambio de siglo. Adicionalmente, detalla los esfuerzos y prioridades actuales de la biblioteca, sus éxitos y su contexto como una institución valiosa, no solo en su comunidad, sino en Estados Unidos. La Biblioteca del Condado de Multnomah ha construido sobre su gloria temprana y se ha convertido en un recurso cultural importante en una población abrumadoramente literaria: el área metropolitana de Portland.

**Keywords:** historia de la biblioteca, la biblioteca del Condado de Multnomah, comunidad, bibliotecario.

## Resumo

A Biblioteca do Condado de Multnomah é um importante patrimônio cultural, com uma história rica e única. Fundada no novo estado ocidental de Oregon na década de 1860, é a biblioteca americana mais antiga oeste do rio Mississippi. Este artigo faz uma análise detalhada da história dessa premiada biblioteca, explorando as maneiras nas quais o seu condado natal tem formado a biblioteca, da mesma forma que a biblioteca tem, por sua vez, formado sua comunidade. Desde sua criação em várias bibliotecas privadas e os papéis de homens de negócios proeminentes na sua fundação, o artigo discute o impacto de uma bibliotecária profissional, Mary Frances Isom, que preparou o terreno para as futuras operações da biblioteca após tornar-se pública na virada do século. Além disso, detalham-se os esforços e as prioridades atuais da biblioteca, seus sucessos, e seu contexto como uma instituição valiosa, não só na sua comunidade, mas nos Estados Unidos. A Biblioteca do Condado de Multnomah tem construído sobre a sua glória precoce e tornou-se um importante recurso cultural em uma população predominantemente literária: a área metropolitana de Portland.

**Palavras chave:** história da biblioteca, Biblioteca do Condado de Multnomah, comunidade, bibliotecário.

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The Multnomah County Library is a nationally renowned library system that serves Multnomah County — the most populous county in the state of Oregon, which includes the Portland metropolitan area. It has been recognized in recent years in national library rankings (Hennen, 2002) and received awards for its library services, such as the Godfrey Award for Excellence in Public Library Services for Families and Children in 2004 (American Libraries, 2005). Moreover, the entire state of Oregon ranked 4<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states in the Hennen's American Public Library Ratings, which are not weighted according to population. The Multnomah County Library ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for cities with populations of 500,000 or more (Hennen, 2002).

Yet the present circumstances of the Multnomah County Library are only the most recent additions to a long history of libraries in the Pacific Northwest. It was the first library west of the Mississippi River (Boehmer, 2006, p. 141) — the result of a combination of an early subscription library and a private collection (Gunselman, 2001) — and since these remarkable beginnings, it has continued to be noted throughout the years for various achievements. Portland could hardly be considered a literary city today without the Multnomah County Library, which plays a significant role in the literacy and literariness of the city. The best way to present this library is to start at its beginning.

The earliest signs of a library in Oregon came with the Multnomah Circulating Library, which was adopted in Oregon City in 1845 (Carey, 1971, p. 352). It had begun a few years earlier with a few donations of books from residents of the city (Carey, 1971, p. 324). In Portland, a reading room had been established in 1850 by Hugh D. O'Bryant, who would be the first mayor of Portland. He collected as many texts, both books and periodicals, as he could find to add to the collection, and the reading room continued to be in operation until 1856. It was not until late in 1862 that Portland had another library, when the Athenian Library Association opened in November of that year with 700 volumes (Maddux, 1952, pp. 51-52). However, the Athenian Library Association was not open to the public (MacColl, 1988, p. 194).

A successful library was first founded in Portland in 1864, a library that would prove to last to the present. The Library Association of Portland was established in this year as a subscription library. A small group of Portland

merchants, who enjoyed considerable success in shipping, decided that the city needed a library, and set about organizing one (Gunselman, 2001, p. 433). This began in 1863 with Leland Wakefield and William S. Ladd, when Wakefield began to raise money for a library by going door to door, and Ladd became the first resident to subscribe (MacColl, 1988, p. 194). Gunselman (2001) refers to a 1938 description of the library founders as “not characteristic of the frontier, for they came largely from the north Atlantic seaboard with experience in an established culture.” (p. 435). Yet their first plan was not to establish a cultural center but a mercantile library for the business community (Gunselman, 2001, p. 435) that would be called the Mercantile Library Association (Maddux, 1952, p. 52).

However, the library founders ultimately decided that a mercantile library would only serve a small group of the population and was too limited in scope for a city as small as Portland, so they selected a broader name: The Library Association of Portland (Maddux, 1952, p. 52). Ladd was elected President, and by March of 1864 the library had 153 members who had paid \$2,500 in subscriptions (MacColl, 1988, p. 195). The Association rented rooms at 66 First Street and began to stock books; within the year they ordered over one thousand books from New York (p. 195) that were shipped to Portland through the Isthmus of Panama, at a price of \$2,000. The early collection consisted of an array of books: Maddux mentions classics such as Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo, several poetry collections, and various history books, including a *Rise of the Dutch Republic* and a *History of Greece*. Harvey Whitefield Scott was the first librarian, responsible for cataloguing the new and increasing collection until he left the position in May 1865 (Maddux, 1952, p. 52-3).

Over the next three decades, the Library Association of Portland continued to grow. In 1878, the library moved to new facilities when the collection of more than 8,700 books became too large for the rooms on First Street (MacColl, 1988, p. 194) and, by 1900, the collection consisted of about 38,000 books (Gunselman, 2001, p. 444). Other changes included new membership fees: in addition to the \$5 initiation fees and \$12 annual dues, life memberships became available for \$200. For fifty dollars more, residents could buy a perpetual membership, which could be given away or willed to someone (MacColl, 1988, p. 194).

These memberships may have been introduced in an attempt to deal with financial problems. In 1865, Ladd wrote in his president's report that there was a disappointing lack of support for the library (Gunselman, 2001, p. 436), and Judge Matthew Deady, who became president of the library in 1874, privately noted that rich Portlanders would not give their money to a good cause, except perhaps in a will. Through 1904, over \$300,000 was donated to the library, but most of this was not donated until 1890, and about half of this total was spent on a new building to house the library (MacColl, 1988, p. 195-6).

Despite the budgeting problems, the library decided to make library membership available to students in October 1898. The price of a student membership was \$1 per year and, by the end of the year, 229 students had become library members. This was a significant change in library policy, and it had several results, mainly positive. Not only did membership increase — before the 229 student members, there had been an average of only 414 members per year — but attendance and circulation also rose sharply. According to head librarian David P. Leach's 1898 report, the membership was working, and although he wrote that it was too soon to be sure, he also stated the student memberships had already “proved a decided success” (Gunselman, 2001, pp. 436-437). Furthermore, it was a step towards the creation of a public library for Portland.

Though the student memberships were initially accepted as a success, there were some aspects of the arrangement that were not considered beneficial to the library. For one, the \$1 memberships did little to improve the financial situation, as is to be expected of such a low membership fee. In fact, by 1901, library expenses per member were higher than the dues they paid, and the student memberships were actually causing the library to lose money. Moreover, the presence of students in the library became problematic. In his library report for 1900, Leach wrote that “it has become a serious problem to deal with,” as whenever school was not in session, the limited library seats were filled with students, leaving the full-paying adult members without chairs and reading space (Gunselman, 2001, p. 437).

In order to combat this problem, Leach suggested setting aside one room for student use, so the members who paid the full membership fees could have other reading rooms at their disposal only. However, Gunselman (2001)

writes that “it was in the nature of the [student membership] arrangement to cause just this sort of problem.” Once the library began to offer student memberships, it had set itself up for both the problems and advantages that came with expanding its membership base. The board had proved itself willing to try new policies, and the library began to move away from the subscription model and toward “the democratic ideals that informed the public library movement in America” (p. 437).

One of the most important catalysts in the transformation from a private subscription library to a public one came in 1900. In September of that year, a prominent Portland resident and merchant, John Wilson, died. Wilson had been a business partner with Wakefield around the time that he started collecting subscriptions for a library. Wilson was a bibliophile himself who collected thousands of books and comprised them in what was considered to be the best private library in Oregon. In fact, the title of his obituary, which ran on the front page of *The Oregonian*, referred to him as the “Owner of the Finest Library in the State” (Gunselman, 2001, p. 439).

When Wilson died in 1900, he left his library to the Library Association of Portland. It consisted of 8,891 books, covering a range of topics such as European history, art and religion, literature, and biography. It also included, besides printed books, ancient manuscripts and various plates, maps, and atlases. However, Wilson did not give books to the Library Association so the Association could do what it pleased with them; Wilson had made one very large condition: The collection of books was to be made available for Portland citizens as a free library, not to be added to the private subscription library’s collection. Such a gift could not be refused, but making the contents of the library available to the public would not be easy (Gunselman, 2001, pp. 438-439).

In 1891, a small public library had been established in Portland. The Portland Public Library, as it came to be known, had a collection of less than 3,000 books, and it was paid for only by donations. Attendance at the Portland Public Library was higher than at the Library Association of Portland; the president of the Public Library, George H. Williams, wrote that, on average, 245 people came to the library daily. The Library Association had only about twice the circulation of the small public library, which moved to City Hall early in 1901. According to Gunselman (2001), at least one source states that the

Portland Public Library was considered a candidate to eventually displace the Library Association as the main library in Portland (p. 444).

Wilson's bequest to the Library Association of Portland, however, would change that. Some historians believe that Wilson's condition that the books be available to the public free of charge was a problem for the Library Association. Board members may have been against the idea of opening the library to the public, perhaps feeling that the Portland Public Library relieved them of any public duties. However, in his biography of prominent Portland minister Dr. Thomas Lamb Eliot, Earl Wilbur indicates that Eliot was a strong supporter of a free library. Furthermore, there is no evidence of any debate, as only the final decisions are recorded, and any discussions that might have occurred are not extant. The main implication that there may have been dissent exists mainly in "anecdotal evidence in references by writers whose sources are undocumented" (Gunselman, 2001, p. 440).

Whatever the personal feelings of the private members of the board, the Library Association of Portland decided to open to the public at some point in late 1900 or 1901. The decision was further aided by state legislation passed on February 13, 1901, which authorized the establishment and operation of public libraries at the expense of taxpayers in all state municipalities (Gunselman, 2001, p. 442). The entire collection was made available to the public, including the circulating books as well as non-circulating reference works from both the Wilson collection and the original association collection (Gunselman, 2001, p. 441).

Of course, there were several reasons other than Wilson's gift for the library to become public. Some believe that by creating the \$1 student membership, the library was already moving towards other services that a library can provide, services that would eventually lead to becoming a public library. Nevertheless, Wilson's donation was not the only reason for the Library Association of Portland to become public. Gunselman (2001) refers to the "saloon problem" as a major incentive for the presence of public libraries to create an alternative pastime for people who might otherwise turn to alcohol. In addition, immigrant groups needed to be "Americanized", and this could be done through a public library (pp. 433-434).

Perhaps the strongest reason for opening the Library Association of Portland to the public was simply following in the footsteps of other libraries in the United States. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, private libraries across the country were opening to the public. This was largely due to a growing awareness of the need to improve access to education for Americans of all ages. It was, according to Gunselman (2001), “the turn-of-the-century atmosphere of social reform and rapid change” (pp. 433-434) that caused so many libraries to become public. Public libraries could perform the services that were required of a society with increasing awareness of social and public needs.

Once the library became a public library, it became available to a much higher number of members. The Board of the Library Association of Portland retained control and management of the library, however, which the board achieved with much satisfaction, as they were wary of political influence in the library. The contract not only allowed the board of the Library Association to enter into the contract with the city, but allowed the board to continue to manage the library and write library policies (Gunselman, 2001, p. 443). In this way, the public library was based on various important aspects of the Library Association — particularly its large collection that was housed in its own building, rather than part of City Hall (Gunselman, 2001, p. 445).

This system proved to be relatively unusual — according to Gunselman (2001), a library governance expert named Carleton Joeckel conducted a library study in 1935. He surveyed 315 libraries across the United States, all of which served city populations of 30,000 or more. He referred to 54 libraries as “association” or “corporate” — as long as they were open to “all residents of the community on equal terms” (p. 445) they were considered public — and the majority of these 54 were found in New England, the Central Atlantic, and a few in the South. Portland’s library was the only association library in the region that Joeckel calls “Mountain and Far West” (p. 445).

The arrangement of Portland’s newly public library became somewhat more complicated in 1903, once again due to new state legislation. This law allowed counties to start public libraries in the county seat, and Portland was the seat of Multnomah County. The Library Association entered into a contract with Multnomah County, enabling them to use tax money from a larger area.

The library continued in its contract with both the city of Portland and Multnomah County until 1911, when the contract with the city was rescinded. The county alone supported the library hereafter (Gunselman, 2001, p. 445), as it continues to do today.

One of the biggest changes to the library, however, was the arrival of a new librarian, Mary Frances Isom. Isom was probably brought to the library in an effort to “make the operation of the library more professional” (Gunselman, 2001, p. 449). Leach described several such goals in his 1901 report, including the need for the Wilson library to be catalogued. For this, the library hoped to engage a trained cataloger (Gunselman, 2001, p. 449). Isom was evidently hired specifically for this cataloging job. Born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1865 and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, she started at Wellesley College in 1883, but soon returned to Cleveland for health reasons. When her father died in 1899, he left Isom an inheritance that was enough for her to live on, but she chose to work. Isom attended the Pratt Institute of Library Science in Brooklyn, graduating in 1900 (Hummel, 2009, p. 3).

Her work at the Portland library would prove to be invaluable. According to the Multnomah County Library website, she was responsible for changing the library “into a major community asset with an enviable national reputation” (Multnomah County Library, n.d.). When she arrived in Portland in the spring of 1901, she set to work, training members of the staff, cataloging Wilson’s bequest, and dealing with the absorption of the smaller Portland Public Library into the Library Association of Portland. In the year report for 1901, her work is described as zealous and enthusiastic, and when Leach resigned — perhaps because he could not handle the pressure of the head librarian job for which he had no training — Isom was offered the position. Within months, the library was officially operating as “the first tax-supported free public library in Oregon” (Hummel, 2009, p. 3).

Isom said that opening the library to the public happened ‘quietly’, but this was an understatement. Circulation rose to 146,329 in the first year, nearly three times the circulation it had as a subscription library. Within years, the library had grown from a single building in downtown Portland and spread to dozens of library outlets across Multnomah County (Hummel, 2009, p. 5). Isom was aware of the need for access to the library in rural parts of the region,



and she set up deposit stations throughout the county to provide access for rural inhabitants. A few years more and the outlets had become established branches in permanent buildings. In addition, several outreach programs and services were started for schools, etc. Many of these programs are still important foundations of the library system today (Hummel, 2009, p. 6).

Her position as head librarian also made Isom, by default, the secretary of the library's board of directors, a position that was rarely given to librarians — and even less often to women — at other libraries. Yet Gunselman (2001) notes that it seemed Isom was “extremely skilled” in working with the powerful members of the board (p. 455), and Hummel (2009) adds that she could not have been so successful in her position if she were not “an astute political player [and] a skilled collaborator” (p. 49), as well as a skilled librarian and administrator. The role of the association as the controlling party gave Isom further power in her position, as boards were often more likely to leave issues such as book selection to the librarian (Gunselman, 2001, p. 456).

Isom considered book selection a serious task, and her selections reflected her effort to attract the masses to the library. She recognized the need to provide books for children, an idea that may not have been obvious to librarians at the time, and setting up librarians from the public library in high schools (Hummel, 2009, p. 6). Isom also believed that the library's collection should reflect the community's immigrant residents, and made an effort to acquire books in foreign languages such as German, believing that the best way to Americanize immigrants is to allow them to embrace their heritage simultaneously. Both of these priorities remain a top concern in the managing of Multnomah County Library to this day. Isom was not entirely forward thinking, however; like many other librarians of the era, she believed that the library was responsible for guiding patrons to and promoting more edifying literature, as opposed to light and popular fiction (Hummel, 2009, p. 7).

Yet the impressive reach of Isom's influence did not stop at the Portland library. Besides the 1903 law that allowed the library to become county-supported, which happened largely because Isom herself wrote the amendment, she created the Oregon Library Commission to establish public libraries throughout the state. Dismayed at the circumstances of the county library law, which was tweaked so as to allow county support only in Multnomah County, Isom

created the Commission to reach the rural residents – the same reason she wrote the 1903 amendment. She hired Cornelia Marvin – who impacted the state herself by introducing a mail order library service — as head of the Commission, and in 1909 Isom helped found the Pacific Northwest Library Association (Hummel, 2009, p. 8-9).

Meanwhile, the Portland library was continuing to grow and expand. The outposts that Isom had installed throughout Portland and smaller neighboring towns became permanent in 1907, as the stations were made into reading rooms and staffed with library employees (Hummel, 2009, p. 9-10). Circulation continued to rise — 15,000 people had library cards and circulation reached 217,743 volumes in 1906 (Ritz, 2000, p. 22). Between 1907 and 1908, circulation rose another 44%. New buildings were built, and the library earned the support of the famous American library philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, to pay for libraries. His first installment, amounting to \$105,000, came in 1911; it was to be one of several donations from Carnegie (Hummel, 2009, p. 9-10). According to Boehmer (2006), there are five Carnegie libraries in the Multnomah County Library system (pp. 143-151), while Hummel (2009) mentions seven — two of which are still in use as a library, while a third is now used as a bookstore to sell library books that are removed from circulation (p. 22).

In 1911, Isom began to work seriously on a plan for a new central library in downtown Portland. She traveled East to receive guidance from colleagues at the New York Public Library, where a new library building was just being finished. She returned to the East with the head architect, Albert E. Doyle, and together they traveled to cities with newly built libraries. One of their most important discoveries was that many of these new buildings were not well suited to being libraries. Isom suggested putting the stacks in the center of the library and building the reading rooms around them, “an architectural first” (Hummel, 2009, p. 10).

The new downtown library opened in 1913, taking up a full city block between Yamhill and Taylor and 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> streets, and marking the 50-year anniversary of the Library Association of Portland. It continued to be a cultural center for the city and residents of Portland: in 1916, over 3,000 events and lectures were held in the library, and in the same year, a visitor claimed

that the two most outstanding things about Portland were the mountains and the library. This was only the beginning of an impressive record of national acclaim for the library (Hummel, 2009, p. 11). Isom had succeeded in making the library a thriving community center, rather than a building where books go to die (MacColl, 1988, p. 154). Unfortunately, Isom herself died in 1920 (Gunselman, 2001, p. 456), but the library has continued to thrive.

The country first became aware of the library in Portland, Oregon after an article in the magazine *Outlook* was published in March 1921. The article, titled “A Library that Goes to the People,” listed the six ways that the library brought its service to residents, as opposed to simply serving patrons who visited the library. These six ways, in order, were: Advertising the library, particularly in foreign language newspapers; giving six parties each month, “especially for the foreign born” (MacColl, 1988, p. 153); making lists of suggested reading for certain interests, again aimed at foreign residents in particular; branch librarians leaving the library and talking to employees in other industries about the library; the use of traveling libraries in neighborhoods that had no permanent library; and, finally, the free auditorium that was made available to the public.

These assets and others made the Multnomah County Library not just a library, but also a community center, and the majority of these are still in place today. The library still writes lists of recommended reading for library users under different themes, such as “Northwest Authors” (Multnomah County Library, 2004). A modern equivalent of the free auditorium that was so highly praised in the 1921 *Outlook* article might be The Sterling Room for Writers, located in the Central Library. In order to access the writing room, prospective users must go through an admission process. The room has been used by some of the area’s most famous writers, such as Ursula Le Guin (Multnomah County Library, 2010).

Bigger and more influential resources include a variety of programs aimed at specific cultural groups, such as the Black Resource Collection. The Collection consists of materials by African and Caribbean writers: CDs, videos, and a variety of other items that are related to “the African American experience.” One of the Black Resource Collection’s greatest assets is the Fisk University Collection, which is not available at any other location in the state of

Oregon. Its 385 volumes are reprints of texts from the Fisk University Library Negro Collection. The library received the collection as a gift from Michael Powell, the owner of another important Portland book institution, Powell's Books (Multnomah County Library, n.d).

The Multnomah County Library also continues to make service for immigrants a top priority, as Isom did 100 years ago. The library strives to provide for the growing number of Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese and Chinese speakers in the area; it has been an area of focus especially since the late 1990s. The reception of a grant in 1998 enabled the library to develop a program for the Latino community, called LIBROS. LIBROS involved improving the Spanish-language collection as well as bilingual storytelling sessions, and building a Spanish website. Its success led to similar improvements in the other three most spoken languages, such as hiring more bilingual staff members and offering more story times, films, and classes in these languages. Five percent (5%) of the library's collection budget is now spent on non-English materials (Multnomah County Library, n.d).

Nationally, the Multnomah County Library is recognized as one of the country's finest (Hummel, 2009, p. 20). In 1997, it was second only to the Queens Borough Library in New York in terms of circulation, with 19,589,530 items circulated (Queens Library, n.d.) — impressive, as the Multnomah County Library has 421,199 registered borrowers (Official Oregon State Web Site, n. d.), while any resident of the state of New York can get a free library card in Queens (Queens Library, n.d.). In recent years, the Multnomah County Library has won multiple awards, such as the previously mentioned Godfrey Award (American Libraries, 2005); its largest recognition, however, is the 2009 National Medal for Museum and Library Service, considered the 'nation's highest honor' for libraries, and awarded for the library's accommodation of immigrant groups and languages (Multnomah County Library, n.d).

The library is used by thousands of people. Every day, 57,000 library materials are checked out or renewed by users, and 13,000 people visit the Central Library (Hannah-Jones, 2010) or one of its 17 branches (Multnomah County Library, n.d). Per capita, the library has highest circulation of large library systems (Hummel, 2009, p. 20) — and the city of Portland the most library cardholders — in the United States. In addition to these overwhelming

facts, the Hollywood Branch of the Multnomah County Library is the busiest branch library in the U.S. The library is central to the life of Portland residents: the Hollywood branch recently moved into a new building that also offers the Bookmark Apartments, and the proximity of these apartments to the library make it prime real estate (Metro's Centers Program, 2005).

That is only the beginning of the residents' support of the library. In 1994, the Central Library closed for renovation after the majority of Multnomah County voters supported a \$24.6 million in 1993. It was the same building that opened in 1913, and had been added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 (Central Library, n.d.), but after eight decades it was declared unsafe. The renovation, however, was not limited to structural reinforcement, but to opening the stacks, expanding the children's room, and upgrading the building for technical innovations, particularly the installation of more computers (O'Donnell, 1997, p. 53). Just before the library reopened in 1997, over 700 Portland residents helped carry 20,000 books back to the building (Hardy, 1997).

The Library, in turn, gives back to the citizens. Aside from free books, it provides other materials such as cassettes and DVDs, resources in foreign languages, English classes and conversation groups, and outreach programs (Multnomah County Library, n.d). It also gives back in less expected ways. In 2008, for example, the Central Library built an eco-roof. In a city as environmentally minded as Portland, it may seem like an obvious choice, but it is the first library in Oregon to have one. The eco-roof simulates a meadow as they occur in nature, where soil and more than 17,000 plants absorb rain and slow the runoff of water from the roof. In one year an eco-roof can reduce water runoff by 70 percent, which is important in Portland, where rain excess rainwater can lead to pollution of the Willamette River (Multnomah County Library, n.d).

The Multnomah County Library is one of the most respected Portland institutions. It is not only the oldest library west of the Mississippi River, but it was one of the first major cultural institutions in Portland. Boehmer (2006) calls it "the literal circulatory system of Portland's vibrant reading community" (p. 141), but it also reaches out beyond expected readers and provides valuable services to all of the citizens in various forms, from a reading room for the homeless (DeCandido, 1989) to a free latte as an incentive for people to return

their overdue books (American Libraries, 1998). Its strong history and the extensive use that is made of the library by Portlanders and citizens of Multnomah County make it central to the city of Portland and to its literary character.

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