
Desert Dreams: The Foundation and Growth of the Amargosa Valley Library

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Abstract:

Amargosa Valley is a remote community in Nevada, deep in the desert southwest of the United States. As is true in many similar settlements in the rural US, residents of Amargosa Valley are, in many ways, marginalized. The median income is far below the national average, and unemployment is higher; this is perhaps unsurprising, given the relative lack of industry in the area. Because the population is so small (even today, barely 1,500 people live scattered within the town's 1,400+ square kilometers), there are no bookstores, coffee shops, supermarkets, or Internet cafes. The economic and informational opportunities that are easy to obtain in urban centers are either much more difficult to come by, or entirely unavailable. In the mid-1970s, the only library access for Valley residents came via a biweekly bookmobile from Las Vegas, some 140 kilometers away. However, in 1976, this community, dissatisfied with its access to information, founded its own library. Beginning as a single shelf at the back of a social hall, the library has transformed into a true local hub, one that has brought and continues to bring access to cultural knowledge, academic resources, and employment opportunities into this community. This paper illustrates the enormous difficulties inherent in creating a library in an area far from traditional information resources, and the way that these difficulties have been surmounted by the tenacious residents of this desert settlement. Though there have been challenges, trials, and setbacks, the history of the Amargosa Valley Library demonstrates the power of local, grassroots energy, aided by the knowledge and support of the state library and the state and local government. The lessons of this transformative library have application for libraries in other marginalized areas, where physical distance and isolation become problematic, and where informational access is an ongoing community challenge.

Keywords: library, history, Nevada, Amargosa, growth

Introduction

Amargosa Valley is a remote community in the state of Nevada, deep in the desert southwest of the United States of America. As is true of many of the small settlements in that part of the

country, Amargosa Valley has been and is an economically depressed area, with a median income far below the state and national average (City-Data).

Figure 1: Amargosa Valley, c.2007



Although there is evidence of human activity in the area going back at least 1000 years (McCracken, 1990), settlement in Amargosa Valley has always been sparse at best. Even today, barely 1,500 people live scattered within the town's 1,400+ square kilometers. At the time of the 1970 United States Census, the community – then known as Lathrop Wells – had fewer than 1,000 residents, and as such, did not even meet the population threshold for its own listing in the census results (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1973). The few people who lived in Amargosa Valley at that time were largely employed in clay and borate mining, farming of alfalfa and other crops, or government work at the nearby Nevada Test Site (McCracken, 1990). Farming and clay mining continue today, supplemented by a dairy, and work related to Death Valley National Park (the Devils Hole unit of which is within the town boundaries) and Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (which is entirely contained within the town).

The area is subject to extreme climatic conditions, which make living in Amargosa Valley even more challenging. At the height of the summer, average high temperatures soar over 39°C, sometimes cresting well above 45°C. The heat, however, dissipates quickly after sunset, with nighttime lows 19°C or more below the highs (Intellicast). Rain is scarce, and fierce dust storms are common.

Development and basic services in Amargosa Valley lagged far behind the country as a whole. The area had no electric power until 1963, and no formal community organization until 1964 (McCracken, 1990). Many common facilities simply do not exist; for example, Amargosa Valley still does not have, and has never had, a bookstore, a coffee shop, a supermarket, or an Internet café.

As such, before the mid-1970s, basic informational access was minimal for area residents. A bookmobile from Las Vegas, approximately 140km from Amargosa Valley, was scheduled to visit biweekly, though this service sometimes had reliability issues. Students who attended the secondary school in Beatty, 46km away, had access to the school library, and residents employed by the Nevada Test Site, a nuclear testing facility, were able to use the government library there, but these resources were unavailable to the majority of the population.

To combat this issue, a group of local residents decided to create their own public library. Though the difficulties involved were immense, the community overcame them, creating a transformational library that would become a thriving information hub for the area.

Methodology

I served as Director of the Amargosa Valley Library from February, 2007 to April, 2008. During this time, I was engaged in the project of preserving and compiling the library's history. I had full access to the contents of the library's archives, most of which have never been published. I also conducted interviews with 14 key individuals from the library's history, in an attempt to gather historical knowledge that had not been written down.

I used much of this material to prepare a manuscript for the library board, which was published under their auspices in 2009 as *Diamond in the Desert: A History of the Amargosa Valley Library*. Although that volume had a greatly different emphasis than this paper, I have made extensive use herein of the information I gathered during the process of writing it. During the past nine years, I have conducted further interviews with persons affiliated with the library, so that I can bring the story of the library and its community all the way up to the present moment.

Beginnings

The official foundation of the Amargosa Valley Library (AVL) occurred in 1976, when a group of residents led by Elna Van Patten (who would become the first chair of the library board) and Marilee Howell (who would become the first librarian) started taking concrete steps towards realizing the community's dream of a library. The challenges facing them were myriad: there was no physical space for a library, no collection, no trained librarians, and no source of income. However, the group found ways to solve each of these problems.

Van Patten assembled a full library board, and met with a representative from the State of Nevada to talk about the process of beginning a library, which provided an immediate infusion of expertise. Additionally, the *de facto* local government organization, the Amargosa Valley Improvement Association (AVIA), agreed to provide an initial space for the library in the AVIA building, which at the time was the only community building in the valley. The new library board received donations of books from local residents, and of a bookshelf from the Death Valley Lions Club, and with this small collection, began operations late in 1976, with its first community "open house" held in January, 1977.

At this point, the library was not a particularly impressive institution – one bookshelf in the back of a community building, with a single, unpaid librarian to check the handful of books in and out. However, the very process of taking these first steps generated momentum, as well as public and governmental interest.

Within most of the United States, each state is divided into several counties, which serve as an intermediate level of governance between town and state. Although Nye County, the jurisdiction that contains Amargosa Valley, had not participated in the creation of the AVL, it proved willing to support the library once the library had come into existence. In early 1978, Nye County donated a single-wide trailer to be used as the library's permanent location – a huge step, given that no buildings into which the library could move existed in the town. The county also agreed to provide \$600 (equivalent to approximately \$2,292 in 2017 dollars) in start-up funds, with continuing funding of \$400 per year. Although this level of funding was quite low, it was enough to ensure that the library would be able to purchase more materials, and continue to operate in the coming years.

Growth

The library continued to thrive and expand in the ensuing years. Funds from the county were supplemented by a variety of fundraising activities, spearheaded by the library board. These included theatrical productions, publication of two cookbooks, and spaghetti cook-offs.

Figure 2: Lisa Selbach, Library Board Chair Linda Bray, and Library Board Secretary Linda Gilliland at the 1990 Spaghetti Cook-Off



This was true even though many of the principal figures in the library's inception were no longer present. In particular, Marilee Howell moved away from the area in the spring of 1978, and Elna Van Patten died in April of 1979. Despite these losses, new leadership took charge. Howell was replaced as librarian by Anne Newhouse, who would serve in this position until her retirement in 1995; Van Patten's successor as library board Chair was Betty Jo Boyd, the first in a series of able heirs to Van Patten's legacy.

As the library continued to grow, and community support for the institution remained high, Nye County increased its monetary contributions. Perhaps most importantly, in July of 1983, the county agreed to add AVL Librarian to its list of county-paid positions. For the first time since its inception, the library was no longer an all-volunteer organization.

Additionally, the library won a construction bond issue in a 1983 vote. This enabled the construction of a permanent building, featuring approximately 185 square meters of space, as well as an adobe exterior that would hold up to Amargosa Valley's extreme climate. This building opened to the public in the autumn of 1984, and is still in use today.

Figure 3: Amargosa Valley Library building, 1984



The AVL was able to use its resources to provide increasing levels of information access to residents of this isolated area. For example, the library obtained its first computer in 1983. Although the capabilities of this particular machine were limited to connecting to the Las Vegas-Clark County Library's (LVCC) catalog and browsing the holdings, this was still enough to greatly expand the library's informational services, as patrons could request items found in the LVCC Library catalog via interlibrary loan. The LVCC Library even sent a staff member, Dick Stegman, to Amargosa Valley to provide instruction on how to use the computer. In the years and decades that followed, the AVL was able to obtain more versatile computers, and offer even more electronic resources, such as word processing, Internet access, and online databases.

Other physical resources were added as well. In addition to the English-language books that had formed the heart of the library's collection since its foundation, the library began providing Spanish-language books, VHS tapes, books on cassette, and later, CDs and DVDs. Indeed, in a letter to the library board dated February 20, 1990, Amargosa Valley resident Katie Hansen opined that the AVL was "probably the one service in this community that has kept pace with the needs of the community" (Eddington, 2009, p. 42).

Library District, Financial Stability, and New Services

In January of 1995, following more than a year of preparation and a successful ballot initiative, the AVL officially became a "library district." This was a key moment in the library's history, because in the state of Nevada, library districts are independent taxation entities, with authority to levy property taxes. In a way that had never been true before, the library was now financially self-sufficient.

During the process of becoming a library district, the AVL benefited greatly from the expertise of the Nevada State Library. The AVL board and director consulted with the State Library on multiple occasions for advice on how to navigate the complex requirements and regulations inherent in district formation. The grassroots, local energy necessary to pass the district formation ballot initiative, and the expertise and experience of the State Library, were both necessary for this achievement.

The AVL had long tried to purchase materials that would help library users learn to navigate new computer technologies, of the kind increasingly necessary for personal, academic, and professional success. In 2001, the AVL was able to further this goal through the purchase of its first PCs for general public use. Public computing remains a cornerstone of library service at the AVL to this day. As of 2018, the library's public computing resources include 4 PCs, 1 tablet, 1 laptop, 1 AWE early literacy station, and 1 AWE early literacy tablet.

Figure 4: Library director Michelle DeLee showcases some of the AVL's new computer books, 1999



Figure 5: Young library user Meliora Eddington poses in front of the AVL's public computers, 2007



Another important expansion of service took place in 2004. Two doors down from the AVL is Amargosa Valley Elementary/Middle, a public school serving children from kindergarten through 8th grade. Almost from its inception, the AVL had had a contract with the school district to provide library services to student classes; however, in 1998, the school district ended their contract with the AVL, in order to create its own school library within the school itself. As it happened, many obstacles, including a hiring freeze that prevented the school district from hiring a full-time librarian or media specialist, prevented this project from being implemented in a sustainable way. Thus, following the 2003-04 school year, the school district signed a new contract with the AVL, and disbanded what remained of the school library shortly thereafter. Ever since then, the AVL has served a dual purpose, as a public library, and as the school library as well. Classes visit the library once a week at scheduled times, and a library staff member is on hand to assist the students with inquiries or projects.

The Library Today

Today, the AVL remains a cornerstone of the community. In Fiscal Year 2017, the library circulated an impressive 13,254 items, and recorded 12,713 visits, both remarkable numbers given the town's population. The AVL's financial situation is stable, and its support among the populace is high (Amargosa Valley Library).

The AVL continues to refine and add to its services. Story times, craft programs, snack sales, and video gaming events are just a few of the library's recent offerings. From its humble beginnings – and with the help of state and local governments, the state library, and the community at large – the AVL has evolved and grown into a true “diamond in the desert.”

Figure 6: 1st-grade class using the library, 2017



Implications

Other libraries in rural, underserved communities, as well as groups of people considering starting a library in such places, can draw on the experiences of the AVL as they consider their own challenges and opportunities.

Perhaps the biggest lesson is not to be afraid to start small. At its inception, the AVL had no paid staff, no budget, and no dedicated location – just a few dozen books and a handful of dedicated supporters. Rallying the community behind the idea of a library proved to be much more important than starting with a first-rate collection or a grand building. Government officials at the state and county level also proved willing to help once the library was already operating, even if only at a “proof of concept” level.

The importance of reaching out for expertise also cannot be overstated. The initial board of trustees and library staff had no formal library training at all; indeed, it would be more than two decades after the library’s creation that the AVL would employ anyone with academic credentials in librarianship. However, over the years, staff members and consultants from the Nevada State Library and the Las Vegas-Clark County Library met with AVL staff and board members, provided guidance and support, and answered questions that AVL personnel would have been otherwise unable to answer. Collaboration with these entities greatly increased the quality of service that the AVL could provide.

Through dedication, partnership, and a simple willingness to try, the AVL has been able to provide information access to people living in one of the most remote parts of the United States. Its future looks bright, and it is poised to continue providing access for many years to come.

Figure 7: Books on the Amargosa Valley Library's shelves, 2017



Acknowledgments

The photos in figures 2-4 and 6-7 are reprinted by the kind permission of the Amargosa Valley Library. The photos in figures 1 and 5 are from the author's private collection. Special thanks to the AVL board; Leslie Scott, the current AVL director; Osvaldo Granados, AVL staff member; and to the many other people from the library's history who agreed to participate in interviews. Thanks also to Matt Thompson and Rachael Stein for their assistance in crafting the proposal for this paper.

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