

The Evolution of Libraries

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(East Oregonian) Go! article – June 25, 2026

In the two plus decades Lili Schmidt has worked at the Milton-Freewater library she has seen monumental changes. In the “good old days?” libraries were quiet places, full of books, reference materials, and magazines. Some you could check out; some you had to use in the library. Libraries were places of quiet and filled to the brim with physical items.

During the past 23 years Lili has watched libraries evolve into community centers. Places where people gather to celebrate holidays, discuss books, celebrate life milestones, learn new crafts, play games and connect with others. It is no longer a place of quiet alone, there are now open spaces filled with games and activities to engage kids, there are less book shelves, but more books displayed to catch the eye; as well as computers to help patrons access resources for legal questions, research, apply for jobs, help with taxes and simply access the internet for those who can't in another location.



Libraries are learning centers, not just places to come check out a book and go home to read it. In the library there are weekly story-times for young children, alongside a place for moms to connect and support each other. There are book clubs for adults and children, a space to encourage reading and then to discuss and learn from others who also read the book. A place to learn different ideas and perspectives and evaluate your own ideas. This summer there will be a theatre group (Bridge City Theatre) coming to perform to introduce

kids to theatre and connect them to reading. The museum of Natural and Cultural History will bring a program on bees to showcase the importance of bees in our environment.

As the library has evolved so has spending at libraries. Today, much more of the library budget is spent on these programs and staffing that can bring learning to our local spaces. No longer do libraires spend thousands of dollars on reference





materials that must stay put in the library. Many of these materials can be found on our smartphones, and so libraries have shifted to spending their budget dollars on new ways to learn, and new ways to draw varied groups of people into the library.

In Milton-Freewater, the Halloween and Christmas parties sponsored by the library each draw upwards of 500 participants. The library is truly becoming the place to connect and be part of the community. The library building itself is a place that welcomes a wide variety of groups and offers a public meeting space that serves many community needs. The City Council and Ambulance Board meet in the library building; and the library hosts outside groups to present Leadership Development Programs, among others.

Libraries today look very different than they did when Lili started library work. These changes are positive and have allowed libraries to become safe, public spaces people from all walks of life can use - free of charge. Milton-Freewater is one of 12 libraries in Umatilla County and one of 70+ in Eastern Oregon. Each one is doing its part in its local town to connect people to learning and one another. If you haven't been recently, go today! To find out more about the Milton-Freewater Public library and all the libraries in Umatilla County visit www.ucslid.org or follow them on your favorite social media.

