

Arizona Daily Star

How the Bisbee library is engaging the community outside of books

Bill Finley Special to the Arizona Daily Star
June 13, 2024



The Copper Queen was one of five libraries honored by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services for the impact they are making in their communities.

Bill Finley photos

BISBEE — It would be fun to know how an old-school librarian might manage on her first day at the [Copper Queen Library](#) here in Bisbee.

“Excuse me, ma’am, do you know where I might find your metal detectors?”

The old card catalog is still on the main level, mind you, but Mr. Dewey might need a whole new decimal system to organize the library’s collection. In addition to books and DVDs, library-card holders in Bisbee can check out metal detectors, seeds, gardening tools, backpacks, toys, sewing machines and blood pressure gauges.

Need bocce balls or pickleball paddles for this afternoon’s picnic in the park? Check. Check.

All are part of the Copper Queen’s “Library of Things,” and they help explain why Arizona’s oldest public library may be the model for all libraries struggling to find purpose in a tech-savvy world.

“We want to engage our audience not just outside the box, but outside the book,” Library Manager Jason Macoviak said. “We’re people who want to work with people. We want to help make a difference, whether that’s here in the library or anywhere else in town.”



Library Manager Jason Macoviak sits in a brightly colored “phone booth” where kids can close the door and listen to an audio book on a toddler-sized headset. – Bill Finley

Word is definitely out. Last month, the Copper Queen was one of five libraries honored by the [U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services](#) for the impact they are making in their communities.

In 2019, the Copper Queen was named the best small library in America by Library Journal.

To understand how much the library now means to the people of Bisbee, consider this: The town's population is 5,050. More than 3,000 of them have library cards.

Established in 1882 and moved to its current location in 1907, the library has always held a unique place in the life of everyday Bisbee. The first salaried librarian was Rev. J.G. Prichard, who doubled as pastor of the Presbyterian Church ... and tripled as chaplain for the local mining company.

“Back then, the library subscribed to newspapers in seven different languages because miners came from all over the world,” Macoviak said. “Since everyone in town knew Reverend Prichard, this was a place everyone could come and feel safe with each other.”

The old Copper Queen is still here for all to see at the foot of Main Street. The Rare Book Room displays the library's original collection from 1907. Throughout the library, books are displayed on 100-year-old shelves. Last-century furniture is still everywhere you look.



Part of Copper Queen Library's original 1907 collection seen in the Rare Book Room -- Bill Finley

The “new” Copper Queen began taking shape when Macoviak became the manager and Alison Williams the services coordinator in 2016.

Neither was a library science major — “we’re both accidental librarians,” Williams confessed — but they are redefining what libraries might want to be.

Their first new rule in 2016: “No shhh-ing.”

“We stopped the shhh-ing policy right off the bat,” Macoviak laughed. “We wanted this to be a place where people could meet and talk.”

Then the real work began, with Macoviak refreshing the library’s collection and Williams breathing new life into the library’s monthly schedule of classes and events.



The “new” Copper Queen began taking shape when Jason Macoviak became the manager and Alison Williams the services coordinator in 2016 -- bBill Finley

“I looked at each of our collections and knew that a lot of our books were outdated, overused or poorly shelved,” he recalled. “I knew we couldn’t do everything at once, though, so we looked at our children’s collection first. I wanted every little patron who came into this library to look up at the books and say, ‘Oh, that’s me!’ All kids should be able to see themselves in books, so that’s where we started.”

In addition to offering a wider variety of picture and chapter books, Macoviak wanted the children’s area to be bright and fun, a place where kids wanted to be.

Today, it is every bit of that, as evidenced by a brightly colored “phone booth” where kids can take a seat, close the door, and listen to an audiobook on a toddler-sized headset.

Using grants, donations and suggestions from library patrons, Macoviak has refreshed and restocked the rest of the collection, as well.

The library’s specialty?

“We’d like to think we have pretty solid collections across the board, but we’re probably strongest in nonfiction,” Macoviak said. “Bisbee is a big nonfiction town. History, science, wildlife, plant life, nature ... Alison says we’re like a college town without a college. People know where the library is, that’s for sure.”

There is a neon sign in the Teen Room that suggests we “Dream Big, Think Bigger,” and no one takes that advice more to heart than Williams.

“I love to take the library out of the library,” she confessed, and she has definitely done that. Exhibit A is the Copper Queen’s [Library of Things](#), which began coming together in 2017.

The concept began taking root when the library began checking out wi-fi hotspot units. Then came the seed library and the backyard game sets.

“After a while, people started calling to ask, ‘Do you have this?’ or ‘Do you have that?’” Williams said. “Our collection has been growing ever since.”

The real feather in Williams’ cap is the Copper Queen Annex in a suburban San Jose neighborhood.

In partnership with the Bisbee Unified School District, the library reopened an abandoned school building in 2018. Williams helped paint the walls. Students from Bisbee High School built the shelves. Volunteers added a 4,000-square-foot patio.

Today, the [Copper Queen Annex](#) is home to most of the library’s programs for children and families. It also houses a majority of the library’s “things,” including a seed library and gardening tools.

“The library has always had programs for the community, but we wanted to take programs to the community,” Williams said. “San Jose is a working class neighborhood with lots of young families, so having the Annex has really been great for that.”

With programs now offered in San Jose and Old Bisbee, the library’s monthly calendar has become a Rubik’s Cube of activities, ranging from preschool book clubs and adult poetry workshops to dance classes, exercise classes, concerts and lectures. Having trouble with your laptop? Come to Device Advice. A French language group meets every Monday.

This month alone, the [library calendar](#) lists 41 events.

Williams said all library activities are free and open to all, but first-timers should remember this:

No shh-ing is allowed.

To learn more, visit tucne.ws/cqlibrary.

FOOTNOTES

Macoviak and Williams will accept the library's National Medal from the Institute of Library and Museum Services late next month at the White House. The date has not yet been finalized.

The Phelps Dodge Mining Co. established the first Copper Queen Library in 1882 and managed the library until 1976, when it was gifted to the City of Bisbee.

The original library was located in the mining company's general store, and burned to the ground during the Great Bisbee Fire of 1888.