

**Southwestern In Focus
LAS CRUCES LIBRARIAN
IN 20 YEARS GATHERED
TWO FINE COLLECTIONS**

By Alice Gruver
Written Especially for Sundial
EPT 3/30/69

LAS CRUCES, N.M.—She was born in a grass house in the Philippines, to parents of English and Irish ancestry. Of military persuasion, they lived the life typical to the trade, and before coming to Las Cruces 20 years ago, she had lived in the Orient and other far corners of the world.

Today, Miss Helen Caffey, head librarian at Thomas Branigan Memorial Library in Las Cruces, looks to the future with hopes that she may retire in the not too distant future. In her two decades here, she has gathered a library collection of museum value in both books and artifacts. Treasure above all is the New Mexico Room, a labor of love and devotion. And though she longs to have time to spend with her family, to travel and relax, she has threatened to return and haunt the powers that be if the museum element is allowed to dissipate.

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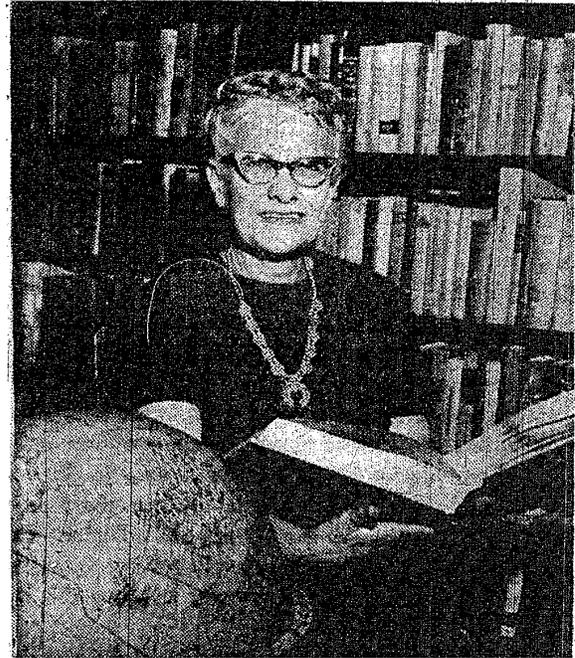
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The colonel had been fond of this country, had promised himself a retirement in the West. But when retirement came, he remained in Georgia, where family ties were

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MUCH TRAVELED

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She had studied at the University of Colorado, earning a BA and BE degrees; her library degree was from Emory University, Atlanta. There she worked as a librarian for some 16 or 17 years, before deciding to branch out and view something different. She studied at Berkeley, in California, where she pursued library science and other related subjects.

She had experience also in operating a branch library in Atlanta. But now she believes that bookmobiles are more efficient and economical, and enjoys better circulation than branch libraries. Large cities are using bookmobiles extensively.

Branigan Memorial Library lends its structure admirably to a museum atmosphere.

The late E.G. Shannon, poet, city attorney, and chairman of the library board of trustees for many years, received the award presented to Thomas Branigan Memorial Library cited by Dona Ana Historical Society for its special award for a public building adhering to traditional regional architecture. It was only fair that Shannon be allowed this privilege, for it was his guiding spirit which resulted in the choice of pueblo design, with its rough trowel stucco exterior, the interior harmonizing with its vigas and beams.

El Paso had its contribution to make when the building was under construction in 1935; Percy McGhee was architect. Tom Lea Jr. did the mural which reposes over the charge desk (a Franciscan friar holding an open book) the contractor was Lembke of El Paso and Mrs. Maud Sullivan, El Paso librarian, was invited to address the dedication ceremony.

It was a great day for Las Cruces, Nov. 7, 1935, with Mayor J. Benson Newell presiding. Efforts had been made as early as 1906 to provide library resources, according to Louis Freudenthal, who recalls that the Don Bernardo Hotel had housed a book club at that time. Members of the Woman's Improvement Association developed plans for a library, and in 1922 began a subscription library with fees of \$1 per year.

DECIDE TO BUILD

History records that on May 14, 1925, the women of the club decided to build "at Court and Barela Streets" with the proposed building to have clubrooms for use by the association, its main room to house the 500 volumes on hand plus whatever new ones could be acquired.

Mrs. Frank Islas was chairman of the library committee; serving with her was Mrs. R.E.

McBride, Mrs. D.F. Biggs, and Mrs. Thomas Branigan.

Mrs. Branigan, whose husband died that same year, was seven years later, at her death, to leave to the town \$36,000 for buildings and equipment and \$30,000 for books; additionally, properties were left to produce income, which also go to purchase reading material.

She had been a teacher, who came west for her health; a native of Illinois, she had attended Cook County Normal School, later taught in Kansas. Little information is available about her life, but it may be presumed she met her husband in Kansas, for it is known he sojourned there for a time. He had fought in the Civil War as a lad of 14, with the Ohio 103rd Volunteer Infantry. He was an Indian fighter, a scout captain and was with the group which captured Geronimo.

In more peaceful pursuits, he served Dona Ana County as assessor, as a member of the school board, and was postmaster during the administrations of Taft and Roosevelt.

Framed portraits of the couple hang on the East wall of the main room of the library.

GIVE SERVICE

Mrs. Sara Swartz, who was with pioneering efforts to obtain the best in library services for the town, was served continuously on the board, as the town grew into a city and continued to grow. She also is being honored with a plaque, having a room named for her. Mrs. Hester Roach has given long service to the board. Mrs. O.H. Brown, a member of the Woman's Improvement Association, wife of a dentist, was a member of the board which greeted Miss Caffey.

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late Sam Klein was for many years its chairman. As the town grew the pressure of business demanding the mayor's attention made it seem impractical to have such an ordinance, and during the tenure of Mayor James E. Neleigh the ruling was withdrawn, although he remained on the board during his terms in office.

The Town Board voted in May, 1935, that wreaths should be placed on the graves of Capt. and Mrs. Thomas Branigan each Memorial Day, a custom still followed.

The building has changed somewhat since then. The children's non-fiction room is in quarters on the east, which was once rented to the chamber of commerce for the magnificent sum of \$10 monthly. The adult reading room on the west was once an auditorium, widely used for civic and cultural affairs. The annex, to the west, was rented as professional offices; the area surrounding the rear patio has been used as Girl Scout headquarters for more than a quarter-century.

The room intended to house the children's Story Hour has long since been outgrown as the population has doubled and doubled again. Story Hour was an intrinsic part of the program from the very beginning, with children moving across the street to Pioneer Park in summer weather.

Reading tastes have changed too, with children today reading more difficult material, with demand growing for science fiction and with southwestern literature dominating demands for all classes of reading material. However there is practically no demand for the shoot-'em-up type of western fiction.

The library acts as a repository for the County Historical Society and has on loan from time to time museum pieces. Among the various collections displayed is a gem show-

ing of the Dona Ana County Rockhound Club.

Pottery and artifacts are among the library's own permanent museum collection.

A picture collection is in process of classification. Included are a 1916 vintage N.M. National Guard photo, taken by J.U. Medley of El Paso; a companion picture shows Company A of the 1st New Mexico Infantry, taken by photographer A.P. Padilla. At dedication of White Sands National Monument in 1934 many prominent figures appear, including Atty. W.A. Sutherland, now in his nineties. The photo was a gift of his daughter, Mrs. Constance McManus.

Among memorial treasures is the Herbert Yeo collection of maps manuscripts, writing and choice volumes from his private library donation.

Unique in volumes is the New Mexico Brand Book, put out in 1915 by the Cattle Sanitary Board of New Mexico. Brands, with history and registration, are listed in alphabetical order.

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Miss Caffey is guided by ethics of the American Library Association in selections for the library; both sides of controversial issues must be represented. A large selection of volumes presents civil rights from diver-

gent viewpoints. There is an extensive collection on Vietnam.

FINE DISPOSITION

The present staff includes only one professional librarian, Miss Caffey. She is assisted by three full-time and three part-time employes, plus the maintenance man.

The librarian is perhaps best described in her personal life by her sister-in-law, Mrs. Eugene Mead Caffey, with whom she shares a home in rural Las Cruces, between Mesilla and Mesilla Park: "Helen has a marvelous disposition."

A companion to the librarian in her home, in best stereotyped tradition, is Muggins, the cat. Ancient, long-haired calico, Muggins is now 20 years of age; she was found on the library steps as a bedraggled kitten when Miss Caffey first arrived in Las Cruces. Now retired to spend long hours sunning in a west window, she is pampered with her choice of diet. One week may find her eating baby food, another time she selects to eat only turkey from a glass jar.

Her owner, never acquisitive in a material sense, has given away many treasures of the Orient—cloisonne and brass—to nephews and nieces who may enjoy them while she spends her hours with dusty files and catalogs and book salesmen and library patrons. Free time is devoid of that mixed blessing of modern civilization—the television. She reads, plays cards with her nephew, Gordon, who shares the home.

She has supported the cultural activities of her home community, has held office in Altrusa, national service club for women; Story League; the American Association of University Women; Dona Ana Historical Society; she has been a patron of the Theatre Guild and the Symphony Guild, and was

recently honored with membership in Delta Kappa Gamma, teachers' national society.

Never married, she nevertheless has a gift for handling young children, says Mrs. Caffey, herself the mother of nine. Children are allowed to take a library card in Branigan Memorial when they can sign their own name—some as early as four years—and it is with quiet delight that the librarian watches the librarian watches the enthusiasm with which they speed to the book shelves, where the wonderful world of words awaits them.

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Among her treasures is an inscribed volume of "Gone With the Wind," Miss Caffey assisted the author with research for the all-time best seller, little dreaming as the book grew how famous it would become.

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