

Check Your Shelf: the Oakland Public Library Podcast

Episode 1: Public Detectives

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- Paul: [00:14](#) Hello and welcome to the inaugural episode of Check Your Shelf, the show that introduces you to the people and services of the Oakland Public Library. I'm Paul Preston.
- Amy: [00:22](#) And I'm Amy Martin. I'm the Community Relations Librarian here at OPL and I work on user experience and content strategy.
- Paul: [00:29](#) And I work in the Teen Zone and circulation departments of the Main Library, helping young people connect to library resources and also checking out your books. Well Amy, this is exciting. I'm so happy to be able to spend this time with you and our listeners.
- Amy: [00:42](#) Me too. And I thought a good place to start might be by introducing ourselves because the show is all about introducing the library and its staff to our listeners.
- Paul: A capital idea. Why don't you go first?
- Amy: Thanks Paul. So I moved to Oakland when I was 26 and at the time I was sort of unsure about my future as a librarian. I had come into librarianship from anti-war activism. I pictured these like glory filled days of crusading for intellectual freedom and that didn't quite square with the day to day reality of work as a librarian. But even so, I took a part time job at the César Chávez branch of the Oakland Public Library. Well, what I come to find out is when you work at OPL, you don't just work in one building. You're part of a whole system of libraries and people that spreads from 56th and San Pablo to Edes Avenue and Jones. It's been 13 years since then, and the Oakland Public Library, we call it OPL for short, is not only the place that I've worked, it's the place where I've met some of the people I admire the most. It's also the way that I got to know Oakland visiting every branch in every neighborhood. What's your story, Paul?
- Paul: [01:44](#) Well, I'm Paul Preston and I grew up right here in East Oakland, right over on 68th Avenue by our Eastmont Branch. But I've lived in many places and I've done a lot of different things in my

work life before coming to the library, one of which was doing audio documentary work for the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and I'm happy to be able to use some of those skills in my latest professional adventure here at OPL: this podcast. Through all my jobs and all the places I've lived, I've always searched for meaningful work and for my money to library is some of the most meaningful work there is.

- Amy: [02:12](#) I would agree with that. So now Paul and I have a journey to take you on. We're inviting you to meet the Oakland Public Library, not just as a provider of books, a place to have fun and pursue your own curiosities, but as a person, as a friend. We're hoping that through this podcast you'll get to know what the library does, how the people here work, and most importantly, what it all means to you, our patrons. In short, we're going to let you borrow us for a few.
- Paul: [02:38](#) Well, after that, I'm raring to go. Amy, do you want to tell them what we have on tap for this episode?
- Amy: [02:42](#) Sure. Today we're going to visit with an OPL legend. Dorothy Lazard in the Oakland History Room is going to talk about what's new in Oakland history and the current exhibit at the Main Library on the great annexation that built Oakland as we know it in 1909.
- Paul: I love that story and I had no idea about the annexation before the show went up. It's a fascinating story. And where are we going after that?
- Amy: So after that we're going to take a deep dive into something that's fundamental to the work of librarians: the questions you ask. What kind of questions do people ask the librarians and how do we go about answering them?
- Paul: [03:17](#) That sounds amazing. Well, let's not tarry any longer, Amy. I'm ready to take a walk down to the Oakland History Room. How about you? I'm ready.
- Amy: [03:23](#) Let's go.
- Amy: [03:30](#) Today we are very, very lucky to be talking to Dorothy Lazard. Dorothy is the manager of the Oakland History Room. Dorothy, thanks for joining us today.
- Dorothy: Thank you for having me.

Amy: So Dorothy, it is new year, new you for the Oakland History Room, excuse that. We're recording this on January 3rd. So I'm still in that mode. Um, tell us about what's going on and the changes that are coming.

Dorothy: [03:52](#) Well, one of our biggest changes is that after 41 years we are, uh, considering rebranding the Oakland History Room. It's been the Oakland History Room since 1978 and now we are moving into a new direction. I'm observing the fact that the room has gotten a lot more progressive and innovative and a lot more scholarship and research is going on here and we're reaching a wider audience than we ever have before. And anybody can come in and request to see these materials.

Amy: Right. You don't lend them out?

Dorothy: We don't lend them out, but we do actually make things available to people because this is a part of the public library

Amy: And you can do reproductions and things?

Dorothy: Absolutely, out of the photos.

Paul: Yes. That's great. Great. Well, part of what you do, Dorothy, is exhibits with the Oakland History Room. And what exhibit do you have up right now?

Dorothy: [04:46](#) Right now we have the Great Annexation of 1909, which is an exhibit that I've wanted to mount for quite a few years. In 1909, Oakland went through a campaign of annexing southern suburbs.

Amy: What does it mean to annex another city?

Dorothy: Well, Oakland had an opportunity and did annex all of these southern Alameda County towns and uh, these little communities that we now know as neighborhoods, really, Elmhurst and Melrose and Claremont. They were once these small communities, not incorporated, they were unincorporated, and they had their own town councils and street departments and schools and churches and so forth and annex, to annex those things, Oakland had to negotiate with their town councils to find out, you know, to basically promote the advantages of being a part of Oakland.

Amy: [05:56](#) Okay. So yeah, I'm a small city. If I'm Elmhurst, which is now a neighborhood, why would I want to join up with a bigger city like Oakland?

Dorothy: Oakland had a lot of advantages. They had a lot of commercial and real estate advantages, transportation advantages. It's near the Bay. It's right across the Bay from San Francisco. And it also had the advantages of not only transportation, but just having a much stronger, more robust commercial profile than these smaller communities surrounding Oakland. And in 1909, the fifth and final, we hope, the fifth and final annexation campaign was launched and it was very successful because now we have the Oakland that we know today, you know, that is very broad and stretches all the way to San Leandro.

Paul: And am I right in saying, Dorothy, that part of the impetus for this annexation was the earthquake of 1906 we were receiving a lot of refugees in Oakland from San Francisco?

Dorothy: Absolutely. Absolutely. The refugee crisis after the April 1906 earthquake drove hundreds of people, hundreds, actually thousands of people over to the East Bay. And so Mayor Frank K. Mott had to figure out, well, what do we do with all these people? How do we house all these people? And he was one of the people who, one of the civic leaders who spearheaded the relief efforts.

Amy: [07:28](#) Yeah, cause I was just thinking to myself why? So, we know why the smaller communities would want to join up with Oakland. Why did Oakland want to add these communities? Was a lot of it to expand places for people to live?

Dorothy: [07:39](#) Yeah. To accommodate all of the, well, the estimation that we added to our exhibit is that over 100,000 people came over here and about 60,000 stayed.

Amy: Wow.

Dorothy: So the city really, really expanded.

Amy: [07:56](#) Yeah. So one thing, so I'll confess that I did--I'm not totally coming to this subject as a newbie, because I did look at your exhibit. And I found, I was really interested, I found a photo of the neighborhood that I just moved out of, which was Adams Point. And from what I read on the card accompanying the photo, it seemed like Adams Point at this time was a tent city, basically. It was a camp.

Dorothy: [08:21](#) It was a camp after the quake. And a lot of people were camped in the Adams point neighborhood, unfortunately, in the relief efforts, that the camps were around Lake Merritt. The southern camp in an area called the Willows, which is now where Laney College is, was the Chinese relief camp.

Amy: Okay.

Dorothy: So it was like this segregated racially segregated relief camp, which is kind of ridiculous.

Paul: One city in particular did resist this annexation though, and that's why we still have Piedmont in the middle of Oakland. Is that right?

That's true. The 1909 annexation enclosed or surrounded Piedmont, because we got all of the hills. We also got the Claremont area, you know, where the Rockridge Library is, for example, and all of the Hills down to San Leandro. And little Piedmont who, is Piedmont a person? No. Piedmont incorporated in 1907 shortly after the quake. And so it became its own city in '07 and in '09, all that territory up in the Hills was annexed to the city.

Amy: So why not Piedmont?

Dorothy: Piedmont incorporated two years before this 1909 annexation. And now there was, this is a much longer story, but there was an effort by Oakland to annex Piedmont, even though they had incorporated as their own independent city. There was even a vote held to disincorporate Piedmont and there was not enough votes to carry that.

Paul: Wow. Huh. That's fascinating. Now, Dorothy, when you're, when you're planning an exhibit like this or any exhibit for the Oakland history room, how does that, how does it work? How do you choose what you do and how do you go about it?

Dorothy: [10:33](#) I try to kind of cater to anniversaries, you know, things that are happening, something that's in the zeitgeist, things that people are talking about, having to do with say gentrification or Oakland. Boosterism, many years ago here, we had an exhibit on Oakland boosterism. How did Oakland promote itself over these years? And it a stretch from like the 1870s to the 1970s. And it went from, you know being very bold in its promotion of itself to kind of almost apologetic, come on, move to Oakland. So we mounted that with the idea of kind of answering the

gentrification and all the new people who were moving into town at that time, I think it was like 2012 or something, we mounted that exhibit. A lot of our exhibits are based on things that are going on, anniversaries that we observe, you know, women's suffrage or something having to do with World War II or something like that.

Amy: Yeah. Hmm. Well now I'm canceling all my plans so that we can keep talking all afternoon... is what I wish I were saying right now.

Paul: But the good news is though that Dorothy is going to be a regular contributor to the show and so we're going to be happy to have her back and talk about Oakland history quite a bit if Dorothy's willing, obviously.

Dorothy: [12:00](#) Yeah.

Amy: We really, we have a treasure here at the Oakland Public Library in the Oakland History Room, moving towards Center, and in Dorothy's expertise. Thank you so much Dorothy Lazard for coming on.

Paul: [12:11](#) Yeah. Last thing though, if people want to come and see that exhibit, where's that located in the library right now?

Dorothy: [12:19](#) Oakland History Room. The first part of it, if you care about chronology, the first part of it is in the second floor landing of the Main Library on 14th and Oak. And the rest of the exhibit is, in the Oakland History Room soon to be Oakland History Center.

Amy: [12:34](#) So right when you get off the stairs or out of the elevator, that's where the exhibit starts.

Dorothy: [12:39](#) That's where it starts, and then there's four sides to it and then you can move down the hall into the second and third cases. And then of course there is—and we also have lots and lots of photos and clipping files about all of those neighborhoods that now are part of Oakland.

Paul: [13:01](#) Fantastic. Well, again, Dorothy, thanks for joining us on the program today and we'll see you next time. All righty.

Paul: All right, well now you can see why I love Dorothy so much.

Amy: Oh my God, I could talk to her all day.

Paul: Me too. I'd love to stay in the History Room all day as well. Well now then, in the Oakland History Center you can ask questions about Oakland's past, but what if you have a question about something else, Amy?

Amy: [13:28](#) Well, reference librarians are on the front lines of research, and if research sounds like intense and difficult searching on grainy old film, you're partly right.

Paul: [13:36](#) Yeah. A lot of people don't know all the different things a reference librarian does and how they go about their research. So I'm really excited to dive in here. Where do we start?

Amy: [13:43](#) We're going to start at the heart of research, the Children's Room at the Main Library. I went down there last week to do a little role playing with one of our superstar children's librarians, Mahasin Aleem, to see how she would answer one of the most common but also sensitive questions that parents have.

Amy: [14:04](#) So this is Corin. I'm Amy.

Mahasin: Nice to meet you.

Amy: Nice to meet you. Um, Corin is two years old.

Mahasin: Great age.

Amy: Very big girl. Um, and Corin and I, yeah, I know. And Corin and I have just started to talk about the potty.

Mahasin: A big moment.

Amy: Yes. It's, it's been interesting. Um, and we are wondering if you have any books in the library that might help us learn more about the potty.

Mahasin: We definitely do. So, you're looking for books you can read with Corin or also for books that would support you in the process?

Amy: Oh, um, I didn't think about that but I guess I guess it'd be good for yeah, sure. Both.

Mahasin: [14:52](#) Okay. So we have two sections. Potty training books are so popular that we actually created a pullout section for potty training books. So I'll show you those books. They're kind of in three kind of categories. Books for boys, books for girls, potty

training, boys, girls and then just general like get excited about the potty.

Amy: [15:08](#) Can you hear that I'm handling this topic delicately? Mahasin can. She knows she has to do two things at once: find me the right books and demonstrate confidence and reassurance to my wary child, who's a little suspicious of this whole potty training thing.

Mahasin: [15:23](#) Then we have a parenting collection where we have books to support parents, process books such as um, potty training girls the easy way. Oh crap! Potty training: Everything modern parents need to know to do it once and to do it right. Stress-free potty training. So we've got a lot. Why don't I walk you all over and I can show you...

Amy: [15:44](#) As the information seeker here, I don't necessarily know what kind of books I want. I just know I want help getting my child potty trained, and books are a tool that I trust. Mahasin hears that and is finding some picture books that I can read to Corin and some books offering guidance for parents who are teaching this important life skill.

Mahasin: [16:00](#) Very popular. But there are no tears in the library, even a lot of urgent questions. If you want to walk back to the computer, we can see if we can put something on hold or if there's something, go get it. Um, one that I like to recommend is, Oh crap: Potty training, everything modern parents need to know. Um, it looks like it's only, uh, it's available... Oh, it's checked out everywhere in the system, but it looks like many copies are due back this month, so I can request it for you. Put a hold on that for you. There's also potty training in three days. You want to go with the first one that I mentioned?

Amy: [16:37](#) Yeah, I think that sounds good

Amy: I'm feeling pretty relieved that Mahasin is being so helpful. I'm potty training on a deadline. My child's daycare has asked me to pick up the pace. I'm glad there's something I can take today, though I can wait a couple of days for the book Mahasin recommends. She mentioned liking that book for her own kids, so I ask her...

Amy: [16:55](#) How long did it take? Just curious.

Mahasin: Oh look, here we go. Once upon a potty for her. I think this may have been the one that we used. For my daughter, it took a

little bit longer. She was a little delayed in her development, so it was a lot slower process, but once she got it, she got it. I do recommend the video if you don't mind a little bit of media because I think it was like exciting. It was like, Oh, I get to watch this and then I get to do this. And um, you know, when kids are in preschool or daycare, the other kids also doing it also kind of helps, you know, the power of peer pressure.

- Amy: [17:41](#) So with my potty training materials in hand, some friendly advice and the knowledge that I'm not alone in the challenge I'm facing, I had for the checkout desk.
- Mahasin: [17:48](#) Wow. Well, good luck
- Amy: Thank you.
- Mahasin: You're welcome.
- Paul: [17:56](#) So that's a pretty universal question at children's reference desks, but I wanted to find out about other kinds of reference questions the library fields on a daily basis. So I headed up to Magazines and Newspapers at the Main Library to talk to another staff member, and she let me in on solving a real mystery.
- Kirsten: [18:12](#) I'm Kirsten Baldock, I'm a reference librarian at the Oakland Main Library.
- Paul: [18:17](#) Kirsten regularly gets patrons that ask her to assist in searches of all kinds, from genealogy to history and even food.
- Kirsten: [18:23](#) Well frequently, what we get is questions about local history or more often people's personal history that might be covered in historical newspapers. So, for example, one of my favorite reference interactions that I had with a patron, a woman came in and was looking for a red snapper, award-winning red snapper recipe that she remembered getting out of the newspaper sometime in the 90s.
- Paul: [18:53](#) Remarkably, the patron in question remembered that the recipe had been published on a Wednesday, March 30th, sometime in the 90s, but couldn't recall the year.
- Kirsten: [19:02](#) So then we looked through, she was like, well, it wasn't before 1990 so we looked at the next two instances of March 30th on a Wednesday and they weren't in that one either. Or the next one. So I said, well, let's just try going back in time, even though

you think it was in the 90s. The one previous was in 1988, which is fairly close to the 90s.

Paul: [19:26](#) Sometimes Kirsten says in her work, you have to have a soft touch and be able to guide a patron down some unexplored avenues of research, even if they're certain that they will be dead ends.

Kirsten: [19:35](#) And yes, it was 1988 we found the red snapper recipe. And at this point I was really surprised to find out that it wasn't her award winning red snapper recipe. It was somebody totally different. But I was about to explain, Oh, well this isn't you. This is some guy. And she started bawling before I could even start ask her about anything. And she said that her husband loves this recipe, that she used to make it all the time and recently he's been very ill. She didn't say how ill, but, you know, I got the impression that this was sort of a terminal illness. And she said "he's been asking for this recipe and I didn't know how to tell him that I didn't know where it was and I don't know how to make it and I couldn't remember." And so now she doesn't have to explain that to him because she has the recipe and she can make him his favorite red snapper dish. So it's always interesting that you think something is maybe one thing, you know, I thought it was a point of personal pride of here's a recipe that I won an award for and I just want to get that recipe again or prove to my kids that I won this award. And then it just turned out that it was way more personal than that.

Paul: [20:58](#) And sometimes, Kirsten says, the questions seem fairly mundane, a birth record here, a marriage certificate there, but often you don't know a patron's real motivation in searching for the information that they're requesting. And every once in a while you get to be a small part of a bigger emotional story, like finding a long lost recipe for a favorite red snapper dish.

Kirsten: [21:17](#) Well, oftentimes when I tell my friends about what I do for a living I give them an example of a question that I've answered. One of my friends said, so you are really a public detective instead of a private detective.

Paul: [21:42](#) Well that was amazing. I love them. And I don't know about you, Amy, but that red snapper story got me all choked up.

Amy: I don't think I needed to tell you how emotional I get about potty training. But, seriously, that's one of the great things about working at the library. We've all gotten to be part of many stories like that.

Paul: I know I have, and every coworker that I've ever talked to has some kind of sweet or bittersweet story like that about helping a patron get what they need.

Amy: I've had the same experience. The library: public detectives at your service, like Kirsten said.

Paul: That's right. Well, Amy, we've come to the end of our time this month unfortunately, and I've really enjoyed it. And listeners, we hope you have too,

Amy: And just before we go, we want to remind you to subscribe to the show anywhere you find podcasts and to join us next month for another jam packed episode of library goodness.

Paul: And just one last thing we want you to know. This podcast is made possible through a grant from the Friends of the Oakland Public Library. The Friends' mission is to advance the role of the Oakland Public Library as a vital community resource and as an institution, critical to the culture, education, and welfare of our diverse community. To learn more about the Friends and how they impact your library, visit F O P L dot org. That's F O P L dot org and until next time, I'm Paul Preston

Amy: and I'm Amy Martin

Paul: and we'll see you at the library.