

History Hike 2

The Most Famous Bathtub In Rolling Meadows!?!

Clue: Why did so many neighbors' books end up in the bathtub of this house and what were all those people reading in the garage?

Walk East on Martin Lane to the corner of Martin and Meadow Drive. Cross Martin by heading south on Meadow and proceed to the following coordinates:

42° 04.504 N
088° 01.057 W

As you walk south on the west side of Meadow, look across the street to your left. The house (3300 Meadow Drive) on the south east corner of Martin and Meadow is no ordinary home, but to understand why, you'll need to know a bit more about Rolling Meadows' history and the folks that built our community.

Rolling Meadows residents have a history of pulling together ... and doing things backwards. Perhaps that should be restated, we tend to do things in a unique way that turn out well even though the path we take is sometimes, shall we say, a bit whimsical. The library is a good example. If not for a gambling scheme created by the library board and run by the Boy Scouts, coupled with some timely threats ... On second thought, there is perhaps a more acceptable way to tell the story of why so many library books ended up in the bathtub and why the librarian was allowed to spend most of her time in the bedroom! No, that doesn't seem appropriate either. Let's start over.

In 1958, a small group of citizens recognized the need for a public library.¹ By July, the Friends of the Library (that didn't yet exist) collected 5,000 books from residents to serve as a core collection of a library that had no shelves, building, staff, budget, or legal status. This approach was a bit unorthodox but received high marks for whimsy and enthusiasm. So high in fact that in February of 1959, an ordinance creating a public library was adopted by the City Council.

Look across the street at the house on the southeast corner of Martin and Meadow. This house, 3300 Meadow Drive, is now a private residence but once served as a sales office for Rolling Meadows developer and architect, Kimball Hill. It may have been the first, and perhaps most important, stop for many homeowners in the newly created city of Rolling Meadows. But in 1959, Kimball Hill made the house available for use as a library in a "rent to own" arrangement.² So far, so good, but no tax monies would be available until the summer of 1960 and the library board was impatient to begin serving the community.

The answer was obvious: create a city-wide raffle to raise enough money to begin library service by having the Boy Scouts distribute two books of raffle tickets to each home; and have the board make it clear, in a mostly non-threatening way, that the opening date of the new building was directly related to the success of the fund-raising campaign; and let everyone know that the first prize for the raffle was a nifty new stereo radio and phonograph, thus ensuring that enough money (\$1,300) would be raised to pay the rent and operating costs for six months. The city council was so impressed with the

dedication and enthusiasm shown by the library board and volunteers that in December of 1959, it voted to purchase the building on Meadow Drive. Now the renovations could begin without fear of violating the rental agreement and Kimball Hill generously released the city from having to pay interest charges on the purchase loan.³ Civic groups continued to raise library funds “over the back fence” and door-to-door. Donations of furniture, lumber for shelves, and draperies were gratefully received. The “library in a house” was opened to the public on February 29, 1960.

Mrs. Norma Hill (no relation to Kimball Hill) had library experience and volunteered to organize and supervise the preparations of all the materials stored in the basement. Norma’s two assistants, Alma Mehn and Barbara Firszt took boxes of books home to organize and catalog.⁴ Alma read children’s stories to elementary school classes visiting the library. Forty-six years later, in 2006, she was appointed to serve on the library board – proving once and for all that Rolling Meadows residents are known for their loyalty and dogged perseverance in the service of a good cause.

So much for the whimsy, gambling, Boy Scouts, and mild threats – what about the books in the bathtub and librarian in the bedroom? Simple, the library was originally built to be a single family residence. The fiction and non-fiction collections were housed in the garage. The children’s collection was in the kitchen. The breezeway served as a checkout area. The “overflow” of books to be shelved was stored, quite naturally, in the bathtub. The librarian’s office and the cataloging department were in, you guessed it, the bedroom (pictured below).



The “library in a house” was a big hit but was woefully short of shelf space. So much so that when a patron removed a book from the shelf, staff would hurriedly put another in its place, hoping that if the patron couldn’t squeeze the first book back in, they’d give up and check it out. By 1966, rapid population growth made it necessary to construct a new library building at its present Martin Lane location. Again, Rolling Meadows responded with unbridled enthusiasm and donations for the new building. The board chose Halloween morning in 1967 to open the new library.

Typical of Rolling Meadows’ mixture of hard-nosed practicality and whimsy, for a month prior to the opening date, patrons were urged to check out ten books each and return them to the new building – thus saving money since less books needed to be moved.⁵

The current 43,000 square foot facility is the product of a number of expansions and renovations since it opened in 1967. In 1977, the Rolling Meadows Library received the Illinois Library Association’s All-Star Library Award. In 2002, it was named Library Of The Year by the North Suburban Library System from among its 650 academic, public, school, and special libraries located in Cook, Kane, Lake, and McHenry Counties. The library no longer has a bedroom or a bathtub – but, happily, we still have Alma Mehn!

*Rolling Meadows Library,
3300 Meadow Drive, in 1960.*

