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Days Past: Walking across history

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One of the detailed carved images of the Prescott Public Library Timeline Sidewalk created by Wilman. This photograph was (1100-2026-4701). (Prescott Public Library Archives/Courtesy)

“Residents walked through history from ‘the beginning’ [of time] about a quarter of a million times last year,” so reports The Prescott Courier in 1984. How was it that residents walked through time? They did so by traversing the timeline sidewalk outside the Prescott Public Library, crafted by artist Francis “Fran” Wildman.

Wildman was an English, art and geography teacher in Prescott. Having served in World War Two in military intelligence, he helped Folsom Prison inmates earn high school diplomas. He taught at Prescott College for a time (even as the calligrapher for their diplomas) and then taught for the Prescott Unified School District, eventually as a substitute teacher. Wildman reported in 1999 that he had poured ten such sidewalks between 1974 and 1999, nine of which were in Arizona and one in Washington. In 1979 he faced charges pressed by the Prescott Unified School District for “defacing school property” when he painted a diagram of the solar system on the playground at Lincoln Elementary Schools. This divided the community, as many community clubs backed Wildman, and charges were dropped.

Wildman’s most well-known timeline sidewalks are at the Yavapai County Courthouse in front of the Rough Rider Monument, and at the Prescott Public Library along Goodwin Street. Many of his works featured unique signature motifs like colorful compass roses. In a February 1999 article for the Daily Courier about Wildman, Salina Sialega wrote that, originally, “ city officials scoffed at Wildman’s plan, saying it would attract graffiti,”. Wildman was also the benefactor who designed and installed a gigantic map of the world in one of the Prescott Public Library reading rooms, a map that took up almost the entire floor-to-ceiling wall. This map remained there until the library’s renovation in 2005. Wildman’s efforts were honored by the Prescott Public Library in 2009 when the Mural Mice completed the mural around the back lawn of the library, featuring Wildman among other authors and historians of the area. Wildman passed away in 2005 at the age of 84 and was unable to see that honor.

The timeline sidewalks were originally poured and painted in Wildman’s garage, and were later transported to their locations. Because the ground –particularly in front of the library—is uneven, the sidewalks have endured some cracking and weathering over the years. Wildman restored the sidewalks in 1984, and in 2003, Eagle Scout candidate Eric Kleinman cleaned and repainted the sidewalk as his Eagle Scout project, presumably with Wildman’s blessing. Yavapai County Supervisor and friend Gheral Brownlow said in Wildman’s obituary that he was obsessed with the restoration of these timelines. He saw it as his legacy, a way for observers to connect with history on a deeper level.

"I felt if the words and numerals are put in a way that you can move your body, a person can have a sense of passage of time," Wildman said. "You learn with your body because it moves from one place to another, from one year to another, from one century to another. That is called kinesthetic learning."

In 2022 Prescott Public Library poured a sidewalk parallel to the timeline sidewalk to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, making for safer travel; unfortunately, the timeline sidewalk was poured on the north side of the building which means during the winter months the sidewalk gets icy. In the name of safety, various snow melt products (including salt) have to be scattered on the timeline, thus causing deterioration. The new sidewalk was recognized by the City Council to be expensive, but the intrinsic historic value of the timeline sidewalk cannot be disputed, even to this day. The Sharlot Hall Museum Research Center holds a collection of Wildman's notes, papers, and other items.

"Days Past" is a collaborative project of the Sharlot Hall Museum and the Prescott Corral of Westerners International (www.prescottcorral.org). This and other Days Past articles are also available at www.archives.sharlothallmuseum.org/articles/days-past-articles/1. The public is encouraged to submit proposed articles and inquiries to dayspast@sharlothallmuseum.org Please contact SHM Research Center reference desk at 928-277-2003, or via email at archivesrequest@sharlothallmuseum.org for information or assistance with photo requests.

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