261# Matheson Library & Archives (Script by Peggy Macdonald)

This building was built brick by brick by the Reverend Harry Biddlecum’s congregation of the Gainesville Gospel Tabernacle, starting in 1933. The church later became an antiques store and one of the very first Melting Pot fondue restaurants in the nation before it was transformed into the Matheson Library & Archives in 2016.

When Melting Pot owner Hope Meucci walked into the repurposed building for the first time, she said she could almost smell the food. Meucci owned and operated the Melting Pot from 1982 to 1999.

Meucci purchased the decommissioned church from Dr. Mark Barrow, who had transformed the space into an antiques store run by his wife, Mary Barrow. Dr. Barrow later became a co-founder of the Matheson History Museum across the street.

Meucci, a Fort Lauderdale native, fell in love with the former tabernacle the moment she set foot inside the building. She and a small crew of friends and family built the restaurant booths by hand. She got hooked on the fondue restaurant concept when she ate at the original Melting Pot that Roy Nelson and Bruce Knoechel opened in Maitland in 1975.

Although Meucci was only 28 and had no restaurant experience, she was able to convince Nelson and Knoechel to let her open a franchise in the former tabernacle. Meucci’s father, Luigi Meucci, made the hand-forged ironwork that used to adorn the booths and lamps in the Melting Pot. One large, ornate piece of the original hand-forged iron is prominently displayed inside the Matheson Library & Archives.

In 2014, the Matheson History Museum purchased the former Melting Pot building, which had sat vacant since a different owner closed the restaurant in 2009. The kitchen and part of the dining area have been replaced with an archives, and the lobby and front portion of the dining area have been transformed into a library reading room used by locals and visiting scholars who conduct research into the history of Alachua County and its environs.

The fondue pots are long gone, but the fondue-themed, stained-glass windows from the front of the building were saved and are now on display inside the library. In 2018, the Matheson Library & Archives won a Meritorious Achievement Award in the Adaptive Use category from the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.