Tom Amos:
“Rare Things Please One”
— Marcus V.M. Martial

[In August 1996, Dr. Thomas Amos assumed the position of Rare Book and Special Collections Librarian in the University Libraries. The following imaginary interview reflects selected aspects of his experience, professional philosophy, and plans for the future at Western Michigan University.]

Q: Why would someone happily ensconced in one of the premier rare book collections in the world apply for a position at a midwestern university?

A: There is no question that the Houghton Library, Harvard University, is a fine place to work, and the collections at Harvard compare favorably with those in national libraries elsewhere. However, my position as Head of Public Services drew mainly on one area of my training and expertise. Kalamazoo, on the other hand, is the “medievalist’s capital” of North America, and it is close to other centers such as the Newberry Library and Notre Dame. The nature of this collection, with both the Institute of Cistercian Studies’ manuscripts and books and the WMU special collections, was attractive. The size of the collection here offered the chance to do other things besides reference and reader service along with the opportunity to help shape its growth. It seemed like a better fit at the right time in my professional career.

Q: Would you briefly summarize your educational and career experiences?

A: My early education was in medieval history, and I earned the B.A. and M.A. at Purdue. I studied with Richard Sullivan at Michigan State for the Ph.D., and also earned a degree from the University of Paris while in France on a Fulbright. After graduate school, I spent nine years on soft money at St. John’s University, Minnesota, first as a medieval manuscript cataloguer at the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, and then as Curator of Rare Books in the Alcuin Library, St. John’s. While working at the Alcuin, I completed a Master of Library Science at Indiana University in two summers—a possible record time.

At that point, the grant funds dried up, but I had the opportunity to become Assistant Head of Public Services at the Lilly Library at IU. Bill Cagle, the Lilly Librarian, nominated me for the Head of Public Services position at Harvard, and, somewhat to my surprise, I was offered the position. When the WMU position came open, I had a difficult choice to make, but the opportunity to run my own shop was something that I wanted to do.

Q: The Search Committee was impressed by your association with a number of major rare book collections. Do you have any thoughts about how this occurred?

A: That’s a difficult question to answer. In part, I have been fortunate in studying with good people: John Contreni, Pierre Riche, Richard Sullivan, and T. Julian Brown taught me medieval history and paleography; and Joel Silver taught me the literature of rare books. I can’t imagine a better way to acquire a strong background in these fields—or to get to know the leaders in the profession. In part, the languages and skills necessary to do the work well are things that have been part of my world since graduate school. I have always been fascinated by rare books and manuscripts, and that, along with a willingness to work hard, has served me well.

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Tom Amos
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Q: You have apparently given considerable attention to research as well as to operational issues. What has motivated your scholarly pursuits?

A: Not too surprisingly, much of my work has stemmed from my dissertation on the origin and nature of the Carolingian Sermon. When I first began my research, few people were reading early medieval sermons—or granting them much value as historical sources. As a result, I’ve co-edited a book of essays and published a number of articles on early medieval preaching, and am still working on a monograph about the sermons. Much of the original information is unedited manuscripts.

While conducting my research, I ran across a curious collection of Irish Latin sermons from the 8th century. This sermon collection is contained in seven manuscripts, something of a “best-seller” for the period, and I am completing work on a critical edition of the collection. In conjunction with my work with the Hill Library at St. John’s, I also published a three-volume catalogue of the Alcobaca manuscripts from the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, along with articles on the database system that I developed to aid in cataloguing the collection.

Q: You appear to have developed an extensive number of personal contacts with well-known scholars and collectors. Any comment?

A: My circle of acquaintances, colleagues, and friends comes from my scholarly work and the libraries and collections where my professional career has taken place. The interest in early medieval sermons led to connections in both medieval sermon studies and among Anglo-Saxon scholars. Through Richard Sullivan, the Hill Library, and my studies, I have met a large number of medievalists in North America, the British Isles, and on the continent. Through the Lilly and Houghton Libraries, I have met a number of collectors, bibliographers, and book dealers. It helps that I like people, and am willing to answer at least as many questions as I ask. That is always a good basis for professional and personal relationships.

Q: You’ve only been at Western Michigan University for some six months, but we wonder if you have a glimpse of the future or anticipate some unique developments in the area of special collections and rare books?

A: It helps greatly in planning for the future that the parts of our collections were solidly put together by my predecessor, Beatrice Beech. There is also a good foundation of support from President Haenicke and the Friends of the Library upon which we can build. My new “boss,” Lance Query, the Dean of Libraries, has shown a great deal of enthusiasm and interest in the collections, and has initiated some collaborative ventures with the Newberry Library. I certainly hope to develop this approach further with Newberry and other institutions.

The Carol Ann Haenicke American Women’s Poetry Collection has recently established an endowment. That will allow us to shape it into a research and teaching collection that will play a major role in the study and research of students and faculty at the University. One of my goals is to make the collections better known through use of the World Wide Web. At the same time, the heart of Special Collections will always be the books and manuscripts. My main role now and in the future will be to work with colleagues in the University Libraries to build a stronger collection, and with colleagues on the teaching faculty to build stronger ties between Special Collections and the WMU community.

“A book, like a person, has its fortunes with one; is lucky or unlucky in the precise moment of its falling in our way, and often by some happy accident ranks with us for something more than its independent value.”

—Walter Pater

Our Amazing Libraries

In the Spring 1996, No. 12 issue of Gatherings, a short column was included that described some “amazing” or at least surprising facts and figures about the University Libraries at Western Michigan University. Building on that first introduction to services and programs, the following commentary includes a few additional facts that appear “well worth noting.”

The majority of the statistics in the first report were based on 1993-94 data. In 1995-96, 234,562 items were added to the collection; the total number of volumes has now reached 3,440,181. There are also large numbers of special format resources including 1,503,237 microforms (microfilms, microfiche, etc.). For the first time, special emphasis has been placed on adding records, tapes, and CDs—the Libraries now owns 18,851 such items.

And, most important, given the high costs of serials, the library has increased its subscriptions from 5,533 to 6,619. For electronic researchers, there are nine online services available including 60 databases on FirstSearch alone. When counting all formats, the library can note with considerable pride that it has database indexes totalling 1,905—each of these offers unique research capabilities to the users.

The Libraries, however, would founder if not for the staffing that makes the system “work.” Every item, whether a periodical issue, a microfiche, a book, an online database, is selected, ordered, received, cataloged, specifically marked and identified for our system, delivered to its physical home, shelved or housed, retrieved, checked out and in, reshelved, repaired, and whatever else is necessary to get the information to the patron. In particular, in addition to the traditional functions that apply to print formats, the library staff must now acquire, install, maintain, and update a sophisticated network of computer terminals and electronic networks for staff and public use.

Who supplies all of this personpower? One of the truly invaluable resources is our student employees, currently numbering 240, who perform a myriad of activities in each unit of the library from “monitoring” the entrance and exit rotunda to reshelving items to answering questions to dozens of tasks performed in the technical processing areas. And, there are over 88 year-round employees including 24 faculty librarians (10 are also unit or department heads), four senior administrators (two faculty), and 2 non-faculty department heads. The other staff members are found in every department of the library performing multiple professional assignments without which the library would become inept.

Come visit our amazing libraries or “check it out” on the Net: http://www.wmich.edu/library/.
One Friend to Another
By Mary Ann Bowman, President
Friends of the University Libraries

Friends' organizations are of great significance to the libraries they serve. At Western Michigan University, the University Libraries are at the heart of the University's mission of teaching, research, and scholarship. Our many fine library faculty, staff, and student assistants are doing an excellent job of providing service to all of the communities they serve, beginning with the students, faculty, and staff of WMU. As Friends we can ensure the continued success of these critically important institutions, the University Libraries and Western Michigan University.

Our Friends' organization is closely tied to the dedication of the strikingly "new" Waldo Library that reopened in 1991 with a formal dedication in April 1992—the same month that marked the official incorporation of the Friends of the University Libraries, Western Michigan University. The purposes of the organization are aligned to the objectives of the University Libraries:

- To strengthen and support the activities of the University Libraries,
- To offer a community for interested individuals to come together with a common interest in the literary and cultural activities of the University Libraries,
- To encourage gifts and bequests,
- To assist in special projects, and
- To aid in the development of special collections.

The 1996-97 officers and members of the Friends' Board of Directors are:

Dr. Mary Ann Bowman, President
Dr. Robert Hahn, Vice President
Ms. Kristin Tyrrell, Secretary
Ms. Bettina Meyer, Treasurer
Dr. Lynne McCauley, Board Member
Dr. William Combs, Board Member
Dr. Richard Brewer, Board Member
Dr. Dietter Haenicke, Ex Officio
Dr. Lance Query, Ex Officio

Each year has seen a growing membership and support for the Friends of the University Libraries. In the past year, the generosity of those who have already become Friends, and the proceeds from Friends' book sales have funded the purchase of several important items for the Libraries' collections. As we continue to increase our membership and contributions, there will be even greater opportunities to support significantly the vital work of the Libraries. Please take this opportunity to complete the form below, to renew your membership, and to encourage your friends and colleagues to join as well.

FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
Western Michigan University
Annual Membership Application

I wish to become members of the Friends

Name(s) ___________________________ 
Address ______________________________________________________ 
City __________________ State ______ Zip ______ 
Telephone _________________________ 

Please make check payable to: WMU-Friends of the University Libraries

Return To:
Waldo Library
Attn. Bettina Meyer
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5080

"Sweet Companions"
By Lois Wyse
[Excerpted from "The Way We Are," Good Housekeeping, September 1994]

It's a strange thing about books. You'd think the written word, printed and bound, would remain inviolable, untouched by the years. And yet...and yet...

I have baskets of letters from readers who tell of returning to books the same way they revisit friends and uncover the warmth of remembered pleasures. But with books, the second time around can be more meaningful as characters improve with age; there are new shadows and planes; hollow passages fill with fresh insights.

In a world of
Sometime
friends
And part-time
loves
The truest
nurturing comes
from
Books
Books and books....
The sweet
companions that
fill
The hours,
The head, and
The heart.

PERSONAL MEMBERSHIPS

__ Student $5.00
__ Associate $10.00
__ Contributing $25.00-$99.00
__ Donor $100.00-$499.00
__ Patron $500.00-$999.00
__ Benefactor $1,000.00 or more

CORPORATE MEMBERSHIPS

__ Donor $100.00-$499.00
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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.
Not Etched in Stone

By Regina Buckner

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said, "Nothing endures but change." That statement accurately reflects what has happened to the physical interior of Waldo Library. In the five and a half years since the doors were opened to the expanded and completely renovated building, numerous changes have occurred—and are still occurring.

The first major adjustment was the moving of an entire branch library, the Physical Sciences Library of some 66,000 items. This collection was logically arranged within the major Waldo science collections, an accomplishment that required considerable internal reorganization and modification of floor plans. Then, a staff office section was "gutted," and six new group study rooms were created. A review of signage produced multiple, readable, color-coordinated signs that direct patrons throughout the four floors of stacks and service areas; an additional service point was established in the newspaper/microfilm area; the office of Faculty Development was designed and constructed on the third floor; and the non-fiction new book collection was moved to the first floor with comfortable seating placed nearby. User demand for additional terminal access has seen the addition of a dozen terminals strategically placed in the stack sections of the library, and all terminals are now being upgraded throughout the library system. Most recently, in response to several issues related to safety and security, the William H. Upjohn Rotunda was remodeled and security cameras installed. As a result, all libraries with incoming and outgoing traffic along with video monitors positioned to record all atrium activity. The advanced design of the newly installed detection system offers a more comprehensive area of detection for magnetic media as well as for traditional books or non-circulating items; there are corridor-specific alarms, both audible and visible. Of course, all corridors were designed to accommodate wheelchairs and to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. During peak usage hours, a library employee is also seated at the Information Desk to assist those who are entering as well as to instruct anyone who has set off an alarm.

Waldo Library Rotunda

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The Liaisons
By David Isaacs

A liaison relationship is characterized by a close bond or connection. Soon after arriving as Dean of the University Libraries, Lance Query began discussion about and formal implementation of a new type of liaison program between the University Libraries and the academic programs, the library faculty and the teaching faculty. The structure is simple: each academic department or program in the University has been assigned a faculty librarian to serve directly as a liaison. Each of the recipient units was also asked to appoint a member of the teaching faculty to coordinate departmental issues and concerns with the faculty librarian. The result is also simple: a stronger and closer bond has been and is being developed between the two previously semi-isolated units. That bond has three interrelated components: collection evaluation and development, library or information literacy instruction, and research enhancement.

The liaison, in ideal circumstances, is not merely a funnel for ordering new library materials but works individually with the responsible faculty member and/or colleagues to identify and order appropriate additions to the library collection. A primary justification for acquisition is tied to the breadth and depth of the academic programming that exists in the department (minors, undergraduate degrees, and graduate degrees), but a more recent emphasis has added an even broader base of coverage—one that is sensitive to the research interests of individual faculty members. This latter perspective is increasingly important since the overall faculty profile has changed radically with numerous retirements and the resulting employment of new teaching faculty who have highly focused and well-developed research interests.

The majority of the books that are acquired for the University Libraries are obtained through an approval plan that has been developed to reflect the various subjects taught in the University. Since its inception, a single firm, Baker and Taylor, has served the University in this acquisition venture. However, the Libraries has just made a major change in vendors and, in so doing, has reviewed every academic profile with the departments and the new firm, Blackwell North America, Inc. The result is that materials received are based on collection development statements that have been re-reviewed by individual units. As programs multiply, change, and evolve in curricula and research emphases, the general approval plan has also been modified—again through the collaboration of departmental faculty and the University Libraries. Moreover, faculty liaisons work with departmental representatives to place direct firm orders and to review items that are identified by the vendor as profile-related. Although not tied explicitly to a detailed profile, serials acquisitions are also correlated with each department’s academic needs. Because a new serial approval is an ongoing expense and inflation for serials is much higher than most book resources, the addition of serials goes through a stringent review process. The library liaison can and should be both Scrooge and Santa Claus in identifying what is needed, arguing the need, and working to resolve the age-old problem of limited funds and changing needs.

Another major contribution of the liaison program is instructional classes for the faculty and their students. High-tech electronic classrooms in Waldo and the Education Library offer faculty librarians the opportunity to demonstrate to departmental faculty and students a variety of sophisticated databases from the basic FINDER book and periodical catalog of the University Libraries to the almost infinite resources of the World Wide Web. Following demonstrations of search techniques, the students, in turn, can utilize classroom computers to test, through practical assignments, what they heard and saw earlier. In 1995-96, liaisons offered hundreds of rudimentary instructional sessions to freshmen (or beginners at any age). Basic searching techniques in the different databases in WESTNET (e.g., FINDER, Dataquest I and FirstSearch are commonplace presentations. A major focus of each session is to give the student a chance to complete an actual assignment while working in the classroom. Equally important, several departments have discovered that their library liaisons will offer more advanced instruction tailored to a particular class and research assignment. In order to plan and present such a class, the librarian and the faculty member must consult carefully so that the objective of the assignment and the search strategy meld into a logical whole. Again, the classes are structured so that after a demonstration by the librarian, there is a hands-on practice session in the classroom with both librarian and departmental teacher helping students to develop search strategies and select appropriate references.

Needless to say, these two main aspects, acquisitions and library instruction, of the tripartite liaison bond build an understanding of the individual research interests of the faculty as well as the purpose of a particular class in the education of the student. When the teamwork is most successful, the library liaison can anticipate at least some of the library needs of the instructor; assist him or her in research; provide updates on new or useful resources (books, serials, online databases and services); and act as a partner in the teaching/research enterprise. Success in the liaison relationship benefits both sides. The faculty gain essential knowledge of old and new resources and the students make better use of existing information in their learning experience. Librarians gain a broad knowledge of the curriculum and a more specific awareness of research concerns of the faculty with whom they work. Ultimately, both share in meeting the challenge of the University “to provide students the opportunity to gain academic knowledge and develop the ability to apply that knowledge, ... and participate meaningfully in a rapidly changing world.” ("Mission of the University," Western Michigan University, 1994-1996 Graduate Catalog, pp. 5-6).
the audible alarm, a visible (light) alarm marks the particular corridor that has been activated by attempting to remove an item illegally.

The library has also taken steps to protect patrons and employees who are in the building. At selected points, mirrors reflect activity on otherwise hidden corridors and around corners. Video cameras have been installed in the entrances to Waldo. Unobtrusive cameras continuously record all activity in these areas. The recorded images will be used by Public Safety to identify patrons who have been or are disruptive. Anyone in the library who is suspected of violating the rights of others, mutilating items, or removing items without authority is turned over to the University's Public Safety officers. The officers are also on call to deal with library disruptions or safety problems.

There are other, less obvious changes in Waldo Library that have been designed to assure open access, a user-friendly environment, and security. The paramount concern is that service within the building be provided within a sane and safe environment. As each day begins, another challenge to access, technological expansion, collection enhancement, effective management, and expanded service emerges. And so, "nothing endures, but change." In that change is found the twenty-first century where nothing is etched in stone.

There's Always a Book—Or is There?

Libraries are magical places.... There's nothing quite like strolling the hushed aisles, letting your eye rove along dimly lit shelves. Each spine, each title, seems to beckon with a promise of incredible wonders, surprises and adventures. ...

Libraries not only take us into new and exciting realms but also help us grow. They answer questions, solve problems, enable us to better ourselves. If I did not have the library habit—which is passed on by families—I certainly couldn't research and write the first chapter of a historical novel.

Whatever the need—from simple escape reading to learning gourmet cookery, or evaluating mutual funds, or confronting dire illness—as my son, Mike, said in his 20s, when he set out to master the handling of small boats: "There's always a book."

But finding the books we need or want, when we want them, is getting harder. Our libraries are in trouble. And we'd better take notice and remedy the situation before one of our nation's most precious assets becomes a skinny, starving shell of its old self.

[Excerpted from an article by historian/novelist John Jakes found in the March 13, 1994 issue of Parade Magazine]