

Archives of University History

By Sharon Carlson, Director, University
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With Western's Centennial Celebration long awaited and now in full swing, the records of the University Archives, which are, ipso facto, the history of WMU, have been and are in greater demand than in years past. The Centennial has motivated all of us involved in library and record management to reflect on the history and mission of the archival program at Western Michigan University. Not to be confused with the better-known Regional History Collections, the archival program deals solely with records created in the course of Western Michigan University business.

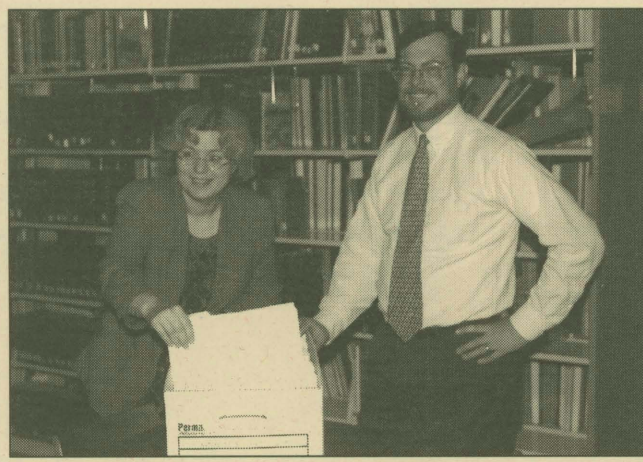
In 1956, President Paul V. Sangren asked Professor James O. Knauss, the retired chair of Western's Department of History, to sort and arrange the papers of Western's first president, Dwight B. Waldo, and those of Ernest Burnham, head of the Rural Education Department. Sangren, with this action, initiated the activities that would ultimately lead to the creation of an archival program at Western. While the library had housed both sets of papers since the late 1940s, by 1956 the papers had not been processed in any way. The library director claimed that the "pressure of regular work had prevented any attention being given to them," despite inquiries from outside-of-the-institution researchers about the collections.

The Western Michigan University *News Magazine*, Spring 1957, summed up the sorry state of affairs that existed before Knauss began the project, noting that the "material was so poorly sorted and arranged that it was practically impossible to answer the inquiries . . . unless the [researchers] were willing to spend weeks scrutinizing the thousands of documents."

In selecting Knauss to process the papers, Sangren made an excellent choice. Knauss had a broad knowledge of Western and had already written two institutional histories. As he worked with the hodgepodge of papers, Knauss became the leading proponent for a permanent archival program to handle the University's records. He argued that the growing complexity of the institution was one of the reasons that both an archivist and an archival program were desperately needed. The lack of an archival program had resulted in lost records and Knauss made the first appeal to alumni and friends holding historical records relating to Western to turn them over to the institution.

Knauss retired for a second time in 1959, and Alan S. Brown of the Department of History was asked to take over the work. Brown continued teaching on a part-time basis and devoted the rest of his time to the administration of the University Archives. In 1960, the mission of the Archives grew to include establishing a collection of regional materials—today known at the Regional History Collections. It became more formalized in 1962 when the Michigan Historical Commission designated the Regional History Collections as a depository of the State Archives. This is how the unit began collecting some of the more popular regional documents, such as diaries, letters, and local business and organizational records.

Wayne C. Mann began as the Archives Field Representative in 1963 and was appointed University Archivist in 1967. It was under Mann's direction that systems and schedules for developing the management, maintenance, and retention of



Sharon Carlson and John Winchell, Archivists

the archival program began. In 1968, the University adopted a retention and disposal schedule for all records created by the University.

Today the Archives collects records in paper and other formats. Records may include any paper, book, photograph, microfilm, map, drawing, or any other document that has been made by the University in the transaction of public business. Increasingly, the Archives deals with issues of electronic records and documents in a variety of formats.

While the major function of the Archives is to preserve records, the unit also works with campus departments to identify records slated for destruction. Records recording routine business transactions often need to be retained for only 3 to 7 years. Careful destruction of documents has taken on a greater importance in the last few years as privacy laws place more responsibility on the institution in the handling of confidential information, and identity theft has become a major white-collar crime.

The process of handling University papers requires departments to place records in boxes and send them to the Archives according to the records retention and disposal schedule. Inventories are prepared by the departments and the Archives to track the records. Copies of the inventories are retained by departments and the Archives. Most records are placed in acid free document boxes. Some records receive extra preservation measures, including replacing folders with archival quality folders and removing potential contaminants from the files such as rubber bands, post-it notes, staples, or paper clips.

Some records of the University Archives are not open to all researchers. Human resource and other confidential materials may be viewed only by the department of origin. Other researchers must obtain permission from the originating department to view records. In some instances, researchers have filed Freedom of Information Act requests to gain access to University records.

Many records are open to researchers and there are gems in the archival collection of interest to internal and external researchers. The University Archives has an extensive photographic collection dating to 1904 when construction began on East Hall and the first classes were conducted. The earliest oral histories include accounts by students, faculty, and friends dating back to the beginnings of the institution. Scrapbooks provide personal records of individual students and their experiences at Western. Records exist for many of the campus buildings and sometimes include architectural drawings.

Frequently consulted publications include Western's student newspaper, the *Herald*, which dates back to 1916 and that is now indexed through 1940. Alternative newspapers representing more radical viewpoints, such as the *Western Activist*, are also regularly consulted by researchers. The Archives has a full run of *Brown & Gold* yearbooks, which span the history of classes from 1906 to 1985.

The institutional interest in the records is obvious, but external users also consult the University Archives records. There are regular inquiries about the landscape drawings by the Olmsted firm, which developed the initial plans for the East Campus. Due to financial constraints, Olmsted's plans for Western never materialized to any significant extent. The firm is known for its more famous projects such as Central Park, N.Y., and the U.S. Capitol grounds in Washington. Another recent research inquiry involved examining the history of how several Michigan

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Waldo on Liberal Education...

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nurtures creative potentials and capacities for understanding as well as inducing respect for the rights of others and a sense of responsibility for the world we inhabit;

provides the necessary basis for all intellectual discourse and thus for the enhancement of knowledge; and

highlights the fact that at the heart of human decisions and actions stand moral choices.'

"It gladdens my spirit to read such words. But let them not be mere rhetoric. Pay as much attention to these words as you to do to the new athletic facility and you will have a true university, one that honors scholars as much as athletes.

"I look around me in amazement at the giant university that has grown out of our modest little teacher's college that opened its doors 100 years ago. But size does not guarantee quality. And while money is always necessary to erect buildings and pay professors, we also need dedication. You cannot buy dedication; you have to inspire it. I hope you continue to have many professors, like William McCracken, with the courage and conviction to talk back to their President. I hope you really mean not merely to expose students to the 'finer things in life' but that you liberate their minds and spirits with a true liberal education.

"I wish you well in your next 100 years."

Dwight B. Waldo

[Special thanks to John Winchell, in the University Archives, for retrieving documents from which the quotations are taken. They certainly helped Dr. Waldo refresh his memory of years past.]

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universities began providing on-campus housing for students. This researcher found detailed information about Walwood, Spindler, and Vandercook Halls in President Paul Sangren's papers.

Some may argue that the need for an Archive will diminish as we become a paperless society and information is retained on the Internet. Anybody pondering that may want to consider the presidential papers as a case study. President Dwight B. Waldo's (1904-1936) papers encompass 6 document boxes or about 3 cubic feet. His successor, Paul V. Sangren (1936-1960), left about 42 boxes. President James W. Miller (1961-1974) accumulated 110 boxes during his presidency. President John T. Bernhard (1974-1985) followed and routed 204 boxes to the Archives over the course of his presidency. President Haenicke and President Floyd averaged about 15 to 20 boxes annually. The presidential papers illustrate the changing role of the presidency and the increasing complexity and growth of the institution as well as the justification for a University Archives program. The Archives are open to public researchers Tuesday through Friday, 8-5, and Saturdays, 12-4, in the Fall and Spring semesters. Inquiries about University history are always welcome.

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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