

Fortunate Choices

A Friends' Personality

The choices made when one is young often prove to be uniquely influential on what occurs in later years. Dorotha Kercher is a woman who made the right choices. In particular, one made all the difference; she chose to attend college at the institution located on the hill in Kalamazoo—Western State Teachers College in those days. So, in 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, after graduation from an Indiana high school, she arrived on what is now our east campus—to study Latin and French. More than fifty years later, Dorotha is still in Kalamazoo.

One might wonder what attraction kept her in this city during all these years and at least one strong influence was a man named Leonard Kercher who was a young faculty member at the teachers college. Since no teaching positions were available for Dorotha in those lean times, she became an assistant in a local doctor's office, and began a lengthy courtship with Leonard that ended in marriage five years later. He was working on his doctorate and when it was completed, he decided to stay and teach at the growing college. Both became very active in campus activities, and Leonard earned a solid reputation as a sociology professor; in due time, he became head of the Department. The University, during the 1950s, had an active faculty interested in international programs and before long there were sociology study programs offered at Oxford and the University of London. These were so successful that they led to other overseas programs with special attention directed to East Africa.

Dr. and Mrs. Kercher were in the forefront of the East African development and, in 1960, they went to East Africa to

do field work and establish contacts with appropriate officials and agencies. There, with the help of Visho Sharma and Evan Richards—both faculty at the University today—and officials at the University of Nairobi and the University of Kenya, they laid a careful foundation for the program from Kalamazoo. Because of their work, two study groups eventually traveled to East Africa, one in 1965 and another in 1968. During that decade, the Kerchers also were well-known travelers to the area; they made the trip on four different occasions and once stayed for eight months. A highlight of their visits occurred in 1973, the year of the tenth anniversary of Kenya's independence.

As a result of these trips, many African students became interested in the college found in the heart of the United States and decided to come to Western to study and to learn American ways. They found a very different culture which sometimes was most amusing. One young man, a chief's son who had two wives in Kenya, stayed with the Kerchers for several months. Since he was not used to the layers of bedding found in this country, he didn't automatically turn down the bed. For several months, he simply slept on top of the bedding. Dorotha became concerned about how to teach him that, in our colder months, he would have to use the blankets and sleep "under the covers." Her tactful way of solving the problem was to turn the covers down to the foot of the bed and prop up the pillows. The young man discovered the use of the blankets and started using them.

The Kerchers were primary "movers and shakers" in our international efforts during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Programs in many areas were developed and the University earned a national and international recognition because of its attention to the non-west-

ern world. The ramifications of those years are still part of the institution and, almost three decades later, Dorotha Kercher continues to correspond with students not only from Africa but all over the world. Today, a new initiative on the campus is revitalizing our entire international program and its multicultural implications.

Another important by-product of the African years was Dorotha Kercher's connection with Waldo Library. Because of her knowledge and skills, she was employed by the library to develop the collection dealing with Africa. For fifteen years, she led in the acquisition of materials including some rare items that are described elsewhere in this issue of *Gatherings*. Mrs. Kercher was so successful in her efforts that the University has a national reputation in this area. She eventually published a bibliography of African periodical holdings in the Waldo collection. When speaking of the problems of locating and purchasing books in foreign countries, she noted that this was never a difficult problem when in a major city such as London where there are hundreds of bookstores. However, locating materials at their source, in Africa, was a very different situation. Printed materials on African subjects were and are relatively scarce, and even when found, the owners would seldom consider selling them. Bookstores were virtually unknown and those which did exist tended to hold European materials, not indigenous items. That she was so successful in obtaining materials indicates her perseverance and wisdom; it also is evidence of the value of Western Michigan University's collection.

Dorotha Kercher's life has been consumed with activities that, despite fifty years in one place, have taken her to many different parts of the world. Travel was a Kercher passion. When her husband was alive, they traveled extensively in Europe, Africa, and the Far East as well as the out-of-the-way places in North America such as fishing camps in northern Ontario—a location that only a sociologist might love. Today she satisfies some of her insatiable wanderlust with reading about all of the places she has been or would go given the opportunity.

Dorotha Kercher—a maker of fortunate choices—whose decision to attend college in the Kalamazoo community over fifty years ago has been equally fortunate for those of us who know her. Her life has been one of service and happiness, and we will also value her as a true Friend of the University Libraries. G.E.

What's a book? Everything or nothing.
The eye that sees it is all.

Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson



Dorotha Kercher, *Africana* specialist.