And Gladly Collect...
By Sharon Carlson, Director, Archives and Regional History Collections

There is an interesting, even intriguing story of “why here, why now?” behind many of the collections housed in the Archives and Regional History Collections. Obviously, many of the collections contain unique materials, which, of course, entice those of us who are curators. But, on occasion, the rationale for the actual acquisition of a collection is equally interesting and that small piece of history may not be apparent to researchers. Indeed, patrons frequently ask how collections come to be placed in an archive. There is no single answer that may be given to this question, but the acquisition of almost every collection has at least one or more causative elements.

To begin this tale is to note that collections arrive due to differing circumstances. In the best case scenario, the creator of the documents makes a decision that he or she would like to donate papers to expand the University’s Archives—usually because “there” they will be preserved. This may be some years after the documents were created, and typically occurs when somebody is cleaning or perhaps downsizing and decides that his or her papers may be of value to researchers. In many instances, this is the best of circumstances for acquiring papers. The archivist has the opportunity to ask questions about the papers and activities associated with them. The archivist also has an opportunity to get biographical information from the donor that helps to evaluate the potential uses of the collection and identify the researchers who would find this particular collection worth examining.

Some recent additions of this nature have included materials donated by Glen Bachelder and Lance Ferraro. Bachelder grew up in Kalamazoo and had a long and distinguished career in Lansing, working for several governors. He started organizing and donating his family and genealogical papers to the Archives in 2006. He is in the process of doing the same for his professional papers.

Lance Ferraro, our second donor example, operated a local photography studio and was very involved politically from the 1970s to the 1990s. Over a period of many years, he has donated records associated with his business as well as files from some of the committees he participated on, including the Citizens for Responsible Rail Consolidation and Urban Development. In both instances, we in the archives have enjoyed getting to know the donors and have been able to ask them questions about the papers. This is perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of archival work.

A variation of this form of gift occurs when the creator of the papers is no longer living and a family member or, perhaps, a personal representative decides to donate the papers. This scenario almost always offers fewer opportunities to learn more about the papers. Depending on the relationship the current donor has to the creator of the papers or collection, information about the contents varies considerably. In the 1960s, Western Michigan University acquired the papers of Caroline Bartlett Crane from her granddaughter. In this instance, the family had considerable knowledge of Crane and could answer questions as the collection was processed for researchers.

Both instances of when and by whom the collection is donated may require site visits. The University Libraries van has been used in several instances to collect papers at a home or business because it is not always possible for donors to bring boxes to the Archives. Sometimes the document retrieval occurs at a stressful time for the donor, especially if a physical move or a death has brought about the decision to donate materials. However, the benefit of retrieving papers from a home or business is that it may well provide additional information about the donor or the history of a business or organization. We especially find that retrieving records from a business location provides information not available in other locations. Yet, when retrieving papers from a family home, there may be additional clues about the tastes and interests of the donor—or friends and relatives who can add an extra dimension to the documents’ value.

In a few instances, the University Archives personnel have, literally, been given the key to a house or building and told how much time could be spent to gather, pack, and remove the papers. The first time this occurred, we had three days to clear all donated materials from a house. The donor of the papers was recently deceased and had not lived in the house for several years. The large two-story house in Kalamazoo’s Vine neighborhood contained one hundred years of professional and personal papers of a prominent nineteenth century family. The donor left a large portion of her estate to Western Michigan University and stipulated that her family papers be donated to the Archives. The estate executor did not know much about the history of the family, but was well acquainted with the donor. The papers included considerable information about the family and additional valuable information was gathered through research.

Retrieving collections may involve several trips and provide unique opportunities to view buildings that would not be typically open to the public. Beginning in 2005, staff of the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections received a call from former employees involved in clearing out records from the building that had housed the Engineering Department of the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Paper Company. The equipment had been removed and sold, and the appropriate owners had removed legal papers. What remained included photographs and drawings of equipment and buildings associated with the several paper...
companies that had operated on that site as well as community buildings. The building where the papers had been kept had, unfortunately, experienced some leaks and had not been heated. As a result, our team of “removal archivists” had some physical challenges to meet!

The first phase of this particular acquisition involved relocating all the materials from their vulnerable environment in one building to a more stable building on the plant’s compound. Once removed from the first location, every item or container has had to be sorted and examined to determine if the record poses a hazard such as the presence of mold. If it does have a problem, that archive must be removed and set apart or destroyed. This evaluative procedure has already taken over two years and will not be finished until summer of 2007. Besides the number of records that have had to be examined, moved, and evaluated, the project has taken extra time because all the buildings housing the records are unheated. As a result, the project has been abandoned during the coldest winter months. Despite this setback, we have had the advantage of being able to see where a key historical industry of Kalamazoo once thrived. Moreover, we have had the expertise of several retirees, Joe Chadderdon and Don Davoust, in particular, who have been able to tell us about the papermaking operations and how the records relate to the once-thriving industry activities that occurred in this now dilapidated place.

One always-intriguing aspect of being a collector of archival family and business papers is that we never know what will be encountered when sorting through a person’s personal papers. One of the more interesting things that we have uncovered is human hair, usually small locks from children although, in one instance, we discovered a very thick brown braid. In this instance, photographs provided documentation that allowed us to make a good guess as to whom it belonged. Photos of the donor through her early teen years revealed that she had beautiful brown hair and often wore a single braid. Later photos from the 1920s indicate that she opted to cut her hair in the popular bob style of that era, but as often occurred, the braid was cut off as a unit and kept with other family mementos.

We have also found wigs, false teeth, and even a toilet seat tucked in with boxes and bags of papers. Obviously, in buildings that have not been occupied, there is also the risk of animals and animal waste. This archivist/archaeologist has never had the unfortunate experience of finding living mice, but I have often encountered evidence they were there before me. And, of course, there is ample evidence of a variety of bugs—both remains and, on occasion, living!

The most unusual acquisition story in which the Archives has been involved revolves around a gun. A Western Michigan University administrator had donated family and professional papers to the Archives in the years following his retirement. On occasion, he stopped into the Archives and dropped off materials, and, other times, somebody would go and retrieve papers from him. On a nice spring day in the early 1990s, he called the Archives to ask if somebody could pick up a few more papers he wanted to deposit. I had never met him and enthusiastically agreed to stop by his condominium over lunch. We visited briefly and I left with a brief case and a paper bag. The bag seemed heavy for the size and presumed number of papers in it, but I simply transported them back to the Archives where I handed the materials to Wayne Mann who was, at the time, the Director of the Archives. Mr. Mann returned about 20 minutes later and asked if I had looked at the papers or anything else in the bag. I indicated that the donor said that this material was especially for Wayne and I had not looked in the bag. Unbeknownst to me, the donor wanted to show a vintage firearm to Wayne and thought the most efficient way to deliver it would be to pack the gun in the bag with the papers! Let me hasten to affirm, the gun was NOT added to the Archives and Regional History Collections.

The next time you visit the Archives and Regional History Collections, in addition to realizing that you are working with unique and interesting materials, you may want to ask about the acquisition itself. Where did it come from and how did it get to the Archives? You may be surprised by the answer, but if you’ve read this far, you may also have learned that every archival collection has a story behind the acquisition that is also a part of the mystery of history!

Books are the legacies that a great genius leaves to mankind, which are delivered down from generation to generation as presents to the posterity of those who are yet unborn.

—Joseph Addison

Friends of the University Libraries: 2007

Susan Steuer, recently appointed Head of Special Collections, headlined the Winter Program of the Friends organization on January 19, 2007. Dr. Steuer’s article on the unique international exhibit of Nobel prize winners, which was displayed in Waldo during the fall of 2006, is found elsewhere in this issue of Gatherings. However, a significant part of her responsibilities in Special Collections relates to medieval history and manuscript administration, areas that are near and dear to her heart since her doctoral studies at the University of Minnesota were directed first to history and then to medieval studies. As she notes in her vitae, her research interests lie in “interdisciplinary social history with particular focus on quantitative and literary approaches to women, religion and social structure.”

The presentation by Susan Steuer to the Friends was entitled “From Widows to Waldo” and spoke about her education and background as preparation for working with WMU’s Special Collections materials, including information about her areas of academic research, notably widows who took religious vows in late medieval England and devotional literature. As she spoke, it was obvious that, as she first noted in her letter of application, “Working at Western Michigan’s Rare Book and Special Collections Library would be a natural outgrowth of my educational and academic interests.”

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