Preservation—At Risk
By Tom Amos

In the library world, the question of preservation, if and when it occurs, becomes a discussion of whether we should preserve "format" or "content," an insider librarian’s debate in librarian language. What that debate means in everyday terms is this: By accident or design, my library has a copy of the first edition of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer on its shelves. Over time, the copy has worn out—the cover may be battered, pages missing, the spine broken. Do I spend money to preserve or save the book in that format, a first edition, or do I buy a modern paperback edition, bind it, and put that on the shelves thus preserving the content. In the happiest of all worlds, I would hope to do both.

Different libraries, and, sometimes, different departments within the same library, will have varying answers to the question of preserving format or content. A special, non-replaceable collection within any type of library usually attempts to preserve the original condition of each record in that collection. At WMU, for example, the Archives and Regional History Collections, located in East Hall on the old campus, does use certain basic methods of preservation. Among them are acid-free folders and storage boxes, limited climate control, ultraviolet filters on lighting, encapsulation, archival sleeves for selected material, and special storage facilities for some materials.

When I came to WMU four years ago, there was no preservation program in place for our department of Special Collections although there had been some preliminary committee discussion. Some years earlier, the Institute of Cistercian Studies Library, then located in Hillside, a remodeled faculty apartment complex, had its own bindery with equipment and materials for various projects. By the early 1990s, when the ICS library was merged with the University Libraries' Special Collections, and moved to the third floor of Waldo Library, the bindery equipment had gone into storage. No in-house bindery existed, only the most basic work could be done in any department of the Libraries.

More important, the biggest problem in preservation is the lack of consistent climate and humidity control. Since the Libraries are largely composed of books printed on wood pulp paper, poor environment has sped up the chemical processes in paper or cloth bindings causing them to turn yellow and become brittle. Only one small rare book vault in the renovated Waldo Library Special Collections area provides complete protection from climate changes or exposures to sunlight or other sources of ultraviolet rays.

Because of the acid instability of the books and other printed materials that are located throughout Waldo Library and its branches, there are many "problem books" in our collections. In addition, some books are located in humid locations resulting in books that contain dormant mold spores. Others have cracked joints and hinges, or even more serious damage to their bindings. Some of the older books have metal boxes and clasps, and pose a threat to their neighbors on the shelf.

For example, when the first security system was installed many years ago, the Libraries' staff had to glue metal security plates to the back paper lining of the book cover, and then glue the last page down over them. Moisture gathered inside the closed book; the plates rusted and did serious damage to the cover and pages of the book itself. Another example of our lack of experience in preservation was the use of neat's-foot oil and lanolin on leather bindings. Unfortunately, a number of our parchment bindings were also oiled. Parchment does not absorb the mixture, and the books were left with a sticky, dust-collecting residue on the bindings.

Given these problems, the logical first step to a preservation program was to determine what needed to be done, that is, a conservation survey of the items found in Special Collections. This also provided an opportunity for the student assistants to learn how to evaluate books: they had to take each book from the shelf and write up a description of its condition, with special attention to any problem that might require treatment. We began this survey in January 1997 and have surveyed over 5,000 books to date—but this is only a quarter of Special Collections and there are hundreds of thousands of books and other deteriorating resources in the rest of the Libraries.

Very quickly, the first rule of preservation became our guide: Do Nothing That You Cannot Immediately Reverse. Because we had much to learn and do, we chose to make book boxes our first "treatment"; these are protective enclosures made from acid-free board stock. Students were taught to take size measurements from the books, and then to cut and fold the board stock. But, the limited Special Collections Reading Room area didn't lend itself to this kind of activity. We needed somewhere to store the large sheets of acid-free board and other materials—and to do the work. Space was found in a microfilm reader area on the second floor, and Michael McDonnell, Head, Government Documents, agreed to give up the space to create Room 2045, the Preservation Office.

The new room was "furnished" with the old Cistercian Studies board shear, a huge cast-iron paper and board cutter weighing over 500 pounds; three large cast-iron book presses; and some smaller finishing presses. An assortment of tables to hold the equipment and a large-scale mat cutter were located and moved to the room. The tables provided space to work as well. There is a large cabinet for supplies, and boxes of acid-free board and document boxes are stacked along one open wall space.

Once we had an area in which to work, we could initiate other treatments. We have rehoused the Mowen Collection of German Newspapers in tray boxes made from corrugated acid-free board, and have organized seven different collections

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of papers with document boxes and acid-free folders thus preserving over 400 shelf feet of modern manuscripts. We do hinge and spine repairs with acid-free paper and PVA adhesive. Mold spores in books are killed with a 100% alcohol solution because we would need a fume hood and vent to use thymol crystals dissolved in alcohol. Since the goal is to preserve books in their original condition, Special Collections is one department in the library that retains dust jackets on books. We began to use sheet Mylar to cut dust jacket protectors since commercially available protectors are not chemically neutral. At a professional library meeting, I saw a machine demonstrated that would place Mylar pockets around books. This item was purchased and the machine allows us to cover 45 books an hour rather than hand making 10 or so in the same amount of time. Every treatment is labor intensive even when we are able to add special equipment.

An operational problem emerged as the program grew. I could not supervise work in two different locations located on two separate floors of Waldo Library, and it was obvious that the duties needed personal direction as they grew more complex. To solve this problem, the position of Special Collections Coordinator was created in the fall of 1999. The current incumbent is Ms. Samantha Cairo, a graduate of WMU’s Medieval Studies M.A. program, and a “graduate” of the Rare Book Room’s “school of preservation” where she spent almost three years as a student worker. Recently, Ms. Cairo completed courses in book and paper repair at the Newberry Library in Chicago, and will use her new skills and techniques to improve our repertory of treatments.

The Preservation Office is an important part of the University Libraries’ efforts to maintain our collections. Along with the funding and administrative support has come excellent assistance in the graduate assistants supplied by the Institute of Cistercian Studies. Tracina Jackson-Adams and Dorothy Porter have been invaluable to our program, and have trained a corps of student workers to the tasks. The Preservation Office staff has been helping other departments of the Libraries with repairs, materials, and advice on how to do their own work. Our hope is that the program initiated by Special Collections will ensure that a century from now a reader can find and read any book that we currently have—and in the same condition that we acquired it. Such a goal requires endless attention to details long unattended, but the staff of Special Collections is dedicated to the preservation of our University Libraries.

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Editor & Designer:
Laurel A. Grotzinger
Professor, Central Reference
[laurel.grotzinger@wmich.edu]

Photos:
Galen Rike
Associate Professor, Education Library

The University Libraries—
A Brief History

By Sharon Carlson

The history of the academic library at Western Michigan University begins with the origins of the institution itself. In 1903, after a battle in the State Legislature about the location, Western State Normal School was officially established in Kalamazoo. The first classes were offered in local school and governmental buildings in 1904 and attracted 117 students. By 1905, the original part of East Hall had been built. It included a series of rooms for the library that were located on the second floor. About 500 books had been acquired, and a librarian, Esther Braley, was hired to oversee and develop the collection.

Miss Braley was appointed as the first library director at the salary of $800 a year—a fairly good salary for the time. She was a graduate of the University of Michigan, and had earned her library degree from the University of Illinois State Library School. Few individuals had such a library degree. In fact, the University of Illinois training school was the only degree awarding school in the Midwest, so the new librarian in Kalamazoo came unusually well credentialed. In addition, Esther Braley had been employed at the University of Michigan Library. During her tenure at the State Normal School, Braley oversaw phenomenal growth in the collections. The fledgling collection of 500 volumes grew to 1,300 volumes in the first year alone.

The growth of the library was not surprising given the forward direction of Western State Normal School even during the first years of its existence. Agitation to build a library building came within the first decade as the scope of the School expanded its enrollment and programs. By 1913, a new science building had been constructed, and the number of volumes in the library approached 20,000. A few years later, in 1919, Western began granting four-year bachelor degrees. The State Legislature funded a library building program to provide the much-needed facility, but the outbreak of World War I, and rising costs during the war years put the program on hold until the 1920s.

World War I also contributed to the resignation of Western’s first library director, Esther Braley. One of Braley’s closest friends, Mary Master Needham, served as a nurse in World War I and was widowed as a result of the war when her husband was killed in a plane accident in France. She questioned the necessity of war and wrote about it several years later in a personal narrative, Tomorrow to Fresh Fields (Horizon House, 1936).

In 1918, Needham returned to the United States to talk about the destruction and devastation in France. She scheduled a presentation at Western and sought others to work with her toward the reconstruction effort known as the “American Committee for Devastated France.” She convinced her friend, librarian Esther Braley, to return to France with her. Braley took a leave of absence and wrote periodically to the Western Normal Herald of her work with the children in France. By 1920 she returned to the United States, but did not return to Kalamazoo.

In the meantime, Braley’s absence required somebody to lead the library. Anna French was the natural choice because of her education and experience. French had earned degrees from Michigan State Normal College and Drexel Institute School of Library Science; the latter school was the third library training school founded in the U.S. She had taught school in Kalamazoo for one year before beginning at Western as a Library Assistant in 1907.

Anna French’s two major contributions to Western State’s library history would be her direction of the construction of the first building dedicated as a library and substantial growth of the collections. French would also view firsthand the growth of Western, as it became Western State Teachers College in 1927, and 14 years later, in 1941, Western Michigan College of Education. Enrollment by the mid-1940s would top 4,000 students and, by the end of French’s career, Western would be attracting international students, and, in conjunction with the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, could offer its first