Rare? Special? Why?

By Tom Amos

The wording of the question is usually a bit more precise: “Can you tell me just why that book is up here?” But, it does get asked frequently. Often, the book that has raised the question is one found in the Carol Ann Haenicke American Women’s Poetry Collection. This is especially true if the volume has been published within the last ten years or even the last 50 since the user’s preconceptions define rare book or special collections (the names applied to the rooms where I work) as something centuries old or of some unique format or value. Yet, there the book is found, on the third floor of Waldo Library, in the Rare Book Room or its Vault.

To answer any such question in more detail than my usual few words of explanation, it’s necessary to review how the poetry collection (or other “special” collections) came into being. On October 28, 1993, the Carol Ann Haenicke American Women’s Poetry Collection was dedicated in the Edwin and Mary Meader Rare Book Room in Waldo Library. Although there are many other book collections in this country, some of which specialize in various areas of women’s studies, this particular array of materials was, and remains, the first to focus solely on poetry by American women authors.

The Women’s Poetry Collection originated when a collaboration of WMU’s Department of English, the administration of the University and key individuals in the University Libraries came to a common conclusion. The University’s English Department has long emphasized creative writing including poetry. As a result, the Libraries has a strong foundation in the literature including, of course, poetry books, literary journals, reference, and associated research tools that support course work and study in the field. Professors of English Katherine Joslin and her husband Thomas Bailey provided the starting point to acquire the poetry collection because of their friendship with Joslin’s dissertation director, Harrison Hayford, Professor Emeritus of English at Northwestern University.

Hayford, a Melville scholar and book collector, has spent his life building collections of American literature for academic libraries. One that he had not yet “placed” was a large “accumulation” of works by American women poets, over 2,200 volumes, that Joslin and Bailey saw as a rare opportunity; it could serve as the basis for a research collection at WMU. Shirley Clay Scott, chair of the department, added her support to a proposal presented to President Diether Haenicke and then Dean Douglas Ferraro, College of Arts and Sciences. Moreover, the recently re-opened and remodeled Waldo Library included a rare book and special collection facility on the third floor of the library—a locale that, for the first time, could provide an appropriate home for a valuable set of books. Monies exchanged hands and the Carol Ann Haenicke American Women’s Poetry Collection was established in honor of Mrs. Haenicke, a professional librarian and strong patron of the arts.

Along with the initial holdings came a plan for continuing growth and development. Within three years, the original purchase had tripled in size to over 6,190 books of which some 4,200 are cataloged in the Libraries’ online catalog. Also found in this “special” resource are five linear feet of manuscripts; seven sound recordings; twenty broadsides; and a number of artifacts, such as photographs, commemorative stamps and other objects. The ability to increase, significantly, the number of items was largely possible because Harrison Hayford has continued to collect American women poets, and two additional “accumulations” were purchased directly from him.

At the present time, the Haenicke poetry collection consists of the broadest possible range of authors, styles, and quality of poetry by American women poets. The chronological range stretches from Anne Bradstreet and an eighteenth century gift books and albums that are con­sequent venues for women poets of that age.

The volumes in the Poetry Collection include first and subsequent editions, appearances in journals and anthologies, broadsides, and fine printing limited editions. Many types of materials and poetic genres can be found. Strong groups of the prose writings of some authors (drama, novels, short stories, essays, and criticism) are also housed with the poetry, and provide a context for the careers of the American poets who also wrote in other genres.

The Carol Ann Haenicke Collection does not exist in a vacuum. Not only do materials found in Waldo’s General Stacks support it, but so do other Special Collections holdings. A number of the women wrote or write children’s books. There are some 1,000 volumes in the Historical Children’s Collection including works by Michigan’s Gwen Frostic, Gwendolyn Brooks, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and others who are found in the Haenicke resources. Some limited editions, and books printed on the hand press by the Perishable Press or the Seizin Press were acquired by the Libraries long before the Poetry Collection was

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steps onto the soil of the 50th state.

Gordon thinks he retired from WMU in 1990, but that really isn’t true. Back in the busy months when Waldo Library was being rebuilt and expanded, Assistant Dean Bettina Meyer and Gordon, along with some colleagues, began the planning for the first Friends of the University Libraries organization at WMU. Staff member Bill Smith and Gordon drafted a constitution, called together interested individuals, and, ergo, the Friends became a reality. No officer has probably items, but he’s invariably at the scene—a busy months when Waldo Library was

The Haenicke Poetry Collection is a scholarly resource for the academic community and a cultural resource for the wider community. Now that the foundation is firmly established, one goal is to give the holdings a stronger shape as a research tool. To this end, an Advisory Committee composed of English department faculty and librarians is preparing a list of 100 poets whose works will be collected comprehensively. A second objective is to acquire the working papers of selected women poets so that the creative process is seen in more detail. Still another aim is to attract younger poets to the collection—first to support and enhance their own work, but also to associate them with WMU and acquire their contributions. Achieving these objectives will ensure the intellectual direction of the Collection, and affirm its research and teaching ends here and in the larger academic community. A major recognition of the value of this resource and the goals established by the Advisory Committee came in January 1997 when an anonymous gift of $450,000 brought about an acquisition endowment. That gift assures that growth, access to the community, and usefulness as a research resource can and will occur.

So, “why is that book up here?” All is understood when the patron/user knows that this non-circulating research collection is kept under controlled temperature and humidity conditions. That book is here so that it can survive the acid burn of our contemporary environment, so that it can remain in the physical state in which it left the publisher’s warehouse for as long as possible. That book is here so that not only the text remains readable, but that its bibliographical integrity is intact. That book is the actual volume that the author created and approved through the publication process. The patron who visits Waldo Library in the next week, the next century, or the next millennium will be able to handle and read that book. Rare in its selectivity and uniqueness, special in its form and availability—and that, in short, is why!

"What is more important in a library than anything else—than everything else—is the fact that it exists."
—Archibald MacLeish

Gatherings

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Unexpected Treasures

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searchable text and some 1,000 illustrations. Found within this substantial set of data are the original Encyclopedia on American Indians, published in the 1850s; the full text of over 350 treaties, color illustrations; myths; statistics; and biographical information on the lives of famous Indian chiefs.

TEXTBOOK COLLECTION

Although the name may not immediately catch one’s attention, this unique compilation of resources is heavily in demand, a focal point in the circulating collection. The titles found in the Education Library include elementary, middle school, and secondary textbooks currently in use in the U.S. They provide prospective teachers with examples of the books and resources they will encounter in the classroom. Among the topical areas are reading, spelling, language arts, mathematics, history, social studies, science, and several foreign languages.

The status of the item as a "textbook" is noted in the classification number that always begin with the letters "LT." The remaining components of that number indicate subject, publisher, series title, grade level, material type, and publication year. Along with the student and teacher editions are activity booklets and workbooks, copy masters, lab manuals, and other teaching tools. Part of the development of this collection is built on the premise that every major publishing firm should be represented. As a result, the user can find examples from Glencoe, McGraw-Hill; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; Holt, Rinehart & Winston; Scott Foresman; Addison-Wesley; and Silver, Burdett & Ginn. As with other materials, the FINDER online catalog can be searched to locate specific titles. Although intended primarily for the teacher-to-be, many users peruse the collection simply because a textbook is a good introduction to the topic.

In general, the University Libraries does not select postsecondary textbooks for the overall collection. This special grouping in the Education Library is intended and developed for the future teacher whose career is centered on the K-12 schools of this country. As such, it is a valuable "special" collection at Western Michigan University as is each of the others described in earlier paragraphs; Curriculum Enrichment, ERIC Document Collection, and Multimedia. Visit the Education Library and discover, anew or for the first time, the variety of resources that can be found in the University Libraries.