The Draper Manuscripts: Frontier Lives

Come along on a trip back through time, to America in the 1700s and 1800s when the Western Frontier was the Allegheny Mountains and the Ohio River valley, when travel was by foot or horseback, and when each day was filled with a combination of danger and drudgery; come back to a time when heroes were bigger than life and could well be your "nighest" neighbor.

Learn what members of the Fox or Sauk tribes meant by Sog-o-nosh, Muc-camon, and She-caw-go-may-mang, and read the Indian Agent’s document on the “Manners & Customs of the Sauk & Fox Nations of Indians …” that was delivered to General William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, on 15th January 1827.

Unravel the detailed genealogies of families that settled in the “Western Frontier” of Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, Kentucky, and Tennessee; learn names like Boone, Clark, Girty, and Kenton; and also hear of the families of Sumter, Finely, Hart, and Pogue.

Come and revel in this treasure trove of material from one of the most significant collections of historical material of the American frontier. Amassed over a period of 48 years by one man, Lyman Copeland Draper (1815-1891), the material is arranged and assembled into over 500 volumes in accordance with 19th century library practice. The Regional History Collections, located on the East Campus of Western Michigan University, has the only complete set of the Draper Manuscripts in Michigan. The collection is reproduced on 123 reels of microfilm acquired from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Original documents dated 1740-1830 make up the majority of the papers. In addition, there are newspaper and journal articles as well as court records and other legal documents that Draper copied out by hand. This amazing set of documents provides an enthralling view of life and times during the frontier conflicts of the 1740s and 1750s through the American Revolution and the War of 1812.

The researcher gains a special feel for the authenticity of the material when he reads the words of Judge A.H. Dunlevy of Lebanon, Ohio, who, writing to Lyman Draper in 1850, harrumphs: “Unfortunately I knew too many of these Pioneers to have a very high opinion of them as a class of men. It is true they comprised [sic] men of the most uncompromising [sic] virtue, integrity and piety, but this was true only of a very few—the most of them were the very opposite, ignorant, depraved and licentious.” And, with a few words, he poked holes in Draper’s romanticized view of the “Heroes of the Frontier.”

Lyman Draper saw the history of the American frontier primarily as a series of military events, and his heroes were the soldiers, scouts, and settlers who battled Indians as well as the British and Tory sympathizers. Draper was interested in frontier women and black slaves only in relation to a particular event or person he wished to chronicle; yet the collection contains fascinating material that opens a window into their lives as well. There are references to black slaves who served as soldiers in the Revolution and Indian conflicts; other documents note African-Americans who migrated west—sometimes as slaves, sometimes as free men. Another commentary tells of a black woman who survived the two sieges of Wheeling. In fact, frontier women are directly represented by some 230 interviews and conversations recorded by Draper.

The prevalent view of the period, described as “Manifest Destiny” for the Indians, was shared by Draper; however, the material he collected presents a broader view. Thomas Forsyth, Indian Agent among the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo tribes; John Johnson, Indian Agent with the Shawnee, Miami, and...
other Ohio Valley tribes; and Richard Butler, Indian Commissioner, provide contemporary material on cultural thought and attitudes, tribal history, traditions, and legends.

Both the Central Reference Department in Waldo Library and the Regional History Collections in East Hall have a copy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's Guide to the Draper Manuscripts (Madison: 1983) which details the 50 series into which the 500 volume collection is divided; Appendix III of the Guide is devoted exclusively to the hundreds of maps found in the collection. Another aid to researchers is the calendars which list, in chronological order, material contained in eleven of the series; these are on microfiche in the Regional History Collections.

Because Lyman Copeland Draper, over a century ago, sought and collected virtually untapped manuscript and oral sources, and because he preserved whatever he collected, historians and scholars today are fortunate to have material available that is truly unique and significant. Through the legacy of the Charles R. Starring Endowment Fund, the University Archives and Regional History Collections is able to provide this amazing resource to our University community as well as to the larger community of historical researchers in Michigan.

Leta Schoenhals:
Nonretiring Spirit
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ends up with a list—not complete, but at least a sense of what she does: (1) Member of the Board and President of the Kalamazoo Association of Retired School Personnel; (2) Member of the Evaluation Board of the Visiting Nurse Association of Southwest Michigan; (3) Co-organizer of a program at the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home that provides readers for the children before they go to bed; (4) Teacher of "55 Alive" for the American Association of Retired People—a program that helps senior automobile drivers cope with aging changes; she has also taught others to teach the course; (5) Chair of the Administrative Council, the governing body of the First United Methodist Church of Kalamazoo; and (6) President of the Friends of the University Libraries, Western Michigan University. Probably, one should also mention that she spends a considerable amount of time cheering on Bronco sports teams including football and basketball.

And there we are, friends: Leta Schoenhals doesn’t know a thing about retirement.

G.E.