Women in the Forefront

Participation in study and literary clubs offered one of the few options to women in the nineteenth century for self-improvement and an opportunity to exert influence in the community. Among the early women's literary organizations in the United States, the Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association also has the distinction of being the first women's organization in Michigan and served as a model for other literary clubs in and beyond the state. Since 1967, the Ladies' Library Association has deposited its non-active records into a collection at the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections, one of the three branches that, in addition to Waldo Library, constitute the official University libraries. Totaling ten linear shelf feet, the Ladies' Library Association Collection documents the operations and events of the organization from its inception in 1852 to the present.

Growing from the informal gatherings of several women of New England origin who met in their homes in the 1840s to read, visit, and do needle work, the Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association filled a void in the "pioneer" village of 2,000 residents. Under the leadership of Lucinda Stone, the group formally organized and expanded in 1852 to "encourage useful and entertaining reading" that would promote the "moral and intellectual improvement" of the community. The Association's first goal was to establish a lending library.

The materials available in the WMU archives provide a wealth of evidential information about the organization including handwritten minutes, membership rosters, account books, audio-visual materials, and architectural drawings. Also available are such ephemeral materials as handbills, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and catalogs of the library holdings. Found among the seventy-five photographs in the Collection are pictures of early members, and interior and exterior views of the Association's building—a unique architectural structure that is believed to be the first such building built exclusively for such a group. Although in excellent condition, the variety of materials represents a processing and preservation challenge. The priorities in processing are three-pronged: to preserve the materials, to retain the original order of the Collection, and to facilitate researcher access. Measures for permanent storage require the use of special containers to reduce contact with harmful agents.

The members of the Association realized the conflicts inherent in advocating self-improvement juxtaposed against the realities of managing the nineteenth century home and family. References to these struggles appear throughout the minutes of the meetings of the Ladies' Library Association. For example, at the Social Meeting of the Association held on March 30, 1859, members debated at length whether the family could "be just as comfortable and just as happy" if women took "fewer unnecessary stitches in the family wardrobe" to gain time to read.

A review of the documents in the collection that describe the activities and operations of the organization gives a valuable perspective on the social and institutional setting of nineteenth century Kalamazoo. The Ladies' Library Association sponsored the first lending library in Kalamazoo, and the manuscripts describe the experiences of the women in establishing policies and selecting books. By 1869, the 300 member organization owned a collection of 1,630 books with a circulation of 4,732 volumes. Membership and circulation levels dropped after a free public library opened in 1872. The Association changed its emphasis from operating a lending library to increasing the number of educational opportunities for women and also faced the continuing question of where to keep materials and hold meetings.

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Out of the Dark Continent

Africa, an enormous continent five times the size of the United States, was long protected from outsiders by the formidable Sahara Desert in the north and a forbidding and rocky western coast with few safe harbors. Despite the barriers, there were still those who chose to fight their way into its dangerous and dark corners. The University Libraries is fortunate to have a small but significant collection of books written by some of the early European and, later, American adventurers.

Most of the collection was compiled by Dorotha Kercher, who was the African Bibliographer for Waldo Library during the 1960s and 1970s. Her life is profiled elsewhere in this issue of Gatherings. To honor her accomplishment in building the Africana collection, the University Libraries, in May of 1994, held an exhibit of some of the outstanding volumes that are now part of the library holdings found in the Rare Book Room. A sense of the value of the collection is found in the following descriptions of a few of the items that Mrs. Kercher brought together.

Our earliest volumes were written by a French ornithologist who traveled to Africa long before modern methods of transportation could smooth his journeys. His major purpose, in the 1780s, was to locate and collect unusual specimens of birds and animals. François Le Vaillant described his voyage in two separate editions, one published in 1790 and the second in 1798—Waldo Library has a copy of each, and of special note is the fact that both volumes include many fine prints that reflect the untamed African world that he visited at the end of the eighteenth century. Le Vaillant hoped that his collection of rare birds and animals would be of interest to the many natural history museums and botanical gardens that were then being built in French cities.

Unfortunately, his timing was poor and he crossed swords with the French Revolution; instead of profiting from his travels, he spent a year in prison. However, he also escaped the guillotine and he crossed swords with the French Revolution; instead of profiting from his travels, he spent a year in prison.


Another name oft-recognized as a searcher for the source of the Nile is that of David Livingstone (1813-1873), who sought the true source in 1866—apparently not knowing of or believing in Speke’s discovery. When he had not returned by 1871, the New York Herald sent journalist Henry Stanley to find him. The binding of the volume by Stanley of his travels in Africa pictures the famous meeting between the two men when Stanley is quoted as saying, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume.” (Stanley, Henry M. How I Found Livingstone. Travel, Adventures, and Discoveries in Central Africa: Including Four Months’ Residence with Dr. Livingstone. London: 1874)

Most might be surprised learn that men were not the only ones who explored Africa in the nineteenth century. Mary French-Sheldon, an American, also took a safari, in the later part of the century, to Kilimanjaro and other areas of Africa. Fortunately, she documented her travels in a book published in the early 1890s—a period in which women were more and more recognized for their ability to do what men alone had been permitted to attempt. [Sultan to Sultan. Adventures Among the Masai and Other Tribes of East Africa by “Bebe Bwana.” London: Saxon; Boston: Arena, 1892].

Africa was, of course, an enigma and a challenge to people from every culture and country. Long before the English and French became interested in East Africa, West Africa had been explored by the Portuguese looking for a route to the Indies. They were successful in their search and then built forts along the coast to protect their fleets as they sailed south around the Horn. By 1575, they had also founded the city of Luanda on the coast of what is known today as the People’s Republic of Angola. However, because of the steep escarpment that separates the coast from the interior highlands of Angola, Portugal had never conquered or ruled the interior kingdoms of West Central Africa. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, it became evident that Portugal either had to gain control of that area or else other European countries would do so. As a result, military expeditions were sent to the interior to strengthen the Portuguese claims.

A unique manuscript in the University’s collection is a field book of an expedition into the interior of present-day Angola. Written in 1878 by an anonymous Portuguese soldier or settler, it details and maps the rivers and other topographical features along the Cunene River in the interior of the country. The author left his residence near the Calunje River on January 1, 1878, and reached Cacina on February 11, 1878. He noted the distance traveled each day—12 to 18
Sharing and Cooperation in Western Michigan

by Lance Query

As the amount of available information proliferates in all formats, and as the cost of acquiring that information also increases, libraries must decide what to acquire for their own patrons because it is needed often or quickly, and what must be acquired from other libraries "in time" to meet the patron's need. Librarians refer to this paradigm as "access versus ownership" of information. At the present time, the trend in allocating dollar resources is toward access over ownership.

The key to an agreeable solution to both users and library administrators is one that incorporates a shared bibliographic catalog in which libraries and their users can identify the source of the information they need, and a delivery system that obtains the information within a reasonable amount of time at a reasonable cost. For practical and obvious reasons, progress in this area has occurred at the local and regional levels rather than nationally. Fortunately, Michigan has been a leader in developing this system also facilitates online statistical reporting about use of the services of the Kalamazoo Valley Regional History Collections, located in downtown Kalamazoo, stands as a functional monument to the efforts of the early members. Among the archival records is the original 1878 ink on linen architectural drawing used to construct the building, as well as a copy of the Act of the Michigan Legislature of 1879 authorizing the Association to own real estate.

This amazing compilation of and about women, libraries, and nineteenth century Kalamazoo is one of several underutilized resources found in the University Libraries. The Ladies' Library Association Collection offers many possibilities for scholarly examination, research, and publication. See the focus is either gender studies or social history, the library association records contain a treasure trove of primary resources. Researchers may use the materials in the Archives and Regional History Collections, located in WMU's East Hall, Room 11, on the East Campus. For further information, please call (616) 387-8790.
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 Nairobi. 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-western 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 Dorothy 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.
There Is No Such Thing As The Dictionary

[The following is excerpted from a presentation at the 1994 Southwestern Michigan Association Annual Meeting of Phi Beta Kappa by Professor David Isaacson, Assistant Head of Reference and Humanities Librarian, Waldo Library.]

When a student (and sometimes a faculty member) asks me for "the dictionary," there simply is no such thing as the dictionary—she [or he] simply wants to "look up a word," doesn't want to spend a lot of time doing it, and may not want to find out that more than one dictionary might answer the question.

But, when a student seems interested or slightly curious, I like to point out that some dictionaries are better suited than others to answer certain questions. If time and inclination permit, I can often persuade students that a few moments devoted to browsing the dictionary shelves—or a few more minutes spent comparing entries on the same word in different dictionaries—can be fun as well as enlightening. If, as is usually the case, I can spend only a few minutes, my response might include some of the following suggestions.

If you want to get more information than the abridged dictionary you probably had in mind when you asked the question, let me show you the standard unabridged dictionaries. "Unabridged" may be a rather intimidating word, as is the size of these fat, sometimes obese dictionaries. On the other hand, size can impress rather than daunt. Probably, for instance, most dictionary users have some vague appreciation of the name Webster's. You may not know, however, that there is no copyright on this brand name, and that only those dictionaries published by Merriam-Webster inherit the venerability of Noah Webster—the most famous of American lexicographers.

The famous second edition, published in 1934, has about 650,000 words, goes back to Chaucer's time, and therefore includes many words not found in the third edition. Although many entries are the same in both editions, each has words not found in the other, and some definitions of the same word have changed over the thirty year period between dates of publication. This edition notes, interestingly, that "disinterested" in the sense of "indifferent" is a rare use of the word (remember, this edition was published in 1934). The second edition also takes a rather prescriptive attitude toward the language, while the third edition has, generally, a more liberal, descriptive attitude. So, for instance, "ain't" in the second edition is labeled as a dialect word as well as a mark of illiteracy, while the third edition has a usage note: "though disapproved of by many and more common in less educated speech, used orally in most parts of the United States by many cultivated speakers, as in the phrase, "ain't I." (Surely, if you're caught in a verbal corner, "ain't" works better than "amn't").

Another highly respected unabridged dictionary is the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, whose second edition was published in 1987. This source defines about 315,000 words, so it's no match for either edition of Webster's. On the other hand, Random House's definitions are usually easier to understand since they're often shorter. Random House also lists the most recent meaning first, which is, after all, what most users are probably looking for. You can immediately see the difference between these rivals by the following example. Webster's Third defines "credenza" as "a sideboard, buffet, or bookcase patterned after the buffet, or bookcase patterned after the credence of the Renaissance period, especially one without legs whose base rests on the floor." But Random House simply defines the word as a sideboard or buffet. If you already know what a buffet looks like, Random House gives you a ballpark idea of a credenza, but clearly Webster's Third, in this instance, is more precise—and has a drawing as well.

By far the most important unabridged English dictionary is the Oxford English Dictionary. This monument of scholarship had its last major revision in 1989. It is published in 20 volumes, costs $2,500, has 291,600 entries, 616,500 definitions, 2.5 million quotations, 250,000 etymologies, and 137,000 pronunciations. The reason it takes 20 volumes to cover the alphabet is that every word is traced historically. Each definition as well as each major nuance of meaning are supported by chronologically arranged quotations. If Webster's Third takes three small print columns to define 40 meanings of the word "set," the OED takes 24 three-column pages of small print to define 147 major and hundreds of minor meanings of this word.

Most general readers may not want the exhaustive detail of the OED, and they may feel that an abridged Random House or Webster's is quite sufficient for everyday use. But you don't have to be a word maven to appreciate that even the unabridged sources may fail to answer some word questions. Waldo Library's reference collection, for instance, is well stocked with hundreds of other general dictionaries as well as specialized ones in English and many other languages. Some of these are at least as scholarly as the OED, such as the Australian National Dictionary.

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Dictionary... Continued from page 5

Dictionary. Some are restricted to a particular aspect of language, such as word origins, slang, dialect, pronunciation, rhymes, clichés, and euphemisms. Some are restricted to the technical language of a profession, such as librarianship or law. Many of these dictionaries are clustered together by the Library of Congress classification system in the general dictionaries section, but many others are classed by subject, so that dictionaries of words in economics are found near other economics books.

With those final comments, my additional words of suggestion or guidance to the student (or other user) who asked for the dictionary would end. But, of course, I invite all members of this audience [and our Library Friends] to visit our dictionaries. After browsing among them for a time, I'm sure you'll agree with me that each is unique, and, therefore, it's not true that one is as good as another nor, indeed, is there the dictionary. D.I.

For those who would like the full references to the titles cited in the article:


Out of the Dark Continent
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kilometers—and the temperature which often reached 27 degrees centigrade—for us a florid 80 degrees Fahrenheit. His last entry is March 6, 1878.

The Africana Collection in Waldo Library's Rare Book Room includes many first and early editions of other explorers of Africa. Often the records of their travels and exploits reflect the late nineteenth century attitude that Africa contained an inexhaustible supply of flora and fauna to remove, hunt, or conquer. The legacy from this perspective has become a sad inheritance for the twentieth century, but the volumes in the collection return us to a time and to exotic places that haunt our dreams, pique our curiosity, and shape our fantasies. B.B.

Friends Meet...
The Annual Meeting and Reception of the Friends of [Western Michigan] University Libraries was held on Sunday, April 17, 1994. A number of donors, contributors, associates, students, and life members met in the Rare Book Room in Waldo Library to conduct the annual business meeting and hear Dean Lance Query describe the University Libraries’ unusual collections and aspirations for the future. The nominating committee put forth the following slate: President, Leta Schoenhals; Vice President, Robert Hegel; Secretary, Kristin Johnston; and Treasurer, Bettina Meyer. The membership unanimously elected the slate and added Kristen Badra to the Board of Directors; she joins Judy Canaan and Hazel DeMeyer Rupp. Retiring president Peter Krawutschke welcomed the members and conducted the annual business meeting.