"Shared Waters," Shared History

By Sharon Carlson, Director, Archives and Regional History Collections

An old adage states that “a friend in need is a friend indeed.” Over the summer of 2005, the Friends of the University Libraries provided support for the University Libraries to host the traveling exhibit, “Shared Waters.” Developed by the Fort Miami Heritage Society, of St. Joseph, MI, in conjunction with faculty and students from Western Michigan University, the exhibit had a very successful showing from 2003 to 2005 at the Priscilla U. Byrns Heritage Center in St. Joseph. A committee, made up of several faculty members involved in the initial project and headed by Dr. Nora Faires, Canadian Studies and Department of History, approached the Libraries’ dean, Joseph G. Reish, about launching the traveling exhibit at Waldo Library.

The exhibit “Shared Waters” illustrates the convergence that occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries as Michigan and its surrounding Great Lakes served as a center for French colonial ambitions in the New World. Pre-historic glacial movement resulted in the Great Lakes, which supported an abundant variety of bird species and fur bearing animals. With the arrival of the French in the 1600s, a network of trade and social exchange developed that profoundly shaped the history of this region. Water routes linked missions, forts, and settlements on the lakeshore and at strategic river sites. This network included Fort Miami and Fort St. Joseph in southwest Michigan.

Waldo Library needed friends to host this first rate exhibit, and, ultimately, the generous financial support from the Friends of the University Libraries made it possible. Much work had to be accomplished over the spring and summer of 2005. One obstacle that nobody predicted involved mounting the exhibit panels. Originally created for the facilities at the Priscilla U. Byrns Heritage Center at the Fort Miami Heritage Society, initial attempts to install them at Waldo Library were discouraging. At one point, committee members questioned whether the traveling exhibit would move forward. Thanks to the perseverance of Regina Buckner, Director of Operational Services in the Libraries, and the ingenuity of WMU’s Physical Plant, temporary mounts allowed the panels to be attached to the walls of the library atrium for the duration of the exhibit. Committee members also secured the original artifacts, negotiated new loan agreements, and created exhibit labels. Additional support for the exhibit and related activities came from several WMU offices including the Office of the President, the Diether H. Haenicke Institute for International and Area Studies, the College of Education, the Department of Anthropology, the Department of History and its Canadian Studies Program, and the Environmental Studies Program. Loaned artifacts came from the Fort Miami Heritage Society, Fort St. Joseph Museum, Kalamazoo Valley Museum, and Mackinac State Historic Parks.

All the efforts paid off when “Shared Waters” opened to an enthusiastic crowd of about 125 on September 9, 2005. Dr. Conrad Heidenreich, York University, Toronto, provided a program to a capacity crowd in the Stewart Clock Tower. President Judith Bailey presided over a ribbon cutting ceremony that included Dennis Moore, Public Affairs Officer of the Consulate General of Canada; Michel Lafleur, Québec Representative for the Midwest; Michigan Senator Tom George; Kalamazoo Mayor Robert Jones; and President Emeritus Diether Haenicke.

Several classes within and outside the University have incorporated “Shared Waters” into their curriculum. Most notably, Dr. Toni Woolfork-Barnes, director of Western’s First Year Experience Program has included the exhibit as a recommended activity for the 600 students enrolled in this new program. K-12 groups may use the curriculum materials originally developed by the Fort Miami Heritage Society with assistance from Western Michigan University students. Curriculum experts from the University and Kalamazoo Public Schools also developed

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additional resources, including materials geared toward university students. These resource materials are available to teachers and faculty interested in incorporating “Shared Waters” into classroom activities.

Experience “Shared Waters” for yourself. The exhibit includes numerous panels with text and artwork from 25 museums and archives in the United States, Canada, and France. The artifacts include some spectacular pieces of trade silver on loan from several museums. One particularly striking artifact is a birch bark canoe constructed using traditional methods. A canoe cradle, developed by WMU’s Physical Plant, provides a wonderful venue for viewing the interior and exterior of this artifact. It has proved to be extremely popular with all of the groups visiting the exhibit. The exhibit is located on the second and third floors of Waldo Library and will be in place through the end of February 2006. For additional information on the exhibit or to schedule a group tour, please contact Kathy Gerow, University Libraries, at 269-387-5202.

Bookworms...
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newspapers, scholarly journals, popular magazines, newsletters, printouts, leaflets, cereal boxes—anything in print.

Fortunately, there is help for bookworms, and for those who care for them. But it must start with a sincere, complete decision by the bookworm himself to give up all forms of excessive reading. For years I was able to hide my addiction to reading from family, friends, and colleagues. But I could not, finally, hide my addiction from myself. In the last years of my increasingly downward spiral, I lost all sense of reality unmediated by reading. I finally attended a meeting of Bookworms Anonymous. I am not going to say anything more about this organization that saved my life because I don’t want to risk compromising it, or my own biblio-sobriety.

But I do want to thank all my fellow librarians who supported me during this sometimes agonizing period of recovery. The first days and weeks of carefully rationed reading are horrible! Bookworms typically need a lot of time to come to terms with a world that seems empty without the constant reading we thought we had to have. But, one day at a time, a normal reading life begins to seem livable, and then, by slow degrees, wonderful. I have finally discovered that I don’t have to hide from the world in a book. There are many books I will never read. That’s OK. Conversely, some books, I’m convinced, probably will get along, “equally OK,” without my reading them. I think it’s even safe for me to attend a library convention again, although I cannot trust myself just yet at all those publishers’ booths. I can have a few books, of course, but not nearly as many as I thought I needed. Now I have the capacity to choose books. Before, books chose me.

If this sounds familiar to any reader I encourage her or him to call, write or e-mail me. You don’t have to suffer alone. Together, we can survive without being hopeless bookworms!

[David Isaacson, Professor and Humanities Librarian in the University Libraries, came to WMU in 1973 and is retiring, after 32 years of service, in January 2006. He has been a major contributor to Gatherings since it was first published, and will, one hopes, continue to bring his love of reading and writing to future issues as he ventures beyond library walls to the wider world.]