New Issues Press will publish a major index in April to the regional history collections found at Western Michigan University. The 1998 Guide to the Western Michigan University Regional History Collections has been “in the works” for more than three years and is the product of hundreds of staff hours. Over a decade ago, William K. Smith, then Associate Director of the Archives and Regional History Collections, proposed that a comprehensive publication be compiled that would replace earlier guides. As with many ambitious, but complicated plans, the idea was put on hold until 1995 when the staff determined that it was essential to make available a resource that identified the extent of the University’s thirty-year effort to collect, preserve, and organize southwest Michigan’s regional history.

Nothing that provided printed access to the collection was available until a 1964 guide and 1966 supplement were published that described the first 157 “holdings” in the Collections. By 1995, the regional history collections had grown to over 2,600 distinct sets of documents. In addition, the compilation of a Guide also addressed the need to promote cooperative information sharing and, of course, the acquisition of additional materials—not only in southwest Michigan but within state and national archival networks. The staff of the ARHC were also motivated by the fact that the Regional History Collections at WMU is a regional depository for the State Archives.

The most compelling rationale for publication of a general index was the benefits that it would provide to the growing number of researchers with increasingly complex projects. Since the inception of the Regional History Collections in 1960, each year had brought more researchers to its various collections and, by the mid-1990s, more than 4,000 researchers annually were searching the resources. They included a range of expertise from the student to the faculty member, the local historian to the international scholar. Their concerns were a reflection of the fact that the University was classified as a Carnegie Doctoral I institution with strong emphasis on graduate education and a research experience that crossed undergraduate as well as graduate study.

The actual production of the Guide did not, obviously, come about without the substantial assistance of many individuals. First, and as a significant catalyst, University President Diether Haenicke provided a mandate and the necessary finances to sustain such a project. Dr. Ronald Davis and Dr. John Houdek of the Department of History were enthusiastic supporters who gave guidance, recommendations, and support to the effort. Five editors, Phyllis Burnham, Sharon Carlson, Pamela Jobin, Charlene Renner, and Suzanne Husband, reviewed collection descriptions and prepared three extensive indexes. Student employees contributed hundreds of hours verifying collections of information and assisting in the various phases of editing.

The final publication comprises 350 pages including an introduction by the first University Archivist, Dr. Alan Brown, Professor Emeritus of History. More than 200 pages include descriptions of each of the 2,600 regional history holdings. Each entry provides information about the contents, scope, and size of the given collection. To cap it off, three indexes—over one-third of the volume—provide access by (1) subject, (2) corporate and organization name, and (3) personal name.

The Guide was prepared with the goal of promoting interest and stimulating further research in the Regional History Collections. It purposefully omits the holdings of the University Archives which consist of historical documents of and about Western Michigan University. As it stands, however, it marks a significant milestone in the development of a remarkable regional history collection that provides many research opportunities to those seeking information about southwestern Michigan.

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History is, in its essence, exciting; to present it as dull is, to my mind, stark and unforgivable misrepresentation.

— Catherine Drinker Bowen