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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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 of acquiring that information also.

Michigan has been a leader in developing a system that obtains the information "on demand" of information. At the present time, the Lakeside Library Consortium (LLC) is a consortium of fifty libraries of all types—academic, public, special, and school—founded in 1990 with support from the Kellogg Foundation. The consortium was formed for three major purposes. First, it would provide member libraries with an online regional information system—a catalog of library holdings—by combining information on WMU's collections with information on the collections of the other area libraries. Second, the system would provide access to locally available commercial databases (periodical indexes, reference sources, business data, etc.), and, third, it would make databases that had been developed at the local levels available to the other member libraries.

So then, what is actually available? LLC libraries currently access WESTNET, which is provided by Western Michigan University. WESTNET services available to everyone, whether a LLC member or not, include the ability to search the following online catalogs:

- KELLY: the regional online catalog that incorporates the bibliographic catalogs of over 40 regional libraries
- FINDER: the WMU University Libraries catalog
- LOOKITUP: the Kalamazoo Valley Community College catalog
- CRL: the Center for Research Libraries (Chicago) catalog
- VIDEOCAT: WMU's catalog of instructional video and film holdings

The basic benefits of LLC membership include participation in the building of the KELLY database. Members may attach their holdings symbol to bibliographic records already in the database. They have the opportunity to add their bibliographic records to the database using the services of the Southwest Library Cooperative, thereby avoiding the costs of original cataloging. LLC members also have access to the electronic interlibrary loan facility that permits each library to generate and receive requests from other member libraries. The system also facilitates online statistical reports about use of the services of the consortium; this can be a valuable tool for planning. In addition, members have access to locally mounted commercial databases—for example, ERIC, an educational database available through WMU—for which consortium arrangements have been provided.

Because of the University's major role in this shared resource system, a number of special services flow from the University out to the other members. Two notable programs are special training in the use of electronic access and electronic mail and bulletin board services.

Other services are available from WMU at an additional cost to member libraries. They include accounts on the University's VAX computer, which, in turn, provides a gateway to the Internet; MARC tapes of the library's holdings, extracted from the KELLY catalog, which can serve as the foundation of a local online catalog; and onsite service calls by the University's Telecommunications or Library Systems Office staff. Through subscription, members libraries can also obtain access to the general periodical database, Reader's Guide Abstracts.

The Lakeside Library Consortium's success has set the stage for the next step in the development of a "total" shared collections philosophy. Discussions are already occurring among several of the LLC members, including WMU, and vendors regarding shared access to bibliographic and full-text databases. While cooperative purchasing and leasing of electronic resources is still an uncharted wilderness for librarians, vendors, and users, the benefits to be derived are so important—and the need so imperative—that we must continue to bring to the task the same spirit of cooperation that resulted in the bibliographic data and document delivery system that now exists in southwestern Michigan.

Women

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The meeting minutes document the discussions and actions leading to the Association's decision to construct a permanent library and meeting space. In 1878, the Association succeeded in its building campaign and the building, still located at 333 South Park Street 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. If 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.

S.C.