



Acquisition and Organization of Local History Materials in Libraries

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A LIBRARY'S LOCAL HISTORY COLLECTION includes a variety of resources in addition to books, and this usual emphasis is on older materials such as out-of-print books, newspaper files, clippings, pamphlets, historic maps, and broadsides. Because of this variety and the fact that most of these items are hard to find and difficult to care for, the usual methods of library acquisition and organization cannot easily be applied.

Before discussing the practices to be recommended, a few comments are in order regarding the local history function within a larger, more comprehensive library. A single purpose library is less restricted in establishing procedures and classification. However the recommendations made here for the local history collection within a more general library, will, it is believed, be more suitable than variations found in the library say of a local history society.

In contrast to the historical society, which may be responsible for the history of an entire state, the local public or college library can make a special effort to concentrate on a much smaller area. If it is to do a detailed job and to be prepared to answer a broad range of questions, it needs to confine itself to a definite and logical local area, an individual city or perhaps the city and the county in which it is located. The materials which reveal the place of this city in the general history of the state are not to be omitted, but the staff is free to do a more intensive job on the many minute subjects properly represented in local history reference work. The public or college library can serve as a center of information about its own locale and, even with a limited collection, can be more effective and immediate in service than the historical society with its larger area of responsibility. In spite of its strong emphasis on research and the long term preservation of

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primary sources, the historical society might have difficulty in meeting the constant demand for quick information and general reference work which is so distinctly a part of the public library's program.

In the first place, the relationship of this general library to the functions of the historical society library must be defined. The society library is concerned with the development of primary resources as well as of a major reference collection; in most cases it will be better prepared to manage and service such difficult materials as historical manuscripts and personal papers. The society will probably have on its library and editorial staff specialized individuals who can aid the serious worker in the field of historical research.

In contrast, the public library can provide the school boy, the interested citizen, the local journalist, the amateur genealogist, the advertising man, the business man, the casual reader, and many others with satisfactory but less specialized information regarding the community. This type of reference and information service is a typical function of a public library.

In the second place, the heart of the local library reference and information program revolves around a carefully assembled collection of secondary works, particularly those chosen for reliability and scholarship. Frequently the nature of the questions asked by readers in this area of local history makes necessary a more involved plan than merely bringing new, good, historical and supplementary works together. Local history reference work deals typically with minutiae, and this is not to express a criticism regarding its value. Many detailed and specific questions must be answered. The librarian who is going to render this service must prepare in advance to handle the questions quickly and accurately.

Ordinary library practices of acquisitions and classification serve only as a starting point in assembling and analyzing the materials that will furnish the answers. Solutions to such questions are to be found in sections of books or in special articles and pamphlets. The major reference tool that makes the information readily available is a comprehensive and detailed index, which will be discussed later.

A major field of American history which appeals to a current group of dynamic writers and investigators is that of urban history. This relatively new interest is placing in its proper perspective in American life the role of the city and its many special facets. Important new works published on the urban complex need not be enumerated here, but the work of the local history librarian can be made more meaning-

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ful if he is aware of this growing interest and is prepared to support any local project or survey. Working with such a program or special project can become a most important step in evaluating the sources of materials held and in developing a community-wide effort to bring from hiding many important items. Thus the Kansas City, Mo., foundation-supported program in recent years, of research and studies on various aspects of that city, intensified the organization and collection of materials at the Public Library as a result of the need for supporting the project.

An effective program of acquisitions and cataloging calls for more specialized methods than do the library's general collections and services. Among matters to be considered are the various techniques for preserving and making useful the categories of source materials, excluding those items treated in separate chapters here, i.e., maps, pictures, manuscripts, and newspapers. Little help can be found in the professional literature on the acquisition and organization of local history materials. The only thorough and comprehensive discussion of this particular field is an excellent English publication by John L. Hobbs¹ which is concerned with libraries having more specialized responsibilities than do those of a similar nature in this country. Archival and public record functions are carefully explained. The preservation of all types of manuscripts is a major concern of the author, although museum work and archaeology receive some attention. The author continually keeps in mind the user of the materials and includes directions in the use of local research materials.

Acquisition and Preparation

The Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore has a fine local history department devoted to collecting and to making available materials about the entire state of Maryland. "It is the general policy of the Maryland Department to acquire, as far as is practicable, one copy for reference use of all printed items—fiction and non-fiction—contributing to a knowledge of state and local history."² The aim is to attain a fair degree of inclusiveness with certain exceptions. Since the material is also frequently of interest to the subject departments in the general library, both these departments and the branches may add duplicates of any necessary Maryland items.

The Maryland Department makes a special effort to secure materials of the social, civic, religious, economic, and cultural fields, both past and present. Genealogical materials are not collected, nor much music,

primarily because of the fine collections of these materials in the Maryland Historical Society which is only a short distance away. The Department does acquire duplicate books which can be circulated.

The policy of excluding certain material is particularly important, since this permits the Maryland Room to do an excellent job within the scope of the collection. For instance, manuscripts, paintings, and museum objects are generally excluded. On the other hand, the Department emphasizes printed material including books, pamphlets, periodicals, newspapers, serials, documents, maps, atlases, clippings, and post cards. In addition, photographic negatives, microforms, and prints constitute an important section of the resources. The Department has followed a vigorous policy of obtaining materials free when possible; older materials are purchased as they become available.

A few policy notes, some quoted in their entirety and others quoted in part, regarding special categories illustrate further the careful thought the Department has given to its function and service. They are:

Authors

The published writings of Marylanders on Maryland subjects are added in accordance with the policy of adding at least one copy of most printed items about Maryland.

The writings of Marylanders on non-Maryland subjects are left to the subject departments concerned. . . .

Collectors' Items

Rarely is a large price paid for a work that would be interesting to have but which would have little reference value, such as an early imprint of which a reprint is already in the collection. The presence in other libraries of such works is also taken into consideration, and expensive, unnecessary duplication avoided. Occasionally, however, books and fine prints that might be considered collectors' items are purchased from special gift funds.

Music

Little music is bought. The official state and city songs, music connected with outstanding Maryland events, persons, or organizations (as school and college songs, campaign songs, etc.) and occasional sheet music with illustrated cover of special local interest are added unless they are very expensive. Music of outstanding Maryland composers, which has no Maryland subject interest, is left to the Fine Arts Department.

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Law

The Code of the state, counties, and cities, session laws and ordinances, and compilations of laws on specific subjects are important parts of the Maryland Department collection.

Fiction

The Maryland Department adds, as it is published, fiction (except for the very trivial) that concerns, solely or primarily, historic Maryland people or has sufficient local color to make it useful from that standpoint. . . . also adds older novels in the same categories, including, . . . some novels of slighter value, in order to preserve them.

Pictures

The Maryland Department aims to have a representative collection of glossy photographs of outstanding Maryland persons, buildings, outdoor views, and subjects such as agriculture, industry, etc., both past and present. . . . Photographic negatives are acquired occasionally by gift and even more occasionally by purchase in order to preserve useful material of this sort that might otherwise be lost. Fine prints of Maryland subjects are collected for their reference value, e.g., the Cator Collection of about 200 views, primarily of Baltimore, which was a bequest to the Library. Other fine prints are acquired by gift and occasionally by purchase, but usually only from special funds.

Maps

The Maryland Department attempts to have a representative collection of maps of the state and its counties, cities and towns, for all periods.²

The Baltimore Library's newspaper policy calls for inclusiveness in the case of Baltimore newspapers and an adequate representation of Maryland papers.

Since local papers are indispensable sources for local information, some of it available in no other printed work, the Library acquires, by gift or purchase, all known Baltimore newspapers, at least one daily from each of the Maryland cities other than Baltimore which have such papers, and one or more weeklies from each of the counties of Maryland. Before the purchase of old files, offered at a considerable price, availability of files elsewhere and of other papers of the same locality are taken into consideration. In order to preserve fragile back files, especially of important papers representing

various parts of the State, and add to the Library's files of such papers when they are incomplete, and to save stack space, an effort is made to acquire microfilm files of such newspapers.²

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin is guided in its collection policy by seven brief points:

1. All materials of a monographic character of a descriptive or historical nature relating to the state or any of its regions or political subdivisions. This includes pamphlets of any content. We do not generally collect advertising materials unless they originated in the early history of the state.
2. All periodicals (magazines) issued by state organizations, religious, fraternal, political, etc. Also annual reports.
3. All newspapers published in Wisconsin.
4. The publications of governmental bodies, state, city, and county, if any.
5. We do not collect "Wisconsin authors," except for a small collection of outstanding ones that classify as literature.
6. We do collect intensively pre-1865 Wisconsin imprints.
7. In general we collect all state and local atlases.³

Regardless of one's acquisition policy, plans must be prepared to accommodate, to preserve, and to make useful a group of supplementary materials which accumulate in ever increasing quantities. Pamphlets, a slight and elusive type of printed matter, frequently defined as not having more than five sheets or eighty pages, must be given more consideration than when destined for general collections. Many such local history items are extremely valuable sources of information, are frequently much sought after by collectors and therefore highly priced, and often give a contemporary flavor to the past which ordinary books cannot portray. It must be admitted that pamphlets were propaganda pieces or strongly partisan and that more current ones are pure public relations devices. Nevertheless each pamphlet should be given a quick appraisal and treatment appropriate to its value in the collection. Many can be disposed of rapidly by placing them in vertical files under subject headings suitable for local materials; included in this category would be advertising pieces received by the hundreds each year. At the other extreme will be pamphlets of lasting value received from dealers and collectors in handsome bindings and slip cases; as appropriate, the item should be treated as a book with full cataloging, and in many cases put with other rare and valuable volumes.

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Arrangements must be devised for the many less valuable pamphlets which are worth preserving more carefully than the first group described, but which should not be handled individually as books. For these, the scheme of grouping by broad subjects and binding in "p.v.s." (pamphlet volumes) is recommended. The volumes for each class are numbered consecutively and the minimum cataloging necessary—an author, or a subject entry, or both—would lead to the correct volume in the series. There are many examples which might be cited, but a few will suffice: railroad materials, denominational publications, sermons or addresses by a single author, and municipal or county documents of a non-serial nature.

Binding insures long-term preservation, whereas subject grouping in pamphlet boxes, classed or alphabetically arranged, leads to early loss and heavy wear and tear. Pamphlets should be bound together, after they have been sorted, within a minimum date range, of approximately the same size, and of a similar quality of paper. Irregular edges lead to early deterioration of paper; a pamphlet printed on paper of poor quality may break out of a binding and the whole volume must be discarded, while uniform quality in the paper of the pamphlets will result in a longer life for the bound volume. A detailed description of this "p.v." (pamphlet volume) process as practiced at the New York Public Library whose rich and extensive collection this writer has used many times over the last thirty years may be found in an article by Robert B. Downs.⁴

Among the "printed ephemera" described by John Wyllie,⁵ the most interesting are broadsides. Usually maintained in a chronological file, these supplement other records and frequently add unique information. In some libraries, broadsides have been included in the manuscript collection, because they had originally been enclosures in correspondence. One hesitates to recommend the separation of these, but for those lacking such a relationship, the physical care and cataloging is simplified by placement in a broadside file. Large, full-size folders, of acid-free paper, filed flat, insure the greatest protection. Full cataloging of broadsides, with particular attention to subject headings, is necessary if their value is to be exploited. In the first place, broadsides are nearly always offered to a library folded as though to be sent in the smallest of correspondence envelopes. They must be carefully unfolded, particularly if very dry, to prevent breaking at the folds. In many cases it will be necessary to let the paper reach normal

humidity while the sheet itself is gently pressed to remove folds or wrinkles.

A major source of local history information is to be found in a well-organized file of clippings taken from newspapers. Fine examples of such a reference tool are found in the "morgues" which exist in the better newspaper libraries. Librarians have failed to take advantage of the methods developed in this area. Based on the clipping of multiple copies of newspapers and the filing of duplicate articles under several subjects, newspaper librarians have available to them a variety of subject approaches and thus can produce quick answers to reporters' questions. Clipping limited to one copy of the newspaper cannot produce the same results. Since a major portion of the file will pertain to individuals, a separate alphabet for biography is desirable. Other material should be arranged under very specific headings chosen, if possible, from the list used for the card index described later.

The practice of microfilming the articles in the file on special subjects ensures the long life of the information, keeps the material in correct order, reduces the space problem, and makes available a tool that can be duplicated for other libraries. Frequently consulted stories usually have been chosen in the filming program conducted by the Kansas City, Mo., *Star*, and these films have been of great value to the Public Library. Regular discarding also simplifies the use of the files and helps eliminate space problems. The practice of including clippings with other vertical file material is not acceptable because of size and other differences involved. Instead, envelopes approximately 4¼ x 9½ inches, opening the long way, have proved most satisfactory.

Newer media have been added to library collections in recent years, and several of these suggest new dimensions in preserving records and highlights of a community's history. The Fort Wayne (Ind.) Public Library has for years made its own motion pictures of local events of importance and interest.

Magnetic tape now makes possible the storage of the spoken word, the sound of a city, the stirring historical drama, the reminiscences of an old settler, or even the last clang of an old trolley bell caught by a buff as he participated in the last trip of a streetcar. Battery-operated recording equipment permits the capturing of sound under the most difficult situation.

As pointed out by John Knoepfle, many a person who has trouble writing of early experiences, can through conversation and interview ". . . deliver a lively description of the days he knew as a boy and

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the work he performed as a man.”⁶ This new field of history recording helpfully is discussed by Corinne Gilb in an article in *The American Archivist*.⁷ She recommends not only the making of tape recordings but also the transcription of interviews for more convenient use. Full cataloging of the transcriptions and recordings will be necessary, although difficulties will occur in the choice of subject headings because of the possible miscellaneous or even rambling nature of many such interviews.

A final special category which requires consideration is that of rare books. Some of these volumes are found in every collection. Original and early editions of Americana, frequently desirable for reference use, have become collectors’ items and are therefore scarce and highly priced. Those volumes which are also valuable for local history content should be identified for that purpose; fortunately, many such works have been reprinted so that less use needs to be made of the originals.

One of the gravest problems existing in special collections is the inadequate attention given to rare books. Unusual and early editions are not only heavily stamped and marked, but are improperly used by readers.

Priceless rare volumes are disfigured when call numbers and ownership marks are applied generously. No marks or labels should be placed on the outside of the volumes, nor should the pages be marred by embossed seals or stamped-in names. The call numbers should be lightly pencilled in, preferably on a page or end paper added by the binder. To aid shelf placement, many libraries now use long slips of paper, placed in but not pasted to the book, which display the call number on the portion projecting above the book. Heavy marks of ownership will not deter the persistent rare book thief. The best help on the care and repair of these books is to be found in the volume by Harry Miller Lydenberg and John Archer.⁸

Organization of the Collection

The acquisition of the various source materials already described is the first step in establishing a local history collection. The second and perhaps more important step is to make known to those who use the local history department the extent of the collection and the exact location of specific detailed information. This result is achieved through cataloging and classification, and through indexing much more information than can be indicated by the catalog.

The basic tool for identifying and locating the books, periodicals,

and other items in the local collection is the dictionary catalog. Its importance and inadequacy, and its relation to the index is noted by Hobbs.

. . . most local catalogues are not detailed enough to serve as authoritative guides to the stock, that many are extremely imperfect, and that there are very few local collections in which the material is so closely indexed that all the available material on a subject can be produced readily and rapidly. This material is so diverse in its nature and content that only by the most minute indexing can the fugitive items be brought to the notice of readers. This is especially true of the non-bibliothecal material which can be such an important part of a "live" Local History department. The tendency is to rely upon the knowledge gained by the local librarian in familiarity with the books and records in his charge, rather than on detailed catalogues and indexes, with the result that when he or she leaves or is absent for any reason, the efficiency of the department drops alarmingly.⁹

In spite of excellent variations developed by some libraries to make the catalog more useful, adherence to standard library practices is recommended. The high cost of cataloging and the expense of adding variations from standard practice make the use of Library of Congress cards an absolute must for economy and efficiency. All original cataloging of books not covered by these cards should conform to the same principles. Variations made to increase the catalog's usefulness make it difficult to include the cards for the historical collection in a general library's main catalog. Many of the additional entries can be included more economically in the departmental index, while the catalogers devote their efforts to keeping up with the current receipts.

A major contribution to the problems of cataloging for a local collection was made in 1934 by Florence B. Murray.¹⁰ Another brief discussion by Alberta Pantle emphasizes the need for making the most of the collection through comprehensive analysis of materials in the card catalog.¹¹ Unfortunately their suggestions do not coincide with the experience of the present writer while in charge of the Long Island Collection at the Queens Borough Public Library in New York City. An index, maintained separately from the catalog, exceeded the latter in size by four times. The basic bibliographical data on the books in the library collection would have been completely buried if the two files had been merged. Catalogers could be more generous with added entries, but they should not try to include many which could instead

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be placed in the comprehensive card index of the local history collection.

The American Library Association published many years ago a list of *Subheads to Be Used Under Cities*,¹² and more recently the English librarian James Ormerod included a similar list in his pamphlet on cataloging.¹² Both of these are helpful, but they are far from being inclusive enough to furnish all the specialized subject headings needed for local materials. This problem of adequate lists of subject headings is even more acute for indexing and vertical files.

Many libraries, feeling the inadequacies of standard classification schemes, have attempted expansions and modifications to permit a more useful arrangement of local history books. Some of these used in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library have been described by Gracie B. Krum.¹³ Sub-numbers, from the Decimal Classification, are used with the shortened history number for any given area. Thus 74D4/813 is used for fiction about Detroit. The 74 are from the Dewey number for Michigan, after eliminating the preceding two digits 97 which are common to all states; the D4 is the Cutter number for Detroit, and 813 indicates fiction. Other interesting and ingenious examples of changes in standard classification procedure could be cited. Each such change made creates more difficulties as new editions of standard classification schemes are issued; and many problems are created if the special collection is part of a general library, or, if it is in a historical society library some ease of use is lost for the reader who is acquainted with the Dewey or Library of Congress classification.

In spite of the importance of the card catalog, the most frequently used file will be the home-made card index which supplements the catalog in great detail. It takes both of these to reveal the detailed contents of the local history collection. It is, of course, not necessary that the index for all types of materials be in one alphabet. For instance, Barbara Westby of the Detroit Public Library lists six major reference index files maintained in the Burton Historical Collection, covering periodicals, newspapers, genealogy, Michigan biography, local history, and pictures.¹⁴ Only old newspapers are included in the newspaper index since current issues are clipped and filed.

The need for detailed analysis of books within the department will be illustrated by just one example, *The Heritage of Kansas; Selected Commentaries on Past Times*, by Everett Rich.¹⁵ The catalog subject headings are "Kansas-History" and "Frontiers and pioneer life—

Kansas." An index would include the following subjects among others: Wagon trains, John Brown in Kansas, Underground railroad, Drouth, 1860, Battle of the Arickaree, Grasshopper plague, Dalton gang, and Kansas Jayhawk. Surely these should not be included in the dictionary catalog. Another major use of the index is to record the successful search for questions which have been difficult to answer. Cases of this occur daily, and the same question has a way of returning; work thus recorded need not be repeated.

It has already been indicated that subject headings for the local collection are not as easily identified as those for general books. Libraries have frequently used *Readers' Guide* subjects for the general vertical file. Some have prepared basic lists of subject headings to use in an index and also in the filing of pamphlets and clippings. The Denver Public Library has an 83-page subject heading list for its Western History Collection; emphasis is on the subjects most important in Colorado, *e.g.*, mining, mountains, forts, and water supply. It is desirable to formalize these headings in an authority file with cross references, starting perhaps from the general list used in *Readers' Guide* with supplementary headings as in the case of Denver. Such a list should then be used as much as possible in the various files—the one for pamphlets, clippings, and above all the card index.

The librarian's responsibility obviously does not end with the collection of the many unusual items of value to a local history collection. His responsibility is to make them available as quickly as possible and to coordinate them with the general library, if the special collection is part of such a library. Many additional steps, such as the preparation of a clipping file and indexes, should be taken. Yet with all these aids—and especially without them, one must agree with Hobbs when he says "The tendency is to rely upon the knowledge gained by the local librarian. . . ." ¹⁸ The librarian's intimate knowledge of and acquaintance with local history materials is indispensable for best service to the public.

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