



# The Use of Local History Materials in Two Public Libraries

A. IN THE PEORIA (ILL.) PUBLIC LIBRARY

BY WILLIAM W. BRYAN

THE ACQUISITION, ARRANGING, cataloging, and use of local history materials is one of the most fascinating areas of public library work. The reason, of course, is obvious since every community and region has its own history. The history materials for any one community are, for the most part, limited to that community, its local library, and its historical society. Local librarians are among the very few with knowledge of a community's history and its historical materials. The preservation of local history materials is the responsibility of the local public librarians. No one else can do it for us.

Who uses a local history collection? John L. Hobbs, in *Local History and the Library*,<sup>1</sup> states, "a live local history collection will be used not only by the historian, genealogist and general students, but by workers in economics, sociology, political science, public administration, geography and science, and by writers and literary historians." It is uncertain how live the local history collection of the Peoria (Ill.) Public Library is, compared with those of other libraries. However, there is no doubt that its collection is live enough to bring in not only the type of person mentioned by Mr. Hobbs, but also a few others.

The largest group to use the biographical materials of the Peoria Public Library local history collection, as probably with all collections, are those seeking knowledge of their ancestors. This includes the professional genealogists, who do their own research, and the amateur genealogists, who all too often seem to want the staff to do the research for them. Included in this group is the letter writer who would be very thankful if a staff member would find the obituaries of his grandfather and his grandmother who lived in Peoria between 1875 and

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### *The Use of Local History Materials in Two Public Libraries*

1855, moved west, but probably had their obituaries published in the local paper because they had so many friends in the area. This, of course, is an exaggerated example, but it does not exaggerate the intense interest that members of this group, often grandparents themselves, have in their forbears.

Several years ago the Peoria Public Library started an index of local residents, listing on cards any biographical material which was found. It soon grew to considerable size, proving its usefulness early. The library has what is believed to be a complete file of Peoria city directories, the earliest dated 1844, and a complete microfilm file of Peoria telephone directories, given by the Illinois Bell Telephone Company. The city directories are heavily used; duplicate copies of many of the directories, even some of the earlier years, are available. Because of the difficulties of using microfilm reading machines and because students use them from 4:00 P.M. to closing time throughout much of the year, the use of the telephone directories is not as great as it might be. Nevertheless, they are in much more permanent form than the ink print copies of the phone book, and they have been useful in locating names not listed in the city directory.

The student group, ranging from children in elementary school to students in graduate school, uses the local history materials quite heavily. The younger part of the group includes boys and girls in the middle and upper elementary grades, Boy and Girl Scouts, and Indian Guides. Their subject-interest most often concerns the Indians who lived in the Peoria area, those who were pushed out by settlers, and the much earlier inhabitants who were called Mound Builders. To answer these questions, papers written by local historians, usually for meetings of the historical society, or popular newspaper articles are used. The latter often take the form of interviews with local historians or hobbyists. Booklets published by the State Museum and articles by amateur and professional anthropologists supply the need for materials on the earliest known residents of our area.

Research papers being prepared by juniors and seniors in college and by graduate students are not numerous, but they are certainly much more time consuming and interesting for the staff. Among the topics for which information has been sought over the past few years are public health facilities, crime in Peoria, and early stagecoach routes. Help has also been given to students writing papers on manufacturing in general, on specific types of industries, and on specific companies. Peoria has been and is a center for the distilling industry

and, years ago, was a center for the manufacturing of handrolled cigars.

The needs of the student researchers are often difficult to fill because they wait too long before starting their project; also, the staff desires to protect unduplicated materials which are available only in the Peoria Public Library. The photocopier has helped to some extent, but the reproduction of many pages of materials is too costly for most students. A quiet place to work is another problem in the too small, too old, public library building. Last winter, a microfilm reading machine was carried into the Librarian's office each Saturday morning for weeks for the use of a graduate student working on his master's thesis. This left only four machines for the crowds of high school students who used them all day long, 30 minutes to a student. One high school student asked why five readers were available during the week and only four on Saturdays, but he appeared satisfied when he learned that the user receiving special attention was not another high school student.

Materials used for the students' papers include governmental reports, most of them annual reports, newspaper articles, and Works Progress Administration historical project files. There was a WPA local history project in the Peoria Public Library during the depression years, and much good work was done. Included are an index of Peoria newspapers from 1837 to 1864, and three file drawers of historical materials on a wide variety of subjects, such as authors, general biographies, charities, clubs, court records, businesses, and industries of all kinds. Many of the files found in most public libraries are also available in Peoria. All too often compiling these has to be categorized as busy work and falls behind during library emergencies; often the work is never caught up. Included in this area are the vertical files of clippings, pamphlets, pictures, scrapbooks, etc. It is requested that the Library be given a copy of any serious paper or speech on any phase of Peoria history, but these materials are not always obtained.

Another group, whose numbers are all too few, who uses our materials to a considerable extent is made up of local history researchers and hobbyists. Individuals in this group prepare papers for the historical society, compile lists, make scrapbooks, and take pictures. In Peoria, there have been a few genuinely professional local historians and a number of amateurs. These persons usually give the Library copies of their work; however, sometimes they must be purchased. The accuracy of the work varies from that of the highly meticulous,

### *The Use of Local History Materials in Two Public Libraries*

experienced local researcher to that of the beginning amateur whose interest is only his own enjoyment or who is trying to prove a preconceived opinion. Actually, most of the work is serious and accurate, although the librarian who almost never can take the time to become a local historian in his own right is sometimes in difficulty here.

All communities have, or should have, the local newspaper columnist who takes an interest in and writes about local history. The public library provides him with material and then receives the columns to add to its collection for the benefit of others. Such a columnist also provides the library with a friend in the newsroom.

In recent years, the Peoria Public Library staff worked with a retired businessman who compiled an illustrated history of Peoria up to 1900. This was taken almost entirely from existing printed sources, but in its present form it has become an extremely useful and valuable source for others. *The Peoria Story*, by A. W. Oakford,<sup>2</sup> is made up of twelve looseleaf volumes and now rests in the Public Library's vault.

Another local historian has been at work for years, with the Public Library's help, on a history of streetcar and interurban transportation. Publication is expected sometime in the not too distant future. A third, a retired motion picture projectionist, is doing a history of theatres in Peoria. The Library staff has found for him a number of pictures to add to his collection; it is hoped that eventually the Library will be the recipient of this work.

All communities have some persons who achieved national prominence, either as residents or visitors. Occasionally, professional writers correspond with our reference staff, and even come to Peoria to do some research themselves. Usually, however, these queries come by mail and result in a correspondence back and forth which may last several months.

Colonel Robert A. Ingersoll lived in Peoria for about twenty years, both before and after his Civil War service. Another person of prominence who lived part of his life in Peoria was Octave Chanute, railroad civil engineer and noted for his early interest in manned flight. Professional writers have shown interest in Charles Duryea who built the first successful gasoline-powered automobile. There are still Peorians who state that the first automobile was made there rather than in Springfield, Massachusetts, to which place Duryea moved and built his famous machine. Other persons for whom information is requested are Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Charles J. Correll of "Amos and

Andy," Charles A. Lindbergh, who stopped here regularly during the period he flew air mail, and J. B. Greenhut, a leader of the "whiskey trust" of the 1890's. Correspondence, over the years, has been held about these persons and others. It is both interesting and a matter of some pride to see the results of the Library's work and the materials which appear in print. It is disappointing when nothing more is heard about a project, and the Library is left wondering if the book or article was ever published.

There is a group of persons who can be known only as "the general public," people who take a temporary interest in some phase of local history, delve into it a bit and then, as far as one knows, drop it. Sometimes the library knows the reason for the research; just about as often, they do not. Possibly the reference librarian's problem of getting a person to express exactly what he wants holds more for questions of local history than any other subject. Perhaps some of us are too proud of our ancestors, others are a little worried. Nevertheless, the questions asked cover every conceivable local subject, person, place, and date.

One man, a building contractor, became interested in an old house which he thought an ancestor had built. The answer was found in an old scrapbook given the Library many years ago, virtually impossible to catalog, and indexed by a local genealogist. More recent material has been added from time to time. Incidentally, the contractor did not say whether or not his ancestor built the house, only that he found what he wanted.

Anniversaries, those of churches, business establishments, and clubs, and sometimes schools, always bring some interested persons into the library. The WPA Newspaper Index, vertical file materials on churches, and the biographical index are the usual sources of material. These efforts usually bring the Library pamphlet histories printed for the occasion.

Recently a new courthouse was built for Peoria County, and the Library provided both a list of what was to be found in the old cornerstone prior to its opening and suggestions for material to be placed in the new one. For the latter much of the material was laminated in plastic; some library publications were included.

Businessmen make other uses of the local history collection. Advertisers periodically use it for yesteryear advertisements, both in newspapers and on television. They search the newspapers for old products, particularly locally made ones, old fashions, and old

### *The Use of Local History Materials in Two Public Libraries*

scenes. One restaurant had the walls of its dining room decorated with paintings of local scenes of early Peoria. Another used the Library's collections for general scenes which would be typical of any Midwestern river town.

Our holdings, particularly the picture collection, have also been used by television stations for local documentaries. One, a documentary on bus service, featured a strike of several months' duration, the purchase of the company by local business men, and the reestablishment of service, all of which will provide an interesting story for future local historians. Unfortunately, the Library does not have the documentary film.

In thinking about those persons who use local history materials, probably the least advertised of all library collections, one notices that the materials are used by a great variety of people, in short, the general public. These are the students, both elementary and advanced, the professional local historian, independent researcher, hobbyist, and business man. In view of such varied interest and use, one wonders if public libraries are giving adequate attention to their community's local history.

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### B. IN THE DAYTON (OHIO) PUBLIC LIBRARY

BY ELIZABETH FARIES

SOME YEARS AGO a general survey of local history collections in American public libraries was made,<sup>1</sup> based on reports that appeared in library literature from the earliest records through

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1948. Accounts of active local history collections in public libraries came from all over the country. Some of these libraries had had long years of service in collecting local history, others reported activities of the World War I period, and still others began their collections at the impetus of a recently celebrated centennial or in an effort to preserve records of the community's activities during World War II.

The Dayton and Montgomery County (Ohio) Public Library belongs to the group of middle western cities that for many years has been giving service in collecting, preserving, and using local historical materials. As in Peoria (Ill.), the most common group to use the biographical materials of the local history collection are those wanting family histories. Dayton Public Library also serves the professional genealogist, the amateur, and the letter writer. It is very common to have patrons ask for obituaries or for other information on grandparents and great grandparents in cases where families living west of Ohio have traced their lines back to earlier generations who lived and died in Montgomery County or in the surrounding area, or to ancestors who were born in this region of the Miami Valley.

A WPA project of the 1930's in the Dayton Public Library was the formation of a name index to all of the Dayton and Montgomery County histories, and to four of the five surrounding counties (the project ended before the fifth county was covered). This has been invaluable in helping patrons find genealogical information. Other valuable tools are indexes to county records—wills and marriages, and indexes to the village and farm cemeteries of Montgomery County and a neighboring county, prepared by a professional genealogist of Miami Valley families. There are also collections of Miami Valley genealogies compiled by this genealogist which the Library was permitted to copy for its collection.

For many years the Dayton Public Library has maintained a card index on Dayton and Montgomery County subjects. This local bibliographical file covers biographies, specific subjects not analyzed in the local history catalog, answers to hard-to-find local history questions, and subject index entries to two scrapbooks on local materials that are used frequently. There is also an obituary index covering several years in the 1950's, particularly death notices about Daytonians who died outside Montgomery County, and many obituaries from newspapers of the 1800's discovered from time to time in local history reference work. Toledo (Ohio) Public Library

### *The Use of Local History Materials in Two Public Libraries*

for many years has maintained an obituary index which is used heavily, not only by genealogists, but by all types of searchers.

Dayton Public Library has a complete file of city directories dating from the first one of 1850, and an almost complete file of telephone directories. As Ohio has a number of independent telephone companies, a few of the smaller towns in Montgomery County are not represented in the city and suburban telephone directories; therefore, the Library makes an effort to build a collection of them, especially as these smaller places have no city directories.

As in Peoria, Dayton has many questions on the Mound Builders and the Indians, not only from young people, but from readers of all ages. Recently the Local History Librarian was asked to speak to a group of Senior Citizens on this subject, as it related to their particular township. The introductory sections of Ohio county histories, local feature news articles, magazine articles, the numerous publications of the State Museum, and the few books and pamphlets by individual authors are all put to use.

Research papers on local history subjects by college juniors and seniors, graduate students, professional historians, reporters, and authors have been on a decided increase in Dayton, especially since the manuscript collection has been enlarged and partially organized. Part of this increase is due to a growing interest on the part of schools in using local history subjects for term papers and graduate theses; part of it is due to easier access to a greater amount of primary source materials. Dayton's manuscript collection includes family and business letters of leaders in Ohio canal matters, Dayton's civic and educational affairs, post Civil War Republican politics, Copperheadism under the Daytonian Clement L. Vallandigham, and soldiers' diaries and letters to families and friends for the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Civil War. Various parts of this manuscript collection have been used not only by local students, but by students, writers, and historians from all over the country. The collection of letters dealing with Vallandigham and his followers was used several years ago by a historian for his book on this movement in the middle west.<sup>2</sup> These papers were cited in the author's notes as an outstanding collection on the subject.

Part of the manuscript collection has been calendared and indexed by the Library staff, but much more needs to be done. To aid in this work and to increase their knowledge of working with primary source materials, some of the upperclassmen in the History

Department of the University of Dayton last year took as their semester projects the calendaring and indexing of some of the Civil War letters in the Dayton Public Library manuscript collection. This work was done under the guidance of their professor and with suggestions from the Local History Librarian. Moving into a new building in 1962 solved many of Dayton's problems in regard to space for patrons to work with these special materials and provided highly improved facilities for the organization and shelving of the collection.

Graduate students and historians have spent weeks in the Dayton Public Library combing the old local newspapers for all references to their subjects, either to supplement material found in other sources, or to use these contemporary records because other materials on the subjects were not extant. Most local history collections have clipping files of local subjects, and Dayton's files, dating back to 1930, have proved to be an important part of the collection. However, even the best of these files is inadequate, as time and a staff burdened with the pressure of other duties limit the coverage of subjects. This coverage is further limited by the fact that such files cannot be all inclusive; they are and must be selective to be usable, but selection varies also according to the knowledge on the part of the person responsible for this work, as to the type of material likely to be needed.

The crying need of most local history collections is for an index of the local newspapers. Such indexing is a big project beyond the ability of most libraries to carry by themselves, especially with the great backlog of indexing to be done. Rather it is a community cooperative project in which the library, newspaper publishers, local foundations, and groups of citizens might be involved. The WPA Newspaper Indexing Project of the 1930's made a good start. In Dayton this Project provided a four-year printed index and a number of years of uncompleted indexing for one local newspaper. The four printed volumes<sup>3</sup> are among first sources consulted for local subjects of the period covered. Cooperation between a public and a local foundation to set up the *Flint Journal* newspaper indexing project has been reported,<sup>4</sup> so one step in the direction of indexing current volumes of a local newspaper under the public library's sponsorship has been taken.

When churches, business establishments, schools, and organizations celebrate anniversaries and turn for help to the Library's local history collection, newspaper clippings, booklets on earlier anniversaries, and city and county histories are great aids in finding materials, but there

### *The Use of Local History Materials in Two Public Libraries*

are always questions and gaps for which answers and connecting links are probably buried in newspaper records. If the local historian is patient and does a good research job for his publication, the resulting booklet can become a valuable reference source for the local history collection.

In the Dayton Collection, local periodicals, especially house organs and bulletins of local institutions and organizations, have proved useful. Businessmen have studied house organs for ideas for their own publications and for other information. Bulletins of local institutions and organizations are good sources for biographies of new staff members or new officials. Often the biographical sketches are fuller than such notices appearing in the local newspapers; they are easier to locate than newspaper material as they are usually front page articles in weekly or monthly publications.

Maps are used by patrons of all types. Students want to locate places about which they are making studies; older citizens use them for locations of places they remember from their youth; genealogists want to locate farms or town plats of great grandparents, or cemeteries no longer on public roads; church, school, or organization historians want to locate early buildings of their institutions; local historians and reporters doing feature articles want to locate old roads, early buildings, or early residences; lawyers want certified reproductions of certain sections of early maps for evidence in court. Pictures are used for many of the same reasons.

A soldier's monument erected in Dayton in the 1880's in the center of a main intersection became a traffic hazard and was moved to a park. City engineers turned to descriptions of the erection of the monument in newspapers and magazines of the day, giving size and weight of each base stone, pedestal, and statue, to help them plan for equipment and method to be used in the moving project. Groups fighting to save the 1850 Court House in Dayton, which is one of the finest examples of Greek architecture in the Midwest, repeatedly used local historical materials to prove not only that it is of value architecturally, but also that much of the history of the city and county is centered around this building.

Dayton is the birthplace of aviation and the home of the Wright brothers. Students of early aviation history and authors of biographies of the Wright brothers have been patrons and correspondents of the Dayton Public Library which is fortunate to have the genealogies of the Wright and allied families (in manuscript) compiled by Orville

Wright and based on family history collected by his father, Bishop Milton Wright. The Library receives many requests for Wright family history and for information on incidents in the early life of these brothers. It also receives requests for materials on Benjamin and John Van Cleve (early settlers), Gen. Robert Schenck, Robert Steele (local and state educational leader), Paul Laurence Dunbar, James M. Cox, Charles F. Kettering, and John H. Patterson—all prominent Daytonians and most of them nationally and internationally known. An excellent biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar was written by a former Dayton teacher, using the local history collection.<sup>5</sup> Four years ago the first novel based on the 1913 flood in Dayton was written by an author of books for young people, a former Dayton children's librarian, and again the local history collection in the Dayton Public Library had extensive use.<sup>6</sup> The latest history of the city of Dayton, a small book primarily for use in the public schools, was written recently by a retired Dayton journalist;<sup>7</sup> for a time he had a desk in the Public Library so that he could use the local history materials easily.

The local history collection is a small library in itself, covering every type of subject and including every known type of record of human activities. The local history librarian has a fascinating job, involving detailed reference work in all the fields of endeavor in which the activities of the community fall, and detailed cataloging and classification work in organizing and shelving the ephemeral materials that so often constitute the collection. Such a service can fill a definite need in any community.

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