Evelyn Leasher Recognized by Historical Society of Michigan

At its annual meeting, held this September in Midland, the Historical Society of Michigan (HSM) presented Evelyn Leasher with the organization’s award of merit for distinguished professional services. In making this award the Society formally recognized Ms. Leasher’s contributions to Michigan history through the many bibliographies she has created.

*Native Americans in Michigan* lists the Clarke Library’s holdings of material regarding the Chippewa, Odawa, and Pottawatomie tribes. The bibliography serves as a virtual checklist of extant material regarding these three tribes. It is an essential document for those seeking to identify Michigan-related, Native American resources.

*Local History in Michigan*, available on the Clarke web site, is organized by county and lists the Clarke’s holdings for each of Michigan’s eighty-three counties. The document, which when printed amounts to almost three hundred single spaced typed pages, is a massive compilation of local history sources for this state. It is the most comprehensive list of Michigan local history available through any source.

The award also recognized Ms. Leasher’s work in constructing a bibliography of children’s fiction set in Michigan. Also available on the Clarke web site, this much more modest bibliography nevertheless lays the groundwork for a more profound understanding of how children around the country and around the world have been introduced to our state. In a world where globalization is increasingly a reality, understanding the impressions and prejudices that others carry regarding our state is critical.

All of us at the Clarke offer Evelyn our congratulations on winning this award.

Library to Relocate

As the fall newsletter goes to press, plans are being finalized to relocate the Clarke in the spring of 1999. Major construction work on the roof of the current Park Library Building is scheduled to begin on June 1, 1999. The scope of this work is such that the space underneath it will be unusable, thus requiring all library operations on the Park Building’s fourth floor, including the Clarke, to relocate.

The spring newsletter will contain details regarding our relocation plans. However, we strongly encourage researchers considering a visit to the Clarke this spring or early summer to contact us in advance to be sure we can be of assistance during the time you would like to visit. Updated information about our moving plans will also be posted on the Clarke web site at www.lib.cmich.edu/clarke.htm.
Packing Our Bags

Although moving day is still months away, the Clarke staff has begun the time consuming process of preparing the collection for relocation. Item by item, the collection has to be prepared for its "big ride" next May. Getting ready involves a variety of activities. The material has been surveyed to determine how to take it safely from here to there and back again. Boxing of fragile material has begun. And many long postponed and sometimes very hard decisions are being made on a daily basis.

Planning for the move began with an informal preservation survey of material in the stacks. Staff identified items that could not be moved without endangering the item. Large items, fragile items, or items easily damaged were all identified for attention. For many of these items the logical solution was nothing more complicated than a good, strong box.

But not just any box. Marian Matyn, the library’s archivist and the staff member responsible for overseeing preparations for the move, argued that if we were going to go through the tremendous amount of work needed to box and label this fragile material, it would be a wise investment to use boxes in which the material could be permanently stored, rather than temporary moving boxes. The preservation of hundreds of items would be much improved with a modest additional investment in archival quality boxes. Marian’s argument was persuasive and soon hundreds of archival quality boxes began to arrive from various suppliers.

Armed with the preservation survey, Marian Matyn (left) and student assistant Meghan Leslie box portraits of Dr. & Mrs. Clarke.
and a seemingly endless pile of boxes, Marian and a small corps of students soon got material of all shapes and sizes into appropriate boxes. Virtually all of the library’s “loose” newspapers have been placed in oversize newspaper boxes. Four hundred scrapbooks, most in very fragile condition, have found their way into yet more boxes. Oversize paintings and other art work also is being placed in containers to protect it during the move.

As boxing proceeded, the staff found itself dealing with many difficult appraisal decisions. These appraisal issues covered a wide spectrum of concerns. Some issues involved items that we had known of for years but had never addressed. Other unremembered “treasures” appeared on an almost daily basis.

Some things we knew really didn’t belong with us, but we had never quite gotten around to finding them a good home. One example is a piano that resided in the Clarke’s exhibit area. A cherished possession of a long-time but now deceased CMU music instructor, the nineteenth century piano was beautiful to look at but a cracked sounding board made it all but unplayable. The CMU School of Music, in a new and much larger building than its former location, was delighted to take possession of the instrument and promised to recondition it to be used in performances as a “period” piece. The piano has found a good new home where it will benefit students and gain a second lease on life.

A second, but harder decision involved copies of books printed by the Clarke in years past. Because of the expense of the program, in the early 1990’s the Clarke Board of Governors voted to discontinue printing books. However, a large number of past publications remained in stock. Some of these titles had been in storage for over twenty years and projections based on past sales suggested it could take up to a half-century to liquidate the entire group of books.

Free storage space within the university had allowed the staff the luxury of ignoring the practical implications of this situation. But when the staff faced the question of moving the books and perhaps having to pay for rental space to store them “for the duration,” it became clear that it made little or no sense to maintain a half-century inventory.

With the permission of the Board of Governors the Clarke staff began the process of liquidating the back inventory of books. A five year supply of each title will be retained for future sales. Of the remainder, the Board asked that the library staff distribute free copies of the volumes to public libraries across the state. The goal of the publication program had been to make scholarship about Michigan widely available. By giving copies of the volumes to public libraries we believed that the publications program could be brought to closure in the same spirit in which it had been initiated. People around the state would have access to the books.

If the piano and the books represented known problems that needed to be addressed, at the other end of the spectrum were “forgotten treasures” that were regularly discovered. Sometimes these “treasures” met swift and satisfactory demises. A cache of old computer printers, so outdated they could not be interfaced with contemporary software, was consigned to the university’s “auction barn” to be sold as part of CMU’s semi-annual housecleaning. Other treasures, however, represented more difficult decisions.

One example was a group of fifty-nine eighteenth century prints illustrating the voyages of famed British explorer Captain James Cook. Beautiful, yet totally unrelated to the library’s collecting objectives, the question was raised over what to do with the material. The prints had been donated by the
library's founder, Dr. Norman Clarke Sr. As is often the case when we deal with donated material that involves difficult decisions, the staff consulted with the Clarke family to determine their wishes. The prints had been given to benefit the library and thus, with the family's consent, the staff proposed to the library's Governing Board that the prints be sold, with the income received to benefit the library's endowment. The Board agreed.

A second example of difficult decisions involved just over one hundred oversize, handwritten volumes from the Grand Rapids Justice of the Peace Court. The volumes dated from 1915 to 1937. During those years the Justice of the Peace served Grand Rapids as a court handling petty crimes and other small cases.

Because of the nature of the charges, individually the cases were usually not of great interest. In the aggregate, however, they tell a very interesting tale of the kinds of problems that plagued a growing Michigan city in the early years of the twentieth century as well as how seriously public officials took various types of individual misbehavior.

Despite the records' value for social history in Michigan the question quickly emerged as to why the documents were at the Clarke. Grand Rapids today runs a well maintained and publicly accessible city archives. Through discussion with the Grand Rapids city archives staff we learned that when Grand Rapids tore down its old city hall in the 1960's and built a new structure little care was taken to ensure the complete transfer of public records from the old building to the new. A number of older documents known to have been in the original city hall had "walked away" and became lost to the community. Most likely the Justice of the Peace files we possessed had been lost in this manner, eventually to be found and salvaged by Clarke staff.

After a bit of soul searching, the Clarke staff came to the conclusion that although the Justice of the Peace files did have useful research value and were within the library's scope, they would be of greatest value reunited with similar records from Grand Rapids. A city's public records should be found where they had been created and where people would likely look for them. Thus on a sunny autumn morning a van loaded with the volumes made its way from Mount Pleasant to Grand Rapids, bringing home a small bit of that city's history that the Clarke had the good luck to save and, we believe, the good judgement to return.

As we continue to prepare for moving, we undoubtedly will find more items that call for good judgement in order to determine if they should stay in the Clarke, and, if not, where a good home for them might be. We will undoubtedly also continue to box fragile items preparing them both for an imminent move and for their long term good. And, most importantly, we look forward to serving our many friends and users both in our temporary location and, in roughly three years, in our new facility.

Web Resources Mounted

During the autumn we have mounted several new resources on our web page. The Portrait and Biographical Record of Northern Michigan... (Chicago Record Publishing Co., 1895) is now available for research use. In addition the staff brought up a small but interesting exhibit on the history of CMU's library buildings. The exhibit was constructed to be part of the page informing users of building plans for the new CMU Libraries Building.

By late December we will also have brought up on the web an exhibit regarding the Aladdin Co. Of Bay City. The exhibit will include a finding aid to the Aladdin collection.
A Final Word

Over the past few months I have had the opportunity to think a great deal about grants, both in terms of their importance to the Clarke and also about how they have effected special libraries on a national scale. The importance of grants to the Clarke can be seen in three separate grant-funded activities underway this fall.

The records of Bay City’s Aladdin Company will be completely processed in late December, the result of a grant to the Clarke from the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH). Although I have talked at length in past newsletters and annual reports about the historical importance of the Aladdin records, without grant funding it would not have been possible to make them available to researchers so well arranged.

This fall a second NEH grant, to the Library of Michigan, is funding the complete cataloging of the Clarke’s extensive collection of newspapers on microfilm. With funds provided by the U.S. Newspaper Project, a long-term NEH funded program to catalog and microfilm virtually all of America’s newspapers, two catalogers from the Library of Michigan have been visiting the Clarke twice each week to describe our newspaper holdings.

For years we have recognized the need to describe fully our newspaper holdings. Lack of funds, however, forced us to “make do” with “provisional” cataloging records. Simply put we lacked the funds to hire a full-time cataloger for approximately one year to do the work. Once again, outside funds have helped us overcome a problem. We anticipate that this spring all of our newspaper holdings will be fully cataloged.

A third grant, from CMU’s Assistant Vice-President for Diversity, has allowed us to begin work on a web site regarding Native American treaty rights. Treaty rights are often a bone of considerable contention between Indian and white society. Whites complain of “special treatment” given Indians while Indians complain of the failure of Euro-Americans to understand the obligations created by treaties.

Given the Clarke’s rich body of resource material about Native Americans, the web site will offer us an important way to share the information we have with a wide group of users. Hopefully both Indians and whites will benefit from having a single place where they can find information about treaties and their implications.

More broadly, earlier this fall at a meeting in Ann Arbor I was given the opportunity to speak on the impact federal grants have had on special libraries over the past generation. In February I will have the opportunity to deliver a shortened version of the paper in Washington to the commissioners of the National Historic Publications and Records Commission, the grant-making arm of the National Archives.

Whether within the Clarke or at the national level, grants from federal and other sources have become a way of life for all special libraries. All of us who seek grants complain about long application forms and considerable red tape, but to paraphrase an old saying, “we can’t live with them but we can’t live without them.”

Grants and other forms of outside funding have become a critical component in allowing the Clarke to carry out the full range of activities that the library pursues. The next time you hear someone complain about spending “their” tax dollars on such things I hope you will, politely, suggest that while no system is perfect, in the humanities federal and other grants have become critical to completing our basic mission. In general those dollars are well spent and accomplish a great deal that all of us interested in libraries and the humanities believe important.

Frank Boles