Library Website Wins National Award

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Maryland, on October 1.

In making this award the AASLH described the library’s website as “a significant local history resource.” “The website is distinguished by an emphasis on substantive content delivered through attractive yet simple page design.”

In the nomination prepared for the site, one outside reviewer wrote, “The Clarke Historical Library Web site is an outstanding example of public outreach that is attractive, easy to navigate, and provides a wealth of information for its Michigan audience.”

The Clarke staff was particularly proud that while AASLH presented eighty-four awards, only one other electronic project was recognized.

Griffin Elected to Board of Governors

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At its October meeting the Clarke Library Board of Governors elected Robert P. Griffin to a five year term on the Board. Griffin is well known to many Michigan voters. He served in the United States House of Representatives from 1956 until 1966. From 1966 until 1979 he represented Michigan in the United States Senate. He also served on the Michigan State Supreme Court from 1986 to 1995.
Evelyn Leasher, public services librarian at the Clarke, recently published *Letters from Washington, 1863-1865* by Lois Bryan Adams. Brought out by Wayne State University Press, the volume brings to light the insightful but long overlooked newspaper columns written by Adams. In discussing the book, Maurine H. Beasley, of the University of Maryland wrote:

“A fascinating look at Civil War life in the nation’s capital—complete with clear sketches of motley street scenes, secessionist traitors, vapid ladies of fashion, former slaves rejoicing in their freedom, and injured soldiers dying in makeshift hospitals. Adams was an intelligent, insightful observer of social and political conditions.”

Kind words indeed about the book, but Beasley fails to mention that the “letters” were first published in the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* and were written by a talented woman whose interesting life was based in Michigan. Born in 1818 in New York state, Adams came to Michigan with her parents in 1823. Her family was among the first to settle in what is today Ypsilanti. Her brother, Alpha Washtenaw, was so named because he was the first non-Indian child born in the county. In 1835 the family relocated 150 miles from Ypsilanti to Constantine. In 1839 Lois attended the White Pigeon Academy, a short-lived branch of the University of Michigan. In 1841 she wed James Adams, a newspaper editor. Unfortunately, James died in 1848.

Newly widowed, Adams supported...
herself for several years by teaching in Kentucky, and by writing pieces published in various Michigan newspapers. In 1851 she moved back to Michigan and became a regular contributor to the *Michigan Farmer*, the state’s leading agricultural paper, and the *Detroit Advertiser*.

In 1853 she moved to Detroit where, based on both her writing ability and printing experience, she became “joint proprietor, publisher, and editor” of the *Michigan Farmer*. Adams inclusion as an editor of the *Michigan Farmer* fit into a broader national trend.

Several agricultural publications of the period had “Household” or “Ladies” departments. In the 1850s most discovered that the paper’s male editors were not very effective in writing copy of interest to “the ladies.” As a result, the newspapers found female editors for these sections.

In 1856 Adams formally became “editress” of the *Michigan Farmer*’s “Household” Department. Adams usually began the column with a poem, which she often personally wrote. What followed was an editorial about a topic of current interest, a few letters from readers, recipes, and an item or two of interest to children such as a puzzle. In addition to her work regarding the “Household” department, Adams increasingly took on responsibility for the overall operation of the paper. By 1859 she had become the managing editor.

While Adams was working at the paper, her poetry was becoming recognized. In 1860 she was published in William Coggeshall’s influential *Poets and Poetry of the West*. In 1862 she published her own works, *Sybelle and Other Poems*. *Sybelle* was a considerable success. In 1863 the *Michigan Farmer*, which Adams had sold her interest in two years earlier but continued to write for, offered the choice of 200 strawberry plants, two grapevines, or a copy of *Sybelle* as a premium for subscribing to the paper.

By the time Adams book of poetry was being used as an incentive to sell subscriptions, she was working in Washington.

Few women had been employed by the government prior to the war. In 1854, for example, the Patent Office had employed three women. The practice of hiring women stopped in 1855 but six years later the Treasury hired a woman. In 1862 Congress authorized the practice at only one-half the pay men received.

Adams found employment in 1862 at the newly created Department of Agriculture. In addition to her paid work at the Department of Agriculture, Adams volunteered in the Michigan Soldiers Relief Association. The Association, composed of Michigan natives in Washington, assisted soldiers from the state, primarily those injured in battle. Representatives of the Association visited local hospitals at least twice weekly. The women offered “comforts, and delicacies, and kindly care,” and often became advocates on the soldier’s behalf before doctors or other officials.

Although wartime Washington had several woman correspondents, Adams voice was unique. Other woman writers tended to have either an overtly political agenda or to seek a broad national audience. Adams penned smaller, more intimate pieces. They were drafted very consciously with her friends and acquaintances in Detroit in mind. Her columns represented a regional voice of great clarity and considerable insight writing on topics of interest to the region.

After the war, Adams remained in Washington, working in the Agriculture Department. However she developed chronic health problems, perhaps aggravated by her regular hospital visitations during the war. She died in 1870. Her body was returned to Michigan and rests in Constantine, near the remains of her father.
With Planning and Hard Work

Library Relocates to Temporary Home

The Clarke staff spent much of the summer moving the Library’s collections to our temporary home in the Student Activity Center/Rose Center. Final preparation for the move began in May when Clarke staff marked off the floor of the “Turfed room” with masking tape.

On the featureless 110 by 125 foot open floor of the room the only way to identify locations for the movers was to mark the floor with tape. Over the course of two days, nine rolls of tape found their way onto the floor, placed by staff members scurrying about with tape measures of up to 50 feet in length.

While staff taped off the floor various skilled workers labored to turn an indoor practice facility into a functional library. Computer cable, electrical cable, and telephone lines had to be run along “racetracks” placed about three feet above the floor. A new electrical transformer was installed. Air conditioning subcontractors undertook a variety of tasks needed to cool the space. Another construction crew scavenged material slated for demolition in the Park Library to construct light-proof cubicles for our microfilm cameras.

As the day of the move grew closer complications inevitably developed. For example, on the first day of the move the air-conditioning was “almost” done; and a week later it was actually working. Nevertheless the move began, with one staff member coordinating at the Clarke while another, in Rose, used a cell phone to keep in touch.

Over the course of several days range after range of shelves and material was transported from Park to Rose. Unlike the virtually interchangeable shelving found in the University Library the six different, non-interchangeable shelving types used in the Clarke caused the movers innumerable problems.

The movers also quickly discovered that the seemingly-firm “turf” from which the room took its name was actually quite spongy. Heavily loaded book carts sank into the floor, making pushing them somewhat akin to shoving the carts through mud. With considerable muscle, and more than a few words that shouldn’t be repeated, the movers and their student helpers managed to move everything in place.

On Monday, June 28, with most of the collection on site, reference service was transferred to Rose. With three tables and six chairs (most of the furniture was still in the Park Building) the day quickly went from bad to worse. As promised, the computer ports were “hot,” but the computers plugged into them refused to connect to the Library’s on-line catalog. A few minutes later, the sole microfilm-reader printer in Rose failed. Naturally, three researchers had arrived promptly at 8:00 am and bore patiently with the staff while things were made right.

The staff met the problems with considerable ingenuity. Until the computer linkage problem was solved, which took about a day, telephone calls back to the University Library’s reference desk supported Clarke reference requests. Extra microfilm readers were hauled from Park to Rose; one in the back seat of the director’s car. By Tuesday morning, if reference wasn’t quite “normal,” it was at least functioning.

On July 16, the vault material was moved from the Park Building to Rose and the move was completed. It had been a journey that the staff will not soon forget but will repeat in late 2001 or early 2002 when we move back to the Park Library Building.
A Final Word

While I was in Baltimore to receive the Certificate of Commendation given to the Clarke by the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) much of the discussion centered around one of the most interesting books about history to be published in the last decade entitled The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). In it, co-authors Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen reported on the first scientifically accurate poll ever conducted to determine what history means to typical Americans.

The results of the survey are eye opening. Overall the book demonstrates the fundamental value and importance of regional history centers such as the Clarke.

Eye-opening was that despite the lamentations of critics who for years have complained of a “historically illiterate” nation, most Americans love history and engage in historically related activities on a regular basis.

The survey revealed that 57% of Americans had visited a history museum or historical site within the past year. Over the same time period 53% had read a “book about the past.” Over a third had engaged in genealogical research within the past year. Much to my amazement, coming from a profession that claims everyone stopped writing diaries about 1900, 29% of those surveyed kept either a diary or a journal.

Perhaps not too surprisingly people who had the benefit of more advanced education tended to be more interested in historical activities. Sixty-three percent of those who had graduated from college had read a book about the past while only 30% of those without a high school diploma had read a similar book. Likewise, 40% of those “with some college” education had written in a journal or diary compared to 16% of those who had not received a high school diploma.

If clear divisions could be made based on education, it was nevertheless heartening to learn how many American who had not had the opportunity to attend college still loved history. Three out of ten had read a book about the past while better than one in ten wrote things down about their lives. These are very encouraging numbers coming from the demographic group that is the least likely to read or write for pleasure.

If Americans loved history in general, the survey revealed they had no such fondness for the “history” they learned in high school or college. Regardless of education, “most had little good to say about the actual classroom experience of studying history,” reported the study’s authors.

The problem, the authors concluded, was not so much the teachers, but rather the curriculum. “Narratives of national greatness,” the stuff of the common American history survey course that includes lists of presidents, great battles, and major pieces of federal legislation, failed to connect with the family and locally-centered sense of history that was the real interest of most Americans.

The authors’ call for connecting “narratives of national greatness” with the local and family histories that most Americans understand and about which they are concerned, struck me as defining one of the fundamental functions the Clarke has performed for almost 50 years.

The Clarke contains a wealth of information that creates a bridge linking the tremendous interest in local and family history shared by most Americans with the broader sweep of national affairs. The study makes clear that institutions like the Clarke serve a critical need by preserving the material that connect local history to national events. It is an exciting conclusion that validates a time-tested saying, “all history is local.”

Frank Boles