Library to Relocate This Fall

On October 15 the Clarke Library will begin moving from its current temporary location to its new home in the renovated and enlarged Park Library building. The move is scheduled to take three weeks.

During the move reference services will be maintained. However, at some point between October 15 and November 2, reference services will transfer from its current location in Rose 143 to the first floor of the Park Library. The exact date when reference services will move from Rose to Park will be determined by the progress of the move itself.

We recommend that researchers planning to use the Clarke during the move contact us in advance, both to be sure the material they wish to use will be readily available when they arrive and also to determine if they should visit us in our soon-to-be empty temporary facility at Rose or in our new home within the Park Library.

When the move is completed, the Clarke will be located on the first floor of the fully renovated and greatly expanded Park Library building, with just over 17,500 square feet of floor space to meet our users needs.
Ten Questions for Local History Societies

During the summer the Clarke staff was invited to Leroy, Michigan, to speak to the town’s historical society about how it should develop its organization. In discussing what to say, we here at the Clarke developed a list of ten questions that we think any local history organization would benefit from answering.

1. Is the organization legally incorporated?

Although it sounds like a bureaucratic nuisance, legal incorporation is critical to any local history organization. The fundamental reason for incorporation comes when an individual appears at the door, boxes of material filling the back of a van, and asks to “make a donation.” A donation to what? Certainly not the person standing at the door who receives the material. But to truly “give something” to the historical society, the society must be a legal entity—it must have been incorporated.

2. What is the organization’s tax status?

It’s an old joke that only two things in life are certain: death and taxes, but two things in life really are certain and one of them is taxes. Almost everyone pays taxes, and many people prefer to be able to write off charitable donations on their federal income-tax returns. However, such write-offs are possible only when the organization accepting the donation has filed the necessary forms with the Internal Revenue Service to be declared a charitable organization. Such organizations are often referred to as “501(c)3” organizations, after the part of the tax code usually cited to establish charitable status for groups such as historical societies. It is a huge advantage for most organizations to be designated charitable organizations. It not only allows them to tell donors about the “advantages” of giving, but also it is often a qualifying condition for grants and other forms of government aid.

Being declared a charitable organization by the IRS is not a quick process. As one would expect, the forms are long and not always clear. But with firm resolve and the better part of a week’s work, usually a member of a small organization can complete the forms to the satisfaction of the IRS agent who will eventually review them.

3. Are deeds of gift in existence, regularly implemented for all donations, and filed in a way that you can find the darned things when you need them?

A deed of gift is among the most critical documents that a local history organization can possess. It seems that regardless of where one travels, there is always a “horror story”
about the “stuff” that “Old Man McPherson” dropped off several years ago, which some relative later claimed “really belongs to me.”

The only way to deal with this problem quickly and relatively painlessly is to have, and be able to find, a signed deed of gift that makes clear that “the old man” really meant to give whatever is being discussed to the historical society and signed his name on the deed to prove it.

A word to the wise however. Even if the organization has a deed, it never hurts to be accommodating. If there is any way to help “solve” the problem of a disgruntled relative by giving him or her an inexpensive photocopy or some other modestly priced copy of the item in question, this gesture should be made. After all, you never know what might still be in the family attic.

4. Is there a collecting policy?

Every historical society will someday be offered “stuff” that doesn’t seem to belong there. Clearly knowing what it is that the society documents, backed up by a written policy that has been adopted by the board that governs the society or the membership, is an invaluable tool both in defining what is collected and politely saying “no” to people offering items that are not wanted.

During the summer I visited a museum in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and found a World War II vintage submarine on display. What did this veteran of the Pacific theater have in common with a small town in Wisconsin? A large number of submarines just like this one had been built in the town’s shipyards and eventually found their way to war. The submarine told the story not only of brave men fighting a war but also of hardworking dedicated employees on the home front who worked long hours to give the sailors the weapons they needed to prevail.

Another museum I visited over the summer had a collection of model World War II aircraft on display. When I asked about those the volunteer on duty said, “Oh, Joe really likes to build them.” Lovely though the models were, they had no connection to the community’s history, and they really didn’t belong in the community’s history museum.

A good collecting policy helps sort out what should, and should not, be kept.

5. Is the material stored in a secure way?

Possession is the first step in building any local history collection, but preservation is the most critical responsibility once material has been obtained. Perhaps the two most important rules to remember are that paper, like people, does best in a regular climate that does not have extremes of heat or cold and that the most persistent “varmints” one needs to protect the papers from are people!

The single best preservation investment for the life of paper records is heating in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. Keeping paper, including photographs, at a constant moderate temperature will greatly prolong these items’ lives.

The most common cause of damage to collections is well-intentioned people who do foolish things. Typical examples include drinking coffee while working with collections (“I never spill the stuff,” they always claim.) and asking to borrow things “just for a day or two.” Individuals who have too little time often accidentally damage items as they race through material hoping to finish in time for supper.

People do spill things, loaned material has a way of never coming back, and the best-intentioned researchers will do damage if they hurry. Historical societies should be on the lookout for bugs and various four-legged creatures seeking a home in their collections, but the biggest troublemakers will always walk on two legs.

6. Are displays put up in a preservation-friendly manner?

Displays are often at the heart of a local history museum, but displaying items can be tough on the material. Direct sunlight or
inappropriate display techniques such as using thumbtacks or glue to mount pictures can do great damage to irreplaceable items.

Sunlight will fade most items over time. Putting holes in pictures or gluing material to some form of backing is usually a very bad idea. In general, exhibits should be designed to “do no harm” to the items exhibited. When in doubt, make a high-quality copy and display it, rather than the original.

7. Are displays interpreted?
Perhaps the saddest question heard in any museum is when a visitor asks, “What’s that thing?” and there is no answer in sight. Displayed items need signs or some other form of interpretation so that visitors can understand what they are looking at and not walk out puzzled and confused.

Signs, however, should be kept brief. Most people only read about one hundred words before they move along to see something else. Short, to-the-point notes will do the job far better than a two-page, typed essay.

8. Is the library accessible?
Many local history societies maintain libraries of local material. This is an invaluable service, if people can use the material. However, unlike museum visitors, library users tend to sit and read what is in front of them and often need considerable time to find what they are looking for. A museum open one Saturday afternoon each month “during the season” might serve the community adequately, but it is doubtful that a library keeping such a schedule would be much good to anyone.

Local history groups that are unable to keep regular, generous library hours might explore the possibility of placing their collections in a nearby public library, which likely will make the information available for use for forty or more hours each week.

9. Has the building become the tail that wags the dog?
A local history building is both a blessing and a curse. Local history groups often spend years trying to find permanent homes for their collections and often end up with a “historical” building in their town.

“Historical,” however, is often a polite way of saying, “old and in need of expensive and extensive repairs.” Very soon meetings that used to discuss the town’s history become filled with talk of the leaking roof or the need for a new furnace. A building is important, but it needs to be kept in perspective and not become the tail that wags the dog.

10. What kind of outreach is the organization involved in?
Historical societies often see their role as preserving the past. This is critical, but it is also fair to ask “preserving the past for what end?”

It is the end that justifies the time, talent, and treasure that is lavished on the things in the museum. Exhibits, publications, historical reenactments, World Wide Web sites, or other outreach ideas are all tools that take the history preserved by the organization and share it with others. The questions are simply, who are we saving this for, and how best can we reach that group of people?

New on the Web Page
During the summer the library added three new features to its web page. An index describing Native American material in the forty volume Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections was created. Also created was a bibliography of children’s books in the Clarke discussing Indians. Finally, an illustrated history was written of the campus buildings of CMU, including biographical information about the individuals for whom buildings are named.
A Final Word

It seems just a short while ago that Clarke staff members poked their noses into the Rose Center’s “turf room” and looked at each other and said, “We’re supposed to make that into a library?” The morning I encountered a person diligently practicing her nine iron shot in the room while the stacks were being installed was the hour of my personal doubt. I had not planned on opening the first combined library and indoor driving range in the country!

With strong support from the university, a tremendous amount of hard work of our own, and a polite but firm explanation that we really couldn’t allow people to practice their golf swings in the room anymore, even if they did promise to hit the balls away from the stacks, we managed to convert the turf room into a functioning library. For more than two years the Clarke has served the public well in its temporary quarters while continuing the Library’s ongoing work of building the collection and reaching out to the public.

To the staff’s amazement, I think that it has been a surprisingly successful transformation of the space not only for the public but also for those of us who work here. The turf room has served us far better than we initially thought it could. And over time we’ve come to think of Rose as a sort of home.

We will certainly miss our friends in Rose and the Student Activity Center. All of them have been helpful in accommodating the needs of a library suddenly stuck in the middle of an athletic facility. And at least one Clarke staff member has already been heard “reminiscing” about “how good the parking was down there at the SAC.”

By the time some of you read this, the Clarke staff will have likely traded exercising on the SAC’s indoor walking track for an outdoor hike to the new building from “perimeter” campus parking or hunting for a place to put the car after lunch.

Despite the loss of our trainers and premiere parking, we are nevertheless anxious to move into the new Park Library building. We’ve planned, we’ve hoped, we’ve watched, on occasion we’ve schemed, and we’ve waited. The time has come to move. Yet with all the “new” things we’ll find, we’ve also taken care to bring a bit of the old with us.

The collections themselves will, of course, move from old to new. The beautiful, richly stained wooden bookcases that graced the exhibit area in the old building will also find homes in our new quarters. So, too, will a few other pieces of lovely furniture.

I am particularly pleased that the old walnut desk from my office will join us in the new building. An approximately seventy-year-old piece of fine workmanship, the desk had seen better days when I “inherited” it. As the new building was being planned, I, along with all of the other staff members, was slated to have worn office furniture replaced with new chairs and desks. By and large this was a wonderful idea as much of the furniture had seen far better days. But as I thought about the walnut desk, I eventually made an alternate proposal. Instead of a new desk, could I use the money to have the walnut desk stripped and refinished? It took some discussion, and just a tad of scheming, but when it turned out that refishing the old desk would cost more or less the same as buying a new one, the deal was struck.

The old desk is currently off campus being restored to its former glory. It is a personal reminder that, although we will have many wonderful improvements to share and enjoy in the new facility, some traditions will also be maintained.

The Library has come a long way from the small room where Dr. Clarke’s original gift was placed when it first arrived here at Central. But we haven’t forgotten our Library’s past, its development, or our mission. It’s going to be an exciting ride in the new building, and I hope you’ll join me for it!

Frank Boles