

Historical Notes

Founding

Before there was a Bentley Historical Library, there was the Michigan Historical Collections and before that, as remembered by associate professor of history Lewis G. Vander Velde, there was little more than “a creative idea, a very small research grant and a goodly supply of optimism.” The Faculty Research Fund grant awarded to Dr. Vander Velde in 1935 allowed him to locate and collect materials relating to the history of the state of Michigan. Dr. Vander Velde had long been concerned that many historical records relating to the history of the university and of the state were being discarded or poorly maintained for want of a permanent home. He found a sympathetic advocate in University President Alexander G. Ruthven. In addition to the grant money, President Ruthven, also concerned about university records, appointed Dr. Vander Velde to serve as secretary of a Committee on University Archives that was to collect and preserve manuscript and printed material relating to the history of the university. In neither area – the state or the university - was there a dearth of material to be collected. In recognition of what Vander Velde and his research associate Elizabeth Sparks Adams had accomplished in a brief period of time, the Regents in 1935 formally designated the Michigan Historical Collections as a research institution of the university. By this regental action, the dual mission of the new unit was ratified: to collect, preserve, and make available important historical records of the state of Michigan and to serve as the archives of the University of Michigan.

Facilities

The Michigan Historical Collections were originally housed in a modest space in the old University Press building and later in a Michigan Room of the William Clements Library. In 1938, with the completion of the Rackham Building on campus, the university provided Dr. Vander Velde and his research associate with a suite of offices in the basement of the new structure. Here the Collections would remain for thirty-six years until the Bentley Library was built.

Statistics are one way of measuring the success of a program. Another criterion is by charting physical expansion. As the Rackham office space filled up, the university responded with the offer of temporary space in a warehouse on Fuller Street. This new space was by then desperately needed to house several collections of business records, most of which consisted of elephantine business ledgers and journals. In 1955, these volumes were moved to the fourth floor of the University Library’s Central Service and Stack Building on North Campus. When the library needed this space, these collections and others were moved to an unheated former barracks located near a runway at Willow Run Airport. At the same time, additional rooms in

Rackham were offered to the Michigan Historical Collections and gladly accepted. These included additional offices, a former lobby coat closet, a basement room off of the Bureau of Government Library, and a small windowless storage room on the 3rd floor. Even more space was needed with the receipt of the George Romney papers. Gubernatorial papers were considered too important to be housed far from the reading room. As a result these papers were temporarily stored in an underground passageway adjacent to the mechanical/boiler room of Angell Hall.

Dr. Vander Velde and his successor Prof. F. Clever Bald were able to locate temporary storage spaces, but it was left to Dr. Bald's successor, Prof. Robert M. Warner, to initiate the fund-raising campaign that would enable the Michigan Historical Collections to have a home of its own. During his first years as director, Dr. Warner worked tirelessly to raise the necessary funds for a new building. With the assistance of many friends of the Collections and a generous gift of Mrs. Arvella Bentley, a structure designed to house the riches of Michigan and University of Michigan history, became a splendid reality in 1974. Designed by Jickling, Lyman & Powell of Birmingham, Michigan, the library occupies a spacious and beautiful site on the North Campus of the University of Michigan. Not only did the new building provide considerable space for the Michigan Historical Collections to grow, but the luxury of new quarters, especially in comparison to the Rackham Building, made new program initiatives possible, allowed more interaction with university classes, and brought closer to fruition a more active participation of the library in the management of university records.

The construction of the Bentley Library meant that the holdings of the Michigan Historical Collections could be consolidated. Even so, stacks that seemed abundant in 1974 were quickly filling up with historical records and by 1980, it was again necessary to think about expansion of the Bentley site. Although the Bentley Library was designed to accommodate easily the construction of additional stack cubes, funding for this expansion was problematic. Thus it became necessary to seek offsite storage. In 1980, acting library director, Dr. Richard Doolen was able to acquire substantial storage space across the street from the Bentley Library in a building vacated by the University Library. This was the same facility – the Central Service and Stack Building – occupied briefly by the Michigan Historical Collections twenty years earlier. Within a decade, the library's active collecting programs for state and university history filled these stacks with historical records. In the early 1990s, the university then provided an unused classroom suite for additional storage in an operational fire station up the street from the Bentley Library.

By 2000, the Bentley Library was keeper of nearly 30,000 linear feet of material, housed in three facilities, all nearly full. Fortunately, as it had been in the library's formative years, the university was supportive of the work and contributions made by the Michigan Historical Collections (formally renamed the Bentley Historical Library by regental action in 1993). In

2001, with little or no space remaining, the Regents of the University of Michigan authorized the long planned-for 36,000 square foot addition to the library building. Completed in late 2004, the new stacks provide additional capacity as the collecting of historical materials continues into the 21st century. Moreover, the addition provided long needed administrative space for the University Archives and Records Program and a new conservation lab.

Acquisitions

The fundamental intellectual challenge for the staff of the archives over the years has been to identify historical documents and records whose significance warrants long-term retention in the archives. Since its establishment in 1935, the library's archivists have identified thousands of linear feet of valuable archival records created by individuals, voluntary associations, corporations, and the University of Michigan and then have transferred those documents and collections to the Bentley. The range of topics covered by these research resources is vast and documents the human condition and the natural environment. While mere numbers don't capture the richness and quality of the library's holdings, the annual acquisition figures do suggest how the work in this functional area varies from year to year. The chart below shows the linear feet acquired annually over the last two decades. The bold line indicates the total number of linear feet received from both university sources as well as historical (i.e., non-university sources), with the other lines showing a breakdown between these two sources. The total annual input has been as low as 600 linear feet in 1984-85 and as high at 3,421 linear feet a few years later in 1987-88. Those years when there is a spike in our acquisition level usually indicates that we have brought in large historical collections, usually gubernatorial papers or collections like the massive Penn Central Railroad.

Alvin M. Bentley

At their meeting on December 17, 1971, the Regents of the University of Michigan accepted a gift of \$500,000 from Mrs. Alvin M. Bentley for a building to house the Michigan Historical Collections. "It is appropriate," Robert Warner noted, "that the building would be named for this former congressman and regent for he was a serious student of history." Mr. Bentley had received both his A.B. and M.A. degrees at the U-M in history and was pursuing a doctorate at the time of his death in 1969. The life and career of Alvin Bentley contained elements of both tragedy and triumph. In 1954, he was seriously wounded when three Puerto Rican nationalists in the visitors' gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives fired into the chamber, wounding five members of Congress, including Rep. Bentley. He survived to continue his career. In 1960, he tried unsuccessfully to win a seat in the United States Senate. Thereafter he channeled his energies into other areas of public service. In 1961, he established the Alvin M. Bentley Foundation and pledged \$1,000,000 to further "science, education and charitable projects." It is that foundation that funds the program at the University of Michigan that provides full scholarships to select distinguished graduates of high schools in Michigan. During 1961-1962, he was a valuable member of the state constitutional convention serving as

chairman of the committee on education. Four years later, he was appointed to the U-M Board of Regents and served until his death in 1969. His contributions as a public servant were many, but his lasting legacy is the historical archives that bear his name.

Other major gifts

The gift of Mrs. Bentley was crucial to the construction of the library. So too were the contributions of many other individuals and organizations. Significant contributions came from Governor G. Mennen and Nancy Williams, the Free and Accepted Masons of Michigan, the family of Roscoe O. Bonisteel, family and friends of Floyd Starr, friends of Governor Wilber M. Brucker, the family of Senator Prentiss M. Brown, friends of Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, Delta Sigma Delta dental fraternity, the Whiting Foundation, friends of James Fairbairn Smith, and family and friends of Governor Chase S. Osborn. As a token of appreciation for these gifts, the library designated various offices and meeting rooms within the public portion of the building as memorial rooms containing photographs or portraits of the individuals and organizations recognized.

Courtyard

The courtyard of the library was designed to be hidden from street view and only accessible from interior doors off of the reading room and the conference room. The courtyard landscape design, a signature feature of the building, was originally made possible in 1975 through an anonymous gift. It was subsequently redesigned in 1998 to add more greenery through a gift of the Roscoe Bonisteel Foundation of Ann Arbor. Anchoring the view from the reading room windows is a Richard Hunt sculpture in two pieces, entitled *Historical Circle* and *Peregrine Section*, donated to the library in 1975 by Hobart Taylor, Jr. in memory of his father. The seasonal changes in the courtyard landscape along with the occasional visits from local deer, rabbits, and foxes, make research in the library a unique experience.

The Executive Committee of the Library

Under the Regent's bylaw governing the Michigan Historical Collections and subsequently the Bentley Historical Library, oversight is placed in an executive committee. Though there are no ex-officio positions other than the director, over the years the library has been fortunate in the composition of that committee. There has been regular representation from the presidents and provosts of the university as well as from the deans of the graduate school and other schools and colleges. From 1972 to 2001, the committee was chaired by Professor Sidney Fine of the History Department. He was followed by Earl Lewis, professor of history and dean of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies. The committee continues to oversee policies regarding gifts, access, and the general administration of the

collections. In matters of budget and other details the library has, since 1938, reported to the office of the Provost.

Friends of the Library

From its earliest days, the library has enjoyed support from a community of friends interested in its work. U-M alumnus Earl D. Babst of New York City, a former chairman of American Sugar Refining Co., was one of the earliest of these supporters. Mr. Babst provided the Library with its first endowment fund. In 1964, Robert Warner and several longtime associates of the Collections formally organized the Friends of the Michigan Historical Collections. Regent Roscoe O. Bonisteel served as its first president. Though its major focus through 1974 was to secure a new building, thirty years later the Friends organization continues to play an important role in the work of the library. Funds generated each year through annual dues are used to assist in the conservation of the library's books, photographs, and manuscripts and to support activities involved in augmenting its holdings. Of increasing importance to the library is the development of endowment funds for the care and preservation of the collections as well as for the printing of publications. Over the past thirty years the library's endowment has grown to \$3 million, the income from which supports conservation and preservation program of the library as well as innovative program initiatives.

It is important to note that beyond those who contribute each year to the annual fund of the library, there have been more than 6,000 individuals and organizations over nearly seven decades who have donated precious historical records to the Bentley Library. The library has no funds to purchase material. The breadth and value of its collections rest on the extraordinary generosity of all those many donors and on their sensitivity to the importance of history.