

Pioneering in Manuscript Seminars¹

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*Western Reserve
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SINCE this paper deals with a program of publicizing the materials of the Western Reserve Historical Society at Cleveland, may I introduce the subject by a brief reference to the Society and its collections. It was founded in 1867. It is basically a private organization with some public support, and it maintains both a museum and a library. The latter, housed in a 70-room mansion, is essentially a library of American history, particularly of the nineteenth century. As might be expected, the collection is strongest in materials covering the Western Reserve area and Ohio generally, but the Society name is not meant to indicate that it is confined in its interest to the Western Reserve. For the most part, the American materials are confined to the area east of the Mississippi River. The library contains some 200,000 volumes, 100,000 pamphlets, 25,000 volumes of newspapers, approximately a million manuscripts, a map and picture collection, and numerous special items.

Like most holders of collections of manuscripts, the Western Reserve Historical Society wishes to have its treasures known and used. It subscribes to the belief that its function is to foster an interest in history and assist in its writing and dissemination by all reasonable means. Although the Society has had little cause to feel neglected by scholars generally, it decided to institute last year a program designed further to acquaint various groups of persons with the resources of the library. Graduate students and majors in the fields of history and English in nearby colleges and universities formed one large group of users of the collections that participated in the program. Out-of-town research workers form a welcome part of the library's patrons, of course, but it would be a mere chance if they could be present at these seminar meetings. Others who attended in considerable numbers were newspaper feature writers, novelists, radio script writers, free-lance historians, and specialists like bankers, lawyers, and government officials.

The manuscript seminar program meetings were held on the sec-

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ond Tuesday of each month, from October through May, at eight o'clock in the evening, in the main reading room of the library. Publicity was given in the Society's monthly news bulletin, through the newspapers, and by means of mimeographed postal cards prepared for each occasion and sent chiefly to some one hundred selected persons within a range of forty or fifty miles, although some were sent to societies and individuals at a greater distance for their information. The local mailing list included history professors in appropriate fields in Cleveland colleges and outlying institutions such as Oberlin, Baldwin-Wallace, Akron, Hiram, Kent, and Lake Erie. It also included selected representatives of the three leading newspapers, the larger radio stations, the Rowfant Club (the local book club), persons who asked specifically to be included, and certain writers who were known to use materials such as we would discuss. In some cases, we included writers in the hope that some comment, some document, or point in the discussion might provide a lead for a feature story. In any case, the word went out that all who were interested in manuscripts were welcome to attend.

No attempt was made to draw in the man from the street who was looking for diversion. The program was designed for a specialized group, and it was felt that the purpose of the seminars might be achieved best by limiting the membership. This was particularly true in regard to opportunity to examine the manuscripts. The word seminar was used with two things in mind. The meetings seemed, in a sense, to be the other side of the usual seminar picture, dealing with the raw materials for reports although having some of the traditional seminar elements. Then, too, it was used as a screening device. It was felt that persons most likely to benefit from the program would understand the term.

Subject-matter wise, topics were selected for discussion that were reflected in our collections and which lent themselves to the program's purpose by reason of inherent interest, scope, or other consideration. The topics also varied in type, and ranged back and forth in point of time. The selection was made so as to point out the subject-matter variety in the collection; the time arrangement was made in order to get subjects early and late, organizational, individual, and topical, presented fairly early in the program in order to catch the interest of different groups. For example the specialist interested in Theodore E. Burton and the turn of the century might be quite uninterested in the Connecticut Land Company or the Shakers.

It seemed appropriate in the first meeting to discuss what we

term our "original collection," which consists of materials up to about 1885 when many of the manuscripts were bound, as was common in that day. As might be expected, this material relates largely to the Western Reserve area, chiefly before 1830, and includes the extensive Connecticut Land Company records and the Virginia Military Land District papers. Surveys and diaries provided much interest at this session.

To indicate the wide scope of the collection as a whole and to interest a different group, we next selected for presentation the papers of two later Ohio figures, Senator Theodore E. Burton and Myron T. Herrick, governor, ambassador, and business man. The evening's offering was unified as to general period and roughly as to subject matter.

The third session dealt with material of an entirely different kind — the records of a communal religious organization, the Shakers. Here we drew upon the Society's outstanding collection of manuscript records of these remarkable people, and presented letters, religious and work journals, account books, spirit drawings, and the like. The next meeting was devoted to a period of history — the Civil War. Except for the perennial interest in Lincoln, study of the Civil War period had been rather out of fashion among the historians in our area, and we hoped that our treatment of the period would overcome this situation and stimulate some interest in a field which we regard as one of our strongest. In addition to promoting the Sigel papers, numerous battlefield letters, and other items, we departed from the strictly manuscript approach and presented accounts of the Palmer collection of printed Civil War and slavery materials, both Union and Confederate. Some printed material could be found in the library to support any of the manuscript collections, but in this field the urgency of including it in a manuscript study seemed particularly strong. Among the special elements in the collection which we emphasized were the pamphlets, many of which are rare, on the war itself and on slavery in general, including many printed abroad. We also took occasion to call attention to our collection of Civil War newspapers, which includes a surprising number published in the Confederacy.

From the Civil War we turned next to a study of Ohio materials for the period 1815 to 1845. In this session we spread our attention over a number of collections, some of them extensive, but all bearing on the social, economic, and political life of the State and the nation. Included were the papers of Elisha Whittlesey, John and A. W. Walworth, Reuben Hitchcock, Turhand Kirtland, Governor

Allan Trimble, and others. Here the emphasis was upon the period.

The next unit was devoted to a subject — transportation — rail, highway, and water, in the eastern lake area, and in Ohio. The seventh seminar was devoted to a second religious group, the communal settlement at Zoar in central Ohio. The last meeting was concerned with materials relating to banks and banking. Thus, allowing for overlapping, the program covered two broad subjects, banking and transportation; three periods, 1815-1845, Civil War, and the Ohio survey and the early settlement period; two communal religious groups; and two groups of individuals widely separated in point of time. As the reader will note, topics were not chronologically arranged, but were mixed to get a variety of topics presented early in the series.

In the handling of sessions we had no precedent and, not being bound by a tradition, we determined to avoid a set pattern. This decision was partly caused by the varying nature of the material to be presented, but also partly because we were feeling our way. We selected and brought to the reading room representative units of the collection, so selected that they would afford a type study of letters, diaries, surveys, and the like. I customarily opened each session with some account of the material under consideration, the circumstances of its collection (where pertinent), and a description of its scope and size. In some cases the circumstances of collection, the person or persons responsible for it, and the provenance of the manuscripts proved of particular interest. We generally added some background information on the Shakers, the Zoarites, the origins of the Western Reserve or the general picture in Ohio, for examples.

Further treatment of the material was divided between our librarian, Mrs. Alene Lowe White, and myself, partly to have new faces, voices, and types of comment before the group and partly to allow the person most familiar with sub-sections of the larger unit to discuss it. The comment varied widely. In some cases we read excerpts from letters or diaries, either for their own sake or as types. On another evening we might display manuscript survey maps. Occasionally we abstracted the main parts of a long story which might be of interest to a newspaper columnist or radio script writer. In one or two cases, in order to show the scope of the material, we even read titles from our manuscript catalog, which covers some 3,000 units which vary in size from a single item to a ton. In only one instance was it feasible to bring more than a small portion of the collection to the meeting place, but it was possible to

indicate, with reasonable exactness, the footage, number of manuscript boxes or items in a given collection.

The need for this variety in treatment is partially explained by the fact that, despite some screening, the seminars included persons possessing a wide range of interest and knowledge of manuscript materials. We were dealing with numerous persons other than trained historical workers. We did not attempt, as might be done, to advise regarding the mechanics of taking notes from manuscript material, or to emphasize the rules of historical research and criticism. On a different occasion and with a more homogenous group such procedures would seem to be highly desirable.

The sessions were conducted quite informally and there were occasional questions from the floor during this expository phase. In fact, in one case, there was a spirited discussion, almost an argument, among members of the group, chiefly between two professors. In each case opportunity was given to ask about any part of the unit. Sometimes persons were present who had done research in the material under discussion and could tell what they had found in the given collections. One retired professor told of his research in the Connecticut Land Company surveys and other papers in quest of information on the locally famous Girdled Road. On November 8, a candidate for office in a suburban community "sweated out" the early hours of election night by telling us about the types of material he had found in the Herrick papers. A young graduate student told of his work in the Elisha Whittlesey papers, and one of the trustees of the Society, the grandson of a Civil War general, made some remarks concerning the Civil War materials and William P. Palmer, who had collected much of it. On the occasion of the Burton-Herrick session, the group, which included a graduate seminar unit, learned a lot of things not found in books about what goes on behind the scenes in a political campaign, when a local judge, a prominent Republican, who had campaigned with and for Burton and Herrick, told of some of his experiences in politics. His inside story, presented with keen insight and pungent, uninhibited comments on personalities, was one of the highlights of this particular session. It was an interesting experience to have these informal comments from one who is reputed to have been the only man able to cage the vitriolic Peter Witt.

On each occasion the session was concluded by an invitation to come forward and examine any part of the materials presented which had attracted attention. After one of the meetings, a photographer from one of the Cleveland papers got an excellent pic-

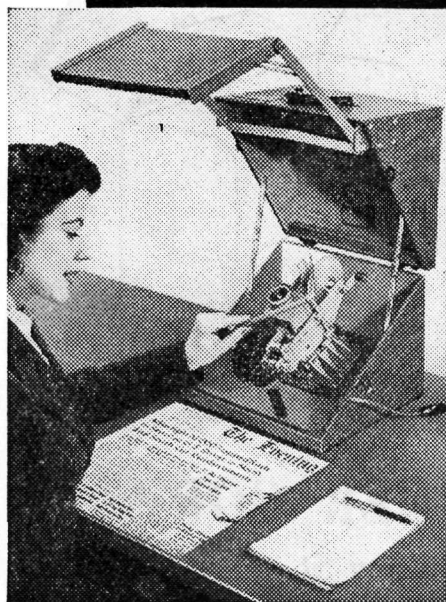
ture of a local writer engrossed in reading a particularly interesting letter. Staff members were available to answer questions, listen to "leads," and in some cases to go to the shelves or vaults for additional material. It happened that on the day of the Civil War seminar a young graduate student from nearby Kent State University had come for consultation regarding a Civil War thesis subject. After going over the matter with him we suggested that he stay for the seminar to be held that evening on this subject. He attended and soon thereafter decided upon a topic for which he used the Sigel papers.

The program as developed last year would seem to be best adapted for the use in the area reasonably close to Cleveland on the assumption that those participating might wish to come in later and make research use of the manuscripts. It is our opinion, however, that a different type of approach would be needed for "distant institute or extension work." We have in mind a form of extension which seems suited to our situation. There is much material in various old communities in the Western Reserve, either in private hands or in local historical society collections, which would serve history better if in a central depository. We have had conversations with one local historical society group looking toward a program of ferreting out source material. In this case it has been suggested that I should come to their group from a society having a working manuscript collection and give a talk on the interesting things that can be found in old letters, diaries, church records, and the like, and show how these facts would help historians write the history of their community. (We would avoid the term "seminar" in this situation as being unsuited to the prospective audience.) We could select material for this talk from our own collection, from that of the local society concerned, and from that in private hands, where we could make arrangements in advance. It would seem wise to place great weight on using local materials since such materials would likely be most effective as being the kind those in attendance might have. The plan would be to read letters, diaries, or excerpts from them, with comments on the writers, the locality, the state of the roads, or whatever the subject might be. In other words verbal editorial comment would be presented on a lay basis. I tried this method recently before the annual meeting of another nearby society and found it quite effective. We would try to drive home the point that single letters may be important when added to others, by reading one from our own collection and one or more found in separated local holdings, showing how they supplement each other.

In this case, we had in mind going one step further. The local group would undertake to secure widespread publicity for the program with explanations of the nature of the talk and an invitation to bring in material to be microfilmed. There is, of course, a weakness in this kind of filming program. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to arrange the material logically and the resulting film would be decidedly "miscellaneous," but the material would be in hand and would relate generally to that locality.

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