

# Western Historical Manuscripts Collection — A Case Study of a Collecting Program

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*Western Historical Manuscripts Collection  
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THE Western Historical Manuscripts Collection of the University of Missouri came into being on January 1, 1943, less than 20 years ago. As a young organization, it may seem presumptuous for us to present an account of our brief history and of our problems and procedures. Nevertheless, we welcome the opportunity to participate in this program. Although our career has been neither unique nor of long duration, we are sufficiently ancient to have made both mistakes and sound decisions, and a record of these may offer some help to similar organizations.

In 1942 Elmer Ellis, then professor of American history at the University of Missouri, outlined the advantages of a collection such as ours and provided the leadership necessary to bring it into being. In a letter to David H. Stevens of the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation in the fall of 1942 Dr. Ellis described the undertaking as a group project under the direction of the history department but shared by the University of Missouri Library and the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Although not a part of the university, the State Historical Society has always been housed in the University of Missouri Library Building, where the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection was also to be located. Our State Historical Society was founded in 1898 by the Missouri Press Association and has continued to benefit from that connection. Various university professors have also maintained interest in its welfare, but its major financial support comes from State appropriations. Long-continued interest of the press association in the society accounts in part for its excellent collection of local Missouri newspapers, probably

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the most complete for any one State to be found anywhere in this country. In addition, the society has published a journal for many years, and it has a larger paid membership than any other State historical society. It owns the J. Christian Bay collection of Midwestern Americana, a good Mark Twain collection, and much other material relating to Missouri's history.

In 1942 the University of Missouri Library contained the basic published works in American history and a sizable collection of bound volumes, pamphlets, periodicals, and microfilm relating to the Great Plains and the West. Included also were such items as the Harry Snyder collection of Western Americana.

The holdings of the two libraries thus provided a wealth of material relating to the westward movement. Nevertheless, the historical society quite naturally had given primary attention to Missouri history, while the university library of course had an obligation to all fields of knowledge. Dr. Ellis proposed to expand their manuscript holdings and thus to establish a center of research and teaching on the history and culture of the Great Plains and western prairie regions. St. Louis was for a long time a center of the fur trade, and through that port and the Missouri River towns just to the west flowed much of the population and material supplies for the westward expansion. In a very real sense, Missouri was the hub of the Santa Fé, California, and Oregon trails. Furthermore, since Missouri sent many of its own people westward, Dr. Ellis believed that a search of the attics of older families would in all probability reveal many letters written to the folks "back home" containing rich materials concerning the settlement of the trans-Mississippi West.

The creation of a new, independent library would have encouraged needless duplication and even rivalry and would have been both expensive and inimical to the interests of all concerned. With this in mind, Dr. Ellis asked the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation to make a three-year grant of \$15,000, to be supplemented by \$5,000 more from the University of Missouri, for the purpose of locating and preserving records of the westward movement in Missouri and in regions beyond its borders. The Rockefeller Foundation had already subsidized some regional collections, such as that at Cornell University, and it recognized that a grant to Missouri would encourage a cooperative effort to build a distinguished collection of Western Americana. Both the State Historical Society of Missouri and the University of Missouri Library agreed to endorse the project if it

was underwritten by the foundation. And so the grant made by the Rockefeller Foundation, effective January 1943, not only got our program underway but also encouraged harmonious relations among its sponsors.

Sponsorship by the historical society during the first crucial year of the project helped greatly in publicizing its purposes. The three-year Rockefeller grant provided the necessary funds to move forward rapidly and also assured prospective donors of manuscripts that the project had been carefully planned. At the end of the third year the University of Missouri increased its support sufficiently to keep the program in operation.

Since then the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection has operated as an integral part of the University of Missouri Library system, with quarters in the main library building. Although it has a small budget separate from that of the library and administers its own staff, good relations are assured through common supervision of the whole library system by the university administration. Moreover, an informal relationship with the historical society has worked well. Relations continue to be harmonious, and the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection encourages donors to deposit papers in the State Historical Society of Missouri if they so prefer.<sup>1</sup> Housed in the same building, as we are, and devoted to many of the same purposes, it would be foolish to withhold cooperation. Indeed, our staff has always been indoctrinated with the idea that our first purpose is to discover valuable historical manuscripts and to see that they are properly preserved in the most appropriate regional library.

Starting from scratch, the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection naturally emphasized the finding and collecting of materials in its early months. The first Director, W. F. English, had a wide acquaintance throughout the State because of his former administrative work with the public schools. During his first year in the new job he concentrated primarily on publicizing the purposes and services of the as-yet-to-be collection. He distributed a four-page leaflet describing the project and wrote many personal letters to prospective supporters. Letters went out almost immediately to former Missouri Governors or their descendants, to a selected list of Missourians who had been prominent in public life, and to newspapers and journals. Dr. English feels that perhaps his most effective work in that early period resulted

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Richard S. Brownlee, secretary of the State Historical Society of Missouri, also serves as assistant director of the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection.

from his talks before local civic organizations and groups interested in history. His previous connection with the public school system and his membership in Kiwanis gave him entree to many groups. At the close of such meetings his hearers frequently told him of people who had manuscripts in their possession. After he spoke at a luncheon meeting of the Dexter (Mo.) Kiwanis Club, for instance, one of its members gave him the exact location of an important collection of early lumber company records at Grandin, Mo., which became the nucleus of our very substantial holdings in that field.

*Bulletin Number 2* of our Collection, published at the end of Dr. English's first year of work, listed the manuscripts he had obtained as illustrations of what could be found in private hands and urged citizens once again to call such materials to his attention. During that first year English had acquired the papers of former Missouri Governors Lloyd C. Stark and Arthur M. Hyde, the beginning of our collection of Governors' papers that now cover almost the whole period since the turn of the century. Included also were the few surviving personal papers of T. T. Crittenden, Governor of Missouri from 1881 to 1885. For some strange reason, no one had tried to collect the private papers of former Missouri Governors until our organization began to operate in 1943. Since then we have found segments of private papers of various antebellum Missouri Governors, and we hope to turn up still more of them. Valuable though such materials are, we had not realized that they would constitute so significant a part of our holdings, and their acquisition became a constant goal of our policy more through experience than through preliminary planning. Thus, within the first year of operation, the Collection began to take on certain characteristics that we had not exactly anticipated but that we were glad to encourage. The first year's accumulation also included papers of leading lawyers, educators, farmers, merchants, and bankers. Diaries acquired dealt with such varied themes as Doniphan's Expedition of 1847-48, the California gold rush, migration from Virginia to Missouri, and the Civil War. When Dr. English acquired the Younger-Bronaugh papers, containing original letters by the famous Missouri bandit Cole Younger, he knew he was in business, because our public feels that no collection is worth its salt unless it has material on Missouri's famous outlaws.

Our desire to supplement rather than duplicate or rival the university and historical society libraries has continued to influ-

ence our policies. For example, we operate with a limited budget and a small staff; in the beginning, the staff consisted only of Dr. English and a secretary-receptionist. We realized, however, that as our holdings grew we should have to allocate a progressively greater share of our budget to the cataloging and care of manuscripts. From the first, we have assured donors that their papers will receive the best of care and will be made available to historical scholars. That policy has eased our problem of collecting and has promoted good public relations. Our biggest basic problem has always been that of sustaining, on a limited budget, our constant hunt for manuscripts and their subsequent care.

Ideally, the director of a project such as ours needs a capacity for getting along with people, willingness to spend long hours on the road searching out donors, the nose of a bloodhound, and a depth of historical training sufficient to enable him to evaluate documentary materials. Ability to speak well, especially to small groups, adds greatly to his effectiveness. All of us can name men with such attributes who have played *the* key role in building valuable manuscript collections.

As the history of our own Collection illustrates, men with such abilities can do so many things well that they are likely to be drawn away for other activities. Dr. English, our first Director, came to us with the understanding that he would also teach the course in Missouri history at the university, partly because we could thus pay him enough to obtain his services and partly because the arrangement would help introduce our graduate students to the materials being collected. He continued as Director until 1951; but, at the request of the history department, he was soon teaching a number of courses. His administrative ability led to his appointment in 1951 as assistant dean of the College of Arts and Science and to his ultimate appointment as dean. Fortunately, his resignation as Director in 1951 did not terminate his connection with our organization, since we now report direct to him as dean of the university. Moreover, he continues to look for manuscripts as a sideline, and many of our best leads come through him. As president of the university, Elmer Ellis, who brought our organization into being, also has retained an interest in our work, and he too is one of our best salesmen. The moral is clear: if one cannot keep such men to direct an organization, it is best to have them at a higher administrative level, where they are still responsible for the agency's continued welfare.

While still Director of the Collection, Dr. English had help for

short periods of time from Gilbert C. Fite and James L. Lowe, graduate students in history who made field trips under his supervision. Although I have continued full-time teaching in the history department, I took over as Director of the Collection in 1951. Shortly thereafter, we appointed James Neal Primm, another graduate student in history, as assistant director to continue the important road work. When he completed his doctorate, he too began to teach an occasional course in the history department, and in 1953 he succeeded me as Director. Unfortunately history repeated itself, and Dr. Primm's ability as teacher and administrator soon involved him in a heavier teaching load. By using two graduate students—John A. Galloway and Marvin Cain—as assistant directors, Dr. Primm kept our program of collecting moving ahead, but in 1957 he left to become dean of Hiram College. The rapid growth of our holdings during the years when Dr. English and Dr. Primm were in charge demonstrates the wisdom of using men of their abilities for such work even though they may move on to other employment within a few years. The first complete listing of our holdings, published in 1952, for instance, included 598 separate entries and ran to 125 pages.

Since my resumption of the directorship in 1957 our relative emphasis has shifted somewhat, for two reasons. As a full-time professor, involved in my own teaching, research, and direction of graduate work, I find it impossible to make frequent road trips, although I do make trips out of town when they seem justified. Then, the growing size of our Collection requires us to devote more of our limited budget to cataloging and to making our material available to students. Because of this, Mrs. Nancy C. Prewitt, as administrative assistant, has been put in direct charge of the holdings. For the past three years she has had the equivalent of five full-time people under her supervision. Since virtually all such employees work only part time, however, the number at any one period on our payroll may run as high as 15 or 20. Most of them are advanced graduate students who classify and restore incoming manuscripts—jobs that enable them to continue their graduate work and at the same time to gain valuable historical training.

Although a full-time field man would expedite our collecting program, budgetary limitations require us to rely on other methods of acquiring manuscripts. It may also be true that field work is now less essential because the previous field efforts have increased public knowledge of our work. President Ellis, Dean



English, members of the history department, and many other friends often give us leads to pursue. We investigate these through correspondence and personal visits when advisable. Each year, just before vacation periods, we send to members of all interested university departments material describing our Collection and containing interesting excerpts from manuscripts on hand, and we ask them to inform their students of our purposes. From this publicity we usually get valuable leads from various parts of the country, brought back to us by students returning from vacation. We also scan the metropolitan papers and magazines for obituaries and feature articles, and we follow these up in various ways. We send out feature stories on new acquisitions, hoping thereby to attract the attention of other donors. In January 1960 a new organization, the Friends of the University of Missouri Library, was established among alumni and friends to support the collection of books and manuscripts for the university library system and the State Historical Society of Missouri. Committees from this new organization have approached probate judges and lawyers throughout the State, asking them to aid us in our collecting program by calling it to the attention of persons who are having wills drawn or estates probated. This system has already proved its value and will be of still greater use in the future. In all such ways our program of collecting continues at a very satisfactory rate.

In 1943 Dr. English visited a number of institutions to examine their systems of cataloging and caring for manuscripts. These included the University of North Carolina, Duke University, the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, Iowa State Library in Des Moines, the McCormick Library in Chicago, and the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. The clearly written booklet *Care and Cataloging of Manuscripts as Practiced by the Minnesota Historical Society* proved very helpful in setting up our classification system, although we modified it somewhat to suit our needs. Some of the modifications were occasioned by our limited budget. Quarters allocated to us had no shelving, but we did have a large supply of filing cases that had come to us as war surplus. We feel that our system is overelaborate and we do not like the fact that it requires us to maintain separate collections, since bound manuscript volumes often do not fit into filing cases. We like the system used at the Truman Library and hope to modify our own somewhat when we occupy our refurbished and expanded quarters.

I suppose, however, that no one is ever satisfied with his filing scheme. Mrs. Prewitt has found Theodore R. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* and some of the National Archives bulletins very useful in instructing new employees.

In the beginning, we accepted manuscripts on deposit if people would not give us outright title to them. Although we still occasionally take manuscripts on such terms, we avoid doing so whenever possible. If they are withdrawn at a later period, our investment in cataloging and repair is lost. Moreover, we have benefited by carefully stating terms of deposit. Experience shows that the heirs of some donors may claim papers left on deposit and thus involve a society in real embarrassment unless such contingencies have been foreseen and forestalled.

How valuable is a manuscript? Donors occasionally ask us to set a monetary value on one for purposes of income-tax deduction. We have adopted the policy of receipting for a gift at the value set by the donor, thereby leaving to him the burden of appraisal. If we feel that his appraisal is ridiculously low we may suggest that he increase it, but if it seems somewhat high we do not insist that he reduce it. Contrary to what one might expect, most people seeking to have a monetary value set on a gift of manuscripts are inclined to value them very reasonably. A society, however, could create much unnecessary ill will by assuming the burden of such appraisals. We have also learned to ask donors for permission to sort out and destroy duplicates and materials of seemingly little importance in sizable collections that we cannot thoroughly examine before accepting them. Many are willing for us to do so or at least to microfilm records and destroy bulky originals. Such freedom of choice upgrades one's holdings without making it necessary to refuse material of undoubted value simply because it is accompanied by a mass of less desirable papers.

Satisfactory standards by which to measure the overall success of such a venture as ours are hard to come by. In less than two decades we have acquired holdings that run over three columns in length in the concise description given in Philip M. Hamer's recent *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*.<sup>2</sup> Our collection is perhaps strongest in the fields of midwestern politics, agriculture, and lumbering. Our materials are broadly based, however, ranging from such collections as that of John G. Neihardt, epic poet of the American West, to the medical records

<sup>2</sup> Compiled for the National Historical Publications Commission. Yale University Press, 1961.



of a Japanese war criminal. We have accepted records of any type that seem to us to have real current or future value for historians. Much of our material transcends Missouri State lines.

Contrary to some opinions, we believe that historical scholarship will be stronger if manuscripts are not centered in a limited number of depositories. Historical scholars as a rule are relatively poor men. Since to work on materials on any subject worthy of a doctoral dissertation or a book they must travel extensively, we believe that a reasonably wide dissemination of materials in depositories will increase their use by scholars and lessen rather than increase scholars' overall financial burden. Eleven doctoral dissertations in history and at least four books have already been written primarily from materials in our Collection, and a great many others have been based in part on our manuscripts. The departments of history, agricultural economics, sociology, forestry, political science, speech, and English at the University of Missouri have used our Collection extensively. Students in introductory research seminars benefit regularly from access to our material. By employing graduate students part time in our organization we have strengthened graduate work at the University of Missouri and have made some contribution toward easing the shortage of college teachers. At least one of the students so employed by us has moved on to direct another major manuscripts collection, his training here having helped him obtain his new appointment. Others have gone to State historical societies. But, most importantly, our Collection plays an increasingly significant role in rounding out the holdings of the State Historical Society of Missouri and the University of Missouri Libraries. Through concerted efforts of many people we are building an excellent collection of books, newspapers, official documents, and manuscripts at Columbia in Missouri.

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### ***Not Sere, Not Yellow***

Not all archival accessions fall into the category of "the sere, the yellow leaf." Some are as fresh as paint, and not much older (albeit of considerably more enduring interest) than this morning's newspaper. Witness the typescripts of two Convocation addresses delivered at Queen's University in May of this year, recently deposited by request in the Douglas Library Archives . . .

— *Douglas Library Notes*, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 2 (Summer 1962).