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The Hidden Collection: Archives in Small Public Libraries

The Vespasian Warner Public Library is located in Clinton, Illinois, a rural farming community with a population of 7,400. It is the former home of a Revere Ware factory, which manufactured copper cookware, and the current home to “Clinton Power Station, one of Exelon’s newest nuclear power plants.”¹

Clinton fits the stereotype of small town America, where people judge you based on whether or not they knew your grandparents and where there is absolutely nothing to do on a Friday night. Like so many other rural communities, Clinton has fallen on hard times. There is high unemployment, and many of the residents are low income and undereducated. All of this makes it all the more extraordinary that the local public library has an archive and rare book collection.

One of the earliest residents of Clinton was Clifton Haswell Moore, who arrived in August of 1841 at the age of twenty-four. Moore was a lawyer and land speculator. His business partner and best friend, Judge David Davis, was the judge on the eighth Judicial Circuit, Abraham Lincoln’s campaign manager in the 1860 presidential election, and Lincoln’s first appointee to the Supreme Court. Moore was also friends with Lincoln and shared his law office with the future president when Lincoln was in DeWitt County.

¹ Clinton also had a Thrall Railcar, as well as a number of other factories that are still in operation. The Clinton Power Station is one of the main sources of revenue for the library and DeWitt County. “Clinton Power Station,” <http://www.exeloncorp.com/powerplants/clinton/Pages/profile.aspx>.

Moore, an avid book collector, had the largest and most valuable private book collection in Illinois outside of Chicago in the nineteenth century. He primarily collected literature and history, although he also had an interest in religion and science. His oldest book was a copy of the *New Testament* published in 1600, and the library's original card catalog indicates he owned a first edition of the *Book of Mormon*. When Moore died in 1901, he left his collection to the city of Clinton with the stipulation that they had to build a library to house it.

Vespasian Warner, Moore's son-in-law and former law partner, as well as a United States Congressman and the Commissioner of Pensions under President Teddy Roosevelt, paid for the library's construction in 1906. The library's doors opened in 1908, and C. H. Moore's books were the library's first circulating collection. Warner also gave the library a substantial endowment, which has kept it afloat in difficult economic times.

Every archival position comes with its own unique set of challenges. Finding creative ways to deal with those challenges can be an endless source of frustration and excitement. Since my own area of interest is special collections, library school did not entirely prepare me for what I faced. I had always planned to work in an academic setting, but the current economic situation made it difficult to find such a position. When I saw the job at the Warner Library, I jumped at the opportunity.

Academic and public libraries certainly have their similarities, but the communities they serve are different. Numerous articles and books note that public libraries tend to be gathering places for local residents, safe havens for those in need, a place to obtain information on local issues, and a source of entertainment. In addition, unlike academic institutions, public libraries are often much more interested in collecting "high demand materials," such as popular fiction,

movies, and, most recently, eBooks.² Collecting materials for research and scholarly pursuits would be a waste of the library's money since few would use them.

This makes it all the more difficult to justify the existence of an archive within a small public library's hierarchy and budget. These types of collections tend to be described as "hidden collections," which Gwen Glazer defines as being undiscoverable "by scholarly users...either through digital or analog means." In Glazer's article, "Digitizing Hidden Collections in Public Libraries," she goes on to say that "such hidden collections are under threat because they are vulnerable to accidents, theft, and neglect."³

This was certainly the case when I arrived at the Warner Library in 2009. The archive and rare book collections were in complete chaos. The materials were in no particular order and covered in thick layers of dust. The collection, like so many others across the country, had been neglected and the victim of theft. As Kathy Marquis states in her article "Historical Collections: Is Adding One Right for Your Public Library?" these types of collections can "provide a useful set of research materials for local researchers, or they can be a 'special collection' which no one is sure how best to handle and so it remains unused."⁴ In my experience, it is often the latter. I know of one small public library that, until a few years ago, stored its archival materials under the sink in the staff lounge.

Life at the Warner Library was a balancing act. I was often left alone, spending my days sorting the archival materials so I could process them, cleaning, organizing, and cataloging

² Ronald G. Edwards, "Migrating to Public Librarianship: Depart on Time to Ensure a Smooth Flight." *Library Trends* 50, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 633-34.

³ Gwen Glazer, "Digitizing Hidden Collections in Public Libraries," *OITP Perspectives* 1 (June 2011): 2, <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oitp/publications/oitpperspectives/oitp_perspectives_ju.pdf>.

⁴ Kathy Marquis, "Historical Collections: Is Adding One Right for Your Public Library?" *Public Libraries Online* 50, no. 2 (Mar/Apr 2011): 1, <http://www.publiclibrariesonline.org/magazines/featured-articles/historical-collections-adding-one-right-your-public-library>.

Moore's rare book collection (of which around 5,000 volumes remained), creating policies for researchers and for collection development, writing the disaster plan, and advertising the collection to the community, which had, for the most part, forgotten about it long ago.

In addition, the collection turned out to be far more diverse than I had originally anticipated. It was more than just books and documents; there were extensive photograph and postcard collections, original artwork from the Works Projects Administration, and an enormous collection of Revere Ware pots and pans, including some prototypes. Sometimes, as I discovered, the archivist is also the museum curator.

Outreach was one of my main priorities. If I wanted to make the collection relevant, to justify its existence and future maintenance, I had to make the community care about it. It has become fairly standard in the library and archival communities to use the Internet to connect with researchers, but this was not possible given my community's economic situation. Many people in Clinton do not have personal computers or Internet access. Instead I focused on more traditional methods. I appeared on the radio and, at the request of our local genealogical society and the historical society in Decatur, IL, gave talks on C. H. Moore and the efforts we were making to preserve the rare book and archival collections. I also talked to patrons about preserving their family heirlooms, in hopes that if they cared about their own treasures, they would understand the importance of preserving the library's too.

My biggest successes were exhibitions. The Adult Services Librarian and I created two major exhibitions on DeWitt County in 2011: one to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War, for which we won a Superior Achievement Award from the Illinois State Historical Society, and the other to honor the 70th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. We used the opportunity to display items from the archive and books in the circulating collections, but also asked members

of the community to bring in their own treasures for display. We wanted the community to feel involved, something that is key in a public library setting.

At first we ran into a wall. Despite our best efforts, we had difficulty connecting with some of our patrons. For a variety of reasons, many people did not find out about the exhibition until after we opened. For others, I think there may have been a lack of trust. We had never done an exhibition before, and community members did not want to attach their names to something that might turn out to be a disaster. As a result, we received most of our artifacts for the Civil War exhibition after we opened.

The World War II exhibition was easier. The local veterans, having seen our previous efforts, were thrilled to help us and eagerly provided us with items to display. A bonus was that I had finally managed to break through that small-town barrier against “outsiders.” (After all, I was born *thirty miles* to the north.) People finally knew me, even though they did not know my grandparents, and the donations and visits to the archive increased substantially after that. Local history enthusiasts became interested in our photograph collections, and one amateur Civil War historian loved our first edition set of *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

Despite my extensive responsibilities in the archive, my work was often interrupted. Although my official title was “Archivist and Special Collections Librarian,” I also spent time participating in activities I had not been trained for. I was often called away from my desk to fill in elsewhere. Reference duties outside the archive are not unusual, but it does not mean the same thing in a public library setting as it does in an academic one.

I had to become an expert on when the newest James Patterson or Danielle Steele novels were coming out, graphic novels and manga, which I had never read before, *Twilight*, which I

could have done without, and *The Hunger Games*, which I enjoyed. I had to learn how to register people for library cards, how to collect child support and unemployment benefits from the state of Illinois, lead both adult and children's programs when their respective librarians were absent, and deal with the joys of bored teenagers.

I think the key to working in this kind of environment is being open-minded and flexible. Within the public library setting, every day library activities such as circulation, reference, and programming are considered more important than archival ones. Mary Manning and Judy Silva in their article "Dual Archivist/Librarians" suggest that this is the case in academic settings as well. When the library or archive is short-staffed, the general response is to "close...or limit access" to the archive, not the other way around.⁵ It can be extremely frustrating to be called away to check out books when you have a collection you need to finish processing or rare books that need to be catalogued.

As I learned, the archive is often seen as a status symbol for the library, not a necessity. There were many times when my role as librarian was of much more importance to the staff and the directors than that of archivist. Sometimes you have to remind yourself that regardless of how you are spending your day, you are still serving a deserving public, and those people you help as the librarian may just remember when the time comes that you are also the archivist.

⁵ Mary Manning and Judy Silva, "Dual Archivist/Librarians: Balancing the Benefits and Challenges of Diverse Responsibilities," *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 2 (March 2012): 172.

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