Remembering These Marble Halls

Reflections on the Memorial Building

It All Began at Tenth and Jackson
by Dudley T. Cornish

This Grand Structure
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Memories of the Memorial Building
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When I joined the staff of the manuscripts department of the Kansas State Historical Society in January 1957, I was fresh out of graduate school at the University of Kansas. In those days only a couple of graduate programs dealt with archival management so, except for a background in Trans-Mississippi western history, I was totally untrained for the job I eagerly took.

My civil service title was assistant cataloger, a library position but the closest one the State Division of Personnel Services had to related to my job. In a way it applied to what I did—I cataloged manuscript collections after they had been processed, but the processing bore no relationship to library functions.

In 1957 the manuscripts department was part of the state archives. I worked for a fine lady, Lola Barnes, who also was treasurer of the corporate side of the Society but who, like me, had no training in the job she performed. Likewise Robert W. Richmond, state archivist and the ultimate boss in our department, held a master's degree in history from the University of Nebraska, but he too learned his trade on the job at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

None of us knew much about the archival dangers of acid paper and ultraviolet light or the importance of temperature and humidity control. Our main concern was cleanliness (a difficult task in the drafty rooms of the old Memorial Building) and staff and patrons properly handling the materials: “Please do not use a pen to make notes.” “Don't mark on the manuscripts.” “Keep the papers in the order you find them.” That sort of thing.

The staff of the Society was small. Two of us were in manuscripts and a total of five were in the state archives. The Society's collection of photographs also was part of the archives, so we handled all the noncurrent official state papers as well as pictures, private letters, diaries, and other unique nongovernmental documents.

The entire manuscripts collection in 1957 was housed in a bank-like vault on the first floor although the vault itself had two levels. The vault shelves were adjustable, but one had to use a wrench and screwdriver to make any changes. Not long after I arrived a similar vault in the basement was shelved, and we expanded into that area. I learned a great deal about the manuscript holdings because it was my duty to rearrange the vault, where the papers were filed alphabetically by collection name, whenever we needed more space for boxes. I would shift every box on both floors to acquire some open shelving where we needed it. As I did this tedious and dirty work, out of curiosity I would examine the boxes' contents, and I quickly learned what wonderful treasures the Society possessed.

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Joseph W. Snell, longtime curator of manuscripts at the Kansas State Historical Society, became the Society’s executive director in 1987 and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1989.

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hundreds of Indians trying to eject him and his fifty civilian scouts from a little island in the Arkansas River in 1868. The note was carried by two volunteers to the commanding officer of Fort Wallace and it pleaded for help.

Another collection contains a series of letters written by a poor young man working in a creamery in Abilene, Kansas, who desperately wanted an education. His letters are addressed to Senator Joseph Bristow, and they ask for an appointment either to the naval academy at Annapolis or to West Point. He lied about his age, being too old for Annapolis, but still eligible for the army. Due to a bizarre set of circumstances the young man, Dwight D. Eisenhower, finally received an appointment and was able to earn his education.

Documents bearing the signatures of Victor Hugo, John Brown, Wild Bill Hickok, missionaries, soldiers, pioneers, entrepreneurs, and others filled the shelves. I was fascinated. I cleaned the vault many times during the twenty years I was in the manuscripts department and found something new and exciting every time.

In the 1950s political history was the rage, the Kansas territorial period especially. Then interest turned to the wild and woolly West followed by ethnic and social history. Biography was always a popular subject, and we could help in all areas.

Whether it was because none of us had any formal training in the field, the staff was so small, or because of the informal atmosphere championed by the Society's secretary Nyle Miller, patron (researcher) service was left to our own characteristics and preferences. Fortunately Lela, Bob, and I saw eye to eye on the subject, and we were able to help patrons on a one-on-one basis with little or no formality.

Generally our procedure, developed unconsciously, was to have a long talk with a new researcher to determine exactly what he or she had in mind for a finished product. This was necessary because some researchers first would ask us for a particular document they already knew we had or they would go through the card catalog for direction. By doing so they would miss a great many items that we had mentally cataloged but would never appear on the cards due to the small size of our staff and the amount of work we had to do. Additionally, many first-time researchers were reluctant to explain the exact nature of their topics because they felt someone else might learn of them, perform the research more quickly, and be the first to publish the results. To the best of my knowledge this never happened, but many patrons thought it would.

The reverse of this occurred at least once when a patron from the history department of the University of Arkansas came to the Society for extended research, which meant he had come to our area prepared to settle down for weeks of intensive work. During our informal get-acquainted talk we were able to tell him that his subject had already been examined here and a book probably would be the result. Our friend from Arkansas was crestfallen when he learned this news; he had received a generous grant with which to conduct his research. But he packed his bags and went home, hoping to find a new topic acceptable to his grantor.

Secrecy was a priority for some people who possessed documents in which they thought the Society would be interested. In several cases supposedly valuable and historically significant documents either were brought to the Society or we went to the holder's residence to examine them. So precious were these materials thought to be that the owners would show them to us only guarded, almost glancing over their shoulders to see if anyone was looking. Quite often the documents would not be what they were purported to be, and the Society would end up empty handed. I think such documents gave the holders a feeling of importance, a sensation extremely significant to them. Their cases were extremely sad.

Again, the reverse occurred in at least one significant incident. Nyle Miller received a call from the
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The room was about twenty feet square, and it was covered literally waist high with files, books, papers, and other materials. The documents we were being offered were photostats of articles that had appeared in New York newspapers a century before. "What about the rest of this material?" we asked. We learned that it had been offered to a university, but as the university had declined to examine the items, they were to be discarded as worthless. "May we take a look at it?" we inquired. Permission was readily granted, and Nyle and I began to dig into some of the files.

What we found amazed us: a couple of original holograph notebooks and several illustrated letters by western artist Frederic Remington; letters from William Henry Jackson, frontier western photographer and artist; an original letter in John James Audubon's hand; the world's earliest known photographic portrait; and countless similar treasures.

Nyle and I licked our lips, saying little beyond, "may we have all of this?" as we swept the room with our outstretched arms. "Of course," we were told, and I spent the next several days carrying boxes down a flight of stairs to the Society's station wagon and transporting the materials to the Memorial Building in Topeka. It was a wonderful experience with the professor's two generous children and one of the highlights of my professional life.

Many of our researchers and I became fast friends. Fortunately my wife, Ruth, was willing to invite them home for dinner or even an overnight stay when we knew they were operating on limited funds.

Thus people like Robert R. Dykstra whose book The Cattle Towns, completed more than a quarter of a century ago, is still recognized as the most significant study of major Kansas communities; Michael J. Broxhead, a longtime member of the history faculty of the University of Nevada and now with the federal records center in Kansas City, Missouri; the late Waldo E. Koop, probably the best amateur historical researcher who ever lived; and Joseph G. Rosa, the English biographer of Wild Bill Hickok, became an integral part of my life.

They were not the only ones, of course. Others with whom I never shared more than a lunch downtown became important to me through their research. I remember well Paul Horgan, author of many outstanding books including Great River, with whom I exchanged copies of my work Why the West Was Wild. When Paul visited the Society, Topeka was in the depths of an extremely cold winter. I can still picture him wearing a suit coat as his only protection against the cold except for a long wool scarf that he would wind around his neck and toss jauntily over his shoulder.

Every time Robert G. Atthearn and his wife, Claire, were in Topeka we would, with Nyle, have lunch together. Once I almost killed us all when I was driving back from a restaurant and was nearly hit by an automobile whose driver had run a red light and bore down upon us as I made a left turn. Bob Atthearn never let me forget that.

Through some Topeka high school students who did their research at the Society I became acquainted with Mrs. John R. Brinkley, the widow of the famous goat-gland doctor of the 1920s and 1930s. It was my good fortune to go to Del Rio, Texas, where she lived in a part of the old Brinkley mansion, and secure the doctor's papers and other items for the Society. One night, at Mrs. Brinkley's request, I took her to dinner in the Mexican town of Villa Acuna, across the Rio Grande from Del Rio. I was driving a state-owned
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 Throughout his tenure with the Society, Snell enjoyed the friendship and acquaintance of many well-known writers who used the Society's collections to help create their literary works. Among these researchers was playwright William Inge (left), who researched the life of Dora Hand, fallen angel of Dodge City's cowboy days.

Snell also was fortunate to meet many individuals whose documents eventually became part of the Society's collections. Among these were several political figures including Senator Nancy Kassebaum (right).

van loaded with the doctor's materials. I never once thought about the improprieties of taking a state vehicle into another country, so we blithely crossed into Mexico, had dinner in an excellent cafe, and headed back to the border.

Getting back into the United States wasn't nearly as easy as going the other way. We were about to unload our entire cargo to be examined by border guards when one of them recognized Mrs. Brinkley and let us pass through. Only then did it strike me that I had committed an unforgivable act by crossing that little river in a Kansas-owned van.

Playwright William Inge used the Society's facilities to research a movie script he was writing, one he never finished due to his untimely death. The subject was Dora Hand, the almost legendary fallen angel of Dodge City's cowboy days. Since I had just completed research for Why the West Was Wild, I was able to be of service to him even after he left Topeka. I sent him letters, and he sent me notes on postcards printed at least seventy-five years before. It was great fun.

Perhaps my most memorable friendship was with Glendon Swarthout, the former schoolteacher who wrote Bliss the Beasts and the Children, The Sheet, and other outstanding novels, many of which became highly successful motion pictures. I met Glen when he was working on a story about Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson in their golden years. Again, because of Why the West Was Wild I could offer much helpful information. We corresponded for years and finally The Old Colts, his story, was published. Although his book had been finished for years, he had withheld its publication because of the market. But what really stunned me upon reading it was that I was a character in the book!

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr; Barry Goldwater; Robert Lewis Taylor; Wayne Angell; Stephen E. Ambrose; and others passed my way and I knew them briefly. Some like Donald McCoy, Paul Trachtman, Aidan McQuillian, Peter Hasserick, Don Danker, Dave Dary, Arrel Gibson, Stan Hoig, Bob LaForce, Bill Unruh, Craig Miner, and John Garver often crossed my path and we became friends. The staff with whom I worked also was extremely talented and together or singly produced many fine works of history. Bob Richmond is perhaps the best Kansas historian alive, a good teacher, and a fine writer. Edgar Langsdorf, then the Society's assistant secretary, never tugged his own horn, but he could turn a piece of so-so writing into a work of art by using his facile pen. Those two, with Nyle Miller, compiled several outstanding books that the Society published. It was my good fortune to help them on occasion and sometimes write first drafts of chapters for their books.

Because of my job I was fortunate to meet many of the people who created the documents we collected. Included are Alfred M. Landon and his daughter Senator Nancy Kassebaum, Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole, Representative Clifford R. Hope, Sr., and many others who in one way or another have shaped our state and nation. It was a grand experience, one that few other people have had, and I thank the people of Kansas for giving it to me.
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