The Minnesota Historical Society Reference Library

A ROOM, A COLLECTION, A SERVICE

Barbara Jones

The four reference rooms that the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) Library and Archives Division now oversees—the reference, audio-visual, newspaper, and archives and manuscripts libraries—will be combined into one centralized public service in the $70 million History Center in 1992. Just one of these resources, the reference library, is the focus of this article; before it is singled out, however, it must be placed in context. Much has happened since Esther Jerabek’s 1956 article about the Minnesota Historical Society library. The handwritten and Library of Congress catalog cards are being replaced by the PALS (Project for Automated Library Systems) on-line catalog, a system linking major collections in Minnesota and some neighboring states. Currently almost half of the collection’s bibliographic data has been entered into this system. Because the society’s holdings are now more widely accessible than ever, interlibrary loan requests and transactions have more than doubled between 1989 and 1990!

From the library’s 1849 founding until 1870, there was no collecting policy. Books and manuscripts were usually donated; by 1869, holdings were 6,000 volumes. Today an acquisitions committee, guided by a written policy, annually purchases about $40,000 of library and archival material. Estimated holdings include 550,000 book titles, 41,000 cubic feet of documents in the Minnesota State Archives, 37,000 cubic feet of manuscripts, 185,000 photographs, and 3,000 newspaper titles. Formats range from microfilm to handmade paper to lantern slides. Among the collection’s subject strengths are political leaders and movements, railroads, American Indians, genealogy and family history, and Scandinavian immigration to the Upper Midwest.

It is a source of pride that the Minnesota Historical Society library and archives have always been open to the general public as well as to scholars. Amateur family historians and professors of the “new” social history sit side by side at microfilm readers, perusing newspaper obituaries and census data. On a typical day, visitors might include a class of fifth-graders looking at photographs of their hometown; attorneys listening intently to Minnesota state legislative tapes; a national or local public television crew preparing a documentary on Minnesotans in the Civil War; a genealogist from Texas who was “just driving through”; and a railroad buff looking at caboose drawings.

The recent reorganization of the Library and Archives Division has helped to centralize service in the best sense of the word. As members of the staff, formerly assigned to one library, cross-train at the four

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The reference library at 690 Cedar Street as it appeared in the early 1980s

desks, they are gaining valuable information about collections. They are preparing for that day in 1992 when the increasingly sophisticated researcher approaches the desk to request materials in all formats to do, for example, a multimedia doctorate on Minnesota musical innovation and tradition.

The ideal envisioned for the new facility is a concept called “Central Reference.” The growth of multidisciplinary studies and the new social history has had a direct impact on the kinds of services requested of the reference department. Women’s studies research, for example, typically utilizes photographs, oral histories, and diaries to supplement traditional library materials. As Lila Goff, director of the Library and Archives Division, stated in a 1988 presentation, “The separation of collections by type of material is necessitated by our physical limitations (we can’t handle the entire MHS collection in one location) and by tradition (most research libraries separate books and manuscripts and other special collections). The trend in current research is changing, however, and the demand increasingly is for research materials of all media. In the new History Center, firsthand research among the library, archival, audio-visual, and artifact materials will be possible in one central access point. It is ‘one-stop shopping’ for both the scholar pursuing a topic in depth and the casual visitor working on personal research. That one-stop shopping would be for the person who visits as well as the one who telephones and today is shuffled around to different phone numbers and reference staff members.” And it will be a great help to MHS staff, especially in exhibit preparation, to be able to examine all our material supporting a concept or an idea.\footnote{Lila J. Goff to MHS Executive Council, Dec. 13, 1988.}

In a sense, the label “reference library” is a misnomer. Contemporary library jargon assumes that to mean a ready reference service with bibliographies, indexes, encyclopedias, atlases, and the like. Telephone and in-person reference work does comprise a great percentage of staff activity. But in addition, the reference library stacks hold the vast majority of MHS collections in the print format—except newspapers.
THE ENTRANCE framed with printers' marks is an appropriate symbol of the reference library's interest in Minnesota printing history. The collections include early state imprints and examples from the extraordinarily lively small press publishers, thriving to this day. Taken together, the important compendia by Minnesota printing historians Mamie R. Martin and Robert H. Staehlin list all books, pamphlets, broadsides, and newspapers from the beginning of territorial printing through 1865 and Twin Cities imprints from 1866 through 1876.³

According to acquisitions librarian Patrick Coleman, the earliest Minnesota imprints in MHS holdings, besides newspapers, are from 1849. These are held in the reference library's reserve collection. Not surprisingly, the early imprints document the territory's efforts toward state government. They include pamphlets and broadsides such as Alexander Ramsey's "MESSAGE FROM THE GOVERNOR OF THE TERRITORY OF MINNESOTA, TO THE FIRST LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1849" and his four-page "MESSAGE OF THE GOVERNOR IN RELATION TO A MEMORIAL FROM HALFBREEDS OF PEMBINA," in 1849. In this same year the Minnesota Historical Society, whose beginnings antedate statehood, began publishing its Annals. MHS has also recently acquired a second copy of the Constitution of the State of Minnesota, so that one can be exhibited and one preserved. The only other known copy is held by the Library of Congress; all were printed in 1857 in St. Paul by E. S. Goodrich, territorial printer.

The reference library also collects rare materials with subject matter relevant to Minnesota history. One fine recent acquisition of this sort is the Dakota-language prayer book, *Wakantanka ti ki Chanku* (The Path to the House of God, 1843). Sometimes called the Ravoux Prayer Book, it was printed on Reverend Joseph Cretin's press at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, in 1843. It was written by Reverend Augustin Ravoux, a missionary to the Dakota from 1841 to 1844, who in 1843 began a mission at Little Prairie (now Chaska) and learned the Dakota language. The book is also valuable by association, since it was in the private library of another important missionary, Reverend Père Jean Baptiste Maria Genin, who spent much time in the Traverse des Sioux area and mediated disputes between Sitting Bull and his adversaries. This prayer book also enhances an already rich Indian-language collection.

The Minnesota Historical Society also has extraordinary documentation of the fine-press movement in Minnesota. Numerous nationally recognized publishers as well as the Minnesota Center for the Book Arts, the Ampersand Club, and the Manuscript Society attest to the lively community of "book people" in the Twin Cities. *High Bridge*, designed and printed by Gaylord Schanilec, is a fine example of its type. Using the society's newspaper collection on microfilm, he weaves the story of building St. Paul's first High Bridge from 1887 to 1889 with its demolition in 1985. The text, adapted from newspapers at the time, evokes the sense of loss and displacement of ethnic communities and other social consequences of such construction projects. The wood engravings are printed in several colors using maple blocks; this visually stunning technique bears witness to the demolition with a somber rhythm. One "duet" is an engraving of several bridge sections falling into the river paired with an account of a woman trying to jump off the newly completed bridge.⁴

Another example of fine printing is Patricia Hampl's *Spillville*, a glorious collaboration by Minnesota book people. A recounting of composer Antonin Dvorak's visit to that small Iowa town, it was well received in the popular edition; MHS has a limited edition of unbound leaves. Writing, design, typesetting, papermaking, binding, illustration—all were done in

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⁵ Patricia Hampl, *Spillville* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1987); limited edition, no. 27 of 150 copies.
One of ten wood engravings showing the demolition of St. Paul's High Bridge

the state. Hampton is from St. Paul and printmaker Steve Sorman from Minneapolis. Three printers, Jon Swenson, Bernice Ficek-Swenson, and Anya Szykitka gave 1,100 hours to print the work. The type was cast in St. Paul by Norman Fritzberg at the Hansestadt Letter Foundry.

An edition of 500 copies of Rose Rees's *Heaven is Eternal Spring* was published in 1935 by the Minneapolis Friday Study Club after the author's death at age 35. Rees and her friends represent a group of women civic leaders who have been ignored by scholars until quite recently. Rees's essays indicate her admiration for Woodrow Wilson, her activism in the peace movement, and the problem of homemakers being "superwomen" in 1928! As president of the Minneapolis section of the National Council of Jewish Women, she expressed alarm over Hitler in the early 1930s. This small book demonstrates the invaluable function of the private press to document the local, the eccentric, often the unpopular—and in Rees's case, women before women's studies. A collecting policy that has recognized community leaders has left us a rich and varied legacy, waiting to be tapped.

A book on yellowing, brittle, wood-pulp paper is J. S. Vandiver's *The Boss of the Ward*, an angry satire of the rough-and-tumble politics in the Twin Cities at the turn of the century. It exhibits the same muckraking journalistic style as the famous *Saturday Press* (copies in the archives) that led to the landmark U. S. Supreme Court decision, *Near v. Minnesota*. Vandiver's satire is similarly filled with racist and ethnic slurs, which prompt the contemporary reader to doubt his credibility regarding urban machine politics, but his contempt for city government of the time was probably justified. This kind of writing enhances an already strong political collection.

In collecting rare books, it is all too easy to get caught in the "treasure" mentality. Some libraries buy old, rare, or pretty books that do not relate to each other, to the institution's research mission, or to the existing collection strengths. In contrast, the Minnesota Historical Society's fine printing and rare books supplement the holdings on state history.

FAMILY HISTORY research remains the major public activity in the reference library. The vast and comprehensive array of genealogical materials at all four reference areas is listed in *Genealogical Resources of the Minnesota Historical Society: A Guide*, written by Library and Archives Division staff in 1989 and published by the MHS Press.

Family histories, usually self-published or printed by special genealogical publishing concerns, comprise one fascinating genre of research material in the reference library. Worldwide there are untold thousands of these histories, most in limited editions. Many in the MHS collections were donated by researchers grateful for reference services. Because these publications are often considered amateur, they are rarely picked up by mainstream indexes, reviews, or bibliographic reference tools. For a traditional academician, they are frustratingly short on footnotes; fact and fiction often mingle. Yet the reference library's hundreds of family history titles provide flesh for the bare-boned census data. "Ordinary people"—the vast majority of the

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United States population—are documented here—
their jobs, hobbies, religious beliefs, attitudes toward
children, illnesses. Women are prominently featured.
The society's collection reveals patterns of immigration
and midwestern family life, family values and struc-
tures during times of social change, and some of the
myths and stories of American success.

The heroic story of the settling of the United States
frontier by courageous immigrant pioneers figures
prominently in most family histories. On the dust-cover
flap of the Black Family Record, for example, the fam-
ily's westward move is characterized as "indicative of
the pioneer courage and stamina, seasoned with opti-
mism, that personified Manifest Destiny." Further,
compiler Doris Louise Black believes that the women
who married into the family "in addition to furthering
their husband's objectives, had strengths of their own
to contribute." She adds: "The Blacks made a worthy
contribution to the building of the American na-
tion.... On the whole, they have been enterprising,
ambitious, resourceful, often of pleasing personality
and intellectual attainment."

This fairly typical book contains photos of family
heirlooms, dwellings, and grave markers. The various
narratives extol the virtue of small towns. Herbert
Black, born in 1909, offers a glimpse of hunting as a
father-son activity in South Dakota in the early part
of the century. All generations of the Black family par-
ticipated in high school band, which in earlier days meant
a considerable financial sacrifice. It is possible to trace
marriage, divorce, and disease patterns. There is also a
wealth of information about family life and values.

One of the finest blends of social and family history
with book design is John E. Hawkinson's The Brothers.
Twelve brothers emigrated from Sweden to Minnesota.
In 12 separate chapters, each plays out his version of
the American dream in a very different way. MHS also
has a rich collection of French-Canadian family histo-
ries and at least one African-American history of a
prominent St. Paul family that traces its ancestry back
to a plantation owner.

If ever there was an archetype for the genre, it is
How I Happen To Be An American, by Alf A. Swenson.
This history of a Norwegian family contains full-color
reproductions of specially commissioned paintings: one
a sailing vessel on the high seas; another, a homestead
devastated by a prairie fire. Swenson documents the
hard times in Norway, leading to the decision to emi-
grate. Along with the family saga is the saga of the
genealogist. For the compiler, the discovery was not a
new family branch, but a knowledge of the pain of
splitting the family between Norway and Minnesota.
Here, too, is a story of a family losing six of nine chil-
dren in 1876 to scarlet fever. And, finally, there is a
family bedtime story passed through the generations.

Some genealogists wish to trace ancestry to royalty
or famous people. The reference library has a substan-
tial collection of family histories of the rich and fa-
mous. The Descent of Alexander Moseley, for example,
tries to relate him to Phoennuza (Fenius Farsa), the
Scythian king who ruled around 2480 B.C. Others are
eager to link to notables such as George Washington or
the Bouviers. Abraham Lincoln's family history opens
"To All Lincoln Lovers . . . This Vindication of the
Memory of His Ancestors is Dedicated by the Authors."
And because the compilers often decide to dramatize

Here and below, Doris L. Black, Black Family Record
(White Heath, Ill.: Mt. Vernon House, 1976), 11.
John E. Hawkinson, The Brothers (Washington, D.C.:
the author, 1969); David V. Taylor, Genealogy of the Vassar
Family (n.p.: the author, 1974).
Alf A. Swenson, How I Happen To Be An American
133-134.
the genealogical charts, they create interesting, sometimes fictional, frames for the ancestors, occasionally with dialogue. Lincoln’s compiler gives the reader a sense of the “glory of the hunt” as he tells how chance played a major role in finding a missing link: “The reference or press-mark to a certain ancient suit in chancery . . . was found to have been wrongly noted by the searcher to whom the listing had been entrusted. In order to correct the inaccuracy a volume of the Calendar of the Proceedings in Chancery was taken down from one of the shelves of the Public Record Office and casually opened—when there, under the searcher’s very eye, lay the laconic record of another suit, by some malign mischance previously overlooked, which supplied the long-sought key to the riddle.”

This drama repeats itself time and again in the reference library, reminding the staff and the researchers that the librarian can only meet them halfway; the final discovery, happily, will often be theirs.

IN ADDITION to the various published biographical sources, the reference library has one that is still being written: the biography file, which is in two parts. The first part, begun in 1917, contains citations to obituaries and biographical sketches for about 100,000 Minnesotans. The second is the result of the Minnesota Biographies Project, begun in 1976, which adds 50,000 names and updates the published 1912 work, Minnesota Biographies, 1855-1912, compiled by Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap as volume 14 of the Minnesota Historical Society’s Collections. Currently, the reference department is investigating the feasibility of transferring these card and paper files to a computerized database. Ideally, this trove will one day be available to researchers along with other reference tools, in addition to the on-line catalog.

Perhaps more than any other subject, the reference library’s American Indian holdings reflect the richness of subject matter and the foresight of curators in generations gone by. Minnesota’s Dakota and Ojibway people are documented comprehensively—in English and in the native languages by agencies and individuals as diverse as the federal government, anthropologists, missionaries, Indian people themselves, and individuals active in grass roots, national political, and scholarly arenas. Various titles chronicle evolving attitudes and social changes within and outside of the Indian community. Topics include the growth of awareness of Indian arts, religious practices, and agricultural policies, as well as the frequent clashes with Euro-American institutions, laws, and beliefs. As in the historiography of the African-American experience, one sees a dynamic tension between documenting the culture’s victimization and celebrating the cultural richness of a people who are sole agents and owners of their future. Currently, there is much debate about collecting policies for multicultural materials. To their credit, the society’s curators have purchased works representing various points of view—from the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs to Indian Marxists. Because librarians did not censor materials, despite their incorrect, romantic stereotypes of the “noble savage,” scholars can now trace the evolution of the general public’s awareness regarding Indian cultures.

Within the society’s extensive collections are Bureau of Indian Affairs reports; anthropological studies as varied as the Smithsonian Institution publications, Edward Curtis’s photographs in the multivolume The North American Indian, and romantic depictions in George Catlin’s Life Among the Indians; and John G. Shea’s Catholic Missions Among the Indian Tribes of the United States (1834), a representative missionary memoir. Awareness in the white community of the Indians as oppressed people comes surprisingly early, though certainly from a minority of scholars. Alfred B. Meacham, an early champion of equitable policies toward Indians, expresses his outrage in Wigwam and War-Path; or the Royal Chief in Chains (1875).

Along with books on Indian stories and songs are accounts of their material culture. The society’s own critically acclaimed exhibit, The Way to Independence...


dence: Memories of a Hidatsa Indian Family, 1840-1920 (1987) led to the publication of an exhibition catalog, much of it in the words of the Indian family. Many books in the collections are written by Indians for Indians. Two examples are Native American Directory (1982), listing tribal offices and reserves, trading posts, and organizations, and B.I.A., I'm Not Your Indian Anymore by New York's Mohawk Nation (1974). Books demonstrating a variety of historiographical approaches include Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies, covering the lives of 14 Indians; New Directions In American Indian History, edited by Colin G. Calloway (1988), a valuable collection of general essays; and Russell Thornton's American Indian Holocaust and Survival (1987), a demographic study.

ALAS, many important, comprehensive areas cannot be highlighted here: rural history and agrarian reform movements; county, local, and institutional histories; foreign-language promotional guides to lure prospective immigrants; sheet music; Minnesota novelists and poets; Scandinavian collections. A final area, however, deserves emphasis: the unique and comprehensive periodical collection, from A to Z. (3M's corporate magazine, Today, actually precedes A, since the filing order starts with numbers! The newsletter of the Zumbrota Covered Bridge Society is the last.) In addition to such corporate magazines as Munsingwear Briefs, the reference library collects publications from church, civic, and political organizations as diverse as the Jewish Lubavitcher sect's L'Chaim and Anchor & Line from the St. Paul Yacht Club. Men Talk reports the concerns of the Twin Cities Men's Center as "a source for emerging male expression," and Dog Days is the official newsletter of the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon. Foreign-language periodicals come from established ethnic groups like the Scandinavians as well as newer arrivals like the Hmong and the Cambodians. The reference department also tries to collect such publications as American Indian Law Newsletter and Anishinaabe Giigidowin, a bilingual newsletter for Ojibway and Potawatomi language instructors. Agriculture is well represented by periodicals ranging from such mainstream work as The Farmer to special interest newsletters like Gobbles, the official organ of the Minnesota Turkey Growers' Association.

I have just spent many pages extolling the public space and the collections of the reference library. Yet the bottom line is ultimately service to researchers. A beautiful room means nothing without good books. And rich collections mean nothing if they are not accessible. For the society's reference department, as for historical society librarians and archivists nationwide, there is a constant challenge to meet the needs of patrons, including staff, in ever-increasing numbers and with more complex research projects. The reference librarians must be knowledgeable about the ever-growing collections, the related resources in the other three reference areas, and the way to find materials in other repositories. Of the many proud traditions of the Minnesota Historical Society, the open-access policy to researchers of all ages and interests ranks high. In the new History Center, the space will be bigger and still beautiful; the collections will have room to stretch; and the room and collections will be even more accessible to anyone wishing to study.

The illustration on p. 157 is from Gaylord Schanilec, High Bridge: Ten Wood Engravings of Demolition With Nine Stories of Construction (1987); that on p. 158 is from John E. Hawkinson, The Brothers, vii (1969); and the one on p. 159 is from Carver, Travels, 228-229 (1778). All photographs except that on p. 153 were taken by Andrea Mugnier.