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Revitalization Through Collaboration: Purdue Students Work with West Lafayette Public Library

Nick Schenkel

Their excitement was infectious. The four graduate students who worked with our community archives collections at the West Lafayette Public Library in fall semester 2008 tore into their work with a passion and a curiosity that amazed me and my staff – and prompted us to see our archival collections, our library, and our city with new eyes and with new interest.

For many reasons West Lafayette, Indiana, has been as much an abstraction as an actual city. For many in the community, West Lafayette's reason to exist revolves around its immediate presence and interaction with Purdue University; so much so that it sometimes seems that West Lafayette is but an appendix to that great university. Also, the neighboring city of Lafayette with its vibrant downtown and its emphasis on manufacturing sometimes makes West Lafayette seem more of a suburb of the town across the Wabash River than a city in its own right.

So why bother with archiving West Lafayette history? Because the archival class' work gives us a new lens through which to see and appreciate both the West Lafayette Public Library and the city of West Lafayette – from the early 1900s to the present day.

Studying the Moffitt family – whose members were major donors to the library in the late 1960s – brings the sense-of-city to light immediately. Two students' efforts to learn more about library donor Bertha Moffitt and her family brought to life a family with significant cultural, political, and intellectual ties to West Lafayette, Purdue, and Lafayette.

The students' work showed that Miss Moffitt's father, Dr. William Moffitt, a physician, was a leader in the West Lafayette and Lafayette communities, serving with West Lafayette city government and on the board of one of our two local hospitals; yet his importance to the community had been lost to history. The achievements of Bertha Moffitt, who obtained

an undergraduate and then master's degree at Purdue, seem exceptional for an early 20th century woman. She also served as her father's office manager, all the while continuing to be active in the West Lafayette/Lafayette community's literary and arts pursuits and, finally, becoming a major donor of both funds and books to the West Lafayette Public Library. But to emphasize again, until the students' work pulled together the disparate threads of her life and work, her work and its importance were in danger of being lost.

The posting of the Library Board's founding documents and first decade of meeting minutes may at first read as a modest effort on the part of the library, but delving into those minutes tells us what institutional history can bring to light.

These early board minutes, all from the 1920s, show a library board composed of members deeply involved with Purdue and West Lafayette communities and concerned, too, with the state's larger library concerns. The archival work shows that these early library board members were not amateurs at governing; from their first meetings the board members developed a respect for clearly differing viewpoints where one group deferred to the other's leadership concerning certain topics at library board meetings; yet both groups had the respect of the other in setting policy for the community's library. It is perhaps not surprising that this set a precedent that – with some lapses – continues to this day: West Lafayette library board members more often than not seek consensus in resolving their occasional disputes.

These early members of the board were important members of the West Lafayette community in other ways too (one was a Purdue dean, another a West Lafayette school board president, to name but two). Learning this, combined with the family history of Bertha Moffitt, begins to show a history of the library's importance to the community and to leaders in the West Lafayette community. This importance

is further reflected in our library board members' ongoing relationships with more recent city councils and mayors that have enabled us to build and remodel the equivalent of four increasingly larger and more sophisticated library buildings over the past 80 years.

In sum, this work has let us know much more about our library's history and development and about our library's involvement with and importance to the larger community.

We are beginning to learn that West Lafayette indeed does have a history of its own, often built around its proximity to Purdue University, yes, but also a city history that stands on its own as interesting and innovative. The early library board was composed of leading men and women of the community, a community interested enough in providing for lifelong learning for its own citizens of all ages to invest in a succession of library buildings deemed worthy of significant book donations. The Moffitt family donations helped our library build a rich public library book collection, but let us not overlook the art donations of talented members of the Hoosier art community such as Bill Cross, Bea Yerian, Robert Browning Reed, and Jacqueline Gerritsen.

Importantly, thanks to the library staff's enthusiasm resulting from working with the students, our staff is investing real time and effort into our library's archival and local history

collections. We are initiating plans to significantly upgrade our early local history website to include many more local historical/biographical photos, continuing the work of the graduate students in preserving paper and photographic records that deteriorate as time takes its toll. In doing so we are making our local history more accessible to scholarly and popular audiences by cataloging our collections into the Online Computer Library Network, also known as WorldCat, an internationally accessible library computer network.

What began as an interesting excursion into the library's often overlooked papers and art by graduate students from Purdue University has developed into a new appreciation for our library, our community, and our city and how collaboration can benefit all.

Participating in the project, in addition to myself, were Nancy Hartman, West Lafayette Public Library computer and reference librarian; Purdue University faculty members Susan Curtis and Kristina Bross, and their graduate students Mary Barford, Shivohn Garcia, Adam Hawkins, Deborah Leitner, and Pete Sinnott.

About the Author

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