

Chronicling the “Lava Wave”

My Adventure Unearthing the Amateur Press

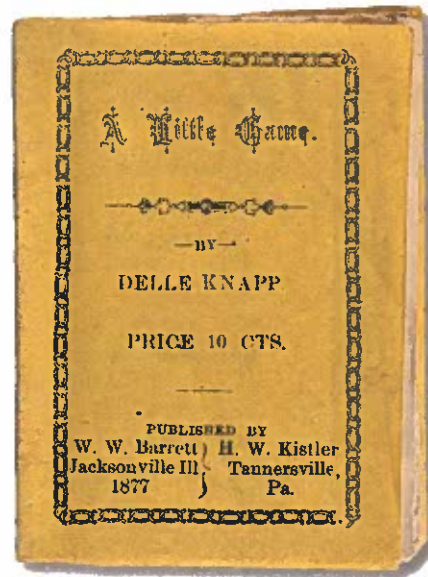
Laura Wasowicz

Although I am a recently minted member of the Caxton Club, my bibliographic roots in Chicago are deep. I studied the history of the book with Michael Hackenberg and advanced cataloguing with Arlene Taylor while enrolled in the University of Chicago’s Graduate Library School. I graduated from GLS in 1986, shortly after it was announced that the school was going to close. I am grateful for the superb training that I received during my time in Chicago. It served me well when I embarked on what was to become my life’s career – being the curator of and cataloguing the comprehensive collection of pre-1900 American children’s literature held at the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), an independent research library in Worcester, Massachusetts. Founded by patriot printer Isaiah Thomas and his friends in 1812, the AAS collects the printed texts and images produced in British North America between 1640 and 1899. We award about fifty fellowships per year, and our deep collections attract worldwide readership among researchers interested in historical America print culture. AAS has one of the largest institutional collections of amateur newspapers produced by young people in the United States between 1805 and 1900; we hold about four thousand such titles.

I joined the AAS staff in 1987 and am still learning from and about the thousands of lesser-known authors, illustrators, and printers whose work can be found in the AAS collection of children’s literature. Most of the researchers who I help are not children’s literature specialists but Americanists taking a deep dive into evidence of their topic across print media – from finely bound novels to tattered children’s chapbooks. Such research is possible because of the detailed cataloguing of this collection with attention to subject/genre analysis, estimated publication date ranges (so important for the thousands of items in

the collection lacking an imprint date), and biographical details of the authors, illustrators, and publishers behind the books.

Over the past year I have created detailed cataloguing for the Historic Children’s Voices Project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This funding provides me with the time needed to make accessible some 150 amateur books held at the AAS, most of which were written and printed between 1860 and 1899



A Little Game

by teenaged boys and girls. Scanned images of these amateur books, along with the in-depth cataloguing describing them can be found on the project website (americanantiquarian.org/historic-childrens-voices-primary-sources).

Amateur newspaper production exploded in the United States, particularly after the invention of the tabletop Lowe Portable Printing and Letter-Copying Press in 1856, and the Novelty Press in 1867. Amateur books are offshoots of these amateur papers. The books are generally between sixteen and thirty-two pages long and contain a wealth of infor-

mation about what young people, especially teenaged boys, found worth printing as well as the names and locations of various journalists, many of whom lived in small towns like Rockport, Indiana; Tannersville, Pennsylvania; and Jacksonville, Illinois.

The title of this article is drawn from a quotation written by eighteen-year-old amateur journalist John Winslow Snyder of Troy, New York (1855-1910) in his amateur book *Essays and Sketches* (Rutherford Park, NJ, 1873). He writes, “The Adams and Novelty presses kindly furnished the crater, and through it poured the burning lava.” The amateur printing craze was about five years old at the time. The flooding of the market by inexpensive hand presses affordable by middle-class youth ignited the amateur printing craze in the U.S. and Canada. The Improved Lowe Press (1868) with a 3 x 4-inch bed sold for eight dollars (current value: \$168); the Woods Novelty Press with a similarly sized bed sold for as little as nine dollars in 1884 (\$274).

As well as the amateur newspapers, AAS has several hundred amateur books, most of which are dated between the 1870s and 1890s. We did not buy these books from dealers. Most came to us from individual donors. The genesis of the AAS collection was established when then AAS director Clarence Brigham (1877-1963) appealed for donations from Worcester, Massachusetts amateur printer Frank Roe Batchelder (1869-1947) and Boston area amateur journalist Edward Harold Cole (1892-1966) in the 1910s. It was through these relationships that we received the donation of amateur papers and books either published by or reviewed by Truman J. Spencer (1864-1944) who wrote the seminal *History of Amateur Journalism*, published posthumously in 1947. About one quarter of our amateur book holdings were donated by AAS collector member Ruth Adomeit (1910-1996). Presently better known for her collection of miniature books

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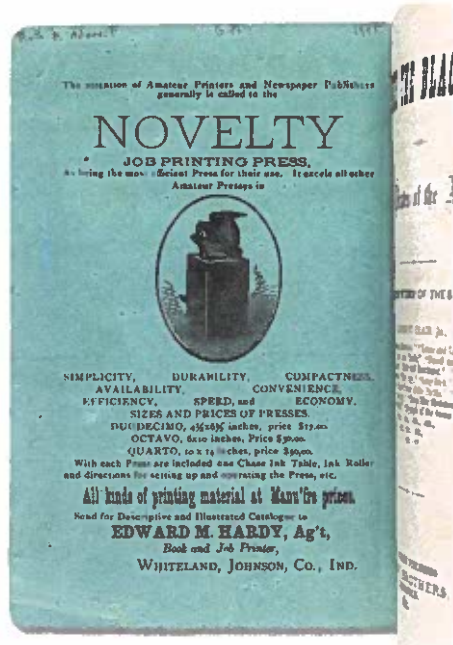
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and bibliography, *Three Centuries of Thumb Bibles*, Ms. Adomeit was also a member of the Bibliographical Society of America, but was never elected to the Grolier Club, perhaps reflecting the double prejudice against women collectors of the time and especially those who collected “later” nineteenth- and twentieth-century children’s books, a prejudice which has happily subsided over the past thirty years. Other major donations of amateur books were made in 2010 by Stan Oliner (1938-2012), an amateur printer, collector, and curator of books and manuscripts at the Colorado Historical Society, and my colleague Vincent Golden, the AAS curator of newspapers and periodicals. If it were not for these people collecting a genre that up

including *The San Francisco Call* under her full name Adeline Knapp. Spencer mentioned Delle Knapp repeatedly in his history, but he did not make the connection with the grown-up professional writer Adeline Knapp, although he discussed the professional careers of her male amateur journalist peers often at length. Her female contemporary, Alice Harper (1856-1933), wrote the piece “Kind Deception” for the anthology *Amateur Gems* (1878). Harper proved to be a challenge to track down. I discovered that her real name was Jennie E. Straw, an amateur journalist from Concord, New Hampshire. She married Henry W. Krukeberg, a fellow amateur from Minneapolis. They moved to South Pasadena, California where he established a printing and publishing business. These examples reflect



Black Flag Novelty Press Ad

until recently was largely regarded as curious and marginal at best, we would not be able to preserve, catalogue, and make freely available these precious voices of nineteenth-century young people.

What follows are several examples of these voices I have encountered while documenting the lava wave. *A Little Game* (1877) is a humorous tale about a swindler’s successful trip through the author’s hometown of Buffalo, New York. It was written by seventeen-year-old Delle Knapp (1860-1909), who was lauded as a fine poetess in Truman J. Spencer’s *History of Amateur Journalism*. Using various census and biographical resources, I discovered that Delle Knapp moved to San Francisco and became a prominent journalist, writing for periodicals



Black Flag illustration

the fluid lives of female amateurs given the common use of shortened first names or pseudonyms, surname changes made after marriage, and geographic mobility.

These amateur books also provide an important resource for understanding how media printing functioned in late nineteenth-century America. *Four Days in New York*, written by fifteen-year-old Lucian S. Wilson (1864-1947), has a wonderfully concise description of his tour of the *New York Times* press floor just as the set type for the paper was being covered with the paper mold to make the stereotype plate of molten lead, tin, and bismuth. As a result, I included the subject headings “*New York Times*” and “*Stereotyping (Printing)*” in the catalogue record describing this amateur title. This is just

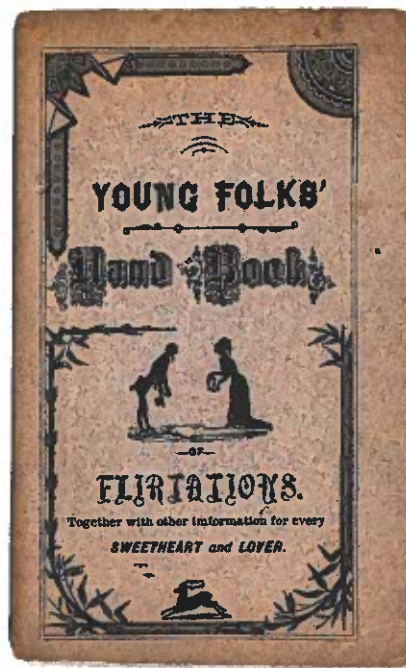
one example of why detailed cataloging to provide subject access is so important.

Adventure stories are one of the most well-represented genres among these amateur books. Twenty-year-old St. George Henry Rathbone (1854-1938), who used the pseudonym Harry St. Clair, Jr., wrote *Under the Black Flag* (Indianapolis, 1878), a tale of high seas adventure of a teenaged boy taken prisoner by a band of pirates sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. Many of these male amateur journalists were influenced by the boating adventure novels written by William T. Adams (1822-1897), who wrote under the pseudonym "Oliver Optic." He also edited the popular periodical *Oliver Optic's Magazine* that served as a literary touchstone for many amateurs. Rathbone's book is an excellent example of what amateur books can tell us about the popularity of its subject (high seas adventure by teenage boys among hardened adult male pirates). They also provide the rich material of its numerous advertisements submitted by amateur journalists from all over the country, who likely paid for visibility in this book written by a prolific amateur journalist. The prime real estate of the inside front wrapper is devoted to an advertisement for the Novelty Job Printing Press, complete with an illustration of this tabletop press. The book also contains numerous ads for other amateur journalists and printers offering services such as job printing of calling cards, selling an amateur book titled *The Drummer Boy*, and for buying and selling collections of foreign stamps (many male amateurs also had an interest in stamp collecting). The advertisements plug the services of amateurs from places all over the United States including Brooklyn, New York; St. Paul, Minnesota; Providence, Rhode Island; Schenectady, New York; and Peabody, Massachusetts. The advertisements reflect the national network of amateur journalists that thrived in the 1870s.

The book's printer, seventeen-year-old Edward Mino Hardy (1857-1940), advertised himself as a book and job printer who also served as the Whiteland, Indiana agent for the Novelty Job Printing Press. Noting its simplicity, compactness, and economy, prices ranged from seventeen dollars (current value \$419) for a duodecimo press with a 4½ × 6½-inch press bed, to thirty dollars (current value \$740) for an octavo press with a 6 × 10-inch press bed, to fifty dollars (current value \$1,233) for a quarto press with a 10 × 14-inch press bed. Given the substantial prices, these new presses were only within the reach of middle-class and

wealthy youth. A used Lowe Press with a 4¼ × 7-inch bed selling for twelve dollars (\$300) was advertised in Delle Knapp's *A Little Game* in 1878.

Although most amateur books are not illustrated, *Under the Black Flag* has a wood engraving of the hero escaping from the pirate ship by jumping overboard; he is represented by a black dot in the middle of the ocean. It is signed "Seaverns" and could have been engraved either by Boston amateur journalist, eighteen-year-old Alexander H. Seaverns (1856-1932), or his younger brother, Stanley E. Seaverns (1858-1927). Alexander eventually became a professional illustrator whose work can be found in picture books published by McLoughlin Brothers in the early twentieth century.



Young Folks Hand Book of Flirtations

Books offering tips about flirtation and courtship also enjoyed popularity among amateurs. One such example is *The Young Folks' Hand Book of Flirtations* published in Rockport, Indiana by seventeen-year-old James Niblack (1865?-1888) in 1882. It is a decoder of flirtation signs given by hands, gloves, parasols, and fans. It also has bonus pieces like one on "how to kiss deliciously" urging the young man to "revel in the blissfulness of your situation without smacking your lips on it as you would after it, after imbibing the Bacchanalian draught, but like Venus sipping the honey from the lips of Oh! Shoo Fly!" If that were not enough, Niblack inserted a short, simple recipe on how to make one's own cologne using

lavender, rosemary, oil of lemon, cinnamon, and a great deal of alcohol. The book's back cover sports ads for James Niblack's four-page amateur paper *The Monthly Eagle* that sold for fifteen cents per year (about \$4.50 current value). At the bottom is a smaller advertisement for Niblack's eight-year-old brother Leslie Niblack's monthly paper *The Skipper* that sold for ten cents per year (about three dollars current value). Sadly, it is not known if James Niblack put his advice on kissing to good use. He died at about age twenty-two while working as a professional printer in Chicago. His brother Leslie Niblack (1874?-1948) lived into adulthood and eventually published the Guthrie, Oklahoma newspaper *The Leader*. It is not unusual to encounter amateur journalists who did not live beyond age twenty-five. Furthermore, although many amateurs wound up having careers in journalism, printing, or professions like accounting, law, or engineering, not all amateurs had successful lives. For example, one eighteen-year-old amateur printer named Bayard T. Alvord (1858?-1919) issued and likely wrote the violent story *Scalping Sam the Silent Slayer* about a man who delighted in slaughtering Native Americans at will. He died at age sixty as an inmate of the Philadelphia Hospital for the Insane, having been committed there nine years before. These amateur writings represent the humor and dreams as well as the violence and racial hatred prevalent in American culture in the late nineteenth century.

In closing, my exploration of these amateur books has been like experiencing Snyder's lava wave, taking in some literary brilliance, some caustic wit, and uncertainty about whether my next discovery will provide a building block critical to unearthing the amateur publishing network or end in a personal tale of sorrow, or even both. Regardless of the outcome of my search for the life underlying the amateur name, I am privileged to excavate this aspect of printing that has been, up until recently, too often belittled as a liminal piece of curiosity. Thanks to the NEH funding to create the intellectual infrastructure that makes this material accessible, Amateurdome and the voices of those who produced it can now be thoroughly scrutinized and appreciated by current and future generations of researchers. A hybrid symposium celebrating this project will be held at the American Antiquarian Society on May 2-3, 2024. More details on registration will be made available at americanantiquarian.org/programs-events.

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