

Collecting Western Americana

BY JAMES T. BABB

THE collecting of Western Americana has developed by leaps and bounds in the first half of the Twentieth Century. This is fortunate as so many of the printed items were published from small local presses, and the activity of dealers, librarians and collectors has preserved many important books, pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers, not to mention manuscripts and correspondence, that would have otherwise completely disappeared. It is also fortunate that many of these collectors were able to and wished to donate their libraries to public institutions, and thus provide the sources for the history of our country and gain the gratitude of generations of scholars.

I shall mention a few of these outstanding special collections in libraries and end by attempting to describe in more detail the one I know best—the Yale Collection of Western Americana.

Great libraries like Harvard, the New York Public, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives are strong in this field, but their riches are not separately maintained and do not have a specialist as Curator or Librarian. The John Carter Brown Library is strong in the pre-1800 period with the Southwest, particularly Mexico, outstanding up to that date. There are also many local collections in the western states like the Rocky Mountain Region Library at the Denver Public, which is especially strong in pictorial material; the southwest material at the University of Texas; in fact, almost every state has one or more, and a number of these special libraries may in time develop strong hold-

ings on the whole area from the Mississippi River west to the Pacific Ocean.

Probably the first to be established and certainly one of the richest is the Bancroft Library at the University of California. This great accumulation of pioneer reminiscences, in manuscript and printed form, came into the possession of the University in 1905 and was the only major library in the area not destroyed by the earthquake in April, 1906. Although the University has given it modest support since, the collection has by one means or another grown considerably.

Let me quote from several reports; first, *A Report Submitted to the President and Regents of the University of California upon the Bancroft Library*, by Reuben G. Thwaites, published in 1905: "Library workers who are especially trained to the administration of maps, manuscripts, and other historical and economic sources, should if possible at once be placed in charge. Such a collection could not, in my judgment, attain its highest measure of usefulness in the hands of any not qualified in this department." Further from an article, "Manuscript Collections in the Bancroft Library," by Herbert I. Priestley, published in *Archives and Libraries*, American Library Association's Committee on Archives and Libraries, 1939, speaking of the manuscripts in the Library: "Such availability is, of course, limited by the knowledge of the subject possessed by the applicant and, to a degree, by the knowledge of material possessed by the librarian and his staff." Finally, in 1950 from the March number of *Bancroftiana*, "Although no one doubts the importance of the Bancroft Collections, thousands of letters and documents lie idle and unconsulted simply because no one knows they exist. Relatively few of the manuscripts have been catalogued."

The Librarians of the Bancroft for forty-seven years have, I believe, all been professional historians and not librarians,

unquestionably interested almost wholly in their personal research and publications or that of their immediate students. For many years the collection has suffered from poor housing and inadequate care. The organization in recent years of the group called the Friends of the Bancroft Library may force a change in this lack of public spirit and responsibility.

The Edward E. Ayer Collection given to the Newberry Library in 1911 is one of the important early collections. Mr. Ayer's purpose was to collect everything about the North American Indian but, as time passed, as with most collectors, his interest broadened and the western movement within the United States is well represented. This collection is catalogued, with an excellent librarian in charge, so is completely available to all scholars.

In 1922 Mr. Huntington purchased from Henry R. Wagner his collection on the Plains and the Rockies which had been on deposit at Yale. This was the foundation of a collection which now covers the West and is particularly strong in California history with important groups of manuscripts such as the Fort Sutter papers and the manuscripts of Elkanah Walker, the Oregon missionary. Incidentally both of these sets of papers are complemented by manuscripts in the Coe Collection at Yale.

Philip Ashton Rollins' fine library at Princeton was built around his interest in cowboys and ranching. After the publication of his book, *The Cowboy; His Characteristics, His Equipment, and His Part in the Development of the West*, the best bucking bronk at the Pendleton Roundup was named Philip Rollins and the Roundup that year was designated to honor Mr. Rollins. As he trotted up to the reviewing stand, twenty-one cowboys, raising clouds of good western dust, raced their ponies up to Mr. Rollins, pulled them back on their haunches, swept off their Stetsons and threw them to the ground—a great honor for an Easterner from the lawns

of Princeton to receive in the heart of the real West. The original diaries which were the sources of another important publication by Mr. Rollins, *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail*; *Robert Stuart's Narratives*, are in the Coe Collection.

The California Historical Society, with the gift of Templeton Crocker's library and the help of Mr. Wagner and others, has important resources in California history with secondary emphasis on westward expansion, and I understand important developments for this library are in the wind. The Robert S. Ellison Collection at the University of Indiana is not large but possesses considerable manuscript material on Joseph Lane, the first Governor of Oregon Territory, Joel Palmer of Oregon Trail fame and other pioneers of the Pacific Northwest.

With the acquisition of the Donald M. Frost Collection, the American Antiquarian Society joined the select circle. The Society was previously strong in this field, its newspaper collections alone would make Worcester a city to be visited by the American historian. The Western Collection will continue to grow because Mr. Frost agreed to the sale of duplicates with the proceeds to go into Western desiderata.

There are, of course, many other collections throughout the country but I hope I have mentioned the ones with the largest and richest resources at this date. I now would like to give you a brief outline of the development of the special collection of Western history at Yale.

I believe there was only a slight interest, if any, in the history of the United States west of the Mississippi by serious historical scholars at Yale in the Nineteenth Century, other than an interest in the earliest explorers like De Soto and Coronado who happened to get across the Mississippi or come up from Mexico. However, a number of our scientists contributed to that history and I am sure many of our graduates did too. James Dwight Dana of the class of

1833 and later Professor of Geology, was on the Wilkes exploring expedition in 1838 to 1842, was shipwrecked at the mouth of the Columbia River, and went overland to San Francisco. He wrote part of the published report of the expedition. Benjamin Silliman, Jr., was a consulting expert on gold and silver mines and oil in the early days in California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado; in fact, his reports on off-shore oil deposits in California were ridiculed at the time but have since proved to be correct. He was some fifty years ahead of the times. Josiah Dwight Whitney of the class of 1839 was active in the geological survey of Iowa and was the first state geologist of California. William H. Brewer of the class of 1852 and Clarence King of the class of 1862 were Whitney's assistants. King was the first director of the United States Geological Survey. William P. Blake, class of 1852, was one of the geologists of the Pacific railroad surveys and explored in Alaska. In consolidating the Western Collection many of the rare items were found to be the gift at the time of publication of either Brewer or Blake. Othniel C. Marsh, the paleontologist, organized the first of many scientific expeditions to the West in 1870. In 1874 the Indians allowed him access to the Black Hills in the Dakotas, only on condition that he would carry their grievances to Washington. He kept his word and significant Indian reforms were made. We have much of the correspondence and papers of these distinguished scientists.

Furthermore, I doubt if there was much interest in western history even in the beginning of the Twentieth Century; western history was too recent; it had not yet become respectable. There was, however, one historian at Yale in the beginning of this century who did show an interest in the history of our West, and this was Professor Edward G. Bourne. Professor Bourne wrote an article for the *American Historical Review* in 1901 in which he pricked

the bubble of the legend that Marcus Whitman saved Oregon. In my childhood I remember arguments at the dinner table which caused me to worry that my parents were not congenial. My mother and father had a real interest in the history of the Pacific Northwest, an interest almost unique at that time in northern Idaho. Mother was for the sentimental legend that Whitman's trip East saved Oregon, a legend fostered by local amateur historians and militant Protestant church fathers, the type that built up the legend around Sacajawea, the Indian girl with Lewis and Clark. My father, a scholarly lawyer, went along with Professor Bourne of Yale, and this caused sparks to fly at the dinner table.

As far as the Yale Library goes, any real interest in Western American history, I believe, was first stimulated by a graduate of the class of 1884, Henry R. Wagner. Mr. Wagner is now in his 91st year and I have a steady and interesting correspondence with him. For many years he was with the Guggenheim Mining interests and wherever they sent him he formed a collection of books on the locality; British, Scottish and Irish economic tracts; over 10,000 of them which he gave to Yale in 1915; books on Latin America; the Southwest; the Middlewest; the Plains and the Rockies; the Southwest and Middlewest collections are in the Yale Library. We also have his collection of books on mining in South America. Mr. Wagner is recognized as the pioneer collector in many of these fields and respected as a scholar with many important publications to his credit. He retired at the age of 60 and has spent the last 31 years in scholarly work, and he is still at it. The Eighteenth Century Peter Pond of the Northwest fur trade from Milford, Connecticut, is his latest interest. Yale owns Pond's manuscript diary. The present-day Peter is a sophomore at Yale.

When Mr. Wagner's collecting activities fell off after his retirement, for good and sufficient reasons, the interest at Yale fell off too, and we acquired only the obvious books. I hope it doesn't sound conceited to say that upon the appointment of a native of Idaho as Librarian, the interest began to pick up. I had attempted earlier, while an investment banker in New Haven, with the help of an undergraduate, the late Winlock W. Miller, Jr., of Seattle, to stir up an interest. The great boost, of course, came when Mr. William Robertson Coe decided, in 1945, to give his collection. Mr. Coe came to this country as a young man from England, made good, and developed a serious interest in the history and traditions of his adopted country. He had large cattle interests in Wyoming, and early realized that our western history was a thrilling story, that its literature was ephemeral, published often on fly-by-night presses in pamphlet form or in newspapers which were rapidly disappearing because of their fragile nature. He set out to acquire these publications, before they completely disappeared, with the help of one of the leading dealers in the field, Mr. Edward Eberstadt; and he has been greatly successful. Mr. Eberstadt exhibited the skill of Sherlock Holmes in locating the books, pamphlets, maps, and manuscripts, and persuading their owners to part with them. On one occasion only the fact that Eberstadt had put the manuscript diaries of Howard Egan, the guide who led the Mormons from Winter quarters in Missouri to Salt Lake in 1847, in the hands of the American Express Company saved him from physical harm in Salt Lake City. I once fled from a lady librarian in the western collection of the Denver Public Library. She was indignant because in the Coe Collection are the first manuscript records of the city government of Denver. They were found after a flood in, I believe, 1867, in the sand of Cherry Creek which flows through Denver. They are badly water-

stained but still legible. I offered her photostats but that did not seem to placate her.

Mr. Coe has made excellent provision for his collection. He has agreed to our desire to attract to that room every rare book, pamphlet and manuscript on the subject already in the Library or which may come in in the future. He has provided us with funds to catalogue the collection, equip the room, repair and make cases for the books, and to publish a handsome catalogue of all the Western American manuscripts, entitled—*A Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Collection of Western Americana, Founded by William Robertson Coe, Yale University Library*, compiled by Mary C. Withington, Yale University Press, 1952. Being the ideal Library donor, he is also providing an endowment to care for and to make additions to the collection in the future, so we have been able to appoint an excellent Curator to the Collection, a trained librarian and historian, Mr. Archibald Hanna.

It is our intention to issue an annual publication called, *Western Historical Series, Yale University Library*. So far we have published a colored facsimile of the manuscript map drawn by William Clark containing all the information from the smaller sectional maps drawn on the expedition by Clark and, second, an account of Mr. Coe's Collection by Edward Eberstadt, and just recently, an exact facsimile of the unique overland diary, *A Journal of John Udell, Kept During a Trip Across the Plains, Containing an Account of the Massacre of a Portion of His Party by the Mohave Indians in 1858*. This was published in Suisun City, California in 1859, and is a recently discovered earlier edition of a pamphlet previously thought to have had its first appearance in 1868.

Mr. Coe set definite geographical and date limits on his collection. The geographical limits are roughly the Missouri River, the Mexican border and the Arctic Circle. The period covered is from the middle of the Eighteenth Century

to the completion of the Overland railroad including the early annals of most of the far western states. Mr. Coe has not specialized on the Southwest, California, or the Midwest west of the Mississippi, although his collection contains important material on those areas. We have transferred to the collection all rare material about the United States west of the Mississippi which was already in the Library and, of course, many important publications and manuscripts have gravitated to us during the past two hundred and fifty years. Mr. Coe's collection contains over 10,000 printed items, a high percentage of them rare and important, and a gallery of paintings by the earliest artists in the West—Weber, Seymour, Catlin, Miller, and Stanley. The accounts of early sea voyages, Eighteenth-Century journals and manuscripts of Juan Perez and Hezeta, the first Europeans to land on the soil of the Pacific Northwest in 1775, and others; the imperial ukases granting the rights to the Russian-American Company, an almost unique collection, are present. The Lewis and Clark expedition for which we have 53 manuscript maps drawn by William Clark, and the explorations of other trail blazers are well documented. The first California imprint, Zamorano's *Aviso al Publico*, 1834, a small broadside, one of, I believe, three known copies, is in the collection as well as later publications of this press, which are regarded as among the rarest of all Californiana.

The history of the exploration of the interior is enriched by manuscripts and correspondence of such men as Robert Stewart, an employee of John Jacob Astor who crossed the Plains eastward from Oregon, in 1812; Major Robert Owen; Alexander Ross on the fur trade; James Stuart of Montana, and others.

There are several hundred early maps and files of many of the earliest newspapers, among the rarest of Western publications, and, of course, full of nuggets for the historian;

and the logbooks of Cleveland, Clinton, and Ferguson, early fur traders.

British Columbia and the Hudson Bay Company-Oregon negotiations are documented by many letters of such important men as John McLaughlin and Peter Skene Ogden, Factors of the Hudson Bay Company. The printed guide books and diaries of the '49'ers are available and often they are unique or one of two or three known copies. In the period 1846-1860 there are over seventy-five manuscript diaries of men who crossed the Plains in search of gold.

The Oregon section, which deals more with fur and cheap productive land than with gold, is of such extent and importance that no definitive history of that country can be written without using the material at Yale. Papers of Elkanah Walker, Marcus Whitman, Henry Harmon Spaulding and Anna Maria Pittman, the young bride of Jason Lee, document the early missions. The group of early Oregon imprints is probably the best in any library.

The journals and papers of Henry Eld and George Foster Emmons, largely kept on the Wilkes United States exploring expedition, the first United States Naval expedition in the Pacific Ocean, should reward the historian.

The state of Washington is particularly well represented because of the late Winlock W. Miller, Jr. His collection was given to us by his father. Winlock's grandfather, General William Winlock Miller, was a close associate of Governor Isaac I. Stevens, the first territorial governor of Washington Territory, and played an important part in the early history of the region. Winlock began his collection when a young boy and raided many attics, of course with the uninterested owners permission. We have all of General Miller's papers and those of Elwood Evans, the early local historian, and many of Governor Stevens, and the files of the earliest Washington and British Columbia newspapers.

Idaho and Montana are well represented with books and pamphlets and considerable manuscript material, particularly to do with the early days in Montana, the outlaws and Vigilantes. I was pleased to have a visit recently from an undergraduate who was doing a paper on early Idaho. I asked him how he happened to call on me. He said many of the books in the library stacks on Idaho were given by me. So you see, a donor is known to the reader and appreciated.

To me the most interesting publications of the Pacific Northwest are what are called the Lapwai imprints. When the Reverend Henry Harmon Spaulding located his mission at what is now Spaulding, Idaho, in November 1836, he set about to import from the Hawaiian Islands a printing press. The press arrived in the Fall of 1839. It was brought to the mouth of the Columbia, up the Columbia River and then up the Snake River to the junction of the Clearwater where my boyhood home, Lewiston, Idaho, was later located. I imagine the press was taken overland from that spot the twelve miles to Spaulding. They set up the press and printed eight little crude booklets in the Nez Percé Indian language. Seven of them are in the Coe Collection. None are in the state of Idaho and only two or three in the Pacific Northwest. Oberlin College has a few, the Newberry Library has three in the Ayer Collection, Harvard has, I imagine, on permanent deposit, a copy of the one missing at Yale, the Nez Percé laws. There is a newly discovered copy which was recently acquired by a member of this Society. I suppose we could ruin him in the stock market or do something else as desperate to acquire the missing link. These imprints are mainly schoolbooks for the instruction of the children, with excerpts from the Bible, etc.

The Mormon material in the Coe Collection, I believe, ranks next to the Church Collection and, of course, contains manuscripts and books not available in Salt Lake. I have a

great respect for the Mormons, particularly for their independence and their conservative outlook. I am told they disdained any help from the federal government during the depression. All of the Mormon material at Yale is available to any serious historian, I doubt if this is true of the Church Collection. The most important and rarest Mormon book is probably *A Book of Commandments*, written by Joseph Smith and printed at Zion, Missouri, in 1833. The printing plant was ransacked as this book was going through the press, and it was never actually published. There are only a handful of copies. There is a perfect one in the Coe Collection. The first item printed in Utah was either a fifty cent or a dollar bill signed by Brigham Young and two others; both are present in the collection. There is also considerable manuscript material on the early days of Mormonism; Brigham Young's correspondence with his first congressional representative in Washington; and the papers and correspondence of other early Mormon Elders. The several offshoots of the Mormon Church, especially the Strangite movement, which located on an island in Michigan, are well represented with Mr. Strang's personal papers including the forged letter he claimed was sent to him by Joseph Smith putting Strang in charge of the church if anything happened to Smith.

Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, the Dakotas are well cared for. Albert H. Allen, the author of *Dakota Imprints, 1858-1889*, published in New York in 1947, wrote to Mr. Eberstadt, "The Coe Collection of Dakota Imprints is simply astounding. To find nearly fifty items of which we had no previous record, left me sagging in my chair with amazement."

The most recent friends of our collection are Frederick W. Beinecke of New York, who is buying important items for us to help round out the collection where it is weakest; for

instance, in the Southwest and California; and J. Ward Mailliard, who picks up important additions for us in the bookshops of San Francisco. The Alumni Committees on the Library in Portland, Oregon, Denver, and other western cities have helped on occasions.

We are proud to have the responsibility for this collection and I am happy to say its presence in New Haven has influenced the teaching and research at Yale. I know of at least one appointment to our History Department which I trace to the fact that we have this rich resource in Western American history. This instructor has developed an undergraduate course which has become so popular that it now has a nickname. It is called, "Cowboys and Indians." The boys in this class prepare their papers in the library and many of them are real contributions to the history of this country. The collection is used constantly by visiting historians and many books appearing currently contain statements of appreciation.

I shall end by quoting an excellent newspaperman in Providence, also a good antiquarian, Bradford F. Swan. "The famous advice of Horace Greeley will have to be reversed for those historians who will write in the future about his land of opportunity. For them the advice will be, 'Go East, and more specifically to New Haven and the Yale University Library.'"

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