Libraries in the Life of the User: Historical and Communal Dimensions

A Proposal for Library History Seminar XII
Center for Middletown Studies
Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

Conference Theme and Keynote:

The Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University, in conjunction with the University’s Bracken Library, seeks to host the 12th Library History Seminar from Thursday, October 21, 2010 to Sunday, October 24, 2010. The theme of the proposed conference, “Libraries in the Lives of Users: Historical and Communal Dimensions,” connects with one of the Center’s major research undertakings, the “What Middletown Read” project. “What Middletown Read” involves the creation and application of an extensive database documenting individual library patronage in Muncie, Indiana between 1892 and 1902. (Muncie is the site of the famed “Middletown” sociological studies commenced by Robert and Helen Lynd during the 1920s and 1930s and it has been one of the most thoroughly studied communities in the United States since then.) Our intent is to stage sessions highlighting the project within the larger Library History Seminar and to open the materials in advance to interested researchers.

The “What Middletown Read” project originated through a stroke of good fortune. Frank Felsenstein, Reed D. Voran Professor in the Humanities at Ball State, uncovered an intact cache of surviving library records that precisely document the books each borrower took from the local public library in Muncie, Indiana for a period of approximately ten years. Historians of print culture in the U.S. have long sought this sort of evidence of reading behavior among ordinary people. With the exception of Christine Pawley’s valuable study of Osage, Iowa, no comparable resource is available to document individual behavior. That it is available in “Middletown” is all the more fortuitous. The city grew rapidly during the 1890s and would become a symbol of mainstream American life when the Lynds completed their groundbreaking studies several decades later. The Center for Middletown Studies is creating an online database that will provide an intimate glimpse into the ways individuals and groups used a local library and engaged the wider world through print. It fully documents 190,000 individual transactions involving more than 6,000 patrons and 13,000 books. We expect to make data available in early 2009, in time for interested scholars to engage it and present findings at the Library History Seminar. A short introduction to the project may be accessed at http://www.bsu.edu/honors/media/pdf/middletown-alumninews.pdf and another at http://www.bsu.edu/middletown/wmr/.

The proposed theme, which focuses on the place of the library in the lives of individuals and communities, not only fits our project but embraces a broader range of scholarly agendas. Studies examining the role of libraries in the experiences of particular social groups, in education, and other communal activities fit comfortably under this heading, as would papers devoted to the internal operations of libraries, their architectural history, and to the place of libraries and of reading in the development of communities. The
theme also easily encompasses research on the history of libraries in other societies and cultures. While we are excited to develop and promote our own work, our intent is to create a broad-ranging conference that is of interest to scholars working on any aspect of library history. It is our hope that the conference theme will attract a range of strong papers suitable for publishing. We would certainly be pleased to have the proceedings, or selected papers, included in a special issue of *Libraries and Culture*.

We have tentatively invited Dr. Abigail Van Slyck, author of *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920*, to present the keynote address. Her well-regarded book explores both the architectural character and cultural role of Carnegie Libraries during the early twentieth century and she would speak on that theme. Professor Van Slyck has agreed in principle to offer the keynote and has permitted us to include her name in the proposal. If and when we are authorized to stage the Library History Seminar, we will make formal arrangements with her.

Several units on campus will provide special resources and expertise to the conference. Ball State has a well known College of Architecture, and we anticipate that there will be interest in participating in the conference by architectural historians specializing in library buildings. We are also working with the university’s Geographic Information Systems (GIS) unit to explore ways in which the demographics of library borrowing can be analyzed through spatial modeling, and our GIS colleagues plan to demonstrate this innovative technology at the conference.

Another feature of the Conference will be a display of the Elisabeth Ball Collection of children’s books. The collection includes more than 8,000 children’s books written in several languages and published during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Lilly Library at Indiana University has agreed in principle to provide a selection of them on loan to Ball State’s Bracken Library and the Ball State Museum of Art, and to help stage an exhibit in conjunction with the Library History Seminar. We envisage the publication of a scholarly catalogue to accompany the exhibition. We plan to organize a plenary session around the exhibit as part of the conference, along with a lecture and reception. Dr. Andrea Immel, Curator of the Cotsen Children’s Library at Princeton University has expressed interest in speaking during the plenary session. The website of Archives and Special Collections in the Bracken Library, which holds part of the Elisabeth Ball collection, is [http://www.bsu.edu/library/collections/archives/rbm/](http://www.bsu.edu/library/collections/archives/rbm/). The Ball State Museum, which has Elisabeth Ball’s extensive and remarkable art collection, can be accessed at [http://www.bsu.edu/artmuseum/](http://www.bsu.edu/artmuseum/).

**Planning and Logistics:**

The Center for Middletown Studies has sponsored a series of comparable conferences devoted to the theme of Small Cities. These multidisciplinary meetings have drawn together scholars from around the country to consider the history of small to mid-size urban communities and the challenges they face today. The fifth such conference is planned for April, 2007. Both Ball State University and other local institutions have provided facilities and logistical support. The University has a Conferences and Special
Events office that supplies staff and assistance for such matters as registration and transportation (including transportation to and from the Indianapolis Airport, located just over an hour’s drive away.) The Center will bring all of these resources to bear on the Library History Seminar, which presents an exciting opportunity for it to expand the scope of its work and to develop connections with library scholars.

The Conference will be organized by a six-member Executive Committee. It will include James J. Connolly, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for Middletown Studies, Arthur Hafner, Dean of University Libraries, Ball State University, Peter F. Blume, Director of the Ball State Museum of Art, Frank Felsenstein, Reed D. Voran Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Ball State, John Straw, Director of the Archives and Special Collections Research Center at Ball State, and Ted Wolner, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture. The Executive Committee will recruit additional help from interested faculty and staff at Ball State as well as external members to serve on the program committee.

We propose to stage the conference at the Hotel Roberts, a historic hotel built in 1921 and located in downtown Muncie. A full service facility, the Roberts provides ample meeting space for both large and small sessions. (We plan to use three meeting rooms, although additional space is available if needed). It includes a restaurant and lounge as well as more than 130 rooms. The hotel’s downtown location puts it in easy walking distance of several restaurants, coffee shops, galleries, and retail establishments. As in the past, the Center will reserve a block of rooms and arrange a discounted rate for conference registrants, which will be included in the registration fee. Muncie has seven other hotels and motels within 4 miles of downtown Muncie, for those who do not choose to stay at the Roberts. (For the Hotel Roberts, see http://www.dorabros.com/Roberts/roberts.htm).

The Conference will run from Thursday afternoon through Sunday morning. It will include a keynote, and plenary sessions devoted to the Elisabeth Ball Collection, the “What Middletown Read” project, and library architecture, as well as opening and closing sessions. There will be nine or ten concurrent paper sessions (depending on the number of submissions and accepted papers). Each session will include at least three panels with each panel devoted to two or three papers. The inclusion of the Elisabeth Ball Collection will allow us to include papers and sessions linking library history and children’s literature.

While the heart of the conference will take place at the Hotel Roberts, including the concurrent sessions, we plan to hold several events at other sites. We will stage the plenary session on the history of library architecture in the U.S. and abroad as well as the main keynote at the Muncie Public Library in downtown Muncie, a recently refurbished Carnegie library. (For the renovation of the Carnegie Library in Muncie, please see http://www.woollenmolzan.com/projectview.asp?pid=15&cid=1&st=3; and for Carnegie libraries in Indiana, see http://home.comcast.net/~jaulik/carnin.html). It was during the reconstruction of this library that Frank Felsenstein discovered the library records that form the basis for the What Middletown Read project. (The library is a 5-minute walk
from the Hotel Roberts.) We will stage the Elisabeth Ball Collection exhibit in Bracken Library and in the Museum of Art on Ball State’s campus. We plan to hold a plenary presentation connected with the collection followed by a reception for conference-goers in the library or art gallery. Bracken Library and the Ball State Museum of Art are located approximately one mile from downtown Muncie. The Center will arrange transportation to and from the reception for those requiring it.

We plan to include several other social events over the course of the Conference, which will run from Thursday afternoon to Sunday morning. There will be receptions each night of the conference, a dinner for conference participants on Friday night, and a luncheon on Saturday. Other meal times will remain free for those interested in venturing beyond the conference hotel.

The Center will arrange for van transportation to and from the Indianapolis Airport (a 65-75-minute drive from Muncie). There will be scheduled runs to and from the airport from Thursday through Sunday. Muncie is also accessible from airports in Fort Wayne, Indiana (70 minutes away) and Dayton, Ohio (90 minutes away). The city’s central location also offers easy driving times from Chicago (4 hours), St. Louis (4 hours), Cincinnati (2 hours), Columbus (2.5 hours) and Detroit (3 hours). The fall is a particularly attractive time to visit the city.

Budget Narrative:

Funding for the conference will flow from several sources. The Center for Middletown Studies will cover the costs of several basic elements, including preliminary and final programs, mailing costs, honoraria for two plenary speakers and transportation to and from the Indianapolis Airport. The Center will provide the staffing to process registrations and manage other aspects of the conference preparations. Other units of the University have agreed in principle to support the conference as well. Ball State’s Conference and Special Events office will provide additional staff to handle on-site registrations and drivers for transportation to and from the airport as well as to and from the reception and presentation associated with the Elisabeth Ball Collection exhibit. The Provost’s office has agreed to pay the expenses and honorarium for the keynote speaker and Bracken Library and the Museum of Art will provide the facilities and expertise necessary to stage the exhibit of the Elisabeth Ball Collection and will help finance the reception associated with it. We plan to seek outside funding from the Ball Brothers Foundation, the Indiana Humanities Council, or the Gladys Kreible Delmas Foundation to cover insurance and other costs associated with the exhibit. The Center has received funding from these organizations in the past; the Delmas Foundation has supported the What Middletown Read project. In addition, we anticipate other units on campus will contribute cash or in-kind contributions.

The remainder of the costs will be funded through registration fees. These include lodging for those interested, meeting space, the conference dinner and luncheon, and receptions. We will offer various registration rates, depending on whether lodging is included and how far in advance the registration is made. Graduate students will receive
discounted rates. Currently the Hotel Roberts can offer us $72 per night for a single room, which would place the cost of registration with lodging at roughly $400 per person (or approximately $200 without lodging). It is of course too soon to lock in these rates at this early stage. We will reduce the registration fees if our expenses are lower than anticipated. The table that follows lays out anticipated expenses.

**Budget:**

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<th>Item/Expense:</th>
<th>Projected Costs</th>
<th>Source of Funding</th>
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<tr>
<td>Programs</td>
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<td>Mailings</td>
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<td>Website/Promotion</td>
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<td>Conference Luncheon</td>
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<td>Exhibit Costs</td>
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<td>External Funds (See Proposal)</td>
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**Proposed Timeline:**

January, 2009: Finalize Conference Dates  
September 15, 2009: Issue Call for Papers  
January 15, 2010: Deadline for Call for Papers  
March 1, 2010: Deadline for decision on selected papers and notification to participants.  
July 16, 2010 (Friday): Deadline for initial registration at lower rate  
September 10, 2010 (Friday): Deadline for final registration  
October 21-24, 2010 (Thursday to Sunday): Conference