

2000

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Recommended Citation

Hollandsworth, James G. Jr. (2000) "Seeing the Elephant in Ann Arbor," *The Primary Source*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.18785/ps.2202.02

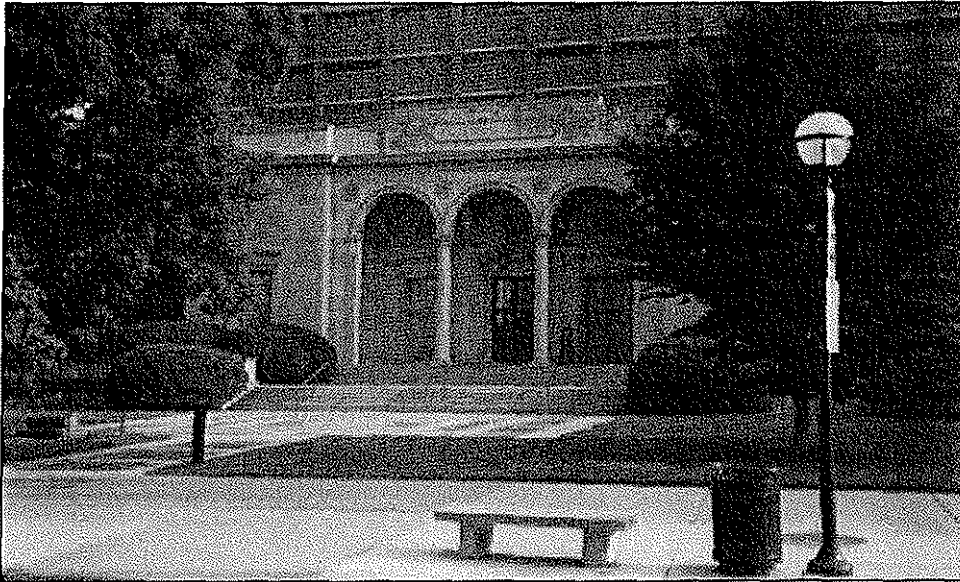
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Seeing the Elephant in Ann Arbor

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During the nineteenth century "seeing the elephant" meant doing something that was out of the ordinary. Today, we might refer to the same occurrence as "having peak experience." Whatever the case, I like the elephant metaphor because it captures the excitement I felt last May when I visited the William L. Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan.



The Clements Library is housed in an elegant building on the main campus of the University of Michigan. The main part of the building, the part you see from the street, contains the rare book room and is reserved for exhibits and receptions. The reading room is down a flight of stairs in the basement.

The staff who work with researchers at the Clements Library do three things that set their archives apart from other libraries I have visited over the past ten or twelve years. The first thing I noticed was that

there is one person whose only responsibility was to keep an eye on the reading room. His name was John Harriman, and, as far as I know, he did not spend his time processing, cataloging, or engaging in any other activities that librarians are typically expected to do. In fact, while I was there Mr. Harriman was rarely called away from his desk, interrupted by telephone calls, or diverted from his primary task of supervising the reading room. This arrangement worked well for both the library and for me. Mr. Harriman was able to provide excellent service while securing the library's collections at the same time.

Another thing that the Clements Library does very well is to foster a sense of collegiality among the researchers using its collections. When I signed in at the beginning of my visit, Mr. Harriman informed me that everyone is expected to stop work at ten o'clock for "tea." I was a bit surprised by what appeared to be an antiquated and even intrusive custom, but sure enough, all the researchers in the reading room set aside their pencils or stopped typing on their laptops at ten o'clock and adjourned to a nearby room for cokes or coffee. The break was not long, only fifteen or twenty minutes, but it provided the researchers an opportunity to discuss their interests and share information about their research. Breaking for coffee was a small touch, but it added congeniality to what otherwise would have been a solitary task.

A third thing that the Clements Library does especially well is to prepare their collections for researchers. Although most libraries devote a lot of time to their collections, the staff at the Clements Library has taken this preparation a step further. Each letter in the James S. Schoff Civil War Collection, for example, was filed in an individual, acid-free folder, with the date, identifying information, and excerpts of the most salient passages from the letter typed on the front of the folder. This detailed information allowed me to move quickly through the material Mr. Harriman brought to my desk. Like most researchers, the amount of time I could spend in Ann Arbor was limited, and this preliminary work by the staff allowed me to make the most of the short time I was there.

I am sure that it is evident by now that the Clements Library has ample resources. After all, it takes money to hire someone to supervise the reading room, to serve cokes and coffee to patrons, and to prepare materials for researchers. Nevertheless, it does not require deep pockets for a library to excel in any of the three areas I have just mentioned. It is not the amount money you have, but how you spend it.

I can illustrate the importance of setting priorities by telling you about my visit on the same trip to the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis. The Indiana Historical Society is housed in a magnificent structure a block from the state capital. I was told that the new building cost more than 37 million dollars. It had everything an archivist would dream of having--enormous amounts of space, the latest technology, and an architecture that was both pleasing and functional. The furniture in the reading room, for example, was made of solid cherry handcrafted in Maine. Each armchair was appointed with leather cushions and had the Indiana Historical Society monogram wood-burned on the back. The archivist's kiosk was also constructed of solid cherry and cost more, I was told, than the house in which the Librarian who worked behind it lived.

Despite these extensive resources, one of the librarians who helped me at the Indiana Historical Society was getting ready to leave. She had accepted the position as the archivist at Butler University. One reason she was leaving was because she could work full-time at Butler. The Indiana Historical Society, she told me, could not afford to employ her for more than 20 hours a week. Although the librarians at the Indiana Historical Society were both friendly and attentive, the lack of funds to staff their remarkable facility reminded me that deciding how to allocate resources can make a big difference, even when those resources appear to be almost unlimited.

When it comes to priorities, the Clements Library has clearly put serving its patrons at the top of the list. Are patrons a high priority at your library? More specifically, when you hire a librarian to work with researchers, do you evaluate his or her interpersonal skills with the same rigor you use to judge his or her professional qualifications? And although you may not be able to offer cokes and coffee, what do you do to create a comfortable and congenial atmosphere for your patrons? And finally, are you able to balance the never-ending quest for more material with a commitment to make the collections you already have more accessible?

As a researcher, I can tell you what a thrill it is to go to a library that actually seems to enjoy working with its patrons. I have been in libraries where the staff give the impression that "You do not know just how fortunate you are to be sitting in this place, much less be allowed to actually hold that document, which, if you happen to deface by your inexcusable carelessness, will likely result in the total collapse of Western civilization as we know it." Libraries do not have to be that way. Archives are as much about serving people as they are about saving things. I learned that lesson in Ann Arbor.

The staff at William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan is known far and wide for their expertise as collectors of Americana. I was aware of their reputation before I went. What I did not know was that they had an elephant in the basement. Imagine my surprise.

(James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., is the Associate Provost, Professor of Psychology, and Lecturer in History at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has written two books on the Civil War *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War*, and *Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks*, both published by the LSU Press. His latest book, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866*, is due out this spring and will also be published by the LSU Press.)