Ask the Archivist: Is One of Our Libraries Overdue?

A question for Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian.

One of the books in the Memorial Art Gallery's Charlotte Whitney Allen Library has the MAG bookplate with the added words, “Presented by the Eastman Theatre Library.” The 1929 MAG Annual Report notes, “When the Eastman Theatre Library was discontinued, the Art Gallery Library received many of its finest books, among them a rare edition of Nash’s Mansions of Old England.” What can you tell me about this mystery library and its books?—Lu Harper, Librarian, Charlotte Whitney Allen Library, Memorial Art Gallery

The Eastman Theatre Library as a collection or location is unfamiliar to David Peter Coppen, head of the Watanabe Special Collections of the Sibley Music Library, and it makes no appearance in the histories of the Eastman School written by Professor Vincent Lenti, or the biography of George Eastman by Elizabeth Brayer.

In 1904, Hiram W. Sibley began collecting musical scores and literature, and the materials were housed in the University's general library. Later, in 1928, Hiram W. Sibley began collecting musical scores and literature, and the materials were housed in the University’s main library in Sibley Hall. There are enough documents to discount that theory. In 1928, Hiram W. Sibley began collecting musical scores and literature, and the materials were housed in the University’s main library in Sibley Hall.

Confirmation is found in the files of Clarence Livingston, building superintendent for the theater and music school from 1922 to 1927, and for the University from 1927 to 1950. From his diary: “January 4, 1928: Carpenters building office for Williams, in Scenic Studio.” Livingston’s inventory indicate that the studio was one of the few rooms equipped with a bookcase. And finally, “May 23, 1929: Delivered to Art Gallery the Eastman Theatre Library from Williams office”; in another file is the typed inventory of the books.

Why was the library transferred? In January 1929, with the market for movies and movie theaters changing rapidly and the theater running a deficit, it was announced that the operation of Eastman Theatre would be leased to the Paramount Corporation. A March 7 memo to the University treasurer outlines budget and personnel cuts, including the assistant art director; although “Williams” remains elusive, it seems likely that his position was also discontinued, along with the library.

To see the list of Eastman Theatre Library books, visit https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/blog/ATA-August2018

NAME THAT LIBRARY: Hiram W. Sibley’s Music Library was once located in Eastman Theatre, but does that make it the “Eastman Theatre Library”? (Lenti, For the Enrichment of Community Life)

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