

HISTORY

in the Library



Lost River Cave, Bowling Green, Kentucky

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BY BOB SKIPPER

WHEN JONATHAN JEFFREY BEGAN WORKING ON A DEGREE IN HISTORY, HE ENVISIONED BECOMING A HISTORY TEACHER. HOWEVER, AN ASSIGNMENT FOR A GRADUATE CLASS CAUSED HIM TO CHART A NEW COURSE THAT HAS ALLOWED HIM TO COMBINE HISTORY, RESEARCH, AND TEACHING AS SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARIAN AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY.

Jeffrey was writing a paper on the history of a house near the Stephen F. Austin State University Campus and

had to visit the library's special collections area. "It was fascinating," he said. "I had never been encouraged to use primary source materials — first-hand accounts of how people lived, their letters, and what they said. "I loved it. It was like reading someone else's mail from 100 years ago. That is really what clicked me into this whole librarianship thing."

Now, 14 years later, Jeffrey has left his mark in Kentucky's history by documenting such topics as the

Shaker textile industry, Warren County postcards, architectural history, and the state's public libraries.

"Because I'm interested in local history, I'm interested in every little aspect of it," Jeffrey said. "I'm interested in the medical history. I'm interested in the architecture, and how all these things affect our history as a whole, and how it changed this area, and how we view things."

Since librarians carry faculty status at Western, Jeffrey was expected to publish. He heeded the advice of Julia Neal, former head of special collections and a Shaker scholar, and began looking through the vast Shaker holdings in the Kentucky Library. "A lot of research is like this — someone else gets you interested in it or they see something in you that predisposes you to a certain kind of research," Jeffrey said.

"I just started looking at topics I might be interested in and there were numerous entries about textiles — because that was something that all pioneers had to do. So I talked with one of my colleagues here who has an interest in textiles and I said, "Why don't we go through all the Shaker records from South Union and pull out all the textile references?"

They discovered three distinct textiles: linens, silk, and woolsens, which they wrote about in three articles. "Then we got really interested in this huge woolen factory that they operated," he said. "We extrapolated a wealth of information because they kept all their receipts of how much cloth had come in, what processes they performed, what color they dyed it. There was a tremendous amount of material there."

That material went into a database and then became a book: *A Thread of Evidence: Shaker Textile Industries at South Union, Kentucky*.

"This was a really interesting project, and we can blame it all on Miss Neal. She knew what she was doing," he said. "Now that I've been at this a while, I realize that you're only here a short amount of time, and you have to get other people interested in it to keep that continuity up and the research going. Plus, anybody who has done research knows that in your pursuit of primary sources you might uncover ones that have never been used before. Sometimes that means purchasing new things for our collection, and sometimes it results in gifts being made to the University."



The Chaperon and the Evansville. These steamboats were used by the Evansville and Bowling Green Packet Co. The Chaperon was built in 1884, the Evansville was built in 1880.

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National Corvette Museum. The museum welcomes over 150,000 visitors a year for exciting programming and a spectacular exhibition of vintage Corvettes.

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Jeffrey’s interests were not limited to the Shakers. His interest in architecture has led to an active role in Bowling Green’s Landmark Association. “You can’t be involved in everything, so you have to pick the things that are most interesting to you, or might be most helpful to you, or where you might be most helpful to other people,” he said. “Landmark combines several of those things for me. I’m very interested in architecture and I like trying to get people involved in local history, and it’s really the only historical society we have in town.”

As editor of Landmark’s newsletter, Jeffrey tries to get other people involved by writing articles on local topics. That work led to another publication that proved to be very popular locally: *Bowling Green, Kentucky in Vintage Postcards*. Published in late 2002, the book sold out of its first 1,800 copies and is now in its second printing.

The project began when Arcadia Publishing called the Landmark office with the idea. “Finally, we gave in and said we’d do it,” Jeffrey said. He contacted historian Ray

Buckberry of Bowling Green, who has a large collection of postcards, and supplemented Buckberry’s collection with cards from the Kentucky Library collection.

Jeffrey selected the cards, sorted them into categories, and wrote the captions. “Anybody who thinks that’s easy hasn’t done it,” he said. “For some of these postcards I could write two or three pages about them. Writing captions of from 50 to 75 words, which is what the publishers wanted, was like trying to write poetry.”

The book provides significant documentation of Bowling Green and Warren County’s history. “The information in the book is good, and it’s good to have it written down,” he said. “Some of the businesses pictured in the book don’t exist any more, and people know little about them. So doing the research for this was, in many ways, like doing the research for any scholarly work.”

He said it was also interesting to notice how postcards changed over the years. “It’s sad how things have changed. Today we don’t have many postcards from our

area, even though we have some nice tourist sites.”

Since the book was so well received, Jeffrey is now working on a photographic history of Warren County using twentieth century photographs from the Kentucky Library’s collection. That book should be ready by Christmas 2003. “I think it shows the interest in local history, particularly pictorial works,” he said.

Jeffrey also has several long-term projects in the works, including comprehensive histories of Warren County and of the development of libraries in Kentucky. When he began writing a column for the quarterly newsletter *Kentucky Libraries*, he saw this as a place to start.

“For each issue I’ve been trying to research a different public library in the state and write its history in hopes that some day I can go back and pull all that together and see the trends and determine what I think has happened,” he said. “The more data you collect, the more you are able to see the patterns, how things have changed and why they changed.”

There are public libraries in 118 of Kentucky’s 120 counties. Jeffrey said he wants to find out why libraries were so slow to develop in the Commonwealth and why there are still two counties without libraries. In 1991 he



PHOTO BY LADONNA HARMON

Jonathan Jeffrey

wrote *Growing with Bowling Green: The History of the Bowling Green Public Library, 1938-1988* for the Friends of the Library.

Jeffrey also would like to produce a comprehensive history of Warren County. While some histories have been written, along with articles detailing various pieces of history, “there are lots of other pieces that need to be in place,” he said, such as histories of the railroad and quarry industries. “I’m encouraging other people to do more and more in local history. This goes back to that idea of getting other people interested.”

“For posterity’s sake it’s good that we’re doing these things now,” Jeffrey said. “Some of the information, when certain people die, is just gone. We don’t have a lot of it written down.

Changes in the way we communicate

and our increased mobility will affect the ability of future researchers to gather information about today. Instead of writing, we use telephones and cell phones, or we send messages electronically via e-mail,” he said.

“We’re not keeping as much of the documentation about everyday life, and the documentation is not as full or colorful,” Jeffrey said. “Future generations will find it harder and harder to document society despite all our electronic gadgets.”



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Novelty Card. The card captured two of the Bowling Green area’s greatest attractions: WKU and Mammoth Cave.