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WEST VIRGINIA COLLECTION HOLDS THE KEYS TO UNLOCKING THE NEW MILLENNIUM

It has often been said that history holds the keys to unlocking the future. If there is even a kernel of truth to this statement, then surely the West Virginia and Regional History Collection of the WVU Libraries is an asset that will prove to be invaluable to the citizens of West Virginia as we struggle to meet the new challenges of the next millennium. As the primary keeper of the historical record of the Mountain State, the West Virginia Collection has a formidable number of keys at its disposal.

Totaling some 40,000 volumes, the Collection's printed resources document virtually all aspects of West Virginia history and culture — its political and industrial development, its natural environment, its rich folk heritage and much more. Included among its 4 million manuscripts are the papers of the men and women who forged the state amidst the turmoil of the Civil War, as well as those of the early captains of industry and labor who established the economic and political systems that have continued to shape the state's destiny to the present. The Collection's audiovisual resources, including sound recordings, motion picture footage and more than 100,000 photographs, provide an opportunity to literally look at and listen to West Virginia's past — the camp of the West Virginia Brigade near Keyser during the Civil War, a rousing speech by UMWA leader John L. Lewis, a square dancing exhibition at the 1953 Glenville Folk Festival.

Each year the West Virginia Collection, provide scholars and laypersons, policymakers and citizens, journalists, genealogists, and many others with the information they seek to understand the past in their personal or professional quest to explain and enrich the present and prepare for the future.

The history of West Virginia University's commitment to fulfilling a function that is more often performed by a state historical society dates back to the late 1920s when Professor Charles Ambler, chair of the University's history department, began to seek out and acquire primary historical documents that related to his research in the relatively young field of West Virginia history. Deeply concerned by the fact that West Virginia lacked the coordinating authority of a state library or historical society to protect its archival treasures, as was the case in many other states, Ambler felt that it was incumbent upon the University, as West Virginia's intellectual center, to ensure that the information resources that elucidated the state's creation and early history were preserved for posterity.

Ambler's dream became a reality in 1930 when the WVU Library allocated both storage and office space to house and process the University's first important manuscripts acquisition, the papers of Senator Waitman T. Willey. Considered by many to be the "Father of West Virginia," Senator Willey's papers established the significance of the WVU Library's historical collections in one fell swoop. Among the more than 7500 items received in the Willey Collection was the Senator's May 29, 1862 presentation to the United States Senate which proposed the

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Headquarters of the West Virginia Brigade, at New Creek, near Keyser, ca. 1863.
formation of a 35th state, to be carved out of the western portion of Virginia. The presentation led ultimately to the creation of West Virginia on June 20, 1863.

The Willey papers became the cornerstone of an archives and manuscripts collection that would grow by leaps and bounds in the ensuing years. The collection's success was fostered by the opening of a new main library consisting of seven stories, “just two less than Yale, the largest Library in the U.S.,” in 1931, as well as by the backing of WVU president John R. Turner. A native of Raleigh County, Dr. Turner had, in fact, instructed Head Librarian Dr. Lonnie Arnett to focus upon the collection of books and documents “pertaining to the history and physical characteristics” of the state shortly after his arrival at the University in 1928.

Aided by a “small compensation” and travel allowance, during the summer of 1931 Professor Ambler conducted a statewide survey which identified more than 100 significant manuscripts collections stored in attics and warehouses across West Virginia. His efforts were rewarded by the immediate donation of a handful of the most important of these collections, including the papers of political and capitalist titans Johnson Newlon Camden and Henry Gassaway Davis, as well as those of another of the state’s founding fathers, Francis H. Pierpont. A native of Fairmont, Pierpont was elected governor of the “Reorganized Government of Virginia” which was established in Wheeling at the beginning of the Civil War. Along with the Willey Papers, these collections would irrevocably establish the WVU Library as the primary repository of information regarding West Virginia’s early political and economic history.

Ambler’s budding program was catapulted to even greater heights in 1933 when the University’s Board of Governors authorized the establishment of an “Institute of Legal History” at the University. Among the Institute’s goals was the “Ascertainment, preservation and cataloguing of ancient legal records” relating to West Virginia’s legal history. At its annual meeting in October 1933, the West Virginia Bar Association applauded the creation of the Institute and formed a special committee charged with assisting in “the examination of records in counties established prior to 1800,” and “the removal wherever possible, of records to West Virginia University.” To head this important committee, the Bar Association selected Judge E.G. Smith, chairman of the University’s Board of Governors. The Board of Governors did its part to foster the initiative by formally establishing the “Division of Documents” at the WVU Library. The Division of Documents received the official mandate of state government when it was designated as a permissive depository for public records by an act of the state legislature on January 25, 1934.

In the months that followed, a steady stream of collections flowed into the WVU Libraries, including the voluminous county court records of Monongalia and Ohio counties. The job of cataloging and indexing these records, along with those of several more of West Virginia’s earliest counties which later arrived, got off to a running start in 1935 when funds from President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration were made available to hire 19 archival assistants through the Morgantown Federal “Relief Office.”
To assist Professor Ambler, who continued to direct the program, essentially on a volunteer basis, the 1935/1936 University budget provided for the hiring of the Division of Documents’ first full-time archivist, Dr. Festus P. Summers. A recent graduate of the WVU history program, Dr. Summers assumed full responsibility for the program two years later. Under his direction, and that of his successor, Oscar D. Lambert, the Division continued its dramatic growth for the next decade and a half. In addition to the papers of West Virginia’s first governor, Arthur I. Boreman, and those of several of his successors, the first installment of the priceless collections of the great West Virginia antiquarian Roy Bird Cook entered the collection during this period.

The “West Virginia Collection,” as the Division of Documents came to be popularly known during the 1940s, assumed its present form under Charles Shetler, who was appointed curator in 1950. In addition to introducing modern archival practices and expanding the scope of the Collection to include books, periodicals and photographs, as well as the relatively new media of sound recordings and motion picture footage, Shetler’s methodical collecting program resulted in the expansion of the archives and manuscripts holdings from 375 collections to more than 1500 over the next sixteen years. This number would more than double from the 1970s to the 1990s under Shetler’s successors, James Hess, George Parkinson, John Cuthbert and Nathan Bender.

A half century ago, in his first annual report, Curator Shetler noted that a sum total of 57 researchers had consulted the resources of the West Virginia Collection during the year 1950/1951. Today the Collection serves more than 5000 users annually. Its library of West Virginia books, periodicals and newspapers is unmatched, as are its holdings of early West Virginia photographs, maps, broadsides, and sound recordings. The Collection’s 3383 archives and manuscripts collections continue to embrace the majority of the deposited papers of the state’s political leaders, up to and including those of Governor Arch Moore and Senator Robert C. Byrd, as well as outstanding archival resources regarding all aspects of West Virginia’s economic and social history.

The Civil War and birth of West Virginia, the post-statehood exploitation of the state’s previously untapped wealth of natural resources, the intense and sometimes bloody conflict between labor and industry during the early twentieth century, West Virginia’s colorful folk heritage, its genealogical significance as a gateway to the West, these are but a few of the many doors to which the West Virginia and Regional History Collection of the West Virginia University Libraries holds the keys.

This article appears courtesy of the West Virginia University Alumni Magazine.

Among the West Virginia Collection’s many treasures are a variety of Civil War photographs and documents including the original commission of General A.J. Lighburn, of Weston, signed by President Abraham Lincoln.

Labor organizer Mother Jones poses with Sheriff Sid Hatfield (to her left) on the steps of the UMWA’s headquarters in Matewan, 1920.

Senator Robert C. Byrd receives the personal congratulations of President John F. Kennedy upon receiving his law degree from American University in 1962.
As twilight ushered out the Missouri sunset, young Captain Stephen Elkins rode his horse along the path toward the safe Union territory of Kansas. He had sneaked behind enemy lines into Missouri, his home state and a Confederate stronghold, for a brief visit with his sweetheart. Knowing the risk involved by a Union officer venturing into Confederate territory, Elkins had disguised himself by dressing in the garb of a typical Kansas farm boy.

As he neared the Kansas border, Elkins was stopped by a gang of armed men. While the bandits questioned him and accused him of being a Union spy, Elkins realized that he had stumbled into members of William Clarke Quantrill's army of renegade Confederate soldiers.

If the men had been any other Confederate band, Elkins might have been able to talk his way out of the situation, but Quantrill's followers were wary and ruthless men skilled in the fine arts of mayhem and murder. Among them were two sets of brothers who would become infamous: Cole and Jim Younger and Frank and Jesse James.

Convinced that he was a spy, the renegades forced Elkins to return with them to Quantrill's hideout. Fearing for his life, Elkins was astonished to find that one of the bandits at the camp was a friend and former student from his teaching days in Cass County, Missouri. This young man was none other than Cole Younger.

Though several versions of Elkins' kidnapping and escape from Quantrill's gang exist, every telling of the story makes it clear that Elkins' safe release was due to the efforts of his former student turned outlaw.

What strange circumstances brought Stephen Elkins and Cole Younger together in Quantrill's camp? The Civil War, primarily, and fate—the series of events in each man's life that caused one to become an infamous outlaw and the other to become an American success story. But that meeting at Quantrill's hideout was only one episode in the long and strange relationship between Cole Younger and Stephen Elkins.

Both men came from respected, well-to-do families. Elkins, the son of a middle-class family from Westport, Missouri, was destined to become one of the richest and most powerful politicians in the nation. The son of a wealthy family from Jackson County, Missouri, Younger would ride with Quantrill's small army of renegades, and would continue robbing and looting at the Civil War's end in the outlaw gang led by Jesse James.

Younger was once described by Elkins as both bright and obedient, so it remains a mystery why he was attracted to the life of an outlaw. The most popular theory suggests that his fate was sealed by the murder of his father, "Colonel" Henry Washington Younger, on July 20, 1862. A rich man in his community of Jackson County, Missouri, "Colonel" Younger was known to carry large sums of money. When his body was found one day near the one-horse buggy he had been riding in alone, robbery was clearly the motive. The Younger boys, however, became convinced that a Union officer, Captain Irvin Walley, had something to do with the death, even though Walley had an alibi for the time of the murder.

Convinced that his father, who was, in fact, a Union sympathizer, was murdered by a Union officer who bore a personal grudge against the family, Cole is alleged to have decided to join Quantrill's Confederate guerrillas. Though this theory is appealing, evidence suggests that Cole had been riding with Quantrill off and on for six months before his father's death.

News traveled fast in the border communities of Kansas, a Union stronghold, and Missouri, a slave state. It was soon common knowledge that Cole Younger, the son of a prominent Jackson County, Missouri, family was involved with Quantrill. The result of this was persecution of Cole's family by members of the Union army.

Among the incidents he recalled with particular bitterness in his autobiography, The Story of Cole Younger, By Himself, was the night when Union troops invaded his mother's house, searching for her rebel son. Unable to find Cole, the soldiers spent the night in his mother's home, ate the food she prepared for them and then set fire to the house the following morning.

While injustices like this made his involvement in the war bitter for Younger and his family, the constant skirmishes and strife had begun to wear on Stephen Elkins as well. A Union captain of the Mounted Company H, attached to the 77th Regiment of the eastern Missouri Militia, Elkins' duties were general scouting and protecting the surrounding area against raids led by Quantrill. For these services, Elkins was paid $187.27 for each month and twenty-three days of work.

The pay may have been too low to suit him, or Elkins may simply have grown tired of a war that appeared to have no predictable end. But whatever his complaints, he asked to be relieved of his command, and on July 3, 1863, his request was granted.

Following his military service, Elkins turned his attention to forging a career in business. He had been told that certain areas of the Southwest presented opportunities to ambitious young men, and on this hope he began the journey...
over the Santa Fe Trail into the newly created territory of New Mexico.

The move to New Mexico proved to be a successful one. Observing the opportunities for an attorney who was fluent in Spanish, the language of all legal business transacted in New Mexico, Elkins learned to read and write the language and gained admission to the New Mexico bar.

Forming a law partnership with a former college classmate, Thomas B. Catron, Elkins quickly became an expert on cases involving disputed land titles, most of which were written in Spanish and involved absentee owners who lived in Spain or Mexico, or who had died and failed to leave a will. The confusion surrounding the ownership of large tracts of land presented lucrative opportunities to attorneys who understood both Mexican and American law. With this knowledge, Elkins began to amass his fortune.

In one notable case, Elkins defended a land owner who had purchased huge tracts of disputed New Mexico territory, then arranged the sale of some of this property. Elkins’ fee for the defense and sale of the disputed land was $1,400,000. The sum was an astonishing one in its day and Elkins later referred to it as some of the easiest money he ever earned.

The desire to make money easily and quickly was a trait that Elkins and Cole Younger shared. While Elkins worked within the limits of the law, Younger broke the law with abandon. Joining in the infamous raid on Lawrence, Kansas, in August of 1863, Cole and the other members of Quantrill’s raiders murdered an estimated 150 people and looted the town, stealing liquor, cash and jewelry. Undoubtedly, this was some of the easiest money Younger ever made.

The massacre at Lawrence, Kansas, however lucrative it may have been, was the beginning of the end of Quantrill’s army. The savagery of the raid was reported in newspapers across the country, and Quantrill was vilified in the press as a fiend and a butcher.

Though the band was eventually forced to disperse, a few men who had ridden together under Quantrill’s leadership continued their exploits in smaller groups. A young boy who had just turned sixteen joined Quantrill’s band shortly after the murders at Lawrence, Kansas. His name was Jesse Woodson James. With Cole and Jim Younger, Jesse and his brother, Frank, formed one of the most notorious outlaw gangs in the history of the American West.

While Cole Younger joined his fate with that of the James brothers, Stephen Elkins married the daughter of U.S. Senator Henry Gassaway Davis of West Virginia and moved to Randolph County, West Virginia, in 1878. There he became vice-president of the West Virginia Central and Pittsburgh Railroad, and president of the Davis Coal and Coke Company. Continuing in the accumulation of wealth he had begun in New Mexico, Elkins’ fortune increased as a result of his involvement in West Virginia’s timber and mining industries.

A staunch Republican, Elkins became active in politics, and in 1884 was elected as executive chairman of the National Republican Committee. While serving on that committee, he became acquainted with President Benjamin Harrison, who appointed him as Secretary of War in 1891. Following in his father-in-law’s footsteps, Elkins was elected as one of West Virginia’s U.S. Senators in 1895.

While Elkins’ wealth and political successes continued, Cole Younger’s fortunes took a different turn. Skilful horsemen and gunslingers, Frank and Jesse James and Jim and Cole Younger were fearless, relentless robbers who also showed a certain amount of creativity in their chosen work. They committed the nation’s first train robbery at Gad’s Hill, Missouri, in the early 1870s, ushering in a phase in the West when train robberies became commonplace.

After breaking ground in the business of robbing trains, the James-Younger gang is estimated to have accomplished at least six more train robberies, three of four stagecoach hold-ups and a dozen or so bank robberies. The gang’s total profit for nearly fifteen years of thievery is a subject of debate, with some estimates as high as $500,000.

Though it provided the James-Younger gang with what
were almost certainly handsome wages, making a satisfactory living from robbery was dangerous work. Eventually, the decision against a socially acceptable means of acquiring wealth exacted a high price from Cole Younger. The day of reckoning was September 7, 1876, and the place was Northfield, Minnesota.

The First National Bank of Northfield was Younger’s last robbery and the end of his career as an outlaw. Involved in the attempt on the bank at Northfield were the three brothers, Jim, Cole and Bob Younger, and Clell Miller, Bill Chadwell, Charlie Pitts, and Frank and Jesse James.

The robbery was a disaster. When news of the holdup spread while it was still in progress, Northfield’s citizens grabbed their guns and began firing on the outlaws. Clell Miller and Bill Chadwell were killed outright by townspeople shooting from their shops near the bank. Frank James was shot and wounded, as were both Jim and Cole Younger. Cole was hit by half a dozen bullets, while half of Jim’s face was shot away. Only Jesse James escaped unharmed.

Eventually captured, Jim, Bob and Cole Younger, together with Charlie Pitts, were jailed and tried on four indictments, two of which were for murder. With no reasonable defense suggesting itself, the Younger brothers faced hanging if found guilty of the charges of murder. Searching for a way out of their predicament, the brothers were informed of a Minnesota law stating that no man charged with murder could be hanged if he pleaded guilty. Not surprisingly, they quickly entered a guilty plea. For his crimes Cole was sentenced to confinement in the Minnesota State Penitentiary at Stillwater for the rest of his natural life.

In 1898, in ill health and having served more than twenty years in prison, Cole Younger wrote a letter to his old friend and school teacher who was now a U.S. senator. Reminding Elkins of that Missouri night long ago when he had helped secure Elkins’ release from Quantrill’s renegades, the outlaw asked for the senator’s help in gaining an early release from prison. Three years later Younger was granted a “conditional pardon,” and released from jail due in large part to the efforts of Stephen Elkins, then one of the richest and most influential men in the country.

Upon Younger’s release from the penitentiary, Elkins is said to have given the aging outlaw $1500 with which to begin a new life. To express his gratitude in person, Younger visited Elkins in Washington, D.C. and is reputed to have received an invitation and traveling money for a two-week stay at Elkins’ West Virginia estate.

Seeking a means of making an honest living after his release from prison, Younger worked at a variety of jobs. In poor health, he was employed briefly selling grave stones, then teamed up with Frank James, who was also in ill health, in a traveling Wild West show. Toward the end of his life, Cole Younger became famous for his lecture tours. A powerful speaker, he admitted the mistakes of his past and exhorted his audience to resist the temptations crime might offer.

As for Stephen B. Elkins, he lived and died wealthy and powerful. At his funeral, a large crowd of family, friends and business associates gathered, but one man is said to have stood out among the rest. A large man with a dignified bearing, he was richly dressed, but in a style unusual in West Virginia. The impressive stranger was none other than Cole Younger.

Outliving Elkins by five years, Younger was the last surviving member of the James-Younger gang. He suffered for years from illnesses caused by the bullets remaining in his body, and died at the age of seventy-two, at the home of his niece, on February 21, 1916.

The original letter Cole Younger wrote to Stephen Elkins from the Stillwater Penitentiary survives to this day in the personal papers of Stephen B. Elkins. In addition to photographs, speeches, newspaper clippings and scrapbooks, the Elkins Papers contain correspondence with such other notable figures as Andrew Carnegie, James A. Garfield, and Ulysses S. Grant, all of which is available to researchers at the West Virginia and Regional History Collection.

SELECTED RECENT ACCESSIONS


“Publicity Plan” notebook for Brockway Glass Co. of Clarksburg, W.Va., 1974, prepared by Ketchum, MacLeod & Grove of Pittsburgh, Pa. Includes correspondence, pamphlets, clippings, photographs, etc. Additionally, there are obituaries and photographs of Samuel B. Bowman (d. 1937), General Factories Manager of Hazel-Atlas Glass Co.


Photographs and postcards of Monongalia County including Cheat River scenes ca. 1900-1920 and pictures of the 1927 Strand Theater fire in Morgantown.

Photocopied 23-page typescript narrative history of Coalwood and Caretta, W.Va., McDowell County, authored by Homer Hickam.


Harley M. Kilgore (1893-1956) served as Judge of the Raleigh County Criminal Court, before being elected in 1940 to the United States Senate where he served three consecutive terms. At the time of his death, he was a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and the ranking Democratic member of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

This collection, which includes correspondence, clippings, copies of Nazi banking correspondence, legislative files, and speeches, complements an extensive body of Kilgore papers acquired by the West Virginia Collection during the 1950s and 1960s.


Papers of the Ley, Robison, and Blosser families documenting the families’ activities in northern West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania. Christian Ley settled and lived on the Cheat River from the 1850s to 1880s. His daughter, Lillie, married George Robison. The couple lived on a section of Christian Ley’s land on the Cheat River where they managed a hotel, among other activities, from about 1880 to 1920. The Robison’s daughter, Eleanor, married Hugh Blosser, a coal miner, in 1917, and lived on the Cheat as well. The Blosser’s son, John Henry Blosser, served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during WWII. These papers document various aspects of business and family life in the Cheat Lake area from about 1850 to 1950. Included are the records of the Pridevale Iron Company, which owned and operated the Henry Clay Iron Furnace, located in Coopers Rock State Forest near Morgantown. The Cheat River is documented as a vacation destination from the latter 19th century forward. The letters of Eleanor Robison (c.1908-1915) offer a perspective on the lives of young women at the beginning of the century. The WWII letters of John Blosser document his experiences in the U.S. Army Air Corps as a mechanic. Also included are photographs of the Blosser Marina on Cheat Lake, ca. 1950-1980.


Records of the Mon Valley Leadership Academy, a collaborative group of faculty and community leaders organized to foster economic development through education and networking. Included are reports, newsletters, correspondence, curriculum materials, working papers and videotapes of presentations.


Photocopy of a scrapbook created by Mildred Arnett. Included are photographs, programs, letters, and ephemera documenting activities and entertainment related to West Virginia University, Morgantown High School, and the city of Morgantown. Subjects include Strand Theater events, silent movies at the Metropolitan Theater, and WVU dramatic and musical productions. The bulk of material dates from 1925-1927.


Research papers on Mother Jones created by WVU Professor of History Edward Steel. Included are photocopies and transcripts of archival materials dating from 1900-1930, as well as photocopies, transcripts, and notes of published material, mostly contemporary to Mother Jones’s time.


Ninety-one black and white photographic prints documenting rail transportation in West Virginia. Subjects include trolleys of the Monongahela-West Penn Public Service Company of Parkersburg, various trolleys of Wheeling and assorted other West Virginia cities, and railroad locomotives including those of the Cass Scenic Railroad.

Clifford Condon was born in Point Marion, Pa., in 1905. He married Frances Eva Limerick on May 1, 1931. Enlisting in the Navy, he was attached to the Naval Medical School in Washington, D.C., prior to going overseas in 1939. Condon was captured by the Japanese in Manila at the outbreak of World War II. He was subsequently involved with establishing a prison hospital with other Americans, under Japanese control. He was later transferred to a prison in Japan around November, 1944, where he died in June, 1945. This collection, which includes correspondence, news clippings, photographs, and two medals, primarily documents Condon’s military service.