

## John Abbott and His Love of Local History

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John Abbott was a very quiet man, introspective and reserved befitting of his stoic Yankee roots; but one thing that would make the eyes twinkle with excitement of Lovejoy Library's head librarian, from the time of its founding in the 1960's to 1981, was a good volume of local history, a chronicle of the past achievement of the common, or more accurately, uncommon early Americans who settled the region in which Abbott himself delved to build a great library.

It was not unusual in Abbott's day for a college or university library to be led by a scholarly individual who had a passion for local history, but in his actions and enthusiasm for the subject, this library director came to epitomize this type of bibliographer. When I came to work for him as a graduate student in history my waking hours were given over to an all-consuming interest in rare books and Americana. I was lucky that I could work with this busy librarian, getting to know him. In hindsight I think my enthusiasm for all things bookish may have reminded him of the salad and glory days of Lovejoy's growth. He would remark often on that, proudly relating that no library ever attained such a size as his edifice did, ever as rapidly. Books came from all over the world to the farmhouse on the bluffs that would become the core collection of the newly built permanent structure which has served SIUE so well for a half century. The budgets were seemingly unlimited; the building itself was very special—he told me with pride one day that one quarter of the world's annual output of Brazilian walnut was used to supply the library's need for tables and chairs. It was a library through and through made to last for generations, formed seemingly overnight.

By the end of the 1970's, however, libraries were changing quickly. OCLC and shared cataloguing recognized that no collection could stand alone to survive; book and periodical prices were rising; conservation and preservation were watchwords for the future; budgets were being slashed just at the time when so many opportunities for collecting and building were presenting themselves. During the previous two decades John Abbott had not only built a great, general academic collection, but he had focused resources on building a regional research collection for advanced study. He marshalled the services of a great book scout, Paul Chamless, to seek out collections as Lovejoy's paid field representative to find rare local history for the Library. That was a remarkable achievement in itself, probably born out of the Library staff having worked with so many second hand booksellers across America in the 1960's for collection acquisition. Dr. Abbott acquired his own antiquarian bookman to scour the attics and

basements of the Midwest for Lovejoy! He also stewarded a fine Friends of Lovejoy Library to create book fairs, antique shows, a special book shop and book funds for the collection. He was often the first customer for the Library's behalf. He encouraged professors like Raymond Spahn to translate regional, difficult vernacular texts into modern English language editions. He found time to help create the Madison County Historical Society, fascinated as he was that SIUE found itself hosted by one of the oldest extant communities in Illinois—Edwardsville—home of all those governors and witness to the pioneers of the Mississippi Valley. He loved to remark that SIUE indeed had built on the largest bluff along the great river. He became a corporate member of my St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, one of its first, this holder of so much local history for the St. Louis region including John Mason Peck's personal books. Indeed his deep reading of early Illinois history led him to suggest naming the earliest SIUE building after Peck and Lovejoy. He befriended the great historian of the region, John Francis McDermott, and it was thanks to Abbott's efforts that McDermott's papers are preserved as a flagship special collection in Lovejoy Library's special collections. The two men worked together to sponsor local history conferences and to publicize opportunities for research in regional resources.

I came along in the latter days of Dr. Abbott's career when the expansiveness of another era was in eclipse and in fact the great man was considering retirement. In my role as assistant to Mr. Chamless and in helping the Friends of Lovejoy Library, I got to know Dr. Abbott better than most other student workers who ever passed through Lovejoy's doors. As many graduate students, I was groping for a topic for a thesis. I had just bought my first copy of Wright Howes' great bibliography *USiana*, a great compendium of local books of the nation which as a whole told the story of America, and Abbott saw me reading it and struck up a conversation about his great uncles who were mining engineers and entrepreneurs on the silver mining region of Colorado in the 1870's. He could see my interest and took me over his lunch hour to his house to show me the ledgers and letters of those illustrious ancestors. He offered me the chance to write my MA thesis on them! "These letters will eventually go to Denver to a repository there but in the meantime you can have access to them for your paper," he pledged. That was my introduction to this great lover of the local and the regional as it merged into the national story.

John Abbott was very proud of the books he brought to the collection. The music research collection is a magnificent resource of local resources, from early recordings to the KMOX sheet music parts, to the early American song books present in it. He and Paul Chamless worked hard to find even more and one time considered doubling the collection's size with a New York collector's hoard of an eight room Brooklyn flat's- full of early American sheet music, stacked to the ceiling in a maze of tunnels. Dr. Abbott told me it was one of the most comprehensive collections ever amassed and it was a shame it could not be rescued in later days. We travelled to a collection of Americana preserved in a grain elevator close to Quincy, Illinois to bring in

thousands of volumes. He nurtured the first regional map collection and created a welcoming home on the massive walls of his institution for the Sullivan ornaments and the Smiling Lincoln. He once spoke to me with great pride that Lovejoy — he really — had collected the three greatest works of local Americana for the Library, great capstones of any Americana collection, Thomas and Wild's *Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*; Henry Lewis's *Das Illustrierte Mississippithal*; and Victor Collot's *Voyage dans l'Amerique Septentrionale*. He used to keep them in the Library's special vault box at the Bank of Edwardsville, he said, before the Rare Book Room was built. He was also instrumental in finding and preserving the earliest extant books of the Edwardsville Public Library, the first library in Illinois. When an old oily tarp was thrown out of the attic window at the Weir House, soon to become the Madison County Historical Society, it fell at his feet in the yard and he recognized instantly that it was part of a coal dust encrusted fragment of an itinerant painter's view of the American Bottom, now lovingly restored.

When I was bound on my way to Library School after graduate work at SIUE, I was awarded a special Friends of Lovejoy Library scholarship for library students, a great honor for which I have remained proud. It was awarded in the administrative offices and I was very pleased that at the last moment out of his office came Dr. Abbott bearing a gift of Robert Williams' *Adventures of an Autograph Collector*, a book on the significance of collecting the papers, the flesh and blood of history at the grass roots level. John Abbott created a significant collection which supports research and study on universal planes, but he never ceased to believe the foundation for any academic library is an underpinning of local and regional bedrock resources to support social and humanistic studies for readers far into the future. He and I one day went out to the closed Nike missile silos used in our region temporarily to hold many of Madison County's circuit court ledger volumes. That was work getting them out and dusted off when the local government transferred them to safe keeping at Lovejoy. I remember, though, our shared pleasure on leafing through them and finding notes in Lincoln's hand among other treasures — John Abbott again had demonstrated how the local and the national preserved in historic papers are two sides of the same coin of historical inquiry.