## FROM THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN

# What Is a Library?

### BOOKS, BUILDINGS— AND PEOPLE

What is a library? In common conversation we often mean a place ("I'll meet you at the library"). But why do we go there? To use the books. Though "books" have come to mean a great deal more than that, it's still the favorite term for most of us. But if a building full of books is a library, then a library is only a warehouse. The books and our digital services have to be made available for users, and that's where the people come in. The human element is our most important asset; it is our staff who allow us to discern reader needs and to provide for them. In addition, it is only through our staff that we can build the campus-wide partnerships and collaborations that let us deliver resources and services at the time and place they are needed.

In other *Connection* articles we've talked about the collection, and you'll soon hear much more about those needs. We've also talked about the building. Though the planned expansion may take a while, we'll soon tell you about that again as well. In this issue we want to tell you about our fine staff, in part because there have been many changes.

Staff in libraries are of several different kinds. Almost all our staff are motivated, at least in part, by some sense of service, for it's no secret that there are more lucrative jobs out there. Because there are differing conditions of employment, we speak of our bargaining unit staff, our administrative-supervisory-clerical staff, and our librarians. We also speak broadly of our public services and technical services staff. The people in each group do essential jobs and there are stars among all of them.

### THE FRONT LINE AND THE BACK OFFICES

The public services staff are our front-line people, those with whom readers and users are most likely to come into contact. The reference staff are in several areas, including fine arts, science, and general reference. They all assist readers in finding, identifying, and evaluating information, and they educate users in information and technical skills.

The Circulation Department manages shelving and works with readers to check books in and out. Our Reserves Department works directly with faculty and students to assure print and electronic information availability on short-term loan. Since our SUMMIT system manages checkout, overdues, recalls, shelf locations, and online availability, these staff require technical ability well beyond using date-stamps or pencils.

Interlibrary loan is now heavily automated as well, allowing service to be greatly improved. Staff in the special collections departments are deeply knowledgeable about our important manuscript, rare book, and audio collections, and the Media Department provides assistance with videos, microfilm resources, and computerized multimedia.

Specialized staff provide selection and resource skills in their areas of knowledge. Most of our public service librarians not only work at the desk but are responsible for

# Digitized Research Collections

**THE LIBRARY GAINED INVALUABLE EXPERIENCE WITH ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF LARGE-SCALE DIGITIZATION THROUGH THESE PROJECTS, WHICH INCLUDE BOTH IMAGES AND FULL TEXT.**

**SINCE 1998,** the Syracuse University Library's departments of Special Collections and Preservation have initiated the creation of web-based digital collections, funded through the New York State Library's Regional Bibliographic Databases and Interlibrary Resources Sharing Program. These online collections contain selected materials from the Oneida Community Collection, the Street & Smith Publishers Archive, and the Erie Railroad Company collection.

The library gained invaluable experience with organization and implementation of large-scale digitization through these projects, which include both images and full text. Questions wrestled with in all three projects included "benchmarking"—determining the best settings and scanning resolutions. Text digitization also required determining the appropriate extent of proofreading to correct errors from the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) process, and deciding which level and type of encoding were needed for the web. Unique to imaging projects are questions of on-screen display size, resolution in dots per inch (dpi), and, intimately related to that, storage requirements. Once created, the long-term preservation of the created files needs to be examined. As file formats and standards evolve, the files will need to be converted to the next format.

The Oneida Community Collection, the only full-text project to date, includes more than 20 historic Oneida publications by and about the Oneida Community, including 140 selected historic photographs. In many respects, this was the most technically challenging and labor-intensive project. The first materials scanned were "modern" imprints with crisp, regular typefaces, printed on good paper. This made the OCR process reasonably accurate, minimizing the amount of editing required. The second materials included original publications by the Oneida Community from the mid-19th century. The combination of aged paper and irregular printing resulted in a much lower OCR accuracy rate, and a correspondingly intensive editorial process.

Concurrent with the second Oneida Community project was the digitization of the cover art from Street & Smith dime novels. Funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) preserved the printed content of the Street & Smith Publishers Archive through microfilming. This provided for encapsulating and binding the cover art, allowing them to be used despite their fragility. The Library's largest imaging project, this was the only one in which the scanning of the covers was outsourced to a local vendor. More than 2,000 dime novel covers as well as a selection of serial covers were scanned. The online images are organized by series title with direct links from individual titles to images; images are also linked from the library's online catalog record.

The library's most recent digitization project involved the Erie Railroad Glass Plate Negative Collection. This collection



From the Erie Railroad collection

East front of Mansion House circa 1870, from the Oneida Community Collection

comprises 750 glass plate negatives depicting stations and other trackside structures, primarily in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, as well as from Indiana and Illinois. In collaboration with the State University of New York at Stony Brook, a 1996 New York State Program for the Conservation/Preservation of Library Research Materials grant enabled the development of a database in which key visual elements were identified. The grant also provided for their cleaning and rehousing. The image content of the glass plates includes individual stations, mile posts, lengths of track, new track construction, and social organizations (such as the East Buffalo Car Shop basketball team and shop bands). While, to date, the station images have attracted the most researcher interest, the images also provide a valuable source of information for documenting the early 20th-century landscape, product advertising, railroad construction, and on- and off-the-job



John Humphrey Noyes from the Oneida Community Collection

Erie Railroad Company employee activities. Not everything in the collection could be scanned due to image degradation, and a small number of plates were chipped or broken. Digitization was selected to best provide access to these materials due to the fragile nature of this medium and the lack of comprehensive copy-prints. Thanks to the digitization, images are viewable online, and high-resolution "archival" images can be provided for reproductions or closer examination.

This year, a grant was submitted to digitize broadsides and related publications from the Gerrit Smith Collection relating to abolitionism, religion, and other social issues of the period. If awarded, the 306 broadsides and publications (2,673 pages) would be scanned and converted to full text, making them available to students and scholars in the region and beyond.

For further information, or to view the collections, please visit the Department of Special Collections web page at *http://lib www.syr.edu/information/spcollections.*