

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. I, No. 9

December, 2015

THE RISE AND FALL OF A MIDWESTERN STUDIES JOURNAL: *THE OLD NORTHWEST*, 1975-1992

David M. Fahey¹

The Old Northwest was a scholarly journal published at Miami University (Ohio) from 1975 to 1992. Its focus was on the states that had been part of the Old Northwest Territory, or those bounded by the Great Lakes and the Ohio and Mississippi rivers: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. In the inaugural issue the editors pointed to the Northwest Territory Celebration Commission of 1937, argued that the Old Northwest had a distinctive cultural identity comparable to that of New England and of the Old South. The journal was founded with the support of Phillip R. Shriver, a historian who served as president of Miami University from 1965 to 1981 and who taught classes on the history of Ohio and Miami.²

The Old Northwest supplemented established state journals with its regional perspective and innovated by being multidisciplinary. The subtitle, *A Journal of Regional Life and Letters*, identified the purview as history and literature. History made up a majority of the articles, with Ohio most

¹ David M. Fahey, Professor Emeritus of History, Miami University (Ohio) gladly remembers publishing two articles, a review essay, and a couple of book reviews in *The Old Northwest*. He is grateful to former editors Jerry Rosenberg, Professor Emeritus of English, Miami University, and Drew Cayton, Warner Woodring Chair and Professor of History, the Ohio State University, for sharing their memories of *The Old Northwest*.

² Shriver was from Cleveland and taught at Kent State University before becoming president at Miami University. Justin McClelland, "Miami U. President Emeritus Shriver dies," *Dayton Daily News*, April 25, 2011; Christopher A. Maraschiello, "Dr. Shriver never stopped encouraging students," *Journal-News* (Hamilton, Ohio), May 20, 2011.

prominent in both history and literature. The first issue included Alma Payne, "The Midwest: Literary Resource and Refuge," and Thomas G. Conway, "An Indian Politician and Entrepreneur in the Old Northwest." Although most *Old Northwest* articles dealt with the nineteenth century, there were exceptions. For instance, in September 1975 the journal published Stephen M. Millett's article "The Midwest Origins of the American Communist Party: The Leadership of Charles E. Ruthenberg, 1919-1927." In every issue, *The Old Northwest* published book reviews and news of the profession. Examples are Robert R. Kettler's reviewing Andrew R.L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Spring 1988) and Judith Fryer's review essay "Recovering the Garden: Women's Fantasies and Experience of the Western Frontier" (Fall 1984). As in these two instances, reviewers often were Miami faculty members. Each volume provided an index.

The co-editors of the first issues, Dwight L. Smith and David L. Frazier, came respectively from Miami's history and English departments. From the first issue, Robert R. Kettler (English), played a large role, originally as managing editor, later as executive editor, then managing editor again, and finally one of the principal editors.

All three were sons of the Old Northwest. Born in West Elkton, Ohio, Smith (1918-2010) was raised as a minister's son and earned his BA from Indiana Central College. One of Smith's students recalled that he "worked his way through college doing everything from shucking corn to serving at the Mills Cafeteria in Cincinnati."³ Smith went on to earn his Ph.D. at Indiana University, where his dissertation was entitled "Indian Land Cessions in the Old Northwest, 1795-1809." Over a long and productive career, he specialized in frontier and western American and Canadian history and the Western History Association named a prize in his honor for his work on bibliographical research. He taught at Miami from 1953 until his retirement in 1984. An obituary refers to Smith's "sharp wit, long stride and accomplished piano playing, especially hymns."⁴ Born in Eaton, Ohio and raised in Richmond, Indiana, Frazier earned his BA from Earlham College in Indiana in 1953 and MA from Indiana University in 1959. He then studied for his Ph.D. at the University of New Mexico from 1959-61 but quickly returned to the Midwest as he "thoroughly enjoyed his lifelong connection with the old northwest territory."⁵ He taught at Miami, beginning

³ Keith L. Miller, "A Tribute to Dwight L. Smith," *Old Northwest* vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 2.

⁴ Obituary, Dwight L. Smith, *Journal-News* (Hamilton, Ohio), May 7, 2010.

⁵ "A Memorial to David L. Frazier," Miami University Libraries, Digital Collections.

in 1962 (where he already had taught briefly in the mid-1950s), and he completed the requirements for his doctorate in 1968. Frazier retired in 1995 and died at age 67 in 2012. Although his favourite research topic was the Ohio author, William Dean Howells, *The Old Northwest* occupied much of Frazier's time. According to an obituary: "For years he dedicated countless hours to selecting articles, editing them, and often with eloquence and grace, so that when contributors saw their work in print, they must often have been delighted that they had written so well. A lot of young scholars broke into print because of David's skill and sensitivity as an editor."⁶ Born in Shelbyville, Indiana, Robert Ronald (Ron) Kettler (1940-1998) earned his BA, MA, and Ph.D. at Purdue University and always kept his Hoosier twang. He taught at Miami from 1968 until his death. He worked widely in American literature, American studies, and creative writing. An obituary reports: "The image is of a tall, lanky, sandy-haired individual, wearing a Harris tweed cap and . . . the lingering aroma of his corn-cob pipe." It added: "Largely through Ron's efforts as managing editor, this well-respected journal survived an early 1980s fiscal retrenchment at the university" and it "continued to advance study of the Midwest and of regionalism until the early '90s."⁷

Many other editors contributed to the success of the journal. When Kettler was on leave in 1980, Jerome H. Rosenberg (English) became acting managing editor. In the following year he became an editor. The first woman to serve as an editor was Alice Fannin (English) in 1977. Although the editorial board included scholars from other institutions, *Old Northwest* editors almost always taught at Miami.

Editorial titles on the masthead were numerous, and it is not clear who in practice had final editorial responsibility. It appears to have been collective and congenial. A memorial notice for Frazier depicts informality: "Some of us remember David best from the group that met in the morning around the coffee pot in the office of *The Old Northwest*, while David and Ron Kettler were in charge."⁸

Editors often shifted responsibilities. Beginning in the second issue as a book review editor, John N. Dickinson (history) became associate editor in 1977 and then served as general editor starting in 1981. Originally trained as an electrical engineer, Dickinson grew up in Milwaukee and

⁶ "A Memorial to David L. Frazier," Miami University Libraries, Digital Collections.

⁷ "A Memorial to Robert R. Kettler," Miami University Libraries, Digital Collections.

⁸ "A Memorial to David L. Frazier," Miami University Libraries, Digital Collections.

later earned an MA in history from Marquette University and then a history Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin.⁹ Dickinson later published his dissertation about the Sault Ste. Marie canal in Ontario, across the border from Michigan's upper peninsula.¹⁰ When he died in 1986, *The Old Northwest* gave him credit for the journal winning the Ohioana Award for Editorial Excellence in 1984. Dickinson's death in April 1986 forced a restructuring of responsibilities.

Beginning with the Spring/Summer 1985 issue Andrew Cayton (history) is listed as one of five editors (the 1985 issue probably appeared in 1986). The final three co-editors from Winter 1986 were Cayton, Rosenberg, and Kettler. Kettler appears to have borne the major responsibility for editorial duties. The journal relied heavily on the English Department as it provided the journal with a handsome suite of offices, most of its editorial staff, and some clerical and photocopying support. Neither English nor history offered course reductions to support the work of senior editors.

As a regional publication, the journal was clearly a success. The final issue for 1975 reported affiliation with the Ohio-Indiana American Studies Association. In December 1978 *The Old Northwest* devoted the issue to the papers presented at the Association's meeting held at Miami University in April. The new journal found readers throughout North America and occasionally beyond. The WorldCat database identifies 189 libraries with *Old Northwest* holdings.

In addition to miscellaneous issues, *The Old Northwest* published special thematic issues: in Spring and Summer 1982 two issues on William Dean Howells (edited by Frazier); in Spring 1984 another Howells issue; in 1986 a festschrift for Dwight L. Smith comprising essays written by his former students and guest edited by two of them; and in Winter 1991-92 an issue on Sherwood Anderson. The 1982 Howells issue included Walter Havighurst, "The Howells of Hamilton." The 1984 Howells issue included, "The Real Diary of a Boy: Howells in Ohio, 1852-1853," edited by Thomas Wortham, while the Smith issue included Thomas D. Matijasic, "African Colonization Activity at Miami University during the Administration of Robert Hamilton Bishop, 1824-1841." The Anderson issue, edited by David D. Anderson, included his essay, "Sherwood Anderson after Fifty Years."

The Old Northwest published some well-known scholars, but it would be an exaggeration to say that it mostly attracted first-rank research. Instead it published respectable articles often written

⁹ "A Memorial to John N. Dickinson," Miami University Libraries, Digital Collections.

¹⁰ John N. Dickinson, *To Build a Canal: Sault Ste. Marie, 1853-1854 and After* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, for Miami University, 1981).

by scholars at an early stage of their careers. With the exception of an issue in 1978 that borrowed from a conference held at Miami University, the editors do not appear to have recruited authors aggressively, for instance, at academic conferences.

The Old Northwest was dependent on the central administration of Miami University for the cost of printing and mailing. In the 1980s this became contentious. Significantly, the first volume had 458 pages, the penultimate volume 301 pages, and the final volume only 272 pages. The inaugural issue offered readers a half dozen articles, the final issue only two. It appears that *The Old Northwest* died as a result of scarcity of funds and the fatigue of editors who were tired of battling for money. They told readers: "With this issue, publication of *The Old Northwest* will be indefinitely suspended: if new editors and appropriate institutional support can be found, we have hopes that publication will resume." The notice added: "changing circumstances in the culture of the university, both locally and nationally, have forced us to take this action." Although the final issue referred to suspension of publication, the journal never was revived. The bindery date for the final volume was October 1993, so probably the last issue was printed in that year and not in 1992. There is no website listing *Old Northwest* tables of contents, alas, so its availability in the age of the internet is much diminished, but I hope this recollection will cause the scholars of a new generation of Midwestern studies to revisit *The Old Northwest* where it can be found in research libraries.