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The Book Thieves of Lexington: A Reminiscence

Thomas D. Clark

The informal organization jocularly called the Book Thieves, which existed from 1931 to about 1960, had a literary impact on Lexington and the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The incriminatory name was the whimsical invention of some of the club's members. Under irresistibly seductive circumstances, one of us might have weakened and extended temporary shelving to a book or manuscript; if he did, it was always with the conscience-clearing assurance that it was for the sake of posterity. The nine members, with one exception, were either already or on the verge of becoming active authors, and all of us had libraries of varying numbers of volumes and significance. Generally, the members were catholic in their reading tastes and in the fields of their literary and historical interests, and the majority fell into the free-spirited fraternity of nonprofessional historians. There was no charter, and no arguments over a constitution and by-laws; no meddlesome secretary kept minutes. None of the Book Thieves was so rash as to suggest that we should stoop to such pompous inanities. This congenial company of men formed themselves into a club by the most casual process of accretion.

I had joined the University of Kentucky faculty in 1931 as an instructor in history and as a collector of basic documentary and manuscript materials for the library. I came fresh out of Duke University, where I had been a student of that insatiable scholar-collector William Kenneth Boyd, who was the guiding spirit in laying the foundation for that university's magnificent holdings in the fields of American and southern history. My first experience in gathering materials and archival data for the University of Kentucky had been during the summer months of 1929 and 1930, when I made an extensive checklist of materials relating to Kentucky and American history held by the various depositories in and near Lexington. In compiling this list I became acquainted with several people, like the bookseller John Wilson Townsend and the geologist Willard Rouse Jillson, then actively interested in the history and literature of the state. I came to know Margaret I.

King, Jouett Taylor Cannon, Nina Vischer, Ethel Gist Cantrill, and Mrs. Charles Norton.

Of all the people I met during these earliest years none exceeded in graciousness and hospitality Miss Florence Dillard, the Lexington Public Librarian. The Dillard sisters, Florence and Annie, lived in the stately old house on South Limestone which is now the Executive House restaurant. These spinster sisters viewed life through rose-tinted lenses. They might well have stepped into or out of the cast of *Arsenic and Old Lace* without disrupting the play. (They lacked, however, the malevolence and the idiotic brother.) They were "aunts" to an assortment of "nephews," including the Clift brothers and James Cogar, all three of whom justified the Dillards' faith in them. Miss Florence introduced me to John Wilson Townsend and Charles R. Staples, both of whom spent almost as much time in the public library as members of the staff.

The beginnings of the Book Thieves can be traced to the early fall of my return to Kentucky in 1931. My Dillard acquaintance **Charles Richard Staples** (1875-1954) asked if I knew a young building contractor named **J. Winston Coleman, Jr.** (1898-1983). I neither knew him nor had ever heard his name. Staples said that Coleman seemed to be interested in forming a collection of books about Kentucky. Sometime after that the "General," as we later called Staples, asked me to go with him one Saturday afternoon out to Dudley Road in the new Ashland subdivision to visit Coleman. At that time Winston lived in a modest stone house, with a small upstairs bedroom containing a High Point desk-and-bookcase. Three or four books rested on a shelf of this case, one of them a copy of Lewis Collins's nineteenth-century *History of Kentucky*; Winston had inherited it from his father. This book was to prove in time the cornerstone of a magnificent library of Kentuckiana. (My own book collection at that time lacked even the bellwether Collins.)

That Saturday afternoon we feasted on sardines, cheese, and crackers, and drank Winston's ungodly home brew. (This latter product fell several notches below Anheuser Busch's worst effort.) We did a lot of talking about book collecting and the writing of local history, as youth is wont to do at the entry of the tunnel. Staples was industriously gathering notes for what became his invaluable history of pioneer Lexington. So thoroughly was he immersed in the past that at times he had difficulty recalling the

modern age in which he lived. He was also compiling the tremendously useful index file of the local newspapers now in use at the Lexington Public Library.

The three of us began meeting with some regularity after that first Saturday afternoon, still feasting on sardines, cheese, and crackers washed down with Winston's bathtub brew. Our main delight, however, was the talk of books and manuscripts. Charlie Staples was a veritable human encyclopedia of facts about Lexington and Fayette County history. To him the rest of Kentucky was no more than a matrix which held the central jewels in place. He was more familiar with the characters who once had paraded before Postlethwait's Tavern than with those who went past the Phoenix Hotel in the 1930s. He had instant recall of places and incidents, the contents of ancient newspapers, scraps of eighteenth-century gossip, and the eternal scandals: he knew whose wayward feet showed under the beds of almost every prominent family in the central Bluegrass.

After several sessions we were joined by **William Henry Townsend** (1890-1964) and Dr. **John Sharpe Chambers** (1889-1971). Townsend was a popular local attorney, and Chambers was the university physician. At that time Bill Townsend was riding the crest of local literary fame. Immediately after its publication in 1929, his *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town* had made him one of Lexington's most successful authors. He was assembling a remarkably valuable collection of books and artifacts relating to Abraham Lincoln and his age. Bill almost rivaled Charlie Staples in his knowledge of the mores and social patterns of central Kentucky. His yarns about the antics of members of the local bar would have made a fascinating book.

"Brick" Chambers had some claim to literary stature. He had just published the results of his seminal survey of the medical needs of eastern Kentucky. In many ways this booklet may be considered the first very modest stone in the edifice that later came to be the University of Kentucky College of Medicine. Aside from the abject medical needs of the commonwealth, the Chambers survey revealed the high incidence of parasitic infestations among students from the hills.

Sometime in the early months Charlie Staples brought along his lifetime friend Dr. **Claude Wilkes Trapp** (1868-1947). Trapp was a highly respected eye specialist whose practice covered central and eastern Kentucky and beyond. He was also an erudite collector of

first editions and a discriminating literary scholar. I do not believe he ever visited England, but he had developed a familiarity with both British authors and book dealers. In addition to his interest in books he was an amateur musician and had a fondness for vintage violins.

By the time the membership of the Book Thieves had thus doubled to six, the group had become too urbane to munch the viands of the founders. There began a rotation of somewhat formal luncheons and dinners followed by marvelous afternoon and evening discussions of libraries, book collecting, research, and writing. All the members, except Claude Trapp, had a book underway, which meant we were searching far and wide for original materials and ideas. By no means, however, were the conversations solely about the refined art of writing books. These men were good storytellers, and they found in the circle of Book Thieves an attentive audience.

Our membership became much more imposing when **Frank LeRond McVey** (1869-1953), president of the university, and Judge **Samuel Mackay Wilson** (1871-1946), dean of the Fayette bar, joined us. I am convinced that Dr. McVey came to the meetings of the Book Thieves because in the process of building the university's library collection he was willing to make any prudent effort to further the cause. I introduced him to the Book Thieves, as he owned a far better than average university president's library. I believe, too, that the president readily welcomed the chance to get away from the nagging problems of his office during the Great Depression and to seek relief from the complaints of the hard-pressed faculty for whom he could offer so little promise.

Judge Samuel M. Wilson was a bulldog of a man who had fought many a fierce courtroom battle and who never undertook a project halfway. Once a fiery redhead, he was now a square-jawed, white-haired, cigar-chewing elder statesman who enlivened any group to which he belonged. He was founder and host of the prestigious Cakes and Ale Club, the dean of Kentucky historians, and an insatiable collector of rare books and manuscripts of local and broad sectional interest. He was the author of several books, pamphlets, and articles himself. The judge's home in Fayette Park, his law offices, and the basement in the Security Trust Company building at Short and Mill streets were crammed to their ceilings with books and papers.

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exception of late joiner **Herman Lee Donovan** (1887-1964), who became president of the university in 1941. At the time Donovan was self-conscious about being elevated to this position from the presidency of Eastern Kentucky State Teachers College (later Eastern Kentucky University). Largely because of this he began building a fairly impressive library of biographical materials relating to American university presidents. Later, and in a far more self-assured moment, he wrote a highly revealing book, *Keeping the University Free and Growing* (1959), in which he discussed his experiences in dealing with the ever-present and stifling political hand which sought to throttle academic affairs in the state.

Few if any Kentuckians ever derived more pleasure and intellectual stimulation from an association of kindred souls. Collectively the Book Thieves possessed an astonishing amount of information not only about Kentucky, but also about national issues and institutions. These were stirring years in America: the Depression, global war, the postwar era. There were important issues which faced all American education and the University of Kentucky in particular. One of them was lifting the level of scholarship in the institution. Frequently Dr. McVey talked of his dream of someday organizing a university press comparable to the one at the University of North Carolina. The Book Thieves gave him hearty encouragement to keep the idea alive and at the proper moment in the university's development to begin an academic publishing program.

Judge Wilson was a strong personal force behind the preservation of historical sites, especially Boonesboro and the Blue Licks. He gloried in the celebration of historical anniversaries, and woe betide the upstart who cast aspersions upon the reputations and prestige of Kentucky's forebears. He had married Mary Shelby, and throughout his life with her he militantly defended Governor Isaac Shelby and his rightful place in the American Revolution, the founding of the commonwealth, and the War of 1812. He was president of the Daniel Boone Memorial Association and of the Blue Licks group, both of which promoted the formation of state parks on historic sites. Every nineteenth of August, Wilson gathered up a huge sheaf of notes and strode onto the Blue Licks Battlefield to flail the British and Shawnees who had waylaid the Kentucky pioneers with such devastating results.

Judge Wilson was also an inveterate letter writer. He carried on an extensive correspondence with historians, librarians, booksellers, and members of pioneering families. Writing in a bold angular hand, he discussed books and research with a broad spectrum of authors and scholars. Occasionally he became involved in controversies with those who had failed to do their homework, and with any craven soul who dared defame Isaac Shelby, John Bradford, or Daniel Boone. He was an aggressive and stubborn adversary in a historical argument. Many of the books in his library had extensive marginal notes, and in many of these he quarreled with the author. The judge had a major hearing problem and often could not follow with certainty the course of the Saturday afternoon discussions. Sometimes he voiced comical and irrelevant responses to what he thought was being said; sometimes he made emotional responses which went wide of the mark.

Up until 1934 it is doubtful that there was a more ardent Democrat in all Kentucky than Judge Wilson. He wore lapel buttons of his favorite candidates; he decorated the mantle in his library with brass roosters, donkeys, gavels, and other political mementoes. He had a near worshipful loyalty to Woodrow Wilson, believing that possibly they had sprung from the same sturdy Scottish ancestral stem; at least they were both Presbyterians. By 1934, however, the judge's Democratic ardor underwent a massive cooling off. He came to loathe Franklin Roosevelt, believing that he was on the verge of destroying the nation. Later mention of the court-packing attempt sent him into a purple fury. This came to be true of the WPA and the PWA as well. One afternoon a whimsical conversation turned to the restoration of Belle Brezing's beloved shrine to Venus on Megowan Street. Through his static-laden hearing aid the judge got the notion that someone had said the PWA was doing the repair. He was eloquent in his denunciation of every letter in the alphabet which implied the New Deal — so eloquent in fact that he had us pile into automobiles and accompany him on an inspection of the scene of the nation's shame. I think he never realized that neither President Roosevelt nor the PWA was aware that the disreputable old house existed.

Charlie Staples was an extrovert and a lovable character of parts. He was a safety inspector for the Southern Railway System, a job which made only modest demands on his time. In his

extended spare moments he came to know every book dealer on the railroad, from New Orleans to Washington and Cincinnati. He had an elephantine memory, and an even more expansive imagination. He was never willing to admit that he was unfamiliar with a book. Often he turned up with "sleepers" for which he had paid almost nothing, and in some cases he gave the dealer an exhortation for not taking better care of his stock.

When someone asked Staples about a book, his stock answer was that he had seen a copy but that it was in very poor condition. On one occasion Winston Coleman and Bill Townsend tested the General's literary integrity. They began a discussion about a very famous Kentucky book entitled *The Grey Cowl*, by lay brother O'Shaughnessy of the Trappist Monastery in Nelson County. This book was so rare, in fact, that it existed only in the minds of Coleman and Townsend. They asked the General if he had ever seen the book. He replied yes, but the copy he had examined was in horribly poor condition. Nevertheless, General Staples gave all of us many a valuable lead on books and manuscripts which could be acquired by the University of Kentucky Library. We had always to be aware that we too might turn up a *Grey Cowl* sleeper.

Bill Townsend was an aggressive collector. Through his law practice and his knowledge of family relationships he was able to get access to Todd, Helm, and Cassius M. Clay papers which was denied others. The popularity of his book on Lexington brought people to his office in the depth of the Great Depression with papers, books, and relics for sale. Once he called me to say that a Mrs. Curd from Curd's Ferry, on the Kentucky River near High Bridge, was in his office. She had a Daniel Boone letter which she wished to sell. He asked me if I wanted to buy it. I was so taken by surprise that I impulsively said yes without asking the price. He bought the letter for twenty-five dollars, a sum which at that time almost equalled the national debt. I almost had to resort to the use of a pistol and mask to raise the money.

Townsend was without a doubt one of the most charming raconteurs ever to enliven a party in the Bluegrass. He could adorn even the most commonplace yarn and make it seem classic. His oft-repeated philosophy was never to let mere facts stand in the way of telling a good story. He knew all the Lincoln scholars: Senator Albert J. Beveridge, Dr. William Barton, James G. Randall, Ida Tarbell, Edgar Lee Masters, Oliver Barrett, Paul Angle, Roy

Basler, Benjamin Thomas, Carl Sandburg, and Otto Eisenschiml. Bill talked about the personalities of the Lincoln era as if he had been a confidant to Abe and Mary, and to their families. He had a phenomenally well-trained trial lawyer's memory and could recall the places, dates, and surrounding circumstances of most Lincoln incidents.

Once Bill told an interesting story about an experience he had with Carl Sandburg. One morning he was sitting in his office working on a brief when Carl walked in with a valise in one hand and a guitar in the other. He explained casually that he was on his way to make a speech in Owensboro that afternoon and had decided to run by Lexington and chat with Bill about Lincoln. Despite the consternation Carl's ignorance of Kentucky geography caused him, Bill listened. Sandburg had been a volunteer in the Spanish-American War and was stationed at Fort Clay. On one occasion a soldier had gotten a bit overseas in one of the famous West Main Street saloons. Staggering back to camp, he had gone out Main Street and wound up in the Lexington Cemetery. Addled by drink and darkness, he stumbled over the tombstone of King Solomon, the gravedigger-hero of the 1833 cholera epidemic in Lexington. Back in camp he described his experience, and his buddies bet five dollars apiece that King Solomon's burial place was where it had always been. The skeptics went to the cemetery to prove the drunken wanderer wrong and wound up losers of their money.

My wife and I were hosts to the Book Thieves at our house on Forest Park Road when we had as a special guest George Fort Milton, editor and owner of the *Chattanooga News*. He had just completed a draft of his voluminous biography of Stephen A. Douglas, later published under the title *The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and the Needless War* (1934). (He was also highly elated over having helped win the enactment of the Tennessee Valley Authority Act.) Almost from the instant he was introduced to Bill Townsend the two became embroiled in a debate which became almost as ardent if not as acrimonious as the famous Lincoln-Douglas confrontations in Illinois in 1858. Milton was a chain-smoker, and the kitchen bowl he used as an ash tray was full of butts when the argument ended and the Book Thieves departed. The meeting, however, did not end the contentions between the Lincoln partisans and George Fort Milton. He asked me to act as his go-between and get Ben Thomas, Paul Angle, and Roy Basler

to read his manuscript. Sometime later I delivered to him letters which were as vigorous with argument as the heated discussion with Bill Townsend.

Townsend's memory was almost infallible. He boasted frequently that he could recognize Lincoln's handwriting style almost instantly. Out of his hearing, Claude Trapp once said he could forge any signature with his left hand. Later, at a Book Thieves meeting in his home on East Main Street, Trapp brought out a book of proper vintage, wrote "Abraham Lincoln" on the flyleaf, and placed it on a table where Bill Townsend would be certain to see it. Townsend came in chattering away and, as usual, chose the most comfortable chair in the room. He picked up the doctored book, glanced at the signature, and almost instantly declared it a forgery. Trapp put the book back on the shelf in his library and no doubt forgot the joke. After his death representatives of a New York auction house came to Lexington to prepare the library for public sale. Mrs. Trapp called me to ask if I knew anything about "Dock" owning one of Abraham Lincoln's books. I have wondered many times if there might be some unknowing collector of Lincolniana who boasts to envious friends that he owns one of the martyred president's very own books when what he actually has is a relic of Claude Trapp's horseplay.

Trapp was a man who had had many fascinating moments in his longtime practice of medicine in Lexington. As a young graduate physician just returned to the town he was called upon to minister to the fatally wounded Cassius M. Goodloe, who had fallen victim in the murderous Swope-Goodloe encounter. The two men were at outs politically when they engaged in a shooting duel in the old post office on Main Street. Two days later Trapp and a colleague struggled to save Goodloe's life while the hearse bearing Swope's body rolled past the Phoenix Hotel.

Trapp knew a host of people in central Kentucky, and no doubt had most of them as patients. One of them was Louis Lee Haggin, of Mount Brilliant Farm on the Russell Cave Pike. Haggin, a wealthy man, had collected a magnificent library of sporting books, paintings of animals, and original prints. Among his treasures was a full file of William T. Porter's *The Spirit of the Times*. On several occasions he had been a guest of the Book Thieves, but the sensational moment in this casual association was in either 1935 or 1936 when he had them as guests at Mount Brilliant to meet the famous American rare-books dealer, A. S. W. Rosenbach

of Philadelphia. Dr. Rosenbach had brought along some of his choicest treasures, one of which was an elaborately bound leather case which he said contained a mummified part of Napoleon's torso.

Through the years there were many other guests of the Book Thieves. Among them were the lovable old Pickwickian character Otto A. Rothert, secretary of the Filson Club; Governor Simeon Willis; John Vance of the Legal Division of the Library of Congress; Richard E. Banta, the Crawfordsville, Indiana, author and book dealer; Dr. W. T. H. Howe, president of the American Book Company; W. Clement Eaton of Lafayette College, later professor of history at the University of Kentucky; A. B. Guthrie of the Lexington *Leader*; Joe Jordan, author of the column "Four Bits" in the *Leader*; Holman Hamilton, biographer of Zachary Taylor and later a member of the university's department of history; John Wilson Townsend, author and book dealer; Willard Rouse Jillson, geologist and prolific bibliographer-historian; and John Tasker Howard, the biographer of Stephen Collins Foster. In 1938 that bright American author Constance Rourke was a guest. So far as I can recall she was the only woman to attend a Saturday afternoon meeting. Miss Rourke had a notable literary reputation as the biographer of John James Audubon. She had come to Lexington ostensibly to speak to women students at the university on choosing careers; however, she was especially interested in consulting local historical sources on the maturing of American culture. Tragically, she died before she had finished the manuscript for this book.

Following commencement in 1938, and at the end of an unusually trying year for President McVey, he invited the Book Thieves to go with him on a roving literary jaunt. We went first to be luncheon guests of Dr. W. T. H. Howe at his country place, Freelands, near Alexandria on the Ohio River. There we met the well-known book dealer Walter Hill. I am of the opinion that at the time he had only Dr. Howe as a client.

I knew Dr. Howe as a crusty publisher, but as a host and away from his office he was the soul of hospitality. He had in that simple frame house at Freelands many unopened boxes which he said contained books and manuscripts of the famous New England authors and poets. He showed us one of the most dramatic historical documents I have ever read; it was the lengthy unpublished statement of John Brown written while he awaited

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the preparation of the scaffold on which he was to be hanged in Charlestown, Virginia. No one, not even Dr. Howe and Walter Hill, knew precisely what precious first editions and manuscripts were in those boxes, packed away from scholarly eyes. Soon after our visit Dr. Howe was fatally stricken in a Pullman berth on one of his weekly commuter trips between Cincinnati and New York. His collection was bought at auction by a donor to the New York Public Library.

From Alexandria we went across Indiana to Crawfordsville to visit with Dick Banta and to examine his fine collection of books and newspapers relating to the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. At that time the university library was purchasing from him as many rare books as it could afford. He had furnished most of the travel books now in the Special Collections Department, books which are easily identifiable by his distinctive price coding. On our visit there was a considerable amount of chuckling over the fact that our host found Dr. McVey propped up in bed with an old-fashioned in one hand and a volume of the Bobbsey Twins in the other. This was not exactly the kind of university library material we had set out to examine.

We retraced our way to a place just south of Indianapolis to visit what turned out to be one of the most extensive non-book collections I have ever heard about. Dr. McVey had corresponded over the years with an old lecture-bureau agent named Stout who had boasted about his collection. Stout's books were stacked in shelves, on tables, on and under beds, on window sills, everywhere. He had been forced out of his house into a humbler abode in the back yard. By no means did we go through all of that bizarre collection, but I did not see any title more significant than a dog-eared copy of a novel from the Rover Boys' Series. Later, as a professor at Indiana University, I shuddered every time I had to drive past the Stout mansion and recall the monumental and ungodly caricature of a book collection it contained.

From Mr. Stout's literary junk pile we went to Ann Arbor to be guests of Randolph G. Adams. He permitted us the utmost freedom in examining the stunning manuscripts and other basic source materials in the William Clements Library. Adams brought out for us to see some tremendously exciting documents, among them letters of Martha Washington to George during the harsh Valley Forge winter, letters intercepted by the British. These letters, however, were only rich historical tidbits compared with

the voluminous caches of official papers and correspondence of British military and administrative officers during the American Revolution. This great library, then as now, contained rich documentary materials awaiting skilled editing and annotation.

This trip revealed to us the tremendous research resources available in the area around Lexington and the University of Kentucky. One of our objectives in visiting Randolph G. Adams was to explore with him the possibility of the McGregor Library Fund Committee including the university library as one of the beneficiaries in its program for the purchase of rare books in the field of regional Americana.

At this juncture I wish to set the record clear for all time to come on the Lexington infatuation with Belle Brezing, the Megowan Street prostitute. In August 1933 that joker Bill Townsend drove into my driveway, blew his horn loud enough to wake up Rip Van Winkle, and in a voice clear enough for all my neighbors to hear asked me if I would like to go to a whorehouse. He then told me that Dr. Charles A. Nevitt had called him and said that he believed Belle Brezing was near death and wanted someone from the university to come out and go through her library with the possibility of accepting it as a gift. Bill and I drove to Megowan Street, but in the meantime the old lady had suffered another sinking spell, and we saw neither her nor the library. Later I went with Bill and Winston Coleman and we did see her small collection of miscellaneous books, none of which I thought was of any appreciable consequence. Belle Brezing gave me a haphazardly collected scrapbook of random news stories which she had torn from the *Herald* and the *Leader*. The first clipping in the book was a story about Bishop Lewis W. Burton of Christ Episcopal Church.

On this second visit Bill Townsend did give "literary asylum" to a small and sketchy account book which contained a few personal entries, one of them referring to the father of one of his law partners. We saw no diary or any other documentary material except some pictures of courtesans who had lived in the Todd House on West Main Street, and later on Megowan. Afterwards I acquired a copy of *Housekeeping in the Blue Grass* from John Wilson Townsend and later discovered that the book had belonged to

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Belle Brezing. This book is now in the Special Collections Department of the Margaret I. King Library.

No doubt there are still people in Lexington who believe the unfounded gossip that we swiped Belle Brezing's diary by throwing it out a window and then running around the house to recover it. Not so. With equal emphasis I affirm that President McVey never sent a letter of appreciation and an elaborately engraved certificate out to Megowan Street. This was a classic case where dull facts have not been allowed to cloud a good folk story.

Once, when the Book Thieves were guests of President Donovan at Maxwell Place, Mrs. Donovan was inspired to do something original to cheer the old boys. She asked each wife to bring one of her husband's prized books or other literary possession. After lunch that day Claude Trapp spotted a familiar copy of a rare first edition and remarked, "I have a book identical to this one." When he opened the book, he exclaimed, "Hell, this is my book!" When each fellow had recovered his precious little gem, it turned out that Frances Jewell McVey had sent along a volume of Dr. McVey's current diary. I rode home with the McVeys after that meeting and heard the president deliver an eloquent Scottish lecture on the sanctity of personal privacy. I have always wondered if the Donovans restrained their curiosity enough to honor the confidentiality of that diary by not reading it. I was fascinated also to see what the wives believed to be their husbands' choicest treasures.

One more McVey anecdote. Frequently the president lamented that the university's students were oblivious to what went on around them. He thought a majority of them would be unable to tell a visitor the president's name. I wondered if he was right in this assumption and undertook to determine the truth. In a test in early American history I listed the names of individuals to be identified. Among them I included Frank L. McVey. The president was right that they did not know who he was. He was thought variously to be a great traitor in the American Revolution, on General Washington's staff, a member of Jefferson's cabinet, a British officer. One honest scholar answered, "I'll be damned if I know who he was!" Joe "Jay Jay" Jordan, the *Leader* columnist, was present when I showed the Book Thieves the comical responses I

had received to my question. Dr. McVey enjoyed the humor most of all. We forgot, however, that this was grist to Joe's mill. The story appeared in his column "Four Bits," and was picked up by the Associated Press and distributed widely. Astonishingly, this whimsical story appeared also in the London *Times*. Later Dr. McVey asked me to leave his name out of future test questions, and we heard no more complaints about student unawareness.

There are many anecdotes which give rich human dimensions to the gatherings of the Book Thieves. When Charlie Staples completed his manuscript on pioneer Lexington, he celebrated by carelessly mislaying it. In a frantic search he concluded it had been sent away with the household garbage. He rushed out to the Lexington garbage dump and spent an afternoon digging through heaps of vile-smelling refuse. At a Book Thieves luncheon he described with realistic olfactory details the stench of the place. Bill Townsend ended that discussion in short order by saying, "General, you should be ashamed of yourself for writing such vile-smelling stuff."

It would be impossible to assess accurately the impact the Book Thieves had on laying the foundation for the special collections in the University of Kentucky Library, whether by giving vital information and advice about available collections of books and papers, or by directly donating materials. On several occasions some of the Book Thieves accompanied us to solicit owners of such materials to place them in the library.

Repeatedly Judge Sam Wilson told me, "I am making you a literary executor of my estate, and when you find duplicates remember they were working copies." We did find duplicates. The judge, like every other successful collector, was too busy assembling his library to spend time cataloging it. Despite his frequent references to literary administrators he never even vaguely hinted at his desire for the disposition of his library. When his will was probated it was revealed for the first time that his entire collection was to be placed in the University of Kentucky Library with remarkably few restrictions as to housing and future use.

The truly significant Wilson Collection went far in restoring to Kentuckians the seriousness of the loss of the Durrett Collection,

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which was sold out of the state in the early years of this century. I am positive that the judge never would have made this gift to the university had it not been for his congenial association with the Book Thieves.

By any criteria of literary measurement Bill Townsend's collection of Lincolnia was one of the most important ones remaining in private possession. Tragically, most of it was sold outside Kentucky. David Turnham's copy of *The Revised Laws of Indiana*, the first law book read by Lincoln, was acquired by Townsend in 1923 and sold to the Lilly Library at Indiana University in 1967. Most of the rest of the collection was sold to Justin Turner, a southern California collector, who in turn sold it to the New York Public Library for several times more than the original purchase price.

The Claude Trapp collection of first editions was sold at public auction by a New York firm. Charlie Staples's books and papers were dispersed, the university acquiring many of them. I am not sure what disposition was made of John Sharpe Chambers's books and papers. I do know that his papers once contained a considerable body of research notes on early Kentucky medical history.

As mentioned earlier, both McVey and Donovan had assembled rather good libraries. Dr. McVey was an avid reader in many areas of interest and, like Judge Wilson, made generous marginal notations. Besides his library, the beginnings of which dated back to the days when he was a graduate student in economics at Yale University, he had a considerable collection of personal correspondence, also dating back to his college days. For years he kept a day-by-day diary, making cryptic observations on the life about him. This multi-volume personal record is now in the Special Collections Department. Library personnel went through his books and selected those which were not duplicated in the library's holdings. I shipped the duplicates to an economics and business library in Bangalore, India. The president of that institution had made a direct plea to me for books when I visited that city as a State Department lecturer. Donovan's books were also given to the university library.

None of the Book Thieves' personal libraries contained as complete a collection of books relating specifically to Kentucky as did that of J. Winston Coleman. At the time of his death in May 1983 Winston had collected several thousand books and hundreds

of precious manuscripts. The latter he had arranged meticulously in forty or fifty scrapbooks. At an earlier date he had willed this collection to the university, but, for some reason unknown to me, he became offended at the institution during the presidency of John W. Oswald. He did, however, give the university a sizable body of his correspondence and copies of all of the books and pamphlets he had written.

The libraries collected by the individual Book Thieves were important, and three or four of them were of major significance, but the collections by no means overshadowed the literary contributions of the members. William H. Townsend achieved broad recognition with his *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town* (1929). Later he published a considerably revised edition which contained two fresh chapters. In these years Townsend also published *Lincoln and Liquor* (1934), and revised Dr. William Barton's two-volume biography of *President Lincoln* (1933). Possibly he gained even wider recognition with the recording of the speech on Cassius Marcellus Clay that he delivered to the Chicago Civil War Round Table in 1952. His last book, *Hundred Proof* (1964), was comprised largely of the anecdotes which he told the Book Thieves over the years with such great joy. In this little book Bill Townsend clearly demonstrated his philosophy of never letting mere facts get in the way of telling a good story.

For years Townsend and Chambers were bosom friends. Their families went on summer vacations together, and they visited back and forth with regularity. Bill greatly encouraged Dr. Chambers not only with his medical survey, but in the research and writing of his landmark book *The Conquest of Cholera* (1938).

Early in his academic career Dr. McVey had published a slender book on populism, and for several decades it appeared as a standard entry in post-Civil War historical bibliographies. While a member of the Book Thieves he wrote and assembled a tremendously interesting presidential documentary under the title *A University Is a Place, a Spirit* (1944). Then he wrote the provocative book *The Gates Open Slowly* (1949), in which he dealt with the history of public education in Kentucky.

Charles Staples published only one book, *The History of Pioneer Lexington* (1939), which he originally thought to entitle *The Little Town of Lexington*. No man ever held his home town in greater affection, a place he called "Lexin'un." Charlie's literary memorial must be one with twin columns. Not even he could say how

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many young authors he encouraged and assisted in their research and writing; this included older ones also. Among his debtors were John Bakeless, Niels Sonne, Bernard Mayo, Glyndon Van Deusen, James F. Hopkins, Holman Hamilton, all the Book Thieves, and a host of others. Occasionally I walk down Lexington's bleak Main Street, and my thoughts turn to what General Staples would think of the sterile piles of plastic and glass, and of the debris-strewn parking lots where once familiar old buildings had stood. They have torn down and robbed the General's "little town of Lexin'un" of its once charming individuality.

Judge Samuel M. Wilson published many books and essays, including the second volume of *A History of Kentucky* (1928), *The Battle of the Blue Licks* (1927), *The First Land Court in Kentucky* (1923), and a much disputed essay on the first printer in Kentucky which appeared in the *Filson Club History Quarterly* and immediately provoked a heated exchange of views with Willard Rouse Jillson. Tragically, the judge died before he could locate all the numbers of John Bradford's "Notes on Kentucky." The three or four missing installments turned up later in the McCalla Collection which was transferred from the Library of Congress to the West Virginia Library. The judge nevertheless left an appreciable body of editorial and annotative notes which still remain unpublished.

Claude Trapp never wrote anything more extensive than a prescription, yet he was widely read and a stimulating conversationalist. He no doubt possessed as good a critical judgment of earlier British writers and poets and their works as a sophisticated professor of English literature. Because of his broad interests he could have joined a British literary club and felt quite at home. In his medical practice he had many loyal patients, but his practice could always be deferred in favor of chats with book-collecting friends.

A. B. "Bud" Guthrie was never a regular member of the Book Thieves, but he attended a good many meetings over the years, and during this time he was reading everything he could lay his hands on about the West. His first novel, and one he has all but disclaimed, was the bastard offspring of that reading, *Murders at Moon Dance* (1943). His two monumental books, *The Big Sky* (1947) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Way West* (1949), were written in Lexington during this time. Bud has given his papers to the University of Kentucky Library.



The Book Thieves in 1944. Standing, left to right: Wilson, Donovan, Chambers, Clark, Coleman. Seated, left to right: Staples, Trapp, Townsend, McVey

None of the Book Thieves, competence notwithstanding, made a greater contribution than Winston Coleman. He proved to be a literary marvel. I doubt that he, before 1931, had even remotely thought of collecting and writing books and essays. Until then he had never written anything more ambitious than a check on the Second National Bank. His first effort at writing, a history of the Masonic Lodge in Kentucky, was somewhat burdened with detail, like almost every other author's first effort, but by 1935 he was rapidly becoming a dedicated collector and researcher. His *Stage-Coach Days in the Bluegrass* of that year is not only a good piece of local American transportation history, but also a lively bit of reading. There followed in 1940 his history *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, which is now cited in most of the modern books on the broader subject.

In 1946 Bill Townsend, Coleman, and I went as invited guests to Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. We ran into a blinding rainstorm opposite Barbourville, Kentucky, and had to pull off the road to await its abatement. In that interval we convinced Winston, considerably against his will, to undertake

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the compilation of a bibliography of nonfictional writings about Kentucky. The result was the preparation and publication of the enormously useful *Bibliography of Kentucky History* (1949). There is neither space nor necessity at this point to list Winston Coleman's other publications, except to note *Kentucky: A Pictorial History* (1971), which has perhaps outsold any other non-textbook title about the commonwealth. The last thing he published before his death last year was a brief account of the Book Thieves.

Most of the Book Thieves were older men, and in the late 1940s the grim reaper began to thin their ranks: Judge Wilson died in 1946, Claude Trapp in 1947, Dr. McVey in 1953, Charlie Staples in 1954, Dr. Donovan and Bill Townsend in 1964, Brick Chambers in 1971, and Winston Coleman in 1983, leaving the author of this reminiscence as the sole survivor. After 1960 the remaining members gradually stopped meeting, and the organization became only a pleasant memory. But the years of its existence were profitable ones for the university, and for Transylvania, the Lexington Public Library, and Berea College, as well as important years in the bibliographic and literary history of Kentucky.