

selections from Lincoln's writings (1950). Both were published by Achille J. St. Onge of Worcester. Wahlstrom's library included more than 1200 books on Lincoln and his times, including one from the great man's own library, and numerous manuscripts of Lincoln and other Civil War personalities.

The earliest extant correspondence between Wahlstrom and the American Antiquarian Society was dated 1954 when Clarence Brigham offered the judge a collection of newspaper clippings on Lincoln that the library was discarding. Election to the Society followed in April 1959. He was a generous member and a faithful attender of meetings during much of the time he belonged. On the advice of Clifford K. Shipton, he was appointed in 1963 as the representative of AAS on the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

The judge retired from the probate court in 1972, but continued to pursue his civic and historical interests, including work in planning for the creation of an historic district in Worcester and for the reenactment during the American Revolution Bicentennial of the trek by Gen. Henry Knox and his men from Fort Ticonderoga to Cambridge.

Carl Wahlstrom died in Worcester, December 11, 1974, after a brief illness. A brother, son, daughter, and five grandchildren survive him. His wife, Margaret (Wahlstrom) Wahlstrom, had died in 1972.

John B. Hench

ERNEST JAMES WESSEN

Ernest James Wessen was born in Lewiston, Maine, on December 4, 1887. The family moved to Auburn, Maine, across the Androscoggin River, the following year. His father was born in Bristol, England, in 1842 and, in his youth, led a generally adventurous life.

There are few details of Wessen's formal education. There

is a primitive photograph of his class in the Washburn elementary school of Auburn, 1895. He finished high school in that same community. He was the oldest of four boys and was favored with presents of books from his father and from others. Some came from Mr. Staples, then proprietor of the *Lewiston Journal*. Another source was his grandfather, still living in Bristol, England, who occasionally sent him books about that city, its history, and the Port of Bristol. Wessen recalled his genuine affection for Professor Stanton of Bates College, who was happy to show an eager boy his collection of bird's nests and eggs, and books. Wessen probably had the yen for books in his genes, since his grandfather was a London and Bristol bookseller, and his great grandfather, William Chalmers, was a well-known bookseller in Edinburgh.

His formal education ceased when he finished high school. Soon afterward he went to work for the local Western Union office, delivering telegrams, and, with the curiosity gene at work, learning Morse Code and the use of the telegraph key. On November 17, 1905, just before his eighteenth birthday, he enlisted in the Army, and was assigned to the Signal Corps. He had the usual Wessen luck in being present at interesting events and close to interesting people. He served duty in San Francisco to repair damage to communications as the result of the earthquake, and, in Alaska, aboard the cable ship *Cyrus W. Field*, to establish wireless communications throughout the territory as a supplement to the telegraph system, already outmoded by the Marconi experiments. Later he served in Washington, D.C., in the Signal Corps office, but was assigned to the transport U.S.S. *McClellan* to work with refrigerator engines and the wireless at the time of the affair at Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914. He remained aboard the transport and met two passengers, Jack London and John T. McCutcheon, cartoonist for the *Chicago Tribune*. He resigned from the service in 1916 to accept a position with the Cumberland Light and Power Company of Portland, Maine, but

with the European war heating up the United States, he requested a return to the service and was accepted. He was commissioned a first lieutenant April 1917. He had various administrative duties and teaching assignments, in Washington, at MIT, and he commanded a Signal Corps school at Fort Ethan Allen in Burlington, Vermont. In December 1917 he was promoted to captain. He remained in Washington at the Signal Corps office until March 3, 1919, when he was discharged with the rank of major, U.S. Army Reserve.

The position of safety engineer for the Equitable Life Assurance Society of New York was waiting for him when he left the service. On January 1, 1920, he became industrial engineer for the W. T. Rawleigh Company of Freeport, Illinois. In early 1922 he received an offer of an appointment as consulting engineer in the Department of Justice. He was appointed in June 1922 and remained with that department until July 1925. The department assigned him as a consultant to a congressional committee investigating the construction of training camps. He was sent to Columbus, Ohio, for a report on the building of Camp Sherman in nearby Chillicothe. When this assignment was nearing completion in 1925 he was asked to perform a similar task at Camp Lee, Virginia. Through contacts made in his committee assignment he was offered the job of proprietor of the Parry Sales Service Company of Mansfield, Ohio, manufacturers and distributors of patent medicines. He accepted the job and moved to Mansfield in July 1925. The principal and perhaps the only product of this company was Parry's Vegetable Compound, mixed and bottled by Wessen and his family. It was chiefly a mail order operation: advertisements in small-town newspapers, cash with order, with occasional delivery in person. He continued his association with that company until it ceased operations in the late 1960s.

While in Washington he met Yetta Searls, who was then working in the office of Gen. Smedley Butler, commandant of

the Marine Corps. They were married on January 31, 1924. Mrs. Wessen had much the same curiosity about collecting as her husband did. She added prints, glass, and decorated hat boxes to fill the shelves and closets. Her enthusiasm for antiquarian objects enhanced Wessen's interest, and consequently the traveling, research, cataloguing, and most important of all, the production of *Midland Notes* was a mutual affair. This fortunate combination was recognized in the trade and most of the older dealers and some collectors always spoke of the 'Wessens.'

With his anchoring in Mansfield, the pattern of his future was fairly well established. He had the income from the sales company, a competent researcher and cataloguer for a wife, and time to travel. He became a gifted member of the vanishing clan of book scouts. The Wessens traveled throughout Ohio and West Virginia making calls on antique dealers, libraries, historical societies; gaining leads on collections and papers; buying books; and doing the spade work in bibliography which made him a competent and well-known bookman. Delivering his company products may have given him access to private sources, but he certainly let be known that he was interested in old books and pamphlets and occasionally placed an advertisement in a small-town paper. The town was usually one which he had found in his reading to be likely to harbor some rare pamphlet.

During the 1920s and early 1930s, Wessen made some discoveries and did some selling but he kept most of the books for his own shelves. This was the stage of the book scout and collector. His books later became his stock for the book business. In the early thirties he retained a couple of book scouts to search and buy for him.

In 1935, while convalescing in a Mansfield hospital following a fracture of his left ankle, Wessen decided to start publishing a book catalogue. No one knows definitely whether or not he was selling many books before that date or whether he

had been toying with the idea for years. The first copy of *Midland Notes* appeared in 1938. It contained fifty-four rare items, mostly Pittsburgh, Wheeling, and Cincinnati almanacs. On seeing the catalogue, Clarence Brigham bought the lot for AAS. Other catalogues followed and with each he attracted a loyal and appreciative audience as well as eager buyers of choice items of Americana. One might read the first dozen or so catalogues now and be somewhat skeptical of Wessen's use of the words 'rare,' 'unrecorded,' 'first edition,' but many of the books which were offered *were* rare and unrecorded. His prefaces in the catalogues and the comments on the books listed were often touched with vinegar or acid, depending upon the degree of his emotional response to some bibliographical error he had spotted, or to some imagined once-over-lightly comment by an amateur critic on one of his favorite subjects. A book review he wrote many years ago provides an excellent example of his acerbic prose: 'But his [the author's] astonishment will hardly equal that of the American Bookman, when they examine this incredibly bad book, which has been presented to them as a compilation "that will prove of greatest usefulness to scholars, collectors and booksellers." The shortcomings of this book are so many that to discuss a few of them is like chastizing a lad for stealing a radiator cap . . . to which an automobile happened to be attached.'

These comments are the product of an agile mind which had been honed on banter and repartee, engaged in verbally and by letter, with several other like-minded souls who were close friends and regular correspondents. This group usually did not include collectors. On the contrary, his customers were treated at arm's length, except for a fortunate few. His stable of collectors included many in the Americana field, with special interests in such topics as overland narratives, almanacs, guides and early midwestern imprints, children's books, legal and parliamentary history of Ohio education,

county histories, Indians and Indian languages, Lincolniana (when Wessen was active in that field), Ohio canals and maps, medicine, and William Henry Harrison (Mrs. Wessen's own speciality).

Among the buyers on his mailing list were many libraries and historical societies. At times a large purchase from a catalogue by one of the institutions upset him. On the other hand, he occasionally openly suggested in a note to an item in his catalogue that this piece probably should go to an institution. This was especially true of the rare and fragile runs of early midwestern newspapers and magazines. He felt that these papers would be better preserved and more available for historical research in a proper library. *Midland Notes* continued through No. 102, issued January 20, 1969. The 100th catalogue was received with applause and affection as was well described by the late Jacob Blanck in *Antiquarian Bookman*, January 6, 1975. There is a complete file of *Midland Notes* in the American Antiquarian Society. Mrs. Wessen was working on an index to *Midland Notes*, but ill health interrupted that project and it was never completed.

E.J. was justifiably proud of his discovery of rarities. As he put it, there were many interesting things to be found in Ohio, and he found them. It is not possible to list his discovery of rarities in their proper chronological order, but from a paper he presented on 'Ohio's Literary Heritage,' another entitled 'Adventures of a Collector,' and from two bound calendars of manuscript collections in his personal files, it is possible to present a fair picture of his activities. A collection of papers and letters of Thomas Worthington, governor of Ohio in 1814, was one interesting find. Most of the letters concerned Worthington's term as a senator from Ohio, the War of 1812, and the Battle of Tippecanoe.

In the late 1940s he acquired a portion of the papers of Rufus Putnam. These were rough drafts of letters written in Putnam's own hand, while he was surveyor general of the

United States, circa 1797, which referred to the survey of the Greenville Treaty Line, and, in part, to the survey of the Moravian Indian Tract, and the so-called Military Lands in Ohio. These letters were unrecorded and unpublished.

The papers and memorabilia of David Ross Locke (Petroleum V. Nasby), 1833-1888, and his son Robinson Locke (Rodney Lee), 1856-1920, came to Wessen by way of a book scout in the Toledo, Ohio, area. The important personal papers of David Ross Locke were lost in a fire at the *Toledo Blade* in 1911, but the son kept an extensive file of his father's letters from which a fair view of David Ross's activities can be reconstructed. In addition to his well-known literary productions and activity on the lecture circuit, David Locke was the editor and, afterwards, owner of the *Blade*. The collection consisted of about 470 folios containing an estimated 3000 separate items.

Wessen's scouting efforts were rewarded by the finding of the diary, original paintings, and drawings by Capt. John F. Reynolds of Canton, Ohio, of his exploration of the Yellowstone River. The last known papers of Henry Clay were found in southern Ohio. The rare narrative written by Dr. George Keller, a physician of Wayne County, Ohio, published in 1851, in Massillon, Ohio, was found in a clutter of debris from the attic of an old house in Wayne County. The contents of the attic were at that moment being fed into a bonfire. He rediscovered the Brayton Narrative, entitled 'The Indian Captive,' published in Cleveland in 1860. A copy had been described by a bibliographer (Fields) but all trace of the Fields copy had been lost. These overland narratives brought good prices and envious glints in the eyes of dealers and collectors.

A catalogue card in the Library of Congress records 'fifteen items relating to Henry Wirz were accessioned May 12, 1948, as a gift from Ernest J. Wessen.' These were among the papers of James William Denver, for whom the Colorado

city was named. Denver was a member of the Washington law firm which had been retained by Wirz for his trial by a military commission in 1865 for inhumane behavior at Andersonville Prison. The manuscripts were the notes and drafts of briefs prepared by the defense attorneys for the trial. Denver did not appear before the commission and during an early session of the trial Denver's law firm withdrew from the case. The descriptions of the atrocities ascribed to Wirz as commandant of the Andersonville Prison were clearly described in these papers. The Wessen family reviewed the manuscripts and decided that the papers would best be sent to an institution and not pass through *Midland Notes*.

Wessen considered the discovery in the 1920s of the Josiah Fox papers his 'most outstanding find,' as he described the affair in a paper entitled 'Adventures of a Collector.' His account provides the flavor and excitement of a major discovery by a talented bookman. As Wessen relates in his manuscript,

I hadn't been in Ohio long before someone gave me an old Wheeling, West Virginia, newspaper. In itself it was nothing . . . a single issue of the 1830s, but glancing through it my attention was caught by a brief editorial. The anti-administration editor wrote that the authorities in Washington were gravely concerned over the design of new naval vessels, yet . . . as he pointed out . . . they had not seen fit to consult the nearby resident, who, as was well known, had been responsible for the design of the frigates so successful in the War of 1812. It so happened that I knew something of naval history, and could think of no Virginian who had participated in the manner described. Who was this un-named resident? What ships had he designed? Were any of his papers to be found?

Time does not permit me to detail the search that followed during the next three to four years; Navy Department records, newspaper files, county histories of Virginia counties were searched . . . all without a trace. And, in the end, the solution came as a stroke of collector's luck.

Dropping into the establishment of an old friend . . . an antique dealer (in Cadiz, Ohio) I noticed a stack of folio account

books on a table. Such things as a rule do not interest me, but to make conversation I asked what they were, and was given the startling information that they were the record books of an old mill near Mt. Pleasant, (Ohio), which started in 1747. This had to be wrong, of course, yet it served to whet my curiosity. The top book was indeed the record of the mill, but that mill was located in Cornwall, England, and my interest subsided a bit, until I found that the last half of the volume had been used for the purpose of recording outgoing letters, and those letters dated from 1794, pertained to naval construction. Several facts made it apparent that I had stumbled on my long sought quarry. The books were bought without further examination, and the dealer replied to my query that there were a number of old boxes of correspondence that could be bought at a specified price.

A few days later we found ourselves the owners of a number of cartons of old letters. Dipping into the center of one of the cartons I pulled out the first letter for examination . . . it was addressed to Josiah Fox, Naval Constructor, and was a bid for the copper work on the frigate building at Boston . . . Paul Revere's bid for the work on the frigate Constitution. Interrupted only by an occasional cup of coffee, Mrs. Wessen and I prowled through these papers with intense excitement, for a solid thirty-six hours.

The Fox collection is now in the Peabody Museum at Salem, Massachusetts.

Wessen was a member of the Bibliographical Society of America; a life member of the Ohioana Library Association; member of and consultant to the Ohio Historical Society; and a past member of the Rowfant Club of Cleveland. He was elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1962.

He lost Mrs. Wessen through illness, July 9, 1972. They had sold Midland Rare Book Company in 1970. In the absence of a companion and the challenge of the rare book game, old age modified his memory and alertness and, finally, his health. Ernest Wessen died in a nursing home on December 13, 1974, aged 87.

Robert R. Crawford

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