

The State Library and Archives of Texas: A History, 1835-1962

By: James V. Carmichael Jr.

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Abstract:

The dust jacket of *The State Library and Archives of Texas: A History, 1835-1962* features a photograph, circa 1946, showing archival worker Marguerite Hester, with one foot perched precariously atop a six-foot ladder and the other on an archives shelf, as she pulls down a bound volume from the very top shelf, almost flush with the ceiling. [...] David B. Gracy II summarizes pictorially the situation that prevailed at the institution responsible for housing a state library, a state archives, a legislative library, and an emerging public library commission and state records management program in Texas.

Keywords: book review | librarianship | texas state library | state archives | legislative libraries | public library commission | state records management | library history

Article:

The State Library and Archives of Texas: A History, 1835-1962. By David B. Gracy ?. Foreword by Peggy D. Rudd. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. Pp. [xxxviii], 226. \$45.00, ISBN 978-0-292-72201-9.)

The dust jacket of *The State Library and Archives of Texas: A History, 1835-1962* features a photograph, circa 1946, showing archival worker Marguerite Hester, with one foot perched precariously atop a six-foot ladder and the other on an archives shelf, as she pulls down a bound volume from the very top shelf, almost flush with the ceiling. Thus David B. Gracy II

summarizes pictorially the situation that prevailed at the institution responsible for housing a state library, a state archives, a legislative library, and an emerging public library commission and state records management program in Texas. His text is devoted to the effort both to find housing not "besieged by rats, roaches and a visiting 'possum family" and to strike a productive balance among the Texas State Library and Archives Commission's various units and functions despite internal struggles for power and interference from commission board members and politicians, including the governor (p. 83). While the situation Gracy describes was typical of the combination of benign chaos and nepotism that reigned at most southern state libraries in the early twentieth century, Texas's unabashed pride in its history as an independent republic and, later, Confederate state, its sheer geographical size, and its agrarian bona fides aggravated the lack of suitable quarters. His purpose, however, is not only to describe the long struggle to secure a worthy physical structure but also to recount the political quagmires and administrative labyrinths that rendered the accomplishment of such a self-evident goal elusive. Gracy tells the story with considerable charm and vigor of expression, especially given the lack of modern state library histories that might have provided a model. His is indeed a pioneering effort in library history and a fitting tribute to the centennial of the Texas State Library and Archives (1909-2009).

As a former Texas state archivist, the author is more than passingly familiar with the careers of the former state librarians, some of whom like Elizabeth Howard West (1918-1925) and Witt B. Harwell (1954-1960), hailed from the archival ranks. While southern state librarians with any special training at all would have been unusual before the second decade of the twentieth century, Gracy seems at times a bit impatient with their lack of familiarity with the archival, library, and records management functions of the modern state librarian, although he admits such an integrated vision is relatively recent. The long tenure of Frances "Fanny" Miles Wilcox (1927-1945) in particular comes under fire for her lack of credentials and leadership ability.

With the exception of celebratory pieces, state libraries and archives for the most part have been ignored by library historians. Gracy's is no doubt the most thoroughgoing and critically competent history we have of a state library, and it creates a new standard to which state and local historians can aspire.

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