SR Visits

Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library

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Built of the same Texas limestone used to construct the Alamo, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) Library shares ground with that famous structure. Although the state of Texas owns the building and the grounds on which it stands, the DRT owns the contents. The library was opened in 1945, and the collection focuses on the period in Texas history, 1836–1846, when Texas was a country unto itself. Serials Review 2010; xx:xxx–xxx.

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Introduction

Beyond the cool, thick limestone walls of the Alamo in downtown San Antonio, Texas, lies a building that houses the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) Library. To understand the mission of the DRT Library, it’s helpful to understand some of the history of its neighboring structure.

The Alamo was built as a Spanish mission and was originally known as Misión San Antonio de Valero. The Spanish missions were built to convert the native population to Catholicism. They served as small, self-contained towns. In the early 1800s it became a Spanish fort. The soldiers referred to it as the Alamo after their hometown Alamo de Parras, and the name stuck. But it is the battle in 1836, between troops of Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna and the Texian and Tejano defenders, for which the Alamo is most well known. Though the defenders were defeated, the Alamo shrine is still remembered as “a place where men made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom.”

The DRT was chartered in 1893. To be a member, one must be able to verify direct descendance from a citizen of the Republic of Texas, which was in existence from 1836 to February 16, 1846. One of the missions of the DRT is to encourage the study of Texas history and to preserve its documents, and the DRT Library seeks to do just that. The library was begun because shrine hostesses (who are always DRT members) often received questions from visitors to the shrine, and a reference collection was needed. Dr. William Eager Howard of Dallas became the initial benefactor by donating his personal library of Texana materials to the DRT in 1943. His friend, San Antonio banker John King Beretta, was also a collector of Texana, and he followed suit in 1945. This reference collection began to grow, and it was moved into Alamo Hall (which was originally San Antonio fire station #2). The collection still grew, and the Daughters began to raise funds for a new building. Sallie Ward Beretta, wife of John King Beretta, then donated a substantial sum in memory of her husband, who had since passed away, and construction began. The new library, a beautiful reading room west of Alamo Hall, opened in 1950. The design and materials used were meant to complement the existing structures. An addition to the south end was built in the early 1970s. In the late 1970s a second addition was made to the north. Then in 1989 a climate- and humidity-controlled vault was added for the storage of rare books, manuscripts, photographs and other sensitive material. Several years ago, the library took the important step of installing a state-of-the-art fire suppression system. All funding came from donations and grants.
No tax money—federal, state or local—was used to construct the library. It was built with DRT money but was deeded to the state of Texas, which owns all of the grounds and buildings, including the Alamo itself. Artifacts in the Alamo belong to the state of Texas. The collection in the library, however, belongs solely to the DRT.

The Collection

Many of the documents one would expect to find at the DRT Library are actually held at the Texas State Archives in Austin. The DRT collection covers Texas history up to about 1900 and San Antonio history up through 1950. It includes book and serial collections, manuscripts, vertical file collection, photo collection, fine arts prints, newspapers and even sheet music—all about Texas.

There are a number of Spanish documents in the archives. The oldest document in the collection is dated 1551 and is from a Spanish king. Another particularly interesting document held by the library is a manuscript map drawn by Stephen F. Austin of his colony. Austin’s father, Moses Austin, received a grant from the Spanish government to bring a group of colonists to the area. Those settlers were known as Americans. Eventually, they began to refer to themselves as Texans. When Moses Austin died, he left the grant to his son, Stephen.

The library has a small collection of early Texas art. In fact, some of the artwork that is used in Texas history textbooks is made from prints of original artwork in the DRT library. One of the artists represented in the collection is Theodore Gentilz (1819–1906), an early San Antonio painter. The library does not normally collect artifacts, but sometimes they come with a book or manuscript collection. In some cases, the books and artifacts must be taken together or not at all, and so the library ends up with some unusual and interesting items. One example is the petticoats of Susanna and Angelina Dickinson, wife and daughter of one of the Alamo defenders. A visiting group of Texas bobbin lacers was especially excited to view these unique items.

The library is proud to have two of the thirteen known copies from the first printing of the Texas Declaration of Independence. They are broadsides printed on March 2, 1836, and distributed to let people know that Texas had declared its independence from Mexico. One is especially noteworthy. It was rented by Samuel Maverick, who was present at the constitutional convention in Washington-on-the-Brazos (so called to distinguish it from Washington-on-the-Potomac).

Clientele and Visitors

Leslie Sitz Stapleton, library director, notes that there is no regular, consistent user population. Visitors come from all over the United States and the world. As one might expect historians are the primary users of the library. Another large group of users are the Alamo enthusiasts, and as Stapleton acknowledges, there are a lot of Alamo enthusiasts! Genealogists also visit the library regularly, and the remainder is the casual visitor who wanders over from the Alamo. Some visitors may have seen their surnames on the list of Alamo defenders in the shrine, and tour guides refer them to the library. The library keeps a vertical file on each Alamo defender. Some files have one or two pieces of paper, while others have an entire shelf of materials. The files may contain research (both published and unpublished), newspaper articles, family bibles, and marriage, birth and death certificates (both originals and copies).

The Alamo shrine receives approximately 2.5 million visitors every year. In comparison, in a nine-month period in 2009, the DRT library had only 516 visitors inside the library. More than 4,000 came to the gated entrance, but many of those were mostly directional questions, such as “Is this the Alamo?” and “Where is the bathroom?” As noted earlier, most of the visitors are academics working on dissertations, books or articles. One professor at a local university sends his students to the library for extra credit in coursework.

A surprising visitor to the DRT Library is pop music star Phil Collins. He was a fan of the television show Davy Crockett when he was a youngster and also of the 1960 movie The Alamo that starred John Wayne. Collins became interested in Texana and Texas history, and now he visits the DRT Library whenever he is in San Antonio. He is a frequent visitor. Sometimes he has specific questions related to Texas history, and sometimes the staff simply trot out new acquisitions to show him.

A not-so-surprising visitor was movie director Ron Howard. Howard was the original director of the 2004 version of The Alamo, and he and his staff did much of their research at the DRT Library. However, Howard and the Disney production company had creative and financial disagreements, and Howard left the project. He was replaced by Texan John Lee Hancock, who also conducted a great deal of research in the DRT Library.

Organization of the Library

The DRT Library functions as its own unit. Administratively, it is not related at all to the Alamo shrine. Stapleton began working in the library in 2000 as a library assistant. She went on to earn an MLS from University of North Texas and became director in 2008. She is joined by seven staff members, including four professional librarians. They are Martha Utterback, assistant director and photograph and art curator; Chuck Tucker, reference librarian; Caitlin Donnelly, archivist; Beverly Ewald, catalog librarian; Madalene Morgan, bookkeeper; Lydia Cuellar, library assistant; and Charles “Rusty” Gamez, library technical assistant. Ewald catalogs any new serials that are received by the library. Morgan is responsible for the check-in of serials, and for maintaining the subscription and renewal records.

Resources

With no acquisitions budget per se, every single item in the library’s collection could be considered a donation. Some of the books in the collection are donated outright. Some items are purchased with donated funds. Stapleton receives publisher brochures and flyers. If a book pertains to Texas or San Antonio history in the specified time period, then Stapleton uses donated funds to purchase. Because it is a non-circulating collection, she seldom buys more than one copy. Stapleton keeps a list of donations that have been made in honor of or in memory of people. When the library acquires a new book, she will ensure that a bookplate is added to indicate in whose honor the book was purchased.

The library currently has between twenty-five and thirty journal subscriptions. Most of those are donated by the organizations that produce them. Some of those are DRT-sponsored organizations. (There are over 6,000 individual DRT members. Chapters are scattered throughout Texas and many at-large members reside in states. San Antonio alone has three chapters.) The journals are almost exclusively about Texas history or genealogy, although there are a few library and archives journals. The library does hold some back runs of historical titles, including...
Cattleman, and Frontier Times. Currently, the library does not provide access to any online journals.

Automation

Since December, 2006, the library has been using an integrated library system from EOS (Electronic Online Systems). The primary use of the system is for the online public catalog. However, the library does also use the system for serials check-in. Current issues appear in the public catalog, and the catalog is available on the Web. It can be accessed from the library's Web site at www.drtl.org. Most of the items in the collection are cataloged, and the Dewey Decimal Classification system is used. Most of the subjects are Library of Congress Subject Headings; however, the library has found it necessary to add a few original headings. “Alamo Defenders” is one example of an original heading. Even the vertical files in compact shelving have been cataloged, although not the individual contents of each file. Currently, the library does not subscribe to any full-text databases, but they do provide access to Heritage Quest Online and PERSI, both genealogical index and abstract databases from ProQuest LLC.

Conclusion

Many people who have lived in San Antonio their whole lives and bring their visitors to the Alamo do not know that the DRT Library exists, and Stapleton would like to change that. The library has had several open houses this past year, allowing visitors to come in to view some of the special items in the library. She would also like to provide more outreach to schoolchildren. Of all the busloads of children that visit the Alamo during the year, most never visit the library. The Alamo has started a summer day camp for nine- to twelve-year-old children, and one of the morning sessions is held in the library. Stapleton would also like to reach out to teenagers to get them interested in Texas history and to cater more to the many tourists that visit the Alamo shrine. To that end, the DRT Library joined the world of social networking in 2009 by starting a page on Facebook. Soon afterward they began a blog, which is updated weekly and highlights the library's collection.

Another important project Stapleton wants to tackle is a new facility for the library. Fortunately, the DRT agrees with Stapleton and has started a capital campaign for a new building. A new facility will be somewhere on the grounds, even if that means increasing the grounds. The library cannot build up, as that would detract from the view of the Alamo shrine. And for the dedicated employees of the library and the members of the DRT, that is of the utmost importance.

Notes