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The Western Man in the Eastern Parlor

ALFRED BUSH AND THE PRINCETON COLLECTIONS OF WESTERN AMERICANA

STEPHEN ARON

THE essays in this issue honor Alfred Bush by using the Western Americana collections of the Princeton University Library, an assemblage of printed matter and artifacts that Bush cherished and developed during his long tenure at Princeton. As the essays detail, when it comes to western North America, the Princeton Library contains many treasures, large and small, worthy of close attention. Reflecting Bush's profound commitment and curatorial acumen, these holdings have supported and will surely continue to support path-breaking scholarship about the West and the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

The strength of the Princeton Collections of Western Americana may come as a surprise, for few places are more closely associated with the "eastern establishment" than Princeton University. True, more than a century ago, while Woodrow Wilson was its president, Princeton made a bold bid for Frederick Jackson Turner, whose "frontier thesis" was then emerging as the new paradigm for understanding American history. But Turner did not join Princeton's faculty, and for much of the twentieth century, the study of the American West did not make much of an impact on the Princeton curriculum.¹

Still, thanks to generous donors like Philip Ashton Rollins, J. Monroe Thorington, and J. Lionberger Davis, the university library did gain significant holdings about the West. The contributions of Rollins were especially vital. "Legend has it," relates William S. Reese in his essay in this issue, that Rollins "once told an antiquarian bookseller that he wanted 'any damn thing that mentions a cowboy.'" Certainly, the cattle business in the "Old West" was central to Rollins's collecting interests, but his gifts to Princeton ranged more widely, incorporating

¹ For Princeton's first flirtation with western history, see Wilbur Jacobs, "Wilson's First Battle at Princeton: The Chair for Turner," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 8 (1954), 74-87.

exploration journals, overland travel narratives, and a particularly rich catalog of books about the Rocky Mountain region.²

As steward of the Princeton Collections of Western Americana, Alfred Bush built on the strengths he inherited. Horse and cattle brand books, the subject of Reese's article, is one such area. Here and in other established parts of the collection, Bush added new materials that expanded the time period covered by original holdings backward to the sixteenth century and forward through the twentieth. The holdings he amassed for the twentieth century are rich in archives relevant to American Indian affairs (as two essays in this issue make clear), but he took special delight in expanding this timeline backward into pre-European eras, as when he acquired a conch shell inscribed with Maya hieroglyphs. Their translation established the item as the Library's earliest dated American manuscript; it bears a date equivalent to March 17, 761 C.E.

Bush's stamp on Princeton's Western Americana collections is most obvious, however, in the holdings about Indians, photographs, and especially photographs of Indians. As the essays by John M. D. Pohl and Javier Urcid Serrano, Anton Treuer, Paul Rosier, Daniel Cobb, Owen Luck, and Alfred Bush himself elaborate, the Princeton University Library boasts diverse materials that illuminate the distant and more recent histories of Indian cultures across the hemisphere. Pohl and Urcid's decoding of the inscriptions on a bone fragment attests to the recovery of precolonial rites that characterized the Zapotec civilization of southwestern Mexico and to their connection with rituals that "are still practiced in parts of Mesoamerica today." In a similar way, Treuer's reading of the uses to which the Ojibwe and their neighbors put a "woompa" bag speaks to the links between past and present ceremonialism among Great Lakes Indians. Shifting from material culture to more conventional textual evidence, both Rosier and Cobb mine the papers of the Association on American Indian Affairs to explore the ideas and activities of non-Native and Native reformers in the decades after World War II. The subsequent radical turn of Indian activists and the government crackdown against them are vividly recalled in Luck's first-person account of what happened at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973.

² See Alfred L. Bush, "The Princeton Collections of Western Americana," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1971), 1-17.

Along with enlarging the place of Indians at Princeton, both within the archives and across the university, Alfred Bush's other great passion has been historic photographs. As Martha Sandweiss observes, prior to Bush's arrival, Princeton University's Western Americana collection possessed a sizable quantity of "spectacular photographic images and albums," most notably albums containing nearly one thousand nineteenth-century Indian portraits and views of early-twentieth-century Alaska. What Bush procured were thousands of snapshots, postcards, stereographs, and cabinet cards. In these objects, "small and easily overlooked," he recognized that "the most common sorts of historical images" convey "complex and illuminating stories about the past." Affirming the wisdom of this curatorial vision, Sandweiss's essay shows how nineteenth-century photographic images of the kind brought to Princeton by Bush can reveal information about "how Americans explored the West, how ancient ruins resonated in the American imagination, how government patronage of the arts worked 130 years ago," and "how images entered the marketplace of ideas and shaped popular opinion about unseen places."

Combining these passions, Bush made acquiring, interpreting, exhibiting, and publishing photographs of (and by) Indians a centerpiece of the Princeton Collections of Western Americana. More than a decade ago, with Lee Clark Mitchell, he organized an exhibition, convened a symposium, and authored a book on this topic.³ This project, Mick Gidley writes, grew out of Bush's "lifetime of contemplation of photographs of Native American people." In his contribution to this issue, Gidley considers the most famous photographer of Indians, Edward S. Curtis, and his exposition draws on Princeton's proof-stage copies of the first two volumes of Curtis's *The North American Indian*, the only proofs of that monumental work known to exist.

Less well known than Curtis's work are numerous photographs of the 1862 Sioux Revolt in Minnesota. These, too, are a part of the Western Americana Collection and are the focus of Heather Shannon's article. The images of the 1862 uprising, Shannon points out, were "among the first photographs to document a conflict between Indians and white settlers in the West." When studied alongside the various books, newspapers, and magazines that were illustrated with

³ Alfred L. Bush and Lee Clark Mitchell, *The Photograph and the American Indian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

wood engravings designed after the original photographs (also at Princeton), they “elucidate nineteenth-century photographic publishing practices” and serve as tools for examining “how white conceptions of Native Americans evolved.”

Perhaps Ann Fabian offers the best summation of Alfred Bush’s career and legacy. Like William Brooks, the subject of her essay, the Colorado-bred Bush is “the western man who appeared in the eastern parlor [and] left a trail through the archives.” And quite a trail it is, with discoveries aplenty awaiting those who find their way to the Princeton Collections of Western Americana.