The Warren N. and Suzanne B. Cordell Collection of Dictionaries

In December 1969 Warren N. Cordell, an alumnus of Indiana State University and senior executive with A. C. Nielsen Company in Chicago, donated 453 early English dictionaries in both his and his wife Suzanne's name. This donation began Cordell's long involvement in building the Cordell Collection of Dictionaries, with the main emphasis on pre-1901 imprints and a secondary emphasis on dictionaries and word books published thereafter. A National Endowment for the Humanities grant received in July 1970 allowed the purchase of 434 editions, many in multiple volumes, over the next two years. It also provided seed money for the establishment of a book conservation program and the fostering of scholarly activities related to lexicography. In 1973, when the Special Collections Department opened its doors for the first time, the original gift was transferred to a specially designed Cordell Room adjoining the lobby area of the department.

During the years intervening between the original donation and the Library opening, Mr. Cordell amassed even more dictionaries. In 1974, he donated a second gift of 1,160 editions, comprised primarily of special dictionaries and books relating to language published both before and after 1901. Paul Koda's A Short-Title Catalogue of the Warren N. and Suzanne B. Cordell Collection, published by the University in 1975, was the first description of the Cordell holdings since Earl Tannenbaum's 1971 checklist of the original gift. A significant contribution to scholarship, Koda's catalog brought together a single list of lexicographical and other philological materials in English and other Western languages published from 1475 through 1900. Meanwhile, the Merriam-Webster Company donated 500 volumes to the Cordell Collection.

In 1976, Warren Cordell made a third gift of 1,003 editions, which built on the riches of the first and second gifts. Mr. Cordell made a fourth major gift of 616 different editions in 729 volumes of pre-1901 English and foreign dictionaries to the Cordell Collection in November 1979. This was the last gift that Cordell personally donated to Indiana State University, as he died unexpectedly in 1980. A brief biographical statement is available on a separate web page.

As well, a digital version of a Friends of the Cunningham Memorial Library newsletter from March 1980 has been provided for interested readers. This issue commemorates the life and of Warren Cordell. The fellowship referred to on page three of the newsletter was reconstituted to support visiting researchers (see below). In "Remarks," an essay written for the 1975 catalog of the collection holdings, Mr. Cordell describes eloquently the genesis and development of his obsession with word books. So eloquent and revealing is this essay that it was reprinted twice in succeeding published catalogs, the last time in 1993.

Mrs. Cordell, who passed away in 2002, maintained an interest, along with other members of the family, in the collection. The family continues its involvement in the Cordell Collection, although no one in the immediate family is known to be a collector of dictionaries.

In slightly more than 10 years, Warren Cordell had donated personally 3,232 editions and variants totaling 3,913 volumes. With the 434 editions purchased with NEH funds and the earlier donation
The Cordell Collection grew so rapidly in its first decade that the volumes overflowed the glass cases designed to hold them and, along with other collections, completely filled shelving in the Lobby and in an adjacent storage vault. After Warren Cordell's death, Suzanne Cordell donated the remainder of her husband's lexicographical holdings, but these volumes had to be housed separately until 1986. At that time, a renovation project was completed, allowing the integration of several hundred more volumes selected from this fifth and final gift.

Although occasional gifts have been received from donors since the early '80s, the number of volumes has been relatively small. Nonetheless, between 50 and 75 titles have been purchased annually for addition to the collection since 1980. Occasionally, lexicographical manuscripts have been acquired. For example, about 60 letters to and from Joseph Worcester, dealing both with his personal life and avocation as a lexicographer, were purchased in 1993.

The twentieth-century and twenty-first-century holdings are considered important, especially when they continue dictionaries published in earlier centuries or have a historical perspective. The most significant addition to an existing dictionary are several hundred Merriam-Webster dictionaries published primarily in the middle decades of the twentieth-century purchased in 1994. All post-1900 holdings have been included in a separate database. In this portion of the collection, there are currently more than 2,750 titles and between 4,500 and 5,000 volumes.

As of January 2011, there were over 6,000 titles in the pre-1901 portion of the collection, many of which have multiple volumes, suggesting that the volume count undoubtedly exceeds 8,000. In its entirety, the two components of the collection number is closing in on 9,000 titles and more than 12,500 volumes of dictionaries and other word books, e.g., glossaries, vocabularies, and learners' grammars. Because of the vision of Warren Cordell and the relentless efforts of its various curators, the Cordell Collection has become recognized internationally as the most significant collection of its type.

Warren Cordell originally conceived of the collection as a means to study both the development of the English language in published dictionaries and the tradition of lexicography which developed in Western Europe. It was also his view that the great written works of civilization were best understood by consulting meanings given in word books extant at or near the time of their creation.

Over time, uses not originally contemplated for the holdings became evident. For example, as cultural productions, dictionaries and other reference works are particularly useful as socio-historical tools for studying British and American interaction with other cultures. Inevitably, because of the great depth of the holdings, they serve researchers in many unrelated disciplines as a vast storehouse of definitions or keys to usage of words about which there might otherwise be only conjecture. The emphasis of acquisition remains, therefore, on materials published before 1901.

The depth of representation of several English-speaking lexicographers is especially noteworthy. Not only are there over 280 different editions and issues of Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language(1755) but also many hundreds of dictionaries compiled by legendary American lexicographers such as Noah Webster and Joseph Worcester. Numerous association copies may be
found in the collection. For example, Peter Roget’s annotated personal copy of the first edition of his famous thesaurus is among the holdings. Also included in the collection are 20 rare lexicographical works printed for the first time in the fifteenth century, although the composition of many of them dates back to the pre-Christian era. These are described in Anton Masin’s Fifteenth-Century Linguistic and Lexicographical Works in the Cordell Collection: Catalogue of an Exhibition Held by the Cunningham Memorial Library of Indiana State University (1986).


Additionally, a downloadable brochure briefly describing the collection and various forms of access is also available. Duplex printing is required to produce it on a single sheet of 8 1/2 by 11" paper, and color is required to reproduce the image of the dictionary provided.

An in-house database of pre-1901 imprints is kept current for quick access to holdings by main entry, subject, language, date of publication, and similar access points. On-demand searching is available in the database itself. A searchable database of titles in the Cordell Collection has been made available for searching by author, title, subject (including language), publisher, and date of publication. The results are provided in a short title form, while the full-blown title and publishing information may be viewed by clicking on an accompanying record number. A new feature of this database allows the user to click on a link to the full-blown online cataloging available in online, public-access catalog, or OPAC. A similar database for titles published after 1900 is available also.

Supplementing published reference works and the searchable database are various bibliographies arranged by topic. These bibliographies are occasionally updated. To request a specially prepared bibliography, contact the department by phone or e-mail (see paragraph below).

Finally, while the Cordell Collection has managed to grow on a fairly consistent basis, the cost of many items is prohibitive. Donations both of funds and gifts in kind are encouraged. While appraisals are not provided, most gifts fall within the value guidelines for self-reporting approved by the Internal Revenue Service. The Cordell Collection has received substantial gifts from Donald Thibeault, Barbara Kipfer, the DSNA, and the University of Illinois Center for Advanced Study in association with the estate of Ladislav Zgusta. While the holdings of the Cordell Collection may suggest that it has everything, it does not. Given the scope of the holdings, this is not surprising. Yet even in cases where books an individual wants to donate are already held, the gift can be put to good use in helping in the acquisition of lacking titles or to supplement an existing copy with one that has unique features, such as notations. Please keep the Cordell Collection in mind for gifts.