Significant book collection given to the Baldwin Library for Historical Children’s Literature

By Rita Smith
Curator, Baldwin Library for Historical Children’s Literature

One day in December, 2006, Ocala resident, Dr. Robert Egolf, walked into the Special Collections Research Room at the George A. Smathers Libraries and told the desk attendant that he had some children’s books he wanted to give to the Baldwin Library.

As curator of the Baldwin Library, I often get phone calls from people who have books they found in an attic or a used book store, or that they have had since they were children and they want to give the books to the Baldwin Library. But Dr. Egolf hadn’t called or made an appointment and as I led him back to my office, I wondered what this was all about.

Once seated in my office, Dr. Egolf explained that he had collected children’s books for about 10 years, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and was now ready to move from a house into a condominium where there would be less space for his 2,800 children’s books. He opened a case and began to show me some of the first editions he had collected such as The Wizard of Oz (1900), The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), The Butterfly’s Ball and the Grasshopper’s Feast (1807) and Randolph Caldecott’s picture books. The books were in pristine condition and a look at his inventory list showed that most of them were first editions. It was a generous, unexpected and exciting offer, but I was concerned about the duplication rate with books already in the Baldwin Library. A comparison with the Baldwin Library catalog over the next few days showed that, while there was some duplication, it was not a significant percentage, and many of the items which were duplicates were high use items, such as award books, and a second copy would be a useful addition. A trip to Ocala and Dr. Egolf’s home to see the full collection convinced me that his books would be a wonderful addition to the Baldwin Library and would fill in many gaps, especially in early twentieth-century holdings.

Dr. Egolf grew up in a small town in western Pennsylvania. He claims that he didn’t have an athletic bone in his body and his idea of a good time as a child was curling up in his father’s big leather chair and reading. Some of his favorite books were comic books and the Big Little Books which his mother gave him as a reward. If he behaved, she’d give him ten cents to buy a Big Little Book at the five and dime. His favorite book as a child, one that he read almost into extinction and one that is still in his collection, was Mother Goose illustrated by Fern Bisel Peat.

Dr. Egolf received his undergraduate degree at Yale University and then went to Temple University Medical School in Philadelphia for his medical degree. Because he had in-laws in south Florida and was an avid fisherman, he and his family moved to Miami for his residency. A fellow resident was from Key West, so after residency, they moved to the island and began private practice. His first experience of note in Key West was the arrival of Hurricane Donna which left the hospital without electricity and totally isolated the town for three weeks. Hurricane Donna changed his mind about island living and he moved to Tampa and became the Head of the Infirmary at the University of South Florida. In the early 1970s, he moved to Brooksville where he conducted a private practice until his retirement in 1994.

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As most collectors do, Dr. Egolf has a story about how he began collecting children's books. "I had these frog bookends," he said when I asked him how he got started, "and one day I got the idea that a dozen or so children's books would look good sitting between the frogs so I bought some books to put between them." These books were new ones purchased in a mall bookstore. Initially, he didn't have any interest in or contact with early children's books, but then he went to an antiquarian book fair at a mall in Tampa and bought several nineteenth-century children's books. This piqued his interest in the antiquarian trade and he began to search for books at Haslem's, a large bookstore in the Tampa area which has an antiquarian section, and then he discovered The Lighthouse, another Tampa bookstore that carries exclusively antiquarian books. He began to understand some of the esoteric terms and aspects of antiquarian book collecting and got hooked.

He also subscribed to *AB Bookman's Weekly*, a journal of the antiquarian book trade which includes advertisers from all over the United States. Through this journal he became aware of book dealers who specialize in children's books. He began corresponding with these dealers and for a number of years kept want lists in their hands which he constantly updated. He especially liked children's picture books and used Barbara Bader's reference book, *American Picturebooks, From Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*, as a guide for his collecting.

That day in December, 2006, was a very good day for the Baldwin Library and the George A. Smathers Libraries. Dr. Egolf's gift of 2,800 nineteenth- and twentieth-century children's books is the most significant gift to the Baldwin Library since the original donation in 1977 of 35,000 nineteenth-century children's books. It moves the Baldwin Library towards a higher level of excellence as a research archive. It is a gift that is much appreciated and a collection that offers material for productive exploration by scholars for years to come.
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