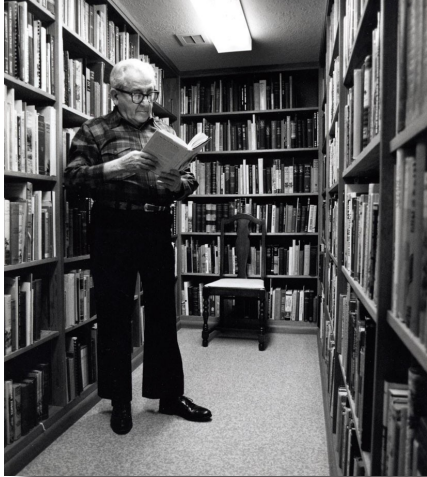


Michael Harrison (1897-2005)



In 1995 the Western History Association named Michael Harrison its honorary lifetime president in recognition of his service to the field as a meticulous collector of Western Americana. Donated in its entirety to the University of California, Davis, his personally-cataloged collection contains more than 21,000 volumes pertaining to the history of the Trans-Mississippi West, as well as personal correspondence and thousands of pieces of artwork and assorted memorabilia.

Harrison accumulated this vast collection over the course of a long and remarkable life that intersected with many topics of interest to western historians. Born on December 13, 1897 in Patterson, New Jersey— just four years after Frederick Jackson Turner read his frontier thesis—Harrison grew up back East but found his calling out West. After graduating from high school in 1916, he worked briefly for the Erie

Railroad in New York City and the Public Service Corporation of New Jersey in Hackensack. In 1918 he enlisted in the Army and served four years before deciding to join the fledgling National Park Service. His western odyssey began as the assistant to the superintendent at Grand Canyon National Park, where he started collecting historical books and Indian art. Harrison also helped promote tourism at the Grand Canyon with a speaking tour for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. In 1931, though, he left the Park Service to manage the Big Bear Lake Lodge in the San Bernardino Mountains, followed by a brief stint as foreman at the Smoke Tree Ranch near Palm Springs. While there he met and married his second wife, Margaret Baker, who became a devoted partner in acquiring and processing items for their collection until her death in 1980.

Shortly after their wedding in 1932, the Harrisons moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Michael went to work for the Office of Indian Affairs as assistant superintendent of the Northern Pueblos Agency. He was soon transferred to northern California and held several posts there for the duration of the Indian New Deal. In 1947, as federal policy shifted again, Harrison left the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for a job with the Bureau of Reclamation. He retired from that agency in 1960 but remained an active collector and amateur historian. In 1967 he helped establish Little Big Horn Associates, which promotes knowledge of Custer and his final battle, and in 1969 Harrison began meeting with UC-Davis officials regarding his bequest.

Two years after being named honorary president of the WHA, Michael Harrison received the Hubert Howe Bancroft Award in honor of his contributions to the dissemination and preservation of western history. He died on April 5, 2005 in Fair Oaks, California.

Sources:

Collection Profile, Michael and Margaret B. Harrison Western Research Center, Department of Special Collections, David Library, University of California, <http://www.celebratingresearch.org/libraries/ucdavis/harrison.shtml>; The Michael and Margaret B. Harrison Western Research Center Collection, <http://library.ucdavis.edu/ul/libcoll/harrison/about.php>

Authored by: Andrew H. Fisher, The College of William & Mary