The Library’s First Dedication Ceremony: Rare book gifts got Library of the Health Sciences off to an auspicious start

By Kevin O’Brien

The grand opening of the renovated first floor of the Library of the Health Sciences-Chicago held on August 22 marked the end of a long process of planning and construction for the improvement of the building and its facilities. The event also served as the formal start of many years of productive use of the amenities designed specifically with the study and education needs of contemporary health sciences students in mind.

The process of planning for the grand opening event gives us an opportunity to look back on the day-long ceremony held on April 22, 1974 to celebrate the opening of the newly-opened Library of the Health Sciences building. Prior to that time, the Library and its collections were housed in quarters in the College of Medicine that dated back to the 1920s. Although the space features a beautiful high-ceilinged reading room (still in use today as a study and event space) it was inadequate for the needs of an institution of health sciences education of the time.

Invitees to the 1974 dedication event included representatives of many prominent medical school libraries from across the country. An honorary degree was presented to Estelle Brodman, an accomplished medical librarian who made numerous contributions to the profession and served for many years at Washington University School of Medicine Library. Dr. Brodman delivered the day’s keynote address, titled “On the economics of medical librarianship.”

A substantial part of the program was the presentation of a number of rare books, archival materials, art works and other items for inclusion in the Library's collection. The benefactors were invited guests and faculty members of the colleges of the University of Illinois medical campus. Taken together, the gifts made to the library make up a fascinating snapshot of the history of the health sciences and the institution that was then called the University of Illinois at the Medical Center.

Among the items presented on that day was what is to this date the oldest book held by the Library of the Health Sciences, a sort of compendium of medical knowledge authored by two Renaissance-period Italian physicians, Dini de Garbo and Gentilis, both residents of the city of Florence. The text, presented by College of Medicine faculty
member and collector of rare books, Dr. Joseph Kiefer, opens with a commentary by Dini on the Canon of Medicine of Avicenna (980-1030), a Persian philosopher, physician, and scholar of Aristotle and Galen. Avicenna’s Canon was an influential text which played an important role in the preservation and transmission of the advances of ancient Greek medicine to Renaissance Europe. Following this part are sections by Gentilis on the treatment of leprosy and bone fractures and a section by Dini de Garbo on weights and measures.

This gift from Dr. Kiefer is especially noteworthy because of the year of its publication, 1496. This date places it in the category of books referred to historians of the book as incunables, or incunabula. This term is derived from the Latin word for cradle and is used to refer to books printed in the 15th century, the earliest period of printing. The word cradle here denotes the infancy of the art of printing.

This book genuinely meets the criteria constituting a rare book. A census of incunables held in U.S. libraries published in 1964 identifies five libraries that own copies of this particular title, with Dr. Kiefer’s gift making a sixth. Additional copies are held in European libraries.

Other gifts presented during the program including an important text from the history of otology published in 1730, Tractatus de organo auditus by Joseph Du Vernay, a landmark title from the history of public health and statistical medicine, Lemuel Shattuck’s Report of a general plan for the promotion of public and personal health, published in Boston in 1850, and a copy of the first edition of the foundational text of the nursing profession, Notes on nursing by Florence Nightingale.

The 1974 dedication program inaugurated a period of over four decades of service of both the building and the staff and faculty of the Library of the Health Sciences. In addition, the generosity of the library’s benefactors that day enriched the collection with the valuable items from the history of medicine and nursing described above. The faculty and staff of UIC celebrated the dedication of the renovated first floor of the Library of the Health Sciences-Chicago as opening a new and equally long period of service to the university’s faculty, staff, and students.

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