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K. Ross Toole speech

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The University of Montana could excel in advanced work on the history of the American West, with emphasis on the Northwest, but a manuscript collection of breadth, depth and variety is fundamental to such a graduate program, a specialist in that area of history told the UM Friends of the Library Friday.

Speaking at the FOL annual Homecoming meeting, Dr. K. Ross Toole of the UM history faculty said the raw stuff of history is very often burned or carted off to the dump before it occurs to anyone that it has value.

"When that happens," he said "there is a stone forever missing from the matrix. You can't fill in the vacant space by interpolation very often -- and you can never fill it in with imagination. So the loss is total."

"The great sweeps of history, the broad interpretations that appear in texts, the multi-volume studies of great events don't seem to bear much relationship to the letters, ledgers, diaries and dusty old papers that come out of attics, barns or cellars," the speaker said. "But that, of course, is where it all begins."

Almost anyone would recognize that the diary of a pioneer had value, or the letters of an early Montana settler, but a great many people would not think of comparatively mundane and recent papers as having any worth at all, according to Dr. Toole. Yet, the latter can yield important information to the historian.

The popular misconception that value depends solely on antiquity leads to the destruction of much valuable material, Dr. Toole said. The face is that much of the history that matters most in the West, most of the truly formative economic and political events, are 20th-century and not 19th-century developments.

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Dr. Toole conceded that the historian can better evaluate and more objectively treat a period somewhat removed from the contemporary scene but said this has no bearing on the collection of recent material. Recent material inevitably becomes old material, he pointed out.

Because the rate of attrition on all historical material accelerates with a kind of geometric progression related not only to the years but to the building boom, last year's records are often in as much jeopardy as records which predate the turn of the century, he added.

Another misconception is that records must be discursive to be valuable, he continued. What the untrained eye dismisses as "just ledgers, just account books" can be more revealing to the historian than the letter or the diary.

Ledgers and account books can provide insights into economic factors and motivations that underlie many events that seem on the surface to be solely political or social, he said. The figures that follow the names in ledgers and account books are often not just deposits and withdrawals or loan dates and interest payments. They are the record of high risk and high faith, the cold gamble or the frightened retrenchment.

If people sometimes undervalue some kinds of records, they overvalue other kinds, Dr. Toole noted. Scrapbooks are an example of the latter because they represent only the quixotic interests or foibles of the owner and so are almost always useless for historical purposes.

Many people over estimate the value of the tape recorded interview with the old-timer, according to the historian. Such interviews can be valuable, but the interviewer must be very skilled to elicit the proper responses. Oral history programs are most successful when they deal with the current man on the scene rather than with the venerable, he commented.

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Although family records, along with bank records, are an important source of historical data, they are the most apt of any type of material to go the way of the incinerator, according to the speaker. Family papers are vulnerable because not only are the old houses vanishing with great rapidity but most such papers are considered "sensitive" by someone in the family.

The fact is, he said, that all legitimate depositories of historical records set restrictions on the use of such materials. Moreover, special restrictions and controls can be imposed by the family.

Noting that about 50 per cent of his job at the University is in the collection of manuscript material dealing with Montana and the West, Dr. Toole said, "Belatedly, we begin now to collect for the University, having recognized that original work requires original material and that advanced studies can not be satisfactorily based on secondary material."

He stressed that the University can not delay the acquisition of collections that offer graduate students of western history opportunity and stimulation.

"If we let another decade, or five years -- or maybe even two years pass, it can never be done again," he warned.