Continued from front page

words and the place? How do we address the difficult issues raised by Du Bois effectively? What are the refined and honed points we want to communicate about someone as complex as Du Bois? How do we bridge the local with the international?”

Bunch spent most of a day in Great Barrington to learn more about the story of W.E.B. Du Bois and went away having also heard stories of Elizabeth Freeman, James Weldon Johnson, the Rev. Samuel Harrison and a lot more.

Elaine Gunn, a member of the Steering Committee of the Friends of the W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite, stood at the commemorative boulder and related the experiences of dedicating that property in 1969 as a public park, over loud opposition. Professor Paynter described archaeological digs held at the property.

I drove Bunch and Odell Murry, who holds the literary rights to the Du Bois Papers held by UMass, on a quick tour of places in town ranging from where Du Bois was born (foot of Church Street) to Searles Castle (where he worked as a timekeeper at age 16, when the villa was under construction) to Clinton A.M.E. Zion Church (where he spoke in 1890 of his experiences as a student in Germany).

Bunch over lunch described how he is collecting artifacts related to the African American experience. He has a big budget, but prefers to solicit donations. And artifacts are rolling in. Within another two years, he has to have a collection of quality, exhibit-ready items. He is not tapping the resources of the other Smithsonian museums; he is starting brand new. And the things he’s found? The Smithsonian has a reputation for having the real things, real airplanes, real dresses worn by the first ladies.

“Visitors,” he said, “expect to feel the power of the authentic.” He plans to deal with the issues of slavery and racism head-on, yet in a creative and, for whites, comfortable manner.

Particularly challenging is the accumulation of popular culture items. He was offered Michael Jackson’s hat for $1 million. He told the potential exhibitor to call him if he didn’t find another taker. Bunch ended up with the hat for $10,000. Already in the collection are a skimpy costume worn by Josephine Baker (“It doesn’t take up much storage space,” he joked) and a dress another Jackson, Mahalia Jackson, once wore (“Now that’s meaningful to me”).

But pop culture is hard to gauge. “I want my curators to build a collection that, in 50 years, future curators will be able to use to make sense of what was going on in the 2010s,” he said. Already, Fonzi’s jacket and Archie Bunker’s living room set are puzzles to the youngest visitors to other Smithsonian museums.

Bunch is fully confident in himself and his staff. He wants to create a great museum, one that will convey the American experience, not just of Blacks, but of all of us.

Bunch has very high standards. Exhibits will be given test runs before they are fully mounted. This comes, he said, from the National Museum of Native American History finding that some of its displays are duds.

“I can’t spend $300 million [on artifacts] and have a bad exhibit,” he said.

He also can’t rely on old exhibition methods. He expects 6 million visitors a year will walk through the doors of the 190,000-square-foot exhibit space. They have to be engaged yet move efficiently.

Dr. Bunch is receptive to possible collaborations with UMass Amherst and the Friends.

He left pleased at having a far greater understanding of Du Bois in general, and Du Bois in Great Barrington in particular. —Bernard A. Drew

Dr. Maurice Hobson is W.E.B. Du Bois Post Doctoral Associate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries W.E.B. Du Bois Center, appointed for a one-year term in September 2009. He has helped set up the Center’s structure, worked with the campus advisory board, assisted in the recruitment of a national board of directors and identified funding sources.

Hobson has a Ph.D. in African American History from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and an M.A. in American Studies from the University of Alabama. He has taught at Tuskegee University, the University of Alabama and the University of Illinois.

The W.E.B. Du Bois Center was established in association with the Special Collections and University Archives Department of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library at UMass Amherst to promote scholarship and public engagement in the ideas of social activist W.E.B. Du Bois. The Library holds the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers in Special Collections and is custodian of the Du Bois Boyhood Homesite in Great Barrington.

Dr. Maurice Hobson
A Du Bois Archive for the Future: Digitization Underway Thanks to Verizon Foundation Grant

By Bernard A. Drew

I
digitized one of W.E.B. Du Bois’s letters. It was written May 22, 1928, on stationery from the National Hotel, Upper Bedford Place, London, to the Institute of Journalists. I positioned the letter face down on the bed of the Scanner 8200 scanner. Aaron Rubinstein tutored me through the steps in the PhotoShop program and in a blink I was typing the file name and placing it in a folder.

In another year, when the Du Bois Papers start to go online, I’ll be able to look it up from home and read what the letter was all about. I’ll be able to download a PDF file.

The historical importance of the materials accumulated by Great Barrington native W.E.B. Du Bois over nine decades is monstrous. The papers are, of course, all about him, but they are also about the civil rights movement in the first two-thirds of the 20th century. There’s a menu from Burnet’s Restaurant, for example, signed by nearly all of the participants in the first meeting of the Niagara Movement in Fort Erie, Ontario, in 1905. (They had roast beef.) The notes that became his speech at that landmark event are scrawled on the backs of old sociology survey forms, with cross-outs and new sentences that show how he was thinking and shaping what he wanted to say.

Du Bois, you see, never threw anything away. Anything. The collection starts with an 1877 letter he wrote to his grand mother, and ends with his death in 1963.

March Winds Temporarily Close Part of Path

Strong winds the weekend of March 13-14, 2010, were too much for some of the century-and-a-half-old white pines at the rear of the W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Homestead property. Large limbs broke at the rear of the W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Homestead property. Large limbs broke during the strong winds the weekend of March 13-14, 2010.

Included is his large FBI file.

Rubinstein is digital project manager for the undertaking, which is now well into its first two-year phase (underwritten by a $200,000 Verizon Foundation grant). Funding for a second two-year phase is secured through the National Endowment for the Humanities ($324,787). The digitization is one of the first initiatives of the Du Bois Center at UMass.

My wife, Donna, and daughter Darcie made an excursion to UMass to learn about the project. We left the elevator on the Du Bois Library’s 25th floor and found Rubinstein in his office. Rob Cox, head of Special Collections & University Archives, let us know we were in for something special: a visit to the actual room that houses the 170 linear feet of Du Bois papers in 380 boxes. Many of the papers are available online on microfilm. But microfilm has limitations in searchability.

“One of the amazing things about the Du Bois collection,” Rubinstein told us as we went into the storage room, “is he made copies of his own letters. We have both sides of the dialogue.” Many institutions with collections of this sort will bring in a scholar, Rubinstein said, to evaluate the collection and decide what should be microfilmed or, these days, digitized. For the Du Bois Papers, UMass is going for it all. It is digitizing everything. An early estimate, Rubinstein said, was 100,000 items. They now think there are actually 200,000 individual items. But they’re already up to 1923. (When Du Bois acquired a typewriter, he wrote more. And when he acquired a secretary, he wrote more yet.)

They are re-boxing and consolidating as they go, so all of the boxes will be full when they are done.

“We’re trying to take the long view,” Rubinstein said of the intensity of the format chosen for the digitization. “We want the information to outlive our present computer systems and always be there.” Staff members picked out a few favorites for a Du Bois birthday-month (February) display, explained Danielle Kovacs, curator of collections. One is a photo of Du Bois in his first snazzy auto. And beside it a letter he sent to his assemblyman, explaining that he was doing a lot of auto camping, and thought it prudent to secure a pistol for security.

Rubinstein said the digitizing is actually the easy part; it’s the cataloging that takes time. Each letter is examined individually, compared to the scan, then entered into a sophisticated program with details of date, addressee, names mentioned, subjects and more.

“In archives, usually a description is given at the collection level,” Rubinstein told us. “But we are doing it item by item.” Future researchers will be able to lookup every letter Du Bois wrote on a given day, or every correspondence he had with, say, Marcus Garvey.

The Du Bois collection is about 80 percent correspondence. Rubinstein said, but includes photographs, ephemera and printed materials.

“We hope by June to have the fundamental features of the digital repository set up and be able to put what we have so far on line,” Rubinstein said.

Scans are made at 300 dpi and 34 bit color. Every pencil mark shows. Files are saved as TIFFS. Later they will be reconfigured for economy on the Internet. Users will be able to search for specific items in the collection, and to see what similar materials are there.

Darcie placed the second page of the Du Bois letter on the scanner bed. Donna took photos. We documented our little family contribution to this fascinating project.

Randolph W. Bromery: Out of Egypt With the Papers

Dr. Randolph W. “Bill” Bromery trained as a geophysicist. During World War II, he was a pilot with the famed Tuskegee Airmen. After the war he helped develop airborne geophysical surveying for the U.S. Geological Survey. He joined the faculty at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1969, became department chair that same year, and was soon appointed vice-chancellor. It was while he was chancellor, from 1971 to 1979, that he worked with the late Shirley Graham Du Bois to secure the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers for UMass.

“We took 72 boxes out of Egypt,” he recalled in March. “We hired local packers who could speak English, so we could prepare a manifest. Wouldn’t you know, a Customs agent reached into one of the boxes and pulled out the one item not on the list. He informed me how long I might stay in a jail in Egypt. I didn’t look forward to that.” Bromery managed to sort it out, and “we were allowed to go so far as to watch them place the crates on a TWA airplane.”

Securing the papers was one thing; making them available to researchers was another. Because of Du Bois’s political views, UMass was not allowed to use state funds to catalog and index the materials. “Senators Ed Brooke and Ted Kennedy helped us get the money to do the work through the National Endowment for the Humanities. It took six years.”

Today, as the papers are being brought into the digital age, researchers flock to the 25th floor of the Du Bois Library to make use of its near-century’s worth of history of the American civil rights movement. — BD