By Kim Wallis

Historical research is contagious. Just ask Walter H. Roeder who is an invaluable volunteer at the Sonoma State University Library Archives. Walter assists the library by helping to organize, sort, and evaluate historic collections and donations to the Library.

The Leopold Justi collection, which contains over 5,600 items, is one of the collections Walter has worked with over the last eighteen years. Walter published an article in the third issue of the 2005 Sonoma Historian about Leopold Justi and the collection.

Leopold Justi was a true renaissance man. He was a Justice of the Peace in Glen Ellen, he grew grapes and made wine, he was an insurance agent, a farmer, and a school board trustee. He was known locally as the “Marrying Magistrate” due to the number of weddings in which he officiated. He attended the Pacific Business College in San Francisco where he studied bookkeeping and he was assistant to the Director of the Industrial Home for the Adult Blind in Oakland, California. He studied viticulture at UC Berkeley where he became interested in phylloxera disease and the science of grafting grape vines.

Justi, born to Charles and Marie (Mary) on October 21, 1864, was the second to the oldest of eleven children. He died on October 29, 1946 of complications from surgery. Justi’s father emigrated to New York from Germany and landed in Glen Ellen via San Francisco and Charleston, South Carolina. Charles Justi was the first postmaster of Glen Ellen.

In 1992 the University Library received sixteen boxes of materials from the heirs of Leopold Justi. As Walter’s article from 2005 stated, these boxes were full of interesting and unusual artifacts. Everything from photographs, greeting cards, manufacturers’ pamphlets for assorted equipment, newspaper clippings, business cards, legal documents, shipping labels, maps and diaries were included in the boxes.

In 1995 Walter “volunteered to finish the job of putting all 5,600 items in alphabetical and chronological order.” Over the years he has continued to refine, review, and explore the collection. Below is information from my recent interview with Walter.

18 Years of Research

Roeder received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1950 from SUNY in Buffalo, New York. After serving in the Korean War, he obtained a librarian degree from Syracuse University and worked from 1954-1968 in Buffalo. Walter then went to Cal Poly Pomona where he was the head Reference Librarian for sixteen years and subsequently became the Archives Librarian. Thus began Walter’s love for and expertise in the world of research/history/archives. After retiring, he moved to Sonoma County in 1994 and started volunteering at the Sonoma State University Library Archives and the Petaluma Public Library History Room.

When I asked Walter why he thought Justi saved the varied materials he collected, he had a ready answer. Justi was a bachelor and whenever he obtained something in the mail or some piece of ephemera he undoubtedly just threw the items in a box. After a box was filled up with items it probably ended up in the “barn or the chicken coop.” He did not have another person living in the house to encourage him to “clean up or get rid of those old boxes”. Since Justi was such a collector I was surprised there were not more boxes and I asked Walter if he thought more materials had existed at one time. It seems that some boxes and items were damaged by the elements or rodents and some items could not be preserved. In addition, there likely were other boxes that ended up elsewhere.

The item in the Justi collection that most fascinates Walter continues to be “a post-earthquake letter that Justi received from his niece, Georgia Merliones” (outlined in the 2005 Journal of the Sonoma County Historical Society article). The letter expressed concern for Justi’s well-being as there was news that Santa Rosa was on fire and “100 people were killed”. Justi’s niece was writing from Oakland and she detailed how she could see San Francisco burning. Other interesting

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letters include correspondence from a gentleman who wanted Justi’s help in being released from military service during World War I, a request from a woman who wanted to collect child support from her husband for her nine children, correspondence from a woman who wanted Justi to speak at her funeral – which he did, and correspondence from Justi’s brother, who was a musician.

*Correspondence to Leopold Justi dated April 29, 1913.*

Justi corresponded for numerous years with several women. One of those women was Emma L. (Anna) Mast. Justi undoubtedly met her when he worked at the Industrial Home for the Adult Blind as she attended school at the institution. Anna had an unusual occupation as she was a coffee tester for over twenty years at A. Schilling and Company of San Francisco. The company stated that “her sense of taste would be more keenly developed on account of her lack of sight.” In the quarterly publication Outlook for the Blind it further stated: “To the company's blender she gives her expert opinion upon thousands of varieties, grown under different altitudes and varying weather conditions which affect a coffee crop. The Schilling Company affirm[s] that Miss Mast is the only blind coffee taster in the world.”

*Flirtatious Letters?*

Anna personally typed many letters to Justi. Sometimes she would run off the page and text or words would be missing, but for a person who was not able to see she was a remarkable typist. The letters from Anna are playful and sometimes flirtatious in nature and include salutations of: Baby Sour-grapes, Baby Justi, and Brother L. She signed the letters Baby, Baby Nem, Binkie, or The Little Dutch Girl. Walter tried to track down the letters Justi sent to Anna as it would be fascinating to see his side of the correspondence. Unfortunately, he was not able to locate any heirs who had information about what happened to the letters.

We know there was a connection between Justi and the Jack London estate as Justi was an insurance agent at one time and two of his customers were London’s wife and London’s half-sister. I asked Walter if he thought Justi and Luther Burbank, who lived from 1849 to 1926 and created several new grape varieties, had crossed paths. Both men were extremely interested in Sonoma County horticulture. In the collection there is only a seed catalog, a postcard, and an envelope from Burbank’s seed company. Roeder visited the Luther Burbank house to see if he could discover any connections between the two men; which he could not. I like to think the two men were aware of each other and each other’s work.

Leopold Justi lived during what is often termed the Second Industrial Revolution - a period known not just for the Great Depression and Prohibition, and the Dust Bowl migration, but for growth in economic productivity, transportation, and agricultural output. Anyone interested in this period of history in Sonoma County will find the Justi collection insightful and interesting. People who have relatives that lived in Glen Ellen may find legal documents, correspondence, or even greeting cards from their family members. Recently a request was made from someone looking for correspondence between their relative and Justi and several documents were found. I can’t wait to further look at the correspondence contained in the Justi collection to see what “gems” I can discover.

Anna Mast, 1917.

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