

CHAPTER 12

Entertainment

R.K. Maroon: How much do you know about show business, Mr. Valiant?

Eddie Valiant: Only that there is no business like it, no business I know.

From Who Framed Roger Rabbit?

LIBRARY: THE HAMPDEN-BOOTH THEATRE LIBRARY, THE PLAYERS FOUNDATION FOR THEATRE EDUCATION

Address: 16 Gramercy Park South, New York, NY 10003

URL: <http://www.hampdenbooth.org/>

Telephone: (212) 228-1861

E-mail: <http://www.hampdenbooth.org/contact.php>

Access: Open to qualified researchers by appointment

Transportation: Subway lines 4 and 6 to 23rd Street

The Players Club had not been on the original list I compiled of libraries to visit. We had seen the building a few times and looked at it with reverence—it was one of the most historic sites in the city. Founded by Edwin Booth, it had Mark Twain and William Tecumseh Sherman as founding members. When visiting the Masonic Library, I had been tipped off that The Players Club had a library that had some access to the public. I checked and found to my happy surprise that this was correct. I quickly e-mailed the librarian, Raymond Wemmlinger, and set up an appointment for April 1—the only day I would attempt to visit four libraries.



Portrait gallery in the living room.

I was met by Wemmlinger, who looked every inch the part for the role he had been playing for four decades. He is tall with white hair and a Shakespearean voice. He led me into the living room with stained-glass windows looking toward the Square. “This is the original building that Edwin Booth procured in 1888, but this part of it was redesigned by Stanford White, creating a porch and vestibule.” Even without that connection, the room is sheer magic. There are portraits of Kate Hepburn, José Ferrer, and Peter O’Toole. “Ferrer was a past president and frequent user of the library,” Wemmlinger said. Other famous visitors included the author John Jakes and the actress Helen Hayes, who had been the first woman admitted to the Club in 1988.



Portrait of Edwin Booth.

Edwin Booth had felt that theater people did not get the respect they deserved as serious artists, so he collected every book he could find to dispel that idea, and that became the heart of the library, which was founded as part of the original Club. Booth also contributed his letters (more than 2000 written by Booth or to him), scrapbooks, and “prompt books.” Also, he felt that actors tended to hang out with other actors, so he saw the Club as a way for actors to socialize with other distinguished citizens, such as writers and politicians, and thus be accepted in that kind of league.

You might think that an organization formed by and for society’s greatest celebrities would not have to worry about money, but you would be surprised. In 2014, the Club put a John Singer Sargent portrait of Jefferson up for sale to raise \$2 million, even though the painting had been part of an early bequest from Booth. In 2000, the Club’s finances were in such a state that it came to the attention of the state Attorney General. Although there was a lengthy inquiry, there were no crimes uncovered, although it did lead to a restructuring of the organization, with the Club coexisting with the educational foundation that included the library.



Shakespearean stained glass in the dining hall.

Up the stairs, and we went past too many portraits to describe, although the one at the reading room door stood out—Mark Twain. The reading room is a rectangular gem of an ornate, wood-paneled library room. It is a frequent meeting place for public programs. A table at the west end of the room contained postcard-sized pictures of actresses. “We have photos of every actress who ever walked on a Broadway stage—12,000 in all,” said Wemmlinger. A frequent favorite of researchers is the set of two photographs of Evelyn Nesbit, the beauty whose charms led to the death of Stanford White by a jealous husband.



Library Reading Room.

Farther up the stairs, past portraits of Emmett Kelly and Norman Rockwell, there is a floor that was, until the 1980s, devoted to housing actors who were in town temporarily. Those floors were taken over by the library and archive. These higher floors contain the rare books, such as the original Booth Collection and his letters and scrapbooks. This contains playbills and notices about Booth’s performances over a half-century, ending in a farewell performance of *Hamlet* in 1891 at the Brooklyn Academy.

The top floor was an apartment where Booth spent the last few years of his life. On his bedroom wall there are portraits of all of his relatives, including the one whose name he would not speak after 1865. The room also contains three human skulls, used in various productions of *Hamlet*. Holding up one of them, Wemmlinger asked “Do you know who this is?” I was an English major in my day, so I said “Certainly—it’s Yorick, a man of

infinite jest.” One of those skulls is that of a criminal who saw Booth in Hamlet, just before the law caught up with him. His last request before being hanged was to donate his skull to Booth, who gratefully accepted.



One of three skulls used by Booth in performances of Hamlet.

Looking out over Gramercy Park, Wemmlinger told the story of the night Booth died. There was a fierce thunderstorm that did not keep throngs of New Yorkers away from the street in front of the house. Just before the end, the power went off, and Booth's daughter exclaimed "Don't let my father die in the dark!" Moments later the lights came back just as Booth slipped into the ages.

I always ask the librarians where they send researchers to lunch when they are spending serious time at the library. Ray recommended Pete's Tavern, which had been in operation for decades when The Players Club was formed.



Mark Twain billiard memorial.

At this point we were all too aware of my next appointment, so Raymond showed me one more thing—down the stairs to street level, and one more to the pool room. Right above the pool table, there is a cue mounted as a trophy. It was Mark Twain’s designated cue. It was the perfect end to a visit that was off the charts in the matter of the “wow factor.”

LIBRARY: LOUIS ARMSTRONG ARCHIVE

Address: Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library, 65–30 Kissena Boulevard, Queens, NY

URL: <http://library.qc.cuny.edu/collections/offsite.php#armstrong>

Telephone: (718) 997-3700

E-mail: <http://www.louisarmstronghouse.org/about/contact.htm>

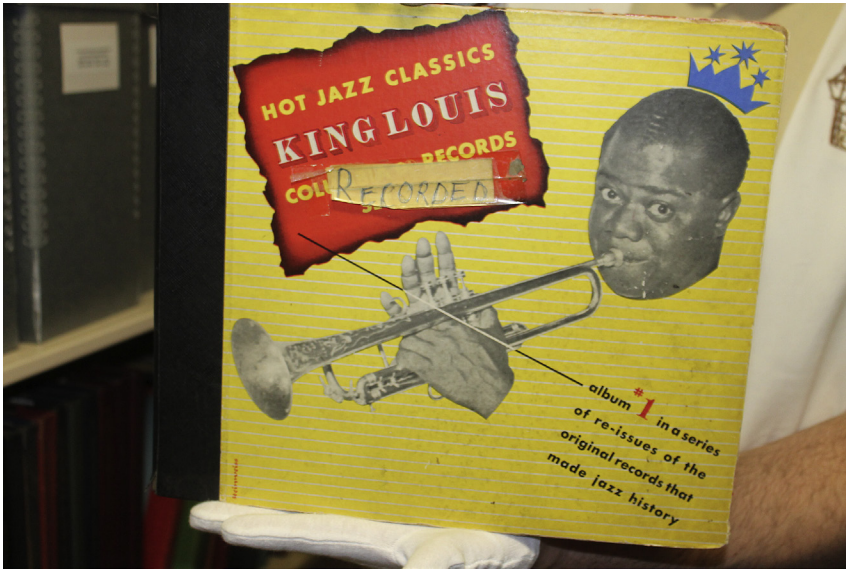
Access: By appointment

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/louisarmstronghousemuseum?rf=115407638474907>

I had been having trouble finding libraries to cover in Queens, so I was very happy to hear about the special collections at Queens College’s Rosenthal Library. In particular, I was happy to visit the Louis Armstrong archives. My son used to have an apartment in Queens a few blocks away from Flushing Cemetery, where Satchmo is laid to rest. His grave is easy to spot—the only one with a marble trumpet resting on the stone. Also, he thoughtfully arranged for a stone bench, so you could linger for a while and have your Louis Armstrong moment.

I had arranged with archivist Ricky Riccardi to drop by on a Wednesday morning in April. The library is in the part of campus farthest from Kissena Boulevard, and when I arrived I announced myself to the security guard, who did not know there was an Armstrong collection. It turned out that the archive is in a room just off to the right of the library entrance. Ricky has been with the collection since 2006 and has been the official archivist since 2009.

Armstrong was an iconic figure in the entertainment world, and he could have lived anywhere he wanted but, in 1943, he chose to buy a house in a working-class neighborhood in Corona, Queens, and lived there until his death in 1971. His wife lived there until 1983 and then donated the house and all of its belongings to the city.



A part of Armstrong's record collection.

After considerable discussion and jockeying about, Queens College stepped up to the plate and opened the archive in 1994. The actual house was opened as a museum a decade later. Riccardi told me that there would be an education center built next to the Armstrong House in a couple of years, and the archive would relocate at that time.

When I asked my standard question about which famous people have visited the site, I was told that Quincy Jones had visited and that Wynton Marsalis had brought his own mouthpiece so he could play one of Satchmo's trumpets.



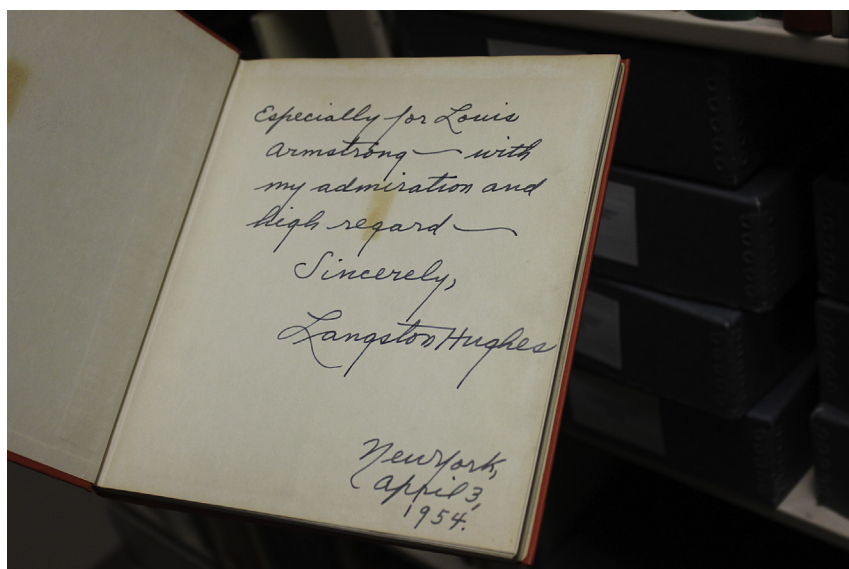
Armstrong's original trumpets.

Much of the funding comes from the Louis Armstrong Foundation which, itself, still gets a considerable income from royalties. When asked what they considered to be their flagship holding, I was told without hesitation that it was a padded case containing five of Armstrong's original trumpets. A close second is a collection of more than 700 reel-to-reel tapes, containing the sounds of concerts, practice sessions, a few off-color jokes, and even arguments with his wife.



Example of Armstrong's tape collection.

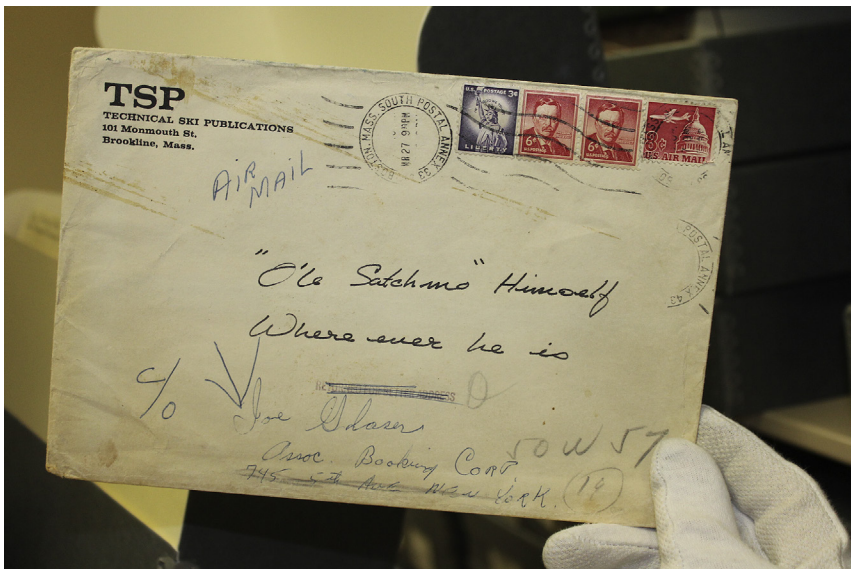
At all times, Armstrong had a keen sense of how important his legacy would be. A number of times on the tapes he could be heard saying "This is for posterity." Naturally, these tapes have already been digitized, and they will be preserved for all time. The only catch is that the estate has not approved the release of these sounds, so I may not hear them in my lifetime.



Inscribed book from Armstrong's library.

The archive room also contains shelves full of the books that were in his home library at the time of his death. There were popular novels by Uris and Steinbeck, but also books in which Armstrong was mentioned. Riccardi held out a copy of a Langston Hughes book about black entertainers, and the title page contains a neatly inscribed note to Armstrong by the author, professing his admiration for Armstrong's work. Pretty high praise for a man who had never gone beyond the fifth grade in school; but then Mark Twain held the same educational credentials.

Further along the archives, we see that they have kept every conceivable bit of memorabilia about the man—dolls, buttons, negatives, contact sheets, and concert posters, among many other objects. “We make the claim that has never been disputed that this is the single largest collection about a single jazz musician in the entire world,” Riccardi said. The international aspect was emphasized when the archive was awarded a massive collection from a Swedish collector that filled in major gaps in materials about Armstrong's work overseas.



Letter that was actually delivered to Armstrong in Queens.

Eventually we made our way back to the main reading room, and Riccardi brought out a pair of ornate satchels on a library book cart. He opened up the first, which contained a selection of Armstrong's mouthpieces. “The last person to blow through this was Louis Armstrong,” he said. No matter how renowned the guest, these were sacred objects. Finally, we reached the

payoff. He opened a velvet-bound case with four of the master's trumpets, including the main trumpet with his name etched on the side. I put on white gloves and had the honor of holding the trumpet in my hand.



Holding history in my hands.

Before I left, I asked Riccardi where he would send researchers to lunch if they were making a day of it. “We have food on campus of course, but, well, you know ...” I have worked at colleges for 25 years. I know. “We always send people across Kissena Boulevard to Gino’s Pizza and Pasta.” At least they will for the next two years. A major education center is being built across the street from the Armstrong House in Corona, and that will be the permanent home for those trumpets.

LIBRARY: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Address: 40 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, NY 10023

URL: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/lpa>

Telephone: (917) 275-6975

Access: Open to the public

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/nypl_lpa

Twitter: https://twitter.com/nypl_lpa

This was my first visit to one of the New York Public Library (NYPL) branches that I had targeted for the book, so I blithely walked in one day, announced myself, and asked if I could set up an appointment with someone in authority. Phone calls were made, hushed whispers were whispered, and I was finally given the name of someone, along with a phone number. “She’s not here today but call her and she’ll be happy to help.” I did that, as well as e-mailing her, and finally got one e-mail back letting me know that she was very busy. I am sure she was very busy, because she was the gatekeeper of all contacts with writers for the entire NYPL system. The punch line is that she never did get back to me, so I resorted to plan B. I would take advantage of the fact that I am a card-carrying member of the library system, visit the libraries I needed because they are open to the public, and write what I find. It was sort of like writing a Yelp review.

There was one item at their library that I was very eager to see. It was the original typed script of the movie *East of Eden*, starring James Dean, Julie Harris, and Raymond Massey, directed by Elia Kazan. It was my favorite movie of all time. I had visited the Kazan archives at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and I had a quick look at the script—enough to know that there are things that were left out of the movie at the last minute. I even have a Web page about the film, so seeing this would give me ammunition for that work. I was directed to visit the second floor and see the reference librarian. He turned out to be a very, very low key information specialist, who stared at his screen for several minutes to verify what I already knew. They had two scripts for *East of Eden*. One was a published version, which was in remote storage. The typed script was, indeed, on their third floor, waiting for me. In the middle of this transaction, Mr. Low Key had to leave for lunch, and he was replaced by a somewhat grim woman. I tried to lighten up the mood by mentioning that I had heard that the Performing Arts Library had videotapes of every Broadway play in the last half-century.

“We don’t have *every* play.”

“This might be my one chance to see the Steve Martin and Robin Williams’ *Waiting for Godot*,” I offered.

“Not just anybody can see those videos. You have to have special qualifications.” Clearly she did not think I had special qualifications. My listing in Google Scholar shows 70 articles and two books, but I did not want to ruin her day by sharing that information.

I headed off to the third floor to see my script, and she called me back. “You know, don’t you, that you can’t check this out. You must use it in the

library.” Gosh, I just landed on your planet and never dreamed of such a thing, I did not say.

On the third floor I had to check my bag, leaving nothing to deal with information but my smartphone and what is left of my brain. I had to fill out a form to request the item, and then another form that explained in some detail who I am and what I was doing here. Despite all of those rules, the people at the special collections desk could not have been nicer. I was supposed to watch the monitor for my number to come up, but the librarian told me to relax and signaled when the item arrived. It was exactly what I had hoped it was, and as I gave it back I mentioned that I would be back at a later time to get a more detailed look. “We will save your information so you won’t have to fill everything out again next time,” she told me.

On my way out the door, I paused to admire a display of Al Hirschfeld art, including his writing desk. By this time, I had seen the writing desks of four iconic figures. New York is, truly, a city of treasures.

LIBRARY: PALEY CENTER FOR MEDIA

URL: paleycenter.org

Address: 25 West 52nd Street, New York, NY 10019

Telephone: (212) 621-6600

E-mail: ScholarsRoom@paleycenter.org

Access: Open to the public with advance reservation

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/PaleyCenter>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/paleycenter>

Transportation: Subway line E to 53rd Street and 5th Avenue

We had visited the Museum of Television and Radio when it opened in its new facility on 53rd Street in 1991. It was a wildly popular tourist site owing to its show business glamor and the fact that you could see television shows from your distant past—just look in their vast catalog and call up whatever you want to see. The museum had existed since the 1970s, but 1991 was when it really came into its own. It was so popular that you had to make your selection and then wait an hour or two for a slot at your viewing station. The museum was a treat in every way, with exhibits and screenings, but it had one overwhelming selling point—this was the only way you could get this information.

Over the years the environment changed somewhat. The Internet appeared in ordinary homes and then the World Wide Web. Something called YouTube came along, which began showing clips of old movies and television shows that users kept on their home computers. I will admit that I had not been to the museum for some time, but I was curious how they coped with this dramatic change of environment. I was delighted to see that they had a Scholars' Room, and further that its manager Mark Ekman was very happy to talk with me about the book. We set up a visit for a Sunday in late Spring. Sunday seemed like an odd choice, but it was great for me because it was easier to get around Midtown on a weekend.

The building is a wonder in itself—designed by Philip Johnson to look like a giant five-story 1940s-style radio. I walked in and was immediately bathed in the glow of media as a wall at the end of the room was showing video feeds from around the world. Mark came down and introduced himself, moving me down the hall to see the enormous lush theater with seating for 200. One oddity he pointed out about the theater is that there is no backstage—all setup work has to be done in advance of a performance.

Next we went to the basement to see the control room, and it looks like a control room that you might see in the film *Network* or the television show *Newsroom*, with giant banks of dials and monitors. It was also where they kept the tapes of their second-tier video archive. The things most likely to be requested are already digitized and in their computer servers, but things that get looked at occasionally are kept on tape and spooled to order on fairly short notice. Tapes that are further down the food chain are kept in a vault through the archival storage company “Iron Mountain.” Not “Cold Mountain”—a mistake that I made in the course of the day.

On a higher floor there are several more smaller theaters. They get a lot of visitors from around the world, including an annual VIP tour from China. Often the group leaders look through the selection and pick out videos for their class. Almost as often, once the people arrive and find out what the choices are, the showing can take an entirely new direction. There are many visitors from Europe and a growing number from South America. Sometimes highly specialized groups arrive, such as the George Reeves Fan Club, in honor of television's original Superman. We went back up the elevator and then up to the top of the 11-story building adjacent to the museum. There we saw the Grant Tinker Boardroom, adorned with original artwork

by Al Hirschfeld. One group shot of CBS personalities had Alan Funt obviously pasted in. It turned out that he hated the original drawing so much that he threatened dire consequences, so Hirschfeld made him a caricature more to his liking.

Beyond that, we entered the William Paley office. He had one of the more unusual executive desks I have seen—a poker table. At the bottom, there is a pair of women's shoes. "Those are Mrs Paley's," said Ekman. She had said there was nothing feminine there, and she decided to fix that. On the shelves was the kind of giant broadcast microphone that you see in front of Larry King.

Last, we went to the Scholars' Room, which contained banks of wide monitors, which replaced the giant viewing booths of times past. Also, they have, since 2007, rebranded themselves as the Paley Center for Media and expanded their lineup of programming, using their immense contacts with media personalities. On that subject, my usual question about famous people using a library was almost meaningless here. Mark told me that there are so many such occasions that they have well-defined rules for dealing with it. The toughest for him was the period in which Valerie Harper was a regular visitor. She was studying Tallulah Bankhead for an upcoming play. The problem is that he himself was a big fan, who often played episodes of the Mary Tyler Moore show at his desk when working late nights. After weeks of restraint, he finally had the talk with her.

I asked him if they could make some arrangement to allow museum visitors to view some of their treasures off-site, given that all of this was becoming digital. He said that would be a dream come true for them, but the contracts from the copyright owners forbid such a thing, so it remains stuck on the shelf of wish list items.

The Paley Center proves that libraries and archives have the staying power to adapt to the most trying conditions.

LIBRARY: CONJURING ARTS

Address: 11 West 30th Street (just west of 5th Avenue)

URL: <http://conjuringarts.org/library/>

Telephone: (212) 594-1033

E-mail: librarian@conjuringarts.org

Access: Open to researchers by advance appointment

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/conjuringartsresearchcenter>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/search?q=conjuring%20arts&src=typd>

Like many a person before me, I have seen a few magic acts that amazed me, a few that did not, and nothing to make me think that actual magic could be produced on demand for a paying audience. I had set up my appointment with this library thinking that it would be just one more library with a distinct specialty, but it turned out to be one of the most surprising visits of the project.

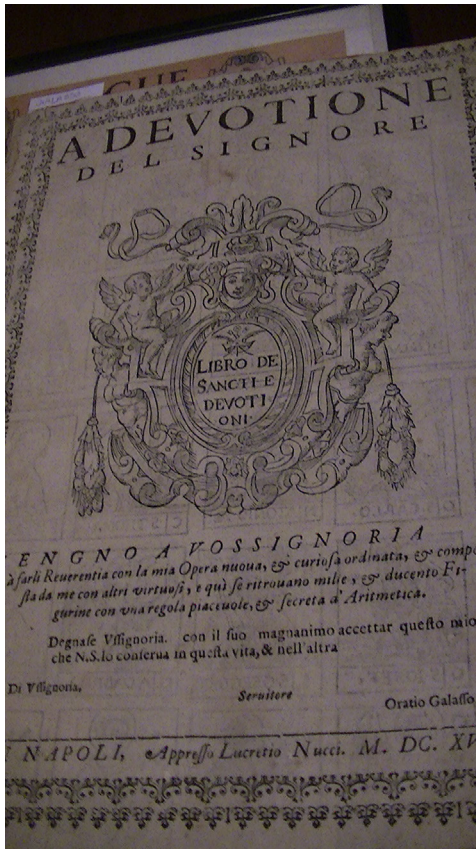
The library is located on an upper floor in a high-rise building just off of 5th Avenue. It is narrow, so you have to pay attention to the number. The library will give you very detailed instructions on how to buzz them, and I managed to get it after a few tries. I rode up an elevator that was packed with residents and a small but friendly dog. I was met at the floor by the reference librarian and introduced to the library's owner, Bill Kalush, whose business card immediately tips you off that this is no ordinary library founder—the extra-large card contains an image of the King of Spades, as well as the usual type of information.



Part of the library's amazing rare books collection.

The tour starts with a look at the rare books room. This is where things got surprising. Kalush makes it his business to collect any book concerning magical acts, including mind games that were found in the back of mathematical texts. This led to him amassing a collection of incunabula the likes of which I had never seen. He told me that he first caught the bug for this type of research while using the New York Public Library's magic collection, then decided to create his own resource, and

15,000 books later, he has created one of the most significant conjuring collections in the world. This collection is noncirculating, but he also runs several circulating collections out of local magic shops—one for books and another for props.



One of the library's rarest items.

Kalush then added another surprise; going into his technical services area, I saw state-of-the-art equipment and learned that they are running a massive digitization program for their original material from magicians. In one case, they had publications from a magician who used a Ditto machine (readers who grew up in the 1950s will know what I mean), and they had a volunteer rekey the words because they were not of sufficient quality to digitize.

He said that the library was initially self-funded and still takes no government money. More recently, though, they have received private grants for their considerable program in education.

I asked about which famous people have used the library and had no trouble in getting several good answers. The late astronaut Scott Carpenter was a friend of Kalush's and had visited the library. Also, the magician David Copperfield had been by.

FURTHER READING

Al Hirschfeld foundation page: <http://www.alhirschfeldfoundation.org/>.

Amazon page for Raymond Wemmlinger - http://www.amazon.com/Raymond-Wemmlinger/e/B001JOYCKA/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1.

East of Eden: A Resource Guide to the Film: <http://www.terryballard.org/eastofeden.html>.

Encyclopedia Britannica article on Edwin Booth - <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/73702/Edwin-Booth>.

Internet Movie Database biography of Walter Hampden - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0358899/>.

Internet Movie Database listing for Louis Armstrong: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001918/>.

Louis Armstrong - biography and song selection: <http://www.redhotjazz.com/louie.html>.

New York Public Library description of Sarum Ellison papers: <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/6267>.

Philip Johnson: <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/biography-philip-johnson>.

Wall Street Journal article about the Conjuring library: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323826704578356542833994224>.

William Paley: <http://www.britannica.com/biography/William-S-Paley>.