

The Dorothy Dix Collection
F. G. Woodward Library
Austin Peay State University

Due to the foresight of former Austin Peay State University head librarian, Ms. Johnnie Givens, a special collection about a local writer with a national reputation exists in the Austin Peay State University Library Archives. It is the Dorothy Dix Collection. As a native of middle Tennessee, Ms. Givens believed that a potential wealth of research materials could be found in homes of families and friends of regional writers in her service area. Because she was successful in her endeavor, the acquired collection meets an objective in developing materials important to its region and is closely linked to those found in larger collections.

Ms. Dix was born and raised at the Meriwether home, Woodstock, located near Clarksville, TN. In 1886, at a time when no respectable woman would dare step into a newspaper office, she began her career in journalism, writing for *The New Orleans Picayune*, and subsequently, for the *New York Journal*.

As the forerunner of today's popular advice columnists, Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer (1861-1951), writing under the pen name "Dorothy Dix," was America's highest paid and most widely read female journalist of her time. Her advice on love and marriage was syndicated in newspapers around the world. With an estimated audience of 60 million readers, she became a popular and recognized figure on her travels abroad.

Although there are several libraries with collections containing information on Ms. Dix, the largest such collection is housed in the Austin Peay State University library archives. In 1969, in an effort to facilitate the development of a collection of materials by and about several prominent local

authors, Ms. Johnnie Givens, solicited information from and about local writers. She enlisted the help of the Assistant to the President, Mr. Felix G. Woodward, who approached Mr. A. Huntington Patch, of Asheville, NC, the favored nephew of "Miss Dix." The request drew a favorable reply. In that same year Mr. Patch sent to the University Library his first shipment of materials by and about Miss Dix. The collection has grown and is now diverse. It consists of approximately 1500 items: personal letters, scrapbooks and journals from her many travels, copies of all the books she wrote, personal mementos, photographs, and many newspaper clippings of her writings. The collection is classified into 15 different categories, including 53 separate folders, which store approximately 1500 individual items.

The seven books written by Dorothy Dix are a vital part of the collection, the only known complete collection of her books. In 1902 Ms. Dix published her first book titled *Fables of the Elite*, a collection of allegories in which animal characters act out domestic incidents and from which the narrator draws a moral. The "beast fables," as they are called, were first published as a series in the *New York Journal* during her first year there as a journalist. Between the years of 1910 and 1920 the "Mirandy" series was published, primarily in *Good Housekeeping* and *Cosmopolitan*. The Mirandy stories expressed folk wisdom in Negro dialect and claimed to be conversations between Mirandy and persons of her race. In 1914 the first volume of *Mirandy* was published, followed by *Mirandy Exhorts* in 1922.

Probably the first letter written to Ms. Dix is found in the correspondence file, entitled "Letters pre-1930." The letter, written by her father, is dated Sunday 24th of May, 1863, before he left his family at Woodstock to fight in the Civil War. Ms. Lizzie, as she was called while a child, was eighteen months old. Her father writes:

My Dear little Lizzie

If you should be deprived of your natural guardian or protector by the untimely hand of death you will be left to the tender care of your most devoted mother, my beloved wife....

Other letters in the collection include correspondence between Ms. Dix and many of her relatives.

After reading several letters by Ms. Dix written to her siblings, her nieces and nephews, one can tell that she cared a great deal about her family. In a letter dated 10 October, 1940, she writes to her favorite nephew Hunt:

I'm glad you liked the check and that you and Bee are going to spend it on some foolishness, though I don't consider clothes in that light. I think they are an investment that give you prestige in other peoples' eyes and buck up your own morale.

It can be seen, therefore, that literary inspiration stemmed from the family and was a part of her life at an early age.

Among the several scrapbooks contained in the collection, one from her Egyptian travels truly depicts Ms. Dix's adventurous nature. Articles, photographs and newspaper clippings vividly describe her exotic experiences with desert Sheiks who would "pay with their lives for the theft of an Arab's wife." Throughout her life Ms. Dix was intrigued by beautiful women. One of those was Cleopatra. Ms. Dix said, "she was the greatest vamp in all history, and she possessed more 'it' than any other woman has ever had. Cleopatra spent a life-time trying to guess how to fascinate men." As she traveled, Ms. Dix showed an interest in the differing relationships among men and women of other cultures. However, in the conclusion of her most popular series, "In the Footsteps of Famous Fair Women," she states that, "the footsteps of fair women lead all around the world and back again to where they started."

Numerous photographs tell the story of a beloved woman. As a child of two years, Miss Lizzie

sits in the lap of her Mammy Emily at Woodstock; as Mrs. Gilmer, during the early years of her marriage to George, she is seen in many family photos with her sister, brother, nieces and nephews.

Her many travels to different parts of the world also are well documented through photographs. She recorded her experiences in the many travel diaries she so diligently wrote while in India, South America, the Philippines, Morocco, etc. These were later published in her book *My Trip Round the World*. As a celebrity of her time, she was honored by many. The photograph album dedicated to her as a remembrance of her visit to the Philippines in 1939 reveals likenesses and information about her many appearances and gatherings while on the islands. Several articles in English and Spanish tell about the "Love" expert's advice to the Manila women who, in turn, ask if Miss Dix has ever fallen in love herself? "Everybody should fall in love," she declares. "It's a good education."

Between the years of 1877-79 Miss Lizzie graduated from the Female Academy in Clarksville and studied at the Hollins Institute in Virginia. On February 1, 1877, her friend, Willie Tandy, presented Lizzie with an autograph book of black leather and gold lettering. On the first page he writes the following:

Light be around thee, Hope be thy guide, Gay be thy bark and
Smooth be thy tide, Soft be the mind that beareth the (sic) on, Sweet
be thy welcome, thy wanderings done.

Over fifty notes of friendship to Lizzie are carefully cited, signed and dated in the autograph book. Miss Lizzie's best wishes are most thoughtful and dear. At an early age she was a beloved friend to many who expressed their love and affection for her, as she did for others later in life.

The most voluminous file in the collection holds many letters and articles that Dorothy Dix wrote in over a half a century. "A Story of War Times: How Chloe Saved the Silver," her first piece written for the *New Orleans Picayune* in 1894, was followed by the "Sunday Salad" column, her

first association with syndication. In 1901 she accepted an offer by Mr. William Randolph Hearst to write for the *Evening Journal* in New York. Many newspaper clippings narrate her sixteen years there as the nation's number one investigative writer. Her first opportunity for major syndication came through a contract that she signed with the Wheeler Syndicate in 1916. Not only did this change permit her to write columns of advice for the lovelorn, it also afforded her opportunities to travel. She no longer had to write about murder trials and court proceedings, which she responsibly reported while at the *Journal*. After seven years with the Wheeler Syndicate she moved to the Ledger Syndicate, which freed her to write advice columns in advance.

At this time, Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, writing under the pen name "Dorothy Dix," had become America's highest paid and most widely read female journalist. Her advice on love and marriage was syndicated in newspapers around the world. With an estimated audience of 60 million readers, she became a popular and recognized figure in her travels abroad.

These are but a few highlighted samples from the Dorothy Dix Collection in the F. G. Woodward Library. The addition of this collection to the University Library, has increased opportunities for students, faculty, and other library patrons to conduct original research on a local figure with a national reputation. It also has allowed the APSU Library to become a connecting link between other university research centers where additional information on Miss Dix is available.