

# Making history live

## How to get students interested in university archives

by Laurie L. McFadden

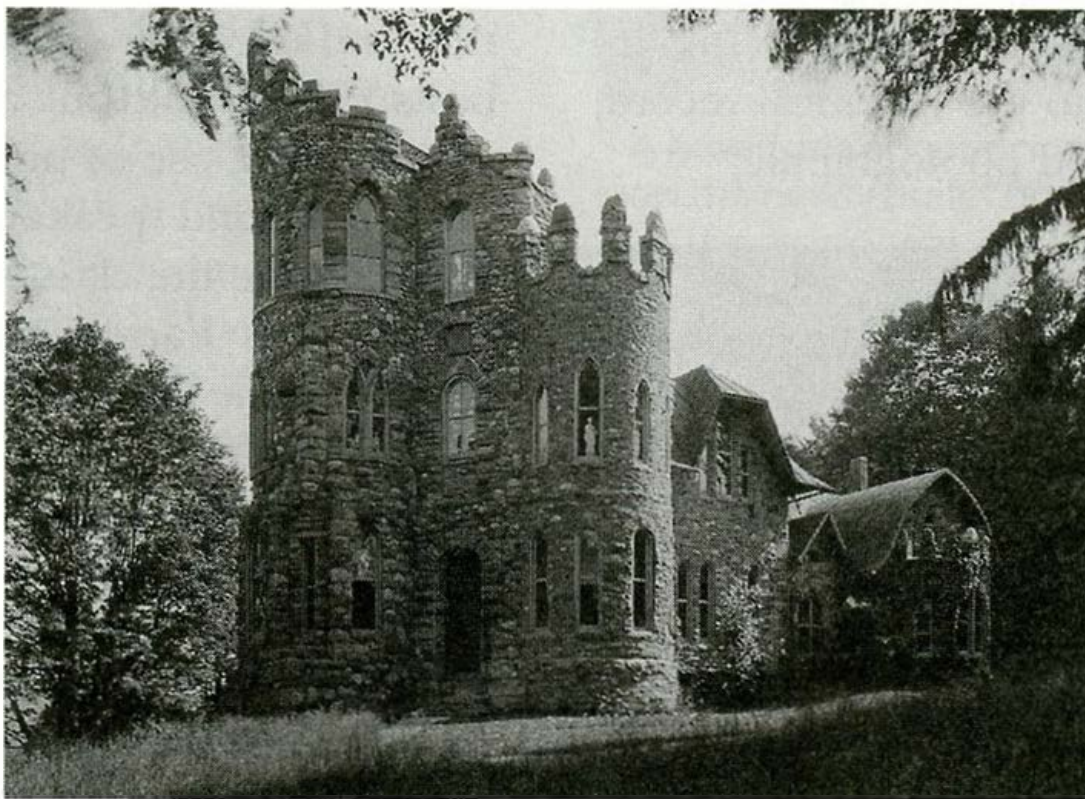
Wow! This is great! Hey guys, come look at this!" Sound like some kids at an amusement park or maybe in a toy store? Believe it or not, these were comments frequently uttered by college students who were taking a semester-long seminar centered exclusively around the university archives. As a librarian with faculty status (who is also in charge of the Special Collections/University Archives Department), I am eligible to teach classes in our university honors program.

Since many university archives are housed within a library, it's important for librarians and faculty to recognize the importance and potential of the archives. Not only are they keepers of institutional history, archives can, and should, be learning laboratories. Including archives in the library's educational program benefits the students and can be an excellent public relations tool.

In this age of computers and online information resources, it is easy to forget that students should also be taught how to handle and conduct research using primary docu-

ments. College students can get excited about archives and all the riches found within. And they don't have to be history majors; there is something for students in performing arts, photography, literature, and more.

If more college students, particularly freshmen, were given the chance to discover the



Completed in 1892, the Steinheim (stone home) was originally a natural history museum. It was recently renovated and is now the career development center.

history of their college, I believe they would not only enjoy it but also gain more respect for their institutions and become more involved and dedicated alumni. Undergraduates need the opportunity for hands-on research using primary resources. If it can be interesting, and educational, so much the better. The fun part of such an experi-

ence is learning about early student life. The serious, and probably the most important, part is learning "to write from original source materials without having to rely on interpretations found within published histories. Furthermore, the study of archival documentation tends to heighten the understanding of the study of history as a deductive process and the [students] learn more dramati-

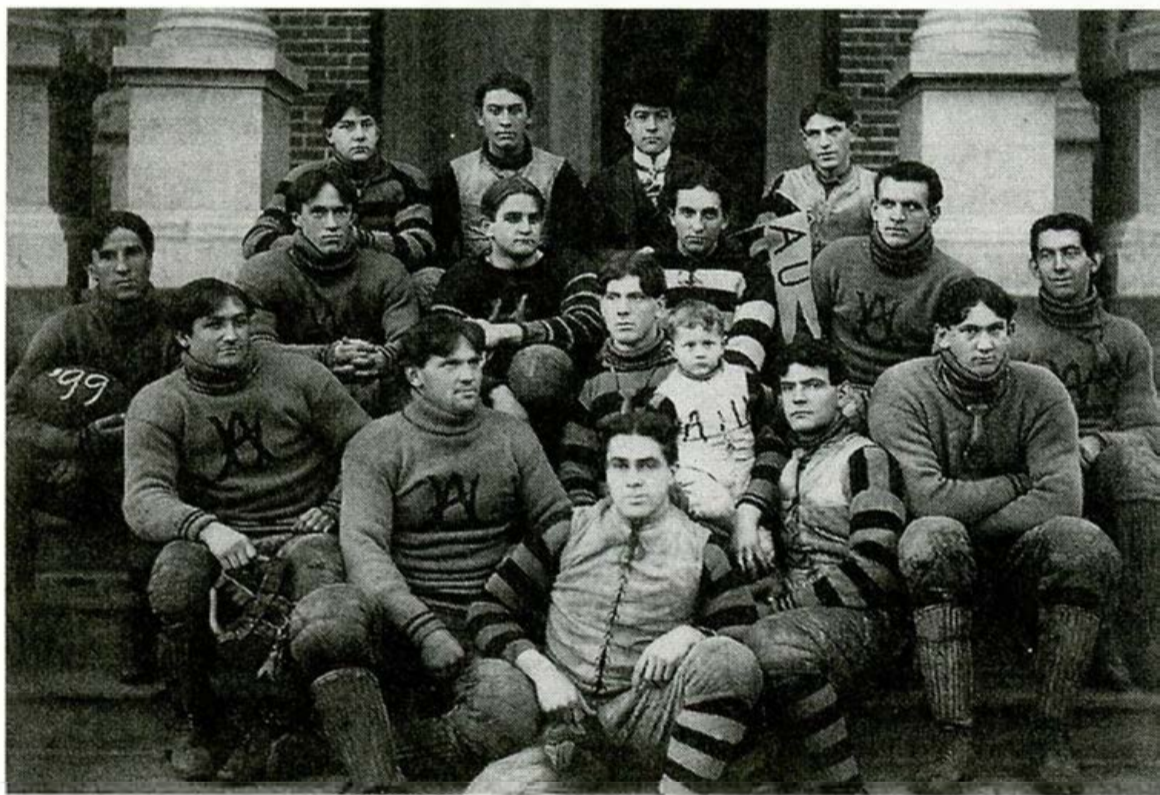
### About the author

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cally how the interactions between people and events have shaped the history . . ." of the institution.<sup>1</sup>

### **A fun way to introduce primary resources**

The focus of the two-credit seminar I developed was to examine student life at our university in the late nineteenth century, specifically the 1890s. Each student chose a different aspect of student life such as athletics, early lyceums, music and fine arts, and student pranks. We met one night a week for two hours in the Special Collections/Archives Reading Room. The seven students in the class were from various academic disciplines and ranged from freshmen to seniors. Not only does such a seminar introduce students to using primary resources, it also gives them a better understanding of their institution's history, an aspect I believe is extremely important to more fully complete their college experience. "An experience such as this might be likened to that of an archeological dig, but in this instance, a digging into the historical record, both written . . ." and photographic.<sup>2</sup>



One of Alfred University's early football teams, 1899.

Learning about Alfred University's 161 year heritage allowed the students in my class to better appreciate and be more attached to our campus. Some of the students in the class lived in a residence hall built in 1858 and were able to research the building's history that had, until recently, housed predominantly female students. So, not only did they discover information and photographs of the building, they were able to delve into the history of women on campus, too.

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### **Guest speakers and assignments**

The class included three guest speakers, four assignments, and a field trip to our town's local history collection. Since I'm not a trained historian, I needed outside help in giving the students a perspective for what life was like in the latter part of the nineteenth century. I wanted them to get a taste for it on a national, regional, and local level since each one had an impact on student life. Our associate provost, who recently completed her dissertation on early education at Alfred University, made a presentation and used her research not only as the basis of her talk but also as a prime example of the use of primary resources. The

second speaker, a history professor, gave the class an overview of what was happening on the national scene during the 1890s. She covered such topics as politics, music, social life, and even the Lizzie Borden murder case. The final speaker was our county historian who was able to give students an idea of what events were taking place in our region.

The assignments were arranged in somewhat of a "funnel" approach. The first one was very broad and the following ones became more focused as the semester went on.

For the first assignment, each student was given a different year from the 1890 decade and asked to develop a timeline of major events. Oral presentations of these timelines allowed everyone to get a sense of the times. The second assignment was to research their student life topic on a national level and write a two-page paper on their findings. Their third assignment, and the main focus of the class, was to research their topic as it pertained to Alfred University's history, us-

ing primary sources found in the university archives. Although there was no minimum or maximum length to these research papers, the students were asked to include illustrations (photographs or drawings). Again, oral presentations were made at the end of the semester. The last assignment was very personal. I asked them to write about student life today and most of them recounted specific stories from their time at college.

These personal stories are what archives need. I write historical articles for our alumni magazine using archival material and receive numerous responses from alumni who remember the event or topic I address. They enjoy their college memories, which recall the fun times and friends of yesteryear. The more stories of "I remember when" that are sent in, the stronger the university archives becomes. These stories are what give "life" to the university's history and make it more tangible to current students doing research. It is possible to develop an institutional history based on facts found in annual reports, student newspapers, and departmental newsletters but they lack the human element, the fun times with friends, the jokes and pranks, and other personal experiences that no one writes down. Having students record their memories while they are still fresh is one way to ensure that our history "lives."

### **Future benefits**

Hosting a class in the university archives serves a twofold purpose. It teaches students the importance of primary resources and how to use them, and it also is a way for the archives to receive help in researching its holdings. I compiled the students' research papers and illustrations into a booklet in which I included a brief synopsis of the seminar and an overview of Alfred University during the 1890s. Copies of this booklet, along with their papers on student life today, are now part of the university archives, to be used by future researchers.

The class and its work has also been a wonderful public relations tool for both the archives and the library. Word of mouth by the students, presentations to local organizations, and a poster session at the 1997

# HEAR YE!

Strawberries,  
Brick Porch,  
Ice Cream,  
Brick Porch,  
Cake,  
Brick Porch.

Brass Band,  
Brick Porck,  
Electric Lights,  
Brick Porch,

All For 15 Cents.

Ladies Hall Lawn,  
**THIS EVENING.**

Bring Relatives, Present and  
Prospective.

A broadside announcing a strawberry festival on the newly built "brick" porch. Ladies Hall, or the Brick, was one of the first places in Alfred, New York, to get electricity.

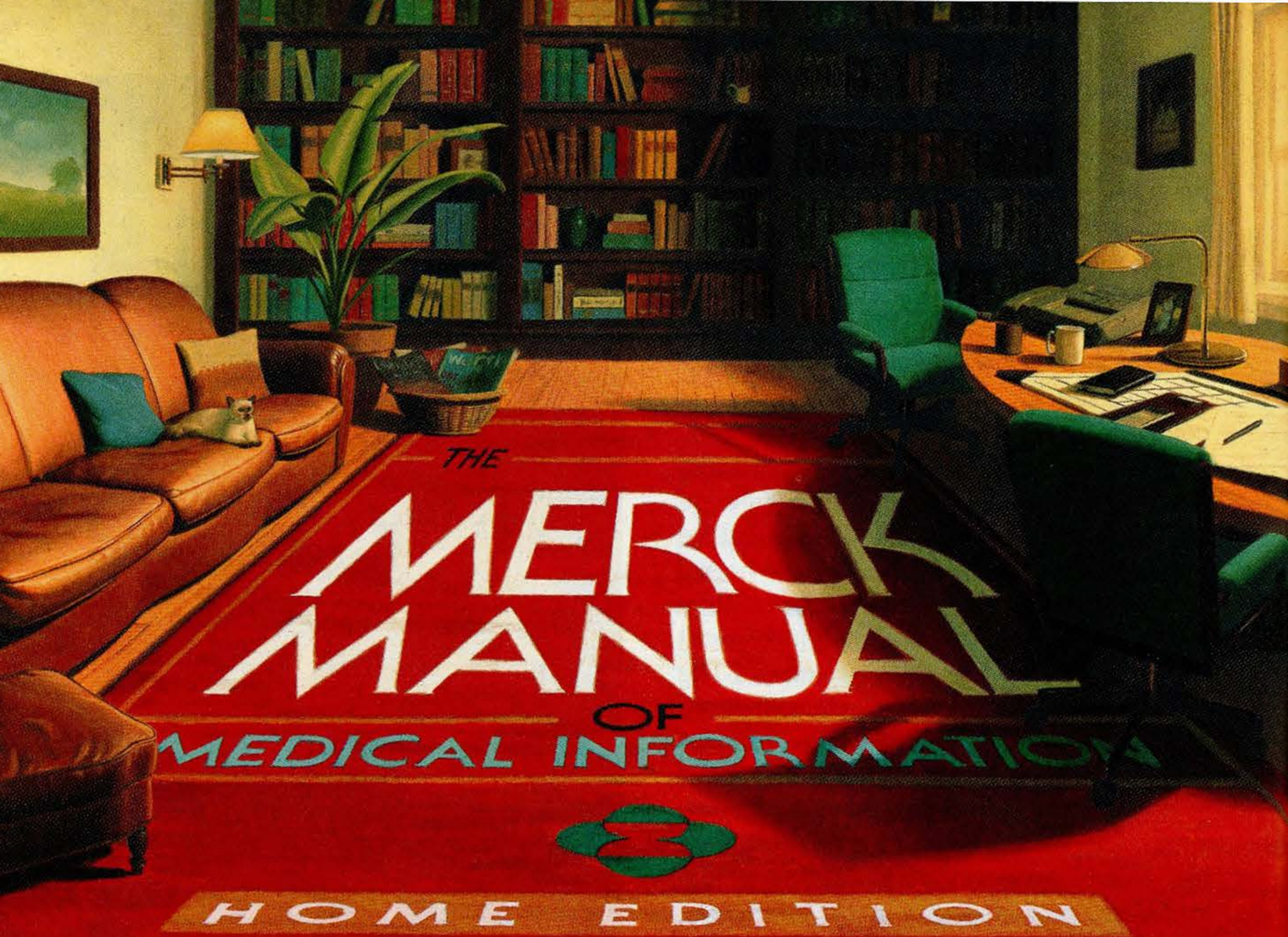
ACRL conference in Nashville have all raised the awareness of the potential of the archives. The seminar was also nominated for the New York State Archives and Records Administration Archives Week Award.

It's my hope that a similar course (or courses) will be taught in the future so that more students will be drawn into the treasures of the archives and our history will be further researched and documented. Students can get excited about primary resources, if we just give them the chance.

### **Notes**

1. James R. Alexander, "Agencies and Universities: Building Opportunities in Public History Field Training," *History News* 49 (November/December 1994): 30.

2. Lt. Col. Jim Hopkins and Duane Reed, "Teaching Historical Methods Through the Archives," *Colorado Libraries* 19 (Summer 1993): 36. ■



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