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The First Ninety-nine Years of the McGoogan Library of Medicine: 1881–1980

Kristin Watkins

University of Nebraska Medical Center, kristin.watkins@unmc.edu

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The first medical library in Nebraska started with the incorporation of the Omaha Medical College in June of 1881. The Omaha Medical College began in a wooden building located at Eleventh and Mason Streets. It housed, “…two large lecture rooms, a laboratory, a library and museum room, a patient’s room, a dissecting room, and an anatomist’s room.”¹ There was no librarian; the documents, pamphlets, and books came primarily from the personal collections of the Omaha Medical College founding physicians.²

Medical libraries are common in the United States at most top tier medical schools and hospitals, and are an important part of layperson or professional medical education and awareness. The first two medical libraries in the United States were established in Philadelphia, the library of the Pennsylvania hospital in 1760, and in 1788 the medical library at the College of Physicians.³ In the nineteenth century, the Midwest was no different from the East Coast in its need for medical information, but an actual medical library came later in time. Nebraska did not become a state until 1867. It did not have a med-
ical school until 1881, and at that point gained its first medi-
cal library.⁴

The origins of the University of Nebraska Medical Center’s McGoogan Library of Medicine consisted of a modest assemblage of books and papers. It progressed into a significant collection of rare books, artifacts, and learning tools of all types. This mirrors the beginning of the National Library of Medicine, which started as the personal library for the United States Surgeon General. Founded in 1818, the National Library of Medicine began its life in Washington, D.C., and moved to its new and current location at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland in 1962. Rooted in military beginnings, the Surgeon General developed it to aid his office, in particular to address communicable diseases that had devastating effects on military populations, especially in battle. What evolved from humble beginnings as the personal use library of the Surgeon General is now a mega-complex and the largest medical library in the world.⁵

In the 1880s, the Omaha Medical College’s board of directors’ membership changed frequently, as did the curriculum; the medical library had no librarian present in the facility. In 1893, the College constructed a brick and stone building at twelfth and Pacific Streets. Four stories high, it had a basement and included steam heat, lighting, and indoor plumbing. Records do not indicate a formal library, but a students’ read-
ing room accompanies the museum. In 1899, the Pacific Street fa-
cility doubled in size; again, records do not mention a library.

In 1902, the Omaha Medical College reached an agreement
with the University of Nebraska Board of Regents and became the
College of Medicine of the University of Nebraska.

In 1913, the College of Medicine moved to a new brick la-
boratory building located at Forty-second and Dewey Streets,
with a library occupying the third floor. During the early years
of the library, from 1913–1946, there were four librarians,
three deans, and considerable library growth.

The Pulse, a College of Medicine newsletter from 1913, re-
calls the library as, “...a room full of white-painted wooden
shelves, many musty books and a lehrbucker [textbook]. There is
one large table in the room, on which repose various minor medi-
cal periodicals...” It quippingly recalled, “The library has two
phases – open and closed.” At the time, the library was open
four hours a day; by 1917, thirteen hours a day, from 9 am to 10
pm. The library contained 12,000 volumes and one-hundred thirty-
five current medical journals.

Dean Wilson Bridges, MD, was the first Dean to lead with a
head librarian in place, and his tenure with the College of Med-
icine ran from 1913–1915. Irving Cutter, MD, served as Dean from
1915–1925. Beginning in 1913, there were three librarians: Mrs.
H. Dorsey Barry, 1913–1914; Harriet (Hallie) Wilson, 1914–1921;
and Madeline Hillis, 1921-1940.¹¹ For a comprehensive list of Librarians and Deans, refer to Appendix A. Dean Cutter was instrumental in the consolidation of the medical campus in Lincoln, with the University of Nebraska College of Medicine. The Lincoln school opened in 1902 and closed in 1913. He brought books from the department in Lincoln and the Lancaster County Medical Society to Omaha and expanded the College of Medicine’s medical library. Cutter began the rare book and history of medicine collections for the library. This era saw Le Roy Crummer help the College develop their rare book collection and their bibliophilic skills.¹²

Le Roy Crummer, a heart specialist who practiced medicine in Nebraska from 1906 to 1925, served on the faculty of the College of Medicine two separate terms and retired in 1925, professor emeritus. Crummer and Cutter’s tenures overlapped, and Crummer purchased some rare books for the College on his bibliophilic trips to Europe.¹³

Crummer’s collection was second only to Sir William Osler’s according to an article on bibliophilic physicians in the twentieth century. Included in the group were Dr. Hiram Winnett Orr, of Omaha, and ten other physicians, no others associated with Nebraska. Eventually Orr’s collection would be lent permanently by the American College of Surgeons to the University of Nebraska College of Medicine library rare book collection.¹⁴
The most influential rare medical book collector of the age was Sir William Osler, a physician with roots in Canada. He practiced medicine in the United Kingdom and eventually the United States. He brought with him his love of medical books and Shakespeare. Osler held many prominent faculty positions in Canada and Britain, and wrote about the importance of the medical library in postgraduate work.\textsuperscript{15} He donated his collection primarily to McGill University, his alma mater. His ashes also repose there, stored amongst his books.\textsuperscript{16}

Le Roy Crummer was a self-described bibliophile and spent considerable time, effort, and thought, on his book collecting. He expounded on the description of his study of book and auction catalogs as a “daily habit.” Familiar with the best-known booksellers and collectors across the United State and Europe, he had a remarkable understanding and knowledge for not only his own collection but for many areas of the medical bibliographic record.\textsuperscript{17}

Crummer traveled frequently to New York and London to purchase rare books. He especially liked Maggs in London where he said many of his greatest treasures came from. He embraced book collecting as a way of life and the key social interactions that went along with it, including rich conversation, food, and smoking cigarettes.\textsuperscript{18} In Paris, the bookshops were full “mostly of trash;” and in Belgium, there was little for the rare book seek-
Crummer, Dr. John Jay Keegan, MD, served as Dean of the College of Medicine from 1925-1929, along with the Librarian Madeline Hillis, who served 1921–1940. The library grew to 18,000 volumes. Dean Keegan had it moved from the laboratory building to the second floor of Unit I of the now adjacent University Hospital. In 1927, Keegan moved the library again, this time to the first and
second floors of the north wing of Unit II of the hospital. This would be its location until it moved into its own facility in 1970. By 1927, under the leadership of Madeline Hillis, the library had grown to 35,000 volumes, 16,300 pamphlets, theses, and ephemera, and subscribed to almost 300 scientific journals.\(^{23}\)

The College of Medicine issued a yearbook, *The Caduceus*, for only two years, 1929 and 1930. In 1929, it boasted a photo of the lovely Madeline Hillis, wearing a string of pearls and a modest blouse. Her bobbed hair fell just below the ears, and was finger waved, as was the fashion. She wore delicate wire-rimmed glasses, and was the essence of a librarian for the time. The yearbook illuminated the library in detail, giving the reader a sense of its space. It described the reading room on the first floor that had room for one hundred readers. Surrounding the room were more than three-hundred current circulating periodicals; lining the space were ten years of bound periodicals, bound indexes, reference books, and the card catalog. The seminar room was on that floor as well, at the opposite end from the Librarian’s office. The lower floor housed the book stacks, with shelving for more than 40,000 books. Between floors, there was a lift. The bottom floor contained a second seminar room with a stairway to the one above, a receiving room, and a bindery.\(^{24}\)

The yearbook described the status of collection of rare and historical books at the medical library and indicated that most
had been gifts to the college, or purchased at low prices. Multiple physicians donated to the collection, among them Le Roy Crummer. The only instance mentioned of executive leadership from the College of Medicine going on a rare book buying adventure was a reference to Dean Cutter making a trip to Europe. He returned with over 3,000 English and French journals.25

The library’s success reflected the prosperity of the 1920’s; in similar fashion, the ensuing 1930’s for the college and the library echoed the hardships of the Great Depression. As Dean, Charles William McCorkle Poynter served from 1929-1946, and worked with Librarian Hillis until her retirement in 1940.

Articles from the late 1930’s indicate the usefulness of associations such as the “Friends of the Library,” usually a fundraising-group, as a way to relieve budgetary strain, gain contributions, and address pertinent topics like medical history.26 Science published an article on “The history and work of the Army medical library,” to celebrate one hundred years of existence of the largest of all medical libraries in the United States. The article stressed the importance of the library as a clearinghouse for medical information to the practitioner, affecting the health of military troops.27 A flattering article in the Library Quarterly in 1941 says of the National Library of Medicine, “...it stands out as a medical bibliographic center not only of the Western Hemisphere but of the whole world.”28
Philip Moe was the next to serve in the post of librarian, from 1940–1947. Moe was librarian for a portion of the Poynter era, which dealt with the challenges of World War II, economic hard times, and downturn, but Poynter continued to augment the campus and kept the institution afloat.  

Librarian Moe served only seven years before vacating his post. Librarian Philip Moe became ill, “...practically at his desk...,” visited a physician, then the hospital, never to return. With Moe’s illness, Bernice Hetzner was asked to become acting librarian. She accepted. Reluctant at first because of her inexperience in medical subject matter, she became a nationally known expert by the end of her career.  

Harold Leuth, MD, became Dean of the College of Medicine in 1946 and served until 1952. Dr. Leuth had the difficult position of following Dean Poynter, arguably one of the most famous and well-liked Deans in the College’s history. Dean Harold Leuth administered during the post-World War II era, when the National Institutes for Health were being developed, research was expanding, and there was a focus on clinical faculty and the development of teaching hospitals. The medical library of the time was described as, “...physically outmoded and hopelessly crowded.”  

Bernice M. Hetzner, MA, was the longest serving librarian the medical library had ever employed, providing twenty-seven years of dedication at the head of the facility. Hetzner grew
the library and prepared the way for a new building. She served during the Wittson Era. Cecil L. Wittson, MD, was first the Dean of the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, and subsequently the first Chancellor of the University of Nebraska Medical Center.32

Hetzner began her time at the library when it was still on two floors of Unit II of the University Hospital. Her notes presented a different perspective of the library – one that was in a transitional space. In a 1980 oral history she gave, she reminded the listener that the library space did not start out as a library, it was initially designed as a hospital ward. There were windows all the way around and no air conditioning. When the college started grading the land around the building for a parking lot, open windows brought dust and dirt from outside. Still, the stacks continued to grow; the College put in a glass floor and extended the steel stacks up to give another level of storage. There was no elevator, just steps, and no way to use a book cart. At one end was an old dumb-waiter, a cast-off from another part of the university, that had been rigged up. Hetzner’s office down in the stacks had a bare electric light bulb with a pull-chain and the temperature fluctuated wildly, harmful for the preservation of books, which had to last. Hetzner gibed, “…people we can replace.”33
By 1959, the library had grown to 50,000 volumes and included sections for the College of Nursing. It remained in Unit II of the hospital and overflowed with books and journals. Mrs. Hetzner went to Dean Leuth to ask for additional monies to spend on the library, only to discover that library governance was conducted by the Library Department under the University of Nebraska System. The Library Department determined all budgetary amounts and items. The Department felt the medical library better funded than other libraries in the system, and they bypassed all of Hetzner’s requests to appropriate funds for a new building. This avoidance tactic stayed in place until Cecil Wittson became Dean of the College of Medicine in 1964.

In 1960, Charles F. Moon, MD, contributed a sizable collection of rare books to the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Medicine Library. Moon had started book collecting under the tutelage of Dr. Le Roy Crummer, who had given him a vellum bound book purchased in Rome from sixteenth century French physician and obstetrician, Severin Pineau. A duplicate of a book that Crummer had in his own catalog, it included Crummer’s bookplate, and so inspired Moon that he, too, became a life-long lover of historical medical texts. Like Sir William Osler, Moon and his wife, Olga, donated their rare book collection to Charles’s medical alma mater. Books that had provided so
much pleasure now could be shared with others, and benefit the medical school as a whole.37

A famous ophthalmologist of the early 1900’s, and past Dean of the Omaha Medical College, Harold Gifford donated his collection of rare books and artifacts, which remain at the College of Medicine at this time, and is noted as a defining feature of the library’s description in John Thornton’s book Medical Books, Libraries and Collectors.38 Prior to his death in 1956, orthopedic surgeon Hiram Winnett Orr contributed some of his collection to the College of Medicine Library. A renowned orthopedist, Orr had been associated with the Nebraska Orthopedic Hospital for over fifty years. His writings included advocacy for the closed plaster method for bone mending and treatises on compound fractures and wound healing.39 In 1977, the Army Surgeon General permanently loaned the medical library the remainder of Orr’s collection.40

In the second year of his tenure as Dean, Wittson set about describing his six-year building plan for the campus. Central to his plan was a new laboratory facility and a new library of medicine. By this time, the library collection had grown to 130,000 volumes and an undisclosed number of periodicals. As the library was previously stuffed when it had 50,000 volumes, it is hard to imagine where they stored the additional 80,000 volumes.41
National sentiment paralleled the College of Medicine’s, as the American Library Association published an article on the importance of hospital libraries. It makes a case for teaching libraries for providing immediate information that when applied clinically can save lives.42

Created in the mid-sixties, the Medical Library Assistance Act allowed the National Library of Medicine to distribute funds via a competitive grant format for the betterment of medical libraries nationwide.43 Both Wittson and Hetzner lobbied nationally for the passing of the Assistance Act and garnered support from senators, representatives, governors, and other officials, urging the passage of the medical libraries act. It passed the Federal government in 1965, and Hetzner saw the first real opportunity for the development of a medical library building. Wittson urged Hetzner to plan very seriously for the new library.44 Wittson submitted a construction grant and received $1.6 million in 1968. A matching fund drive led by Dr. Leon S. McGoogan raised an additional $385,000 for the library.45

In 1969, the year prior to the new library building opening, the parent organization’s name was officially changed to the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and Cecil Wittson was named Chancellor. Robert Kugel, MD, served as the next Dean of the College of Medicine, from 1969-1974.46
The new library, built on top of the new basic sciences building, held the prime position directly on Forty-Second Street. The design of the two buildings shared only a central service core, later modified by the addition of fifth floor administrative offices, altering the initial design. The basic sciences building and the library had different architects and different construction contractors. The construction companies completed the buildings by July 1970, and the library moved over the July Fourth weekend, then opened later that month to high accolades. Hetzner was quoted as saying:

We must revise our thinking that a library is a storehouse of books. While libraries do collect, store, and index they also need to retrieve and disseminate. The emphasis in a library today must be on transfer of information.

Boasting 71,000 square feet, with a staff of nearly fifty, ten of whom were professional librarians, the library housed three stories of information and contained state-of-the-art study carrels with their own tape recorders. There was access to slide projectors, filmstrip projectors, and 8mm motion picture projectors. For the first time since the library had moved from its original spot in the laboratory building in 1925, the term museum described the library, and artwork adorned the walls on every story. The library contained more than 160,000 volumes, subscribed to over 2,400 medical journals, and maintained back issues of important clinical and basic science journals. With
seating for three hundred-thirty people, this new library was nine times larger than the old library. Included on the third floor of the library were rare book rooms with enclosed cabinets and a reading area. 49

Before Hetzner retired, she received many honors of her long and successful career, including Presidency of the national Medical Library Association, and the Murray Gottlieb Prize Essay award. 50 In 1972, President Richard Nixon named her to the National Library of Medicine Board of Regents, the first librarian to serve in the role. Bernice Hetzner retired in 1973, three years after opening her three-story library complex. In 1974, she was the first woman, and one of only a handful of non-physicians at the time, awarded UNMC’s Distinguished Service to Medicine Award. 51

As a library Professor Emeritus, Hetzner continued to work actively for the history of medicine. Officials added an office for her on the eighth floor of the library, where other librarians were housed. She built up support for the history of medicine at the university and remained during the tenures of the next two library directors, David Bishop, LLS, and Robert Braude, MA, MLS.

One of Hetzner’s more labor-intensive projects created an index to Tyler and Auerbach’s History of Medicine in Nebraska. Magic City Printing in Omaha, Nebraska, published the book in
1928, and Hetzner knew from using it as a reference book at the library that an index would be immensely helpful. Additionally, she corrected some of the erroneous material in the text. Working with a physician’s daughter in need of summer employment, Hetzner as a volunteer, both toiled on the name and subject index. Hetzner then singlehandedly corrected the text, line by line. Having negotiated a contract with a printing company in Evansville, Indiana, to reprint the volume, she was able to pre-sell enough copies, completely underwriting the cost of binding and printing. Hetzner then began an oral history project, to help preserve the history of the College of Medicine.⁵²

Leon S. McGoogan, MD, a local obstetrician and an enormous supporter of the library, started working in the stacks as a medical student in 1921. He had a private practice early in his career, eventually coming to serve as the Chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine from 1950-1955, and again from 1961-1962. He began sitting on the library committee in 1950, and stayed a part of the group until his death in 1993. Even after retiring from the university, he served as a senior consultant for the department. McGoogan continued to advocate for the library and the rare book collection, which had grown significantly over the years. As part of the Medical Assistance act, the government required that $300,000 in matching funds be raised by
the College of Medicine. If those funds were raised, the government matched the funds with 1.2 million dollars to build medical libraries. Dean Wittson, the College of Medicine Alumni Association, and the University Foundation all asked McGoogan to spearhead a fundraising effort for the new library building in 1967, and by 1969, McGoogan raised $385,000. In 1978, Robert Braude was the Director of the Library when the library’s name changed to the Leon S. McGoogan Library of Medicine. Dr. McGoogan’s long affiliation and service to the library, as well as a desire to honor his capital fundraising efforts, led to the name change.53 By 1980, the library housed 180,000 volumes and 3,370 serial subscriptions.54 See Appendix B for volume growth at the library for the first ninety-nine years.

Upon his death in 1993, Dr. McGoogan left a reportedly substantial but undisclosed amount of funding to endow library operations, as well as his own rare book collection to the library.55 In a 1986 essay, or perhaps a speech he was to give, found in the collection of his personal papers, McGoogan compared the library to a cellular model and described the history of his involvement in the library, starting back to his freshman year working as a part-time student librarian. He discussed the development of an endowment to ensure the long-term future of the library and expounded on the duties of the “Friends of the Library” an auxiliary group formed to provide not only funds but
also books, hobby collections, and artworks of all kinds to the library. His determined advocacy for the library that would bear his name is admirable. The observer must concede that he was unmatched in his passion and adoration for the library, and it is a rightful honor that the facility should bear his name.

Word count: 5,030
Passive sentence percentage: 7%


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35 Peter Boughn, 20-23.


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44 Peter Boughn, 23-25.

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