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Papa Lyman Remembers — The McGuffey Readers

by **Lyman Newlin** (Book Trade Counsellor) <broadwater@wnyip.net>

Editor's note: On March 24, 2000, my family celebrated my father's 80th birthday amid much festivity in Richmond, Virginia. My father had requested a copy of the McGuffey Readers for his birthday present. So, who did I contact, but the incredible **Papa Lyman** who had mentioned the Readers to me more than once. Next thing I knew, I had received a beautiful set of seven McGuffey Readers from the incredible **John Chambers of John Wiley!** My father was thrilled and thinks that librarians are miracle workers. So don't tell him my secret, okay?—KS

When Katina suggested I do a **Remember** column on the *McGuffey Readers*, I readily accepted. Immediately all sorts of memories flooded my mind. It was going to be one of the easiest essays I'd ever undertaken.

To begin with, I had made many visits to Oxford, Ohio, as a textbook buyer representative of **Wilcox and Follett's** College Division. Oxford is the site of **Miami University** whose **Edgar W. King Library** includes the **William Holmes McGuffey Library and Museum**, the **Edgar W. King Collection of Children's Literature**, and the **Walter Havighurst Collection of American Literature**. I was fortunate to have had **Walter Havighurst** frequently stop by my buying stand in the **Purity Cafe** for a talk about current publishing. I can readily put hands on my autographed copy of his *Long Ships Passing* (MacMillan, 1946). It is my favorite book about my favorite waters: the Great Lakes.

Edgar King was librarian at Miami in my day and was always gracious to all of us book peddlers. It goes without saying that Miami's library was not yet named for him.

Beyond academic recognition, the word "Miami" has been a confounder among journalists, especially sports writers. Confusion is frequent between the two Miami's. The one in Coral Gables, Florida (**The University of Miami**) has been around for three quarters of a century. Ohio's **Miami University** was opened 101 years earlier in Oxford. Soon after Miami Oxford opened with twenty students varying in age from twelve (yes 12) years to 20, **William Holmes McGuffey** was hired, in spite of his not having yet earned a degree, as professor of foreign languages. Thus began the ten-year tenure of a native of the backwoods of the Western Reserve of Ohio, born September 23, 1800, whose name was to become one of the most widely known in American education. Like many pioneers, his early

schooling consisted mainly of reading the *Bible*, which was the only book in many homes. Circuit riding preachers and teachers were the infrequent and only instructors. Calvinism was so thoroughly implanted in young **McGuffey** that much of its philosophy which guided his action was bound to seep into his writing. Although he actually wrote only a few of the readers which bear his name, a brother and several other teachers were added to the series so that *McGuffey Readers*, with their emphasis on hard work, truthfulness, and loyalty to family, church, and state were responsible in great measure for the "American Way of Life" as it was known for the latter part of the nineteenth century and still widely used until World War I. But even that was not a complete demise. **John Wiley and Sons**, the current publisher, keeps the seven volumes of the "revised 1879" edition in print. Thus the latest edition is now over one hundred

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twenty years old and still sells several thousand books per year. The Wiley ISBN for a set of the *Readers* is 0471294284. Total sales since their first appearance is well over one hundred fifty million. In view of the *Readers* living longer than all but one American publisher, **Wiley**, we suggest that the hand of Fate is responsible for the fact that **Wiley** is now their publisher. But this union is quite recent; there were at least four predecessors; notably the **American Book Company** of Cincinnati whose publisher should have its own biography. A good start on that project can be found in *The History of the American Book Company*, Cincinnati 1978, an unpublished study by **Wanda L. Boaz**, an employee of ABC and still on the staff of **International Thomson Publishers** which no longer lists ABC among its acquisitions. Considerably more could be written about the publishing history of *McGuffey's Readers*, but we'll leave that to book industry historians.

I can't leave ABC without mention of another personal connection; **American Book Company** also published in mid-twentieth century a series of school music texts: *The American Singer*, whose co-author/editor was **Josephine Wolverton**, my high school music teacher. Josephine went from our small Kansas school system to **Northwestern University** where she became head of the Music Department in NW's School of Education. Josephine became a very wealthy retiree before she joined the Heavenly Choir. I am confident of this because Jo was raised a Presbyterian and her successful and untarnished character was certainly due in large part to Calvinist preeminence in *McGuffey Readers* from which she must have had instruction.

I'm not quite old enough to have been exposed to the *Readers* in my formative years, although *McGuffeys* were still widely used and selling over a million copies annually when I began my schooling in the second decade of the twentieth century. And staunch Presbyterians, among whom I was raised, were already beginning to bemoan the drifting away from Calvinistic basics in the more modern texts being taught. (I was also too early for *Dick and Jane*.) It was not uncommon for contemporaries of my father to rattle off from memory as many pages as you called for out of the *Readers* they had absorbed by rote. I recall a superintendent of a well-known Kansas public school system who performed beautifully in this exercise. This wonderful scholar had a set of early *McGuffeys* on one of his office shelves. It was well known among traveling book peddlers that to win this educator's attention was to note and comment, "I see you have some *McGuffeys*," whereupon the owner would ask the caller to choose any one of the seven books, open to any page at random, and to read the first line, whereupon the Superintendent would proceed to recite the rest until his guest evinced conviction.

In the 1930s and 40s, I was one of a dozen

Wilcox and Follett College Department employees who traveled to colleges at semester ends to buy used textbooks. The now gigantic **Follett College Store** chain already had stores at Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan and Purdue. Ohio was one of my states and my favorite buying school was Miami. Few of us buyers had automobiles; we traveled by train or bus. Miami was always my first stop. **The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad** ran a spur from Chicago to Cincinnati primarily to transport students from their home towns along the line to their colleges. I don't recall the names of any except **Miami U.** The train would "set off" a Pullman car in Oxford and thus early on the first day of semester-end exams, I would set up in the **Purity Cafe** on High Street ready to buy books from students. My main competition would always be a buyer from **Long's College Book Company**, in Columbus who worked out of **Frasers' Book Store**, a few hundred yards closer to campus. **Folletts** had the last laugh, however; **Frasers'** became an early acquisition after **Folletts** began intensive chain expansion. I used to stay at "The Elms," which was a semi-motel, as yet an uncommon word for an uncommon substitute for hotels. Oxford was "dry" but one of the College Book reps knew where a local bottled beer was obtainable in a nearby Indiana town. Book-buying enmity was soon forgotten after a cold bottle.

Now back to *McGuffey*. A surprising piece of knowledge came to me from reading *McGuffey and His Readers* by **John H. Westerhoff III** (Abington, 1978). Westerhoff warns his reader that the "influence of **William H. McGuffey** must be distinguished from the influence of *McGuffey's Readers*." The author then proceeds to write a succinct brief on this difference. This information was fortified in my phone conversation with the very helpful **Beverly Bach**, curator of the **Miami University Art Museum**, which works with the **McGuffey Museum** on special programs and displays. I learned from Ms. Bach that **McGuffey** should be regarded as the "compiler" rather than the "author" or "editor" of the *Readers*. She also confirmed that **W.H. McGuffey** was actually responsible only for the compilation of the first four *Readers*—and only for the editions before 1858.

Before signing off I'd like to acknowledge factual information to some of the hearsay responsible for my memories of **Henry Ford's** influence on public interest in *McGuffeys* in the first half of the twentieth century. Those memories prompted some phone calls to the **Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village**. **Richard J. Staples**, Research Assistant has furnished me with excerpts from three publications quoting several of Ford's allusions to the *Readers* and their merit. In his Greenfield Village, Ford had the author's birthplace recreated and built a one room "McGuffey School" from logs originally from a barn on property of the original which is in what is now Washington County, PA. Mr. Staples points out that Ford made no public statement during his last years. He suggests that perhaps **Clara**, Ford's wife, may have continued with

the Ford interest in *McGuffey*. **Geoffrey C. Upward**, in his 1980 profusely illustrated *A Home for our Heritages*, tells us that by the late 1930s Ford had collected some 468 copies of 145 different editions—amassing one of the world's three best collections. Upward tells us that this collection began when Clara could not find in their house a single copy of the books (*McGuffey*) which had educated both her and her husband. Henry inquired among friends and then "if necessary, among book stores to find a copy." Upward writes that the search started with this "fairly insignificant incident in 1914." I am bold enough to opine that this was the beginning of a myth that was still current when I began working at **Follett Library Book Co.** thirty years later—and was still around even after the Fords were laid to rest.

In conclusion I would like to urge my readers who are not familiar with *McGuffey's Readers* to examine at least one of them. They are to be found in many libraries and are individually available for less than ten dollars from **Wiley**. I make this suggestion out of fear that these books may be replaced as artifacts of past generations by **Harry Potter**. I take personal umbrage with **Ms. Rowling** for defiling the Potter name which comes down to me from my mother's family, direct descendants of **Captain John Potter** who crossed the Delaware Christmas 1776 with **General Washington**.

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* Above are from the **Miami University Bibliography** (over 35 items) available from **Lyman Newlin c/o ATG**.

Thanks also to **Richard J. Staples**, Research Assistant, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village for suggesting McGuffey references in the following books: *Young Henry Ford* by Stanley Olson, Nevins: *Ford* and the G.C. Upward title mentioned above.