“Words of Wisdom Past and Present”

September 17, 1999

Dedication and Day of Celebration

for the New Library at

WINONA STATE UNIVERSITY
The Origin of Libraries

by Gary Eddy, professor of English, Winona State University

1.
I find myself walking through deep snow
in the wrong shoes. Every step breaks
the rimey crust and I plunge ahead,
wet and cold to my knees until
I come onto the deer trail.

Every ungulate print has something in it--
bark shred, dry leaf, deer scat--
like a row of open books I look into and follow
up through the woods, around treefall and brambles.

The red halo in the snow under the scat
means there are still dried berries up on the ridge.
The pawed up spots are where moss used to be.
How on this cold earth to live? Read,
my teachers told me, read everything.

2.
In The Great Library of Alexandria, Egypt,
we collected all the alphabets of Babel, the news
from Khartoum, and the sky maps of Ptolemy.
The known world, and everyone had library cards.

Then Romans came and burned whole languages up, so sand
would wash those kingdoms away. Not one brick
nor book beside another. We stood in the smoke, gathered
what we could save, and started over.

The human trail broke up into pathless prints
among the brambles, where we have lived since, hemmed round
by Huns and Vandals, rewriting our lost books,
turning skirmishes into myths and myths into wars,
turning lives into words and words into love of words.

3.
The origins of this library are in trees and sand.
The lost language of trees is written into books;
sand that binds these bricks holds flakes of mica lit like stars.

Following the writing in the snow, the deer sense a seam
through bare trees: the owl’s trail up the ridge to the open sky.
RATIFICATION

by Emilio DeGrazia, professor of English, Winona State University

Here, in the solemn silence
Of these democratic walls stilled
By a congress of voices ratifying
Our theft of fire from oppressive gods
And once-forbidden compulsion
To discern the difference
Between evil and good,
Here we ask forgiveness
Of this blameless ground
Once graced by grass and trees
And the enduring logic of wind.

Our duty here is to handle with care
The leaves scholars script,
And reply in truth to diviners
Of fossil, atom and galaxy,
Critics, dreamers, computers, and sage
Fools who dare to speak against
The sophists who pay their way in.

Our good in this sanctuary honors
Those with eyes in their hearts
And ears for the cries
Of the voiceless weak, victims
Of that knowledge and power
Now also present, here.

On these dedicated grounds
Where grass and trees no longer
In the enduring logic of wind,
Abandon all fear of hope
Only ye who enter here
With pride rooted in humility.
Great River

The terrazzo floor in the entrance of the WSU Library features “Great River,” by Brad Kaspari and Carolyn Braaksma, features visual and textual references to Winona, the Mississippi River and the historical development of the region. The quotations inlaid in the floor art are:

“They followed it up, they followed it down...”
- Wanda Gale from “Snippy and Snappy”

“The face of the water in time became a wonderful book.”
- Mark Twain from “Life on the Mississippi”

“I was convinced that the future was a better key to the present than the past.”
- J.G. Ballard from the Introduction to “Crash”

“If I had wings and I could fly I know where I would go. But right now I’ll just sit here so contentedly and watch the river flow.”
- Bob Dylan from “Watching the River Flow”

“Nauka Klejnot, nauka skarb drogi... Tego nie wydrze nie przyjacieta srogi...”
“Education is a jewel... a priceless treasure. No fierce enemy can take it away.”
- traditional Polish chant, trans. by Sophie Hodorowicz Knab

“Sunday, August 5, 1838.... As the French of the country say, water slightly troubled, a little whitish... which the Sioux express by Mini Sotta.”
- Joseph N. Nicollet, journal entry, trans. by E.C. & M.C. Bray

“Nothing was left of me but my right foot and my left shoulder...”
- James Wright from “Above the River”

“The water may be in love with fire But not with the last of the winter ice”
“High on his watershelf the fish shudders in the book of sleep...”
- Thomas McGrath from “Death Song”

“The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make”
- Robert Frost from “Collected Poems”

“Over the earth I come... A soldier I come... I am a ghost”
“The milky way The path of spirits”
“Often for each other flows a sympathizing tear”
- traditional Dakota sayings and chants
Founders’ Words

(These words, engraved in the large grate in front of the Library’s main entrance, are a reminder of the vision of Minnesota’s great leaders in Education who helped found and shape Winona State.)

William Holcombe,
Minnesota Lieutenant Governor - 1859

“The effect of such an improvement in education seems almost incalculable. The information, the intelligence, and the refinement which might be thus diffused among the body of the people would increase the prosperity, elevate the character, and promote the happiness of the nation to a degree perhaps unequalled in the world.”

John Ogden,
First President of Winona State - Inaugural address 1860

“If we shall succeed in making this school what it ought to be, and must be, in fact, to meet the demands of the state, Minnesota will then have won her way to an exalted position among her sister states. ...no candidate... shall ever leave this institution... until he or she shall have rendered good evidence of such qualifications, physically, intellectually, and morally, as shall meet the demands of the society and the state.”

E.S. Youmans,
Winona county lumber baron - 1864

“The state must have a normal school... I have a state pride in this matter. I shall be ashamed to live in a state which has so little appreciation of its own highest interest as to consent to rank second rate in this respect.”
D.S. Burt,
Minn. Superintendent of Public Instruction -
First biennial report 1879-80

"The assumption is that we are to decide whether or not a given school has any claims for... support from the public treasury, in view of the numbers of pupils that actually receive its culture. The fallacy of this reasoning consists in assuming that the benefits of education accrue only to those who receive it. This is not true, especially as regards higher education. The benefits of such culture, like the fragrance of flowers and the pleasure of music, are diffusive and accrue to the society in general. The skill of the engineer who plans our bridges, of the pilot who guides the steamer into port, of the chemist who assays our ores, or the linguist who translates foreign literature into our language, is more valuable to the public than profitable to himself, and it amply compensates the state for supporting the schools in which it was acquired."