

Edward Weber, retired Labadie Collection curator at U of M, dies at 83

BY TIM RETZLOFF



Edward Weber in 2001.

ANN ARBOR - Edward Charles Weber, longtime curator of the University of Michigan's Labadie Collection, a self-described bohemian, and a beloved figure in Ann Arbor's gay community for over fifty years, died at his home April 11, 2006. He was 83 and had been in declining health for

several months.

Born Sept. 14, 1922 in Rochester, NY, he moved to Ann Arbor on his 30th birthday to attend library school at the University of Michigan. While at U of M, he served as Acting Head and Head of the Social Sciences Library from 1953 to 1958, and as Head of the Graduate Library

Reading Room from 1958-1960 before taking the reigns of the renowned Labadie Collection.

Interviewed for the very first issue of *Between The Lines* in 1993, Weber recounted his early coming out into the "subterranean" gay bar life of 1940s Rochester. At the time, moral and legal censure could have dire consequences for homosexuals. Weber recalled the free-spirited bohemian community and intimate gay social circle he discovered once he moved to Ann Arbor "was nonetheless menaced by insecurity and outside threats."

During the 1950s and early 1960s, authorities instituted routine crackdowns on homosexual activity on campus with U of M complicit in such surveillance. "The University didn't mind so much if you were gay but if you had brushes with the law, out you were," Weber told a reporter for the *Michigan Daily* in 1999. "We are a puritanical society that thrives on repression."

Despite, or perhaps because of, the atmosphere of hostility, Weber made the amassing of marginalized voices his lifelong career. In 1960, he was appointed Curator of the Labadie Collection of social protest literature. Over the course of

40 years in that position, he expanded its holdings sixfold and extended its scope to embrace a wide range of rare materials, including the category of "sexual freedom." Because of Weber's efforts, Labadie amassed impressive holdings on early homophile and gay liberation publications, well before other academic institutions deemed them worth preserving.

Gayle Rubin, a U of M anthropologist, met Weber while an undergraduate at the university in the early 1970s, when her search for library materials about lesbians led her to the Labadie Collection. "Without his collecting, I never could've done much of my lesbian and gay research," Rubin said in a telephone interview. "Labadie was alone among university collections in gathering homophile materials in the 1960s. It is one of the best collections of homophile literature due to Ed and his spectacular and unique commitment to collecting such materials. He is owed an enormous debt."

Current Labadie curator Julie Herrada worked with Weber for five years before his retirement in 2000. "He really made a significant impact on scholarship," she said. "I really learned

a lot from him, how to make the collection accessible to people and to the world."

Novelist Henry Van Dyke met Weber in 1952, when both were students at U of M. He reminisced about his friend by telephone from his home in Manhattan. "He was as dedicated in his personal life as he was in his professional life," Van Dyke said. "He luxuriated in all life's possibilities." Van Dyke lauded Weber's devilish sense of humor and his dedication as a correspondent, often writing him as many as three letters a week. "He was a faithful friend and a person I'm going to miss a great deal."

Weber was also known as an outspoken advocate of the underdog. He abhorred ignorance, disdained pretense and embraced unconventional views.

Weber was preceded in death by his parents, Edward J. and Eva Elizabeth Weber, his brother Raymond, and his sister Doris Johnson. His sister Ruth Brown, nieces and nephews, and his longtime companion survive him. A memorial celebration of Weber's life at the Hatcher Graduate Library is being planned. Details will be announced at a later date.

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