The Stuff of Dreams

BY A TRAIVE GOMEZ-RHINE

Mayme Clayton had a dream. When she died last October, she placed its fate firmly in her son Avery’s hands. Entrusted with his mother’s vast archive of black Americana, Clayton has set out to create the Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum in Los Angeles.

But how does one individual accomplish such a monumental task? Where would Clayton build his library? How would he move the entire collection from his mother’s property in the West Adams district and make it available to researchers and the public alike? The contents in the house and garage alone took up 680 boxes, and two off-site storage units were filled to capacity.

Clayton was trained as an artist, not an archivist. He’d spent his career teaching elementary and high school students, not building libraries or museum spaces. Aware of his limitations and realizing that success hinged on his ability to acquire expertise, he began soliciting advice from curators and other experts at a number of area institutions, including The Huntington. “I knew that I didn’t know,” he says. “And in the beginning I wasn’t sure if I could do the right thing by the collection, and by my mother.”

Thus, over the past few years Clayton has developed relationships with The Huntington, the Skirball Cultural Center, UCLA, and USC (which is digitizing films from the collection). The Library of Congress even flew curators out to Los Angeles in January to help survey the collection.

Sara S. “Sue” Hodson, curator of literary manuscripts for The Huntington, was somewhat skeptical when she first talked with Clayton about his plan. Because of the colossal nature of such an undertaking, it’s unusual for individuals to set out to establish their own research library or museum — and succeed. “But after a half hour of conversation, I believed otherwise from his passion and commitment,” she says. “Avery’s been able to get important people on board at critical moments.”

As Clayton began working on the project, several institutions tried to persuade him to donate or sell his collection — if not in its entirety then in choice lots that could be separated by any number of stand-alone categories:
30,000 rare and first-edition books (many of which are signed), representing nearly every writer from the Harlem Renaissance; 16-mm films made by black filmmakers, including rare silent reels; 75,000 photographs; and tens of thousands of documents and correspondence, journals, cartoons, magazines, and playbills.

Josh Sides, a professor of history at California State University, Northridge, did scholarly research at The Huntington while working on his 2004 book, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Sides says the addition of the Clayton Library to Southern California will prove invaluable to scholars who usually have had to travel outside the state to find a comparable collection. “Having such a concentration of African American artifacts right here is very exciting,” he says. “I plan to send my students to the archive in droves.”

The Clayton collection dovetails nicely with The Huntington’s significant Western collections, which are rich in the history of the trans-Mississippi West and the development of Southern California. Clayton highlights include black western films, *Flash* magazines from the 1920s and ’30s, and many items showing the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on Southern California early in the 20th century.

Hodson says it wouldn’t be inappropriate for a collection such as Clayton’s to come to The Huntington, but she agrees that it should be housed in its own facility. “Within our profession, the higher ethic is to ensure that a collection is in its right home, no matter how much we may lust after such a staggering archive,” she says. “In this case it will have a greater symbolic impact to have it all together in a facility that focuses entirely on African American culture. The library will honor Clayton’s mother and her enormous effort; it will serve as a magnet for other collections.”

A selection of Clayton items related to the Harlem Renaissance: **Left:** Portrait of activist and writer W.E.B. DuBois, ca. 1925 (signed). **Opposite:** Program of George Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*, 1935. **Below:** The marquee of the Bill Robinson Theater on Central Avenue, Los Angeles, ca. 1933. The theater was owned by entertainer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and was a showcase for the works of black filmmakers. Courtesy of Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum.
Huntington staff and curators have embraced Clayton’s vision and are collaborating in ways that will highlight both collections. To this end, Clayton has worked closely with Hodson and Huntington educator Jennifer Phillips to create The Huntington’s “Dreams Fulfilled” series, which for the past two years has examined the artistic and cultural contributions of black Americans. Clayton was on the planning committee for the inaugural program in 2006 and exhibited some of his mother’s items throughout the series, a project that proved an invaluable learning experience. “I was amazed by the level of care Huntington curators brought to the materials,” he says. “I learned so much about mounting a literary exhibition, such as preparing the documentation for the audience and identifying teaching opportunities.” That first series included a panel discussion on the Clayton collection, with Mayme Clayton in one of her last public appearances.

“Dreams Fulfilled,” in fact, brought together the talents and resources of a number of community members who hadn’t previously worked with The Huntington. Pasadena organizer and volunteer Lena Kennedy, for instance, made significant contributions to the inaugural series by securing funding for the project. “Having great diversity within the collections is important, but equally important is having diversity on the Huntington campus with patrons and visitors,” Kennedy says. “With ‘Dreams Fulfilled,’ The Huntington brings in a new audience that otherwise may not be exposed to everything the institution offers.”

Clayton is preparing for the audience that will someday use his materials. “I’m using The Huntington as my model for a research library,” he says. Hodson toured the building that Clayton secured for the collection — a former courthouse in Culver City — and ticked off a checklist of logistical concerns. “Sue made me much more aware of security issues,” admitted Clayton. “We have many rare and out-of-print books and many documents that predate emancipation. Sue impressed upon me the importance of having a top-notch security system in place, about making sure the collection is accessible but safe.”

The collaboration continues. In 2009, Hodson and Clayton will jointly curate an exhibition at The Huntington on the Harlem Renaissance in Los Angeles. Among items likely to be showcased from the Clayton collection are letters of Josephine Baker and Pearl Bailey, rare movie posters from black films, and a 1905 copy of the African American newspaper The Pasadena Banner. The Huntington will show items from the papers of writer Langston Hughes, composer Harold Bruce Forsythe, and the First Negro Classic Ballet. Hodson looks forward to this and other opportunities to work together. “Archivists operate in networks, and though we are often competitive for collections, we are also enthusiastic about helping one another,” she says.

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