



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
January 14, 2005

“Parchment: The inner portion of the inner skin (the ‘undersplit’) of a sheep, not tanned but specially degreased and dressed, like vellum either for writing on or for use in binding.”

-From *ABC for Book Collectors* by John Carter

A friend of mine from library school is working for a few weeks at the Bancroft Library, on the Berkeley campus of the University of California (my Alma Mater), and she invited me to go see the library. On my way to the library, I enjoyed walking through the campus, past familiar buildings. And I noticed that, instead of looking at the students, I was more aware of the professors as they walked by me - I guess because they look more like my friends. It is interesting how we change without realizing it.

Anyway, I found the library; which, even though it officially dates back to 1905, I never used as an undergraduate. I wish I had - I think it would have impressed me even then with its amazing collection of rare books and manuscripts. And, in case you are wondering, the word manuscript refers to handwritten or typed materials, while a book is mechanically produced.

I found this out later, when I went to the Bancroft Library website (bancroft.berkeley.edu) and read the Frequently Asked Questions.

I saw three manuscripts up close. The first one was a Book of Genesis from the 12th century, with 17th century notes on the original. When Martha took it out of its acid-free box, she placed it gently on Styrofoam triangles that helped support the binding. Evidently in these old books, the binding is likely to have been replaced, while the pages - or folios, as each complete page is called - are the originals. These are made of skin, either parchment or a finer parchment, called vellum. I have to admit I always thought parchment was a kind of paper and I had no idea it came from sheep, rather than plants.

The next was a small Book of Hours from 1450 to 1500. This prayer book, in French and Latin, was written for the wealthy. It was

continued on page 2

beautifully illustrated with bright colors and real gold – and the hues were so vivid, it was hard to believe how old they were.

And, finally, I saw a small notebook, apparently written by an Italian child learning Latin. Each page had handwritten Latin on one side and then the same text in Italian on the opposite page. Each Italian entry was dated – various dates in the year 1616. There were also small drawings on some of the pages, as if the child had been doodling. It was moving to imagine this notebook somehow making its way through hundreds of years and ending up in a library where it will be preserved as a small reminder of the continuity of our lives.

The Bancroft Library has other collections besides rare books. The library’s holdings include 600,000 volumes; 600,000 manuscript items;

2,800,000 photographs/pictorial materials; 43,000 microforms; and 23,000 maps. Included in these are various collections, such as the University Archives, the Mark Twain Papers, the History of Science and Technology Program, and the Bancroft Collection of Western and Latin Americana.

I highly recommend visiting the Bancroft Library. The reading room, where you may examine the materials, is open six days a week and it can be used by anyone at least 18 years old. There are even reference books to help library users, such as books on watermarks, history and papyri. And go soon, since the library will be closing in the summer of 2005 for major construction – although it will reopen in the fall in a temporary location until the work is completed.