

The Rudolph Scrapbook – A Rare Find in Dartmouth’s Archives

In the spring of 2010, Dartmouth College Archivist Peter Carini discovered an uncataloged scrapbook in the Robert Lewis May Collection housed in Rauner Library. May, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the class of 1926, was the creator of the iconic Christmas tale *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The library holds copies of the original soft-cover book issued in 1939, mock-ups and manuscripts of the book, as well as subsequent printings and adaptations of Rudolph, Rudolph merchandise, and other children’s books by May. The newly discovered scrapbook is a significant addition to the collection, as its 54 pages chronicle the creation and success of Rudolph as a brilliant marketing scheme for Montgomery Ward, where May was a copywriter in the advertising department.

Carini considers the scrapbook one of the best pieces in the May collection. Very dirty, and with more than 60% of its fragile contents unattached and jumbled, the scrapbook needed considerable attention. Archives Research Assistant Maria Fillas, class of 2011, performed stabilizing work, organizing the contents and providing the impetus for the project to move forward. With scores of newspaper clippings, tissue-thin business letters, colorful promotional materials and hand-written personal notes, all mounted on acidic paper and dating from 1939 to 1946, the scrapbook presented interesting challenges to the book conservation team in Dartmouth Library’s Preservation Services Department, where conservation of the scrapbook was completed in August.

May was a 34 year old copywriter in the Retail Sales (advertising) Department of Chicago-based Montgomery Ward when he was given the assignment to come up with a promotional give-away that would boost Ward’s 1939 Christmas sales. Fond of animals, and with an eye to what would please his five-year-old daughter Barbara, within a week May had prepared a rough draft of a Christmas story, a poem in rhyming couplets. After putting the finishing touches on metre and rhyme, the poem was sent to the Montgomery Ward art department for illustration by Denver Gillen, and the result was a 32 page soft-covered book with an unlikely hero named Rudolph.

The Rudolph scrapbook chronicles the rollout of Montgomery Ward’s massive marketing campaign behind the promotional give-away. The scrapbook itself, measuring 20 by 24 inches, appears to have been created in the Montgomery Ward art department; the cover is professionally designed, with a pocket for a copy of the story on the inside of the front cover, and the labels for different sections of the scrapbook are meticulously hand lettered. The contents - - business correspondence, order forms, promotional materials, newspaper clippings sent to the Montgomery Ward home office from all across America, as well as personal correspondence directed to May - - would have been collected in the Retail Sales office. The first page of the scrapbook bears the dedication labels “Given to Two Fogler Girls”, “And Two Fogler Boys”, “Rudolph the First”. The Fogler girls and boys are most likely the children of Raymond H. Fogler, who was president of Wards in

1939 but left the company in April of 1940. The three items originally mounted above those labels are important examples of May's creative process: a list in pencil of potential names for the protagonist reindeer (with Reginald circled as a likely contender); a sheet of brainstormed thoughts in pencil; and a hand-written draft of the last page of the original manuscript, all presumably in May's hand. Facsimiles of these three items are now mounted in the scrapbook, the originals kept with the May manuscripts in Rauner Library.

The first announcement of the Rudolph book from the Retail Sales Department, on September 1, 1939 to all Montgomery Ward retail store managers, unleashed a massive marketing flurry. The book which "as a whole should strike the youngsters as a happy combination of 'Ferdinand the Bull' and 'The Night Before Christmas' " was to be given away to any child who came into a Wards store accompanied by a parent. The announcement, with its attached advance copy, highlights the book as a marketing tool. "We believe that an exclusive story like this aggressively advertised in our newspaper ads and circulars...can bring every store an incalculable amount of publicity...and, far more important, a tremendous amount of Christmas traffic". The internal push to get stores to participate in the give-away continued through the fall, and the scrapbook contains circulars, ordering news, advertising ideas and promotional posters heralding the "rollickingest, rip-roaringest, riot-provokingest, Christmas give-away your town has ever seen!" The response from local stores was overwhelming. The scrapbook has copies of the order forms from participating stores. The Kansas City, Missouri store #3-802, for example, ordered 20,000 copies of the book at a cost of 1 ½ cents each. In 1939, a production run of 50,000 made a book a best seller. With participation by over 800 stores in all 48 states, depicted on a distribution map in the scrapbook, the first Rudolph run totaled 2,365,016 copies, which press coverage lauded as the "largest first edition yet recorded".

As books started flying out of Montgomery Ward stores in December, the Retail Sales Department issued a press release to newspapers on December 6 with an enclosed copy of the book. Asking that the news of Rudolph be treated as a book review, a school news item or as a straight news story, this bid for free publicity was a calculated success, as newspapers across America gave the story of the Rudolph "sensation" front page treatment. The scrapbook has nine pages of clippings from newspapers from thirty states, reporting how teachers and psychologist hail the book as the perfect Christmas book, how schools are requesting special orders, and how John Barrymore changed the script of his current play to include a mention of Rudolph. Two dozen letters from newspaper advertising managers include congratulations and requests to print the story in its entirety. The advertising manager of the Fort Worth Press calls Rudolph "one of the finest pieces of institutional advertising that I have ever seen". Included in the scrapbook is a letter of apology for not running a story from the advertising manager of the Clinton (Iowa) Herald. The Clinton Montgomery Ward store did not participate in the give-away, and the paper feared that if it ran a story about Rudolph "it might create a riot at our store".

May's personal delight in the success of the Rudolph story is seen in a warm exchange with the advertising manager of the Minot (North Dakota) Daily News, who asks May's advice on how to explain to his own young children why the deer in the Minot zoo don't have red noses. Writing on December 19, 1939 as "Rudolph's father and Montgomery Ward's authority on deer", May hopes to solve "this very knotty problem", and you can find his solution on page 9 (verso) of the scrapbook.

Personal friends and colleagues from Montgomery Ward write Robert May to share their excitement over "the perfectly swell little book (Kenneth Collins, *The New York Times*, Dec. 13, 1939), encouraging May to crash the gates of Hollywood with Rudolph. Dartmouth College Secretary Sidney C. Haywood assures May that he is sending the book over to the alumni magazine for an article in the January issue, and advises May to use several Dartmouth connections in the Walt Disney Studios. Some letters request signed copies, permission to broadcast the story or to do dramatic readings. Other letters offer a slice of life in 1939, with talk of football pools, stag bridge nights and the rolling out of Wards double crotch drawers into every American home!

Letters from teachers requesting copies of the book for their classrooms and from students writing thanks for the gift of the book comprise two sections of the scrapbook. The Bakersfield, California Montgomery Ward branch describes how Rudolph was distributed directly to 15 schools, reaching 6,440 children. The power of the give-away is felt in the words of the Bakersfield manager: "A Mrs. Stinson, teacher in the Lincoln School, the poorest school in town where there are seventeen different nations represented, called to tell me how happy the children were to receive the story and the books, several of the children said to her 'Do you mean we can take them home and have them for our very own?'"

Correspondence from acquaintances of May at Random House, Knopf and Time Magazine explore the possibility of taking the Rudolph idea even farther, and there are letters from Jack Rose, Class of 1928, from Disney, as well as from the Leon Schlesinger Corporation (Looney Tunes, Merrie Melodies). Commercial publication of Rudolph would not happen until 1947, the year Montgomery Ward turned over the copyright to May and presumably after the scrapbook was assembled. A nine-minute cartoon followed in 1948. May's brother-in-law songwriter Johnny Marks wrote the lyrics and melody for the song recorded by Gene Autry in 1949. When the Burl Ives television special was produced in 1964, Rudolph's place was secure as an American icon.

Near the end of the scrapbook are copies of Montgomery Ward's advance work on re-issuing Rudolph for the Christmas of 1940. Store managers are asked in March to place their orders for the book; questionnaires are presented for merchandise tie-ins, such as a Rudolph soft toy, toy bank, china figurine, nursery lamp, the sales of which would cover the costs for the give-away. The suggested price from the branches for the stuffed Rudolph - - 50 cents!

The scrapbook provided the perfect challenge for Summer Conservation Intern McKey Berkman, a student in the bookbinding program at the North Bennet Street School in Boston. Under the supervision of Head Conservator Deborah Howe, it would take over seventy hours of work to conserve the scrapbook, from trimming new acid-free scrapbook pages to making a conservation box to house the finished object.

The original mounting pages, highly acidic and very dirty, could not be reused. The team used Mohawk Superfine Cover Stock paper for the new sheets, which were trimmed to fit the original cover. Holes were drilled in the paper for the screw-post structure using the lab's Challenge Paper Drill machine, and the paper was scored to provide easy turning at the spine edge.

The next step in the work proved to be an exercise in puzzle solving. With more than half the contents detached from the original pages, McKey had to both confirm Maria's placement of loose items, which ranged in size from full-page posters to tiny clippings from newspapers, and to place items that were not yet placed which were stored in an "extras" folder. This process was guided by the discoloration shadows left by items on the original scrapbook pages, and by the distinctive "blots" left on the scrapbook pages and on the individual items by the seventy-year-old glue, a brittle, dark glue in the family of rubber cement. Matching an item from the folder with an empty spot on a page, or shifting a letter to its rightful placement, all based on matching the "blots", was satisfying work. But the real cause for celebration came when Carini found the three items from the dedication, described above, which were missing from the scrapbook. Making note of the "shadows" and the glue "blots" on the empty scrapbook page, he found the three hand-penciled items, complete with their matching "blots", stored with the May manuscripts in Rauner Library. At some point in time, the value of these items had been recognized and they had been removed from the scrapbook for safekeeping.

The items that survived attached to the original pages provided a different problem. In some cases, where the glue was most brittle, the scrapbook page could be rolled or manipulated at the point of attachment and the item would pop off. In many cases, however, the glue held firm and would not dissolve with alcohol. Using a No. 15 "feather" scalpel blade, those items were removed by coming in under the glue and excising.

Page by page, all items in the scrapbook were surface cleaned with dry cleaning sponges. One item was washed in filtered water to see if staining from the original glue would lessen; since there was no improvement, the team decided not to wash individual items. Sample papers were tested for acidity (the result an acidic pH of 3:30). Every item was deacidified with Bookkeeper's Deacidification Solution, an alkaline buffer (magnesium oxide) in a water-free formula which neutralizes acid in paper. Hours were spent mending tears in fragile and damaged items with Japanese paper and wheat paste. Several items were so fragile that they had to be completely

backed with Japanese paper to make them strong enough to re-mount in the scrapbook.

After cleaning, deacidifying, mending and confirming placement, each item was remounted onto its new scrapbook page. Heavy items were hinged onto the page with Japanese paper, as were items where both the front and back could be read. All other paper was attached directly to the scrapbook page with small amounts of wheat paste. An archival corrugated board box was constructed to house both the finished scrapbook and the original scrapbook sheets, now in an acid-free soft cover and kept as the original glue “blot” record of item mounting.

Along with the scrapbook, Carini discovered twenty artists proofs of the Rudolph story, presumably by Denver Gillen. Many of these renderings, done in acrylic (? Or poster paint??) paint on white board, have tissue overlays on which the artist made changes or corrections in colored pencil. At some point the images had been mounted in a display, their backs completely covered with glue stains. Each rendering was surface cleaned, old tape securing the fragile and damaged tissue overlays was removed with acetone, and tears in the tissue were repaired by tacketing with Japanese tissue. Using the conservation lab’s Minter Ultrasonic Welding Encapsulator, each tissue overlay was encapsulated in mylar, hinged over its corresponding piece of art and housed in a mylar sleeve. This important story board can now be safely handled by students and researchers.

As an archivist, Carini greatly appreciates the value of scrapbooks in a collection. Scrapbooks open a window into a person’s life, providing documentation about a subject and revealing the author’s thoughts about what is important. While the Rudolph story itself reveals Robert May’s writing talent and explores themes that are universal, the Rudolph scrapbook frames May’s creative process in a new and important way, as a product of 20th century commerce and well-executed promotion. As such, it will be of interest to students of business as well as lovers of the iconic red-nosed reindeer.

--McKey Berkman 2010