

# **National History Day Activities at the Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library**

*By Tanya Zanish-Belcher*

The Special Collections Department has been hosting National History Day groups since 1998. Our staff has enjoyed meeting with a wide variety of youngsters from throughout the state of Iowa and serving as a resource for them, sometimes as their first contact with a large academic research library. During 2008 and early 2009, the Department has hosted over one hundred individuals accompanied by teachers and/or parents and responded to numerous external History Day project requests by both e-mail and telephone.

National History projects are often a student's first introduction to working within an academic library, in addition to being their first exposure to an archival repository. This has posed many challenges, and the staff is continually working to improve the methods used to assist students with their projects. During the fall staff members brainstorm potential History Day collections, based on the announced national theme, and develop a list for distribution to potential participants. Groups are recommended by the State History Day Coordinator and the Department works with the group contact in advance, obtaining information about the students' potential topics. The groups primarily schedule their visits in November through February, although the Iowa weather can serve as a frequent disrupting force!

Once the students arrive, they participate in a number of sessions for 15-20 minutes on varying topics. The Library's Collections Officer gives an introduction to the Library and its general catalog. Archivists then give tours of the Department as well as a presentation on how to use primary sources. After the presentations, the students are free to work in Special Collections or in the Library using the General Collection. For individual students visiting Special Collections, there may be a shorter sequence of presentations, depending on what they have requested. There is also a website of resources provided to all students in addition to answering follow up questions. The website includes local resources, guidelines for using primary sources, and a link to National History Day guidelines: <http://www.lib.iastate.edu/spcl/resources/hd/NHD.html>.

The Department has experienced numerous challenges and opportunities during its ten year experience with History Day. Budget concerns remain an issue for the State of Iowa. As of fall 2008 the State Coordinator was only part-time and was not able to coordinate any scheduling for visiting groups so this was left to be organized by the groups and selected repository. In addition to assisting with on-site visits the Department also receives e-mail requests for photocopies from our collections. The e-mail requests can be difficult when working with students unfamiliar with an archives, and staff may have to make judgments on what materials may be most useful. Scheduling groups of 1-25 students has also increased pressure on staffing and hours. During the visit, there may be several students needing one-on-one attention, while others have requested access to Special Collections after hours or on Saturday and Sunday. In regards to the specific projects, while some of the students are well prepared and focused, a large number have not given their topic much thought. Many of them have never been in an academic research library before, and there are a number of times where we need to work individually with these students.

It is hoped that our series of presentations will assist and provide some of the skills they need. As our goal is to provide a positive experience and as much support as is possible, we do try and accommodate these requests as best we can.

For the future, we also hope to be more proactive about working with students prior to their visit, to develop training sessions for teachers, and to reach out specifically to home schooled students and their parents. The Department also needs to increase its assessment and evaluation of the History Day experience, with the results informing changes in our programming. The majority of comments from participants have been overwhelmingly positive, and for our part, working with these younger students to show them the value of archives is very rewarding.

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Laura Sullivan leading a tour of students from Marshalltown. (2009)