

Ervin donates Twain books to local college library

By LETA PARKS
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Burke County residents who are interested in American author Mark Twain will now have a chance to read many of his works in their original editions, following a donation of about 180 Twain volumes to Western Piedmont Community College.

Although the collection, donated to the school by Jean Ervin, has yet to be appraised, college officials have estimated its value at about \$10,000.

The collection was officially donated to the college at an Aug. 14 program during which Wayne Clawson performed an impersonation of Samuel L. Clemens, the man behind the pen name of Mark Twain.

The collection includes volumes

from the 1800s, as well as a book with illustrations by famed American artist Norman Rockwell, said Winston R. Lear, the college's dean of the Learning Resources Center.

A longtime enthusiast of Twain's humor, Ervin said she first began collecting his works in the late 1940s. She also collected books about the famous author's life.

"You could begin to collect your favorite author, one book at a time," she said as she described her quest for material by and about Twain. One source she sometimes used was secondhand bookstores.

Ervin also went on a quest for old newspaper articles describing Twain's speeches as he traveled from place to place entertaining

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Ervin with Clawson at ceremony.

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audiences with his humor.

"Because I was interested and wrote my dissertation on his speeches I'm primarily interested in his speech-making more than his novels," she said.

After careful research into newspaper accounts telling of Twain's visits to various towns and cities, his speeches and the sizes of his audiences, Ervin was able to obtain the articles on microfilm.

Lear praised the collection, saying, "it will be most beneficial to us in that it will give the opportunity to students to become aware of some of the lesser known Mark Twain materials we haven't had access to prior to this."

Both Ervin and Lear see the donation as the beginning for a collection they hope will grow.

"There are new writings every year," Ervin said. "There are dissertations being written in various universities."

Lear agreed.

"One of the things we would hope to do is that we might be able to keep adding to the collection over the years," he said.

But while Ervin expressed interest in new material about Twain, Lear said he hoped the college could obtain more of the older editions of his books.

Instructors at the college do not plan to let the Twain collection sit in the college archives unused, Lear said.

"We have talked to some of the English instructors about it and they're really enthusiastic about

getting their students to do more in-depth research on Twain," he said.

"We feel the materials will be a real benefit to the college and students and researchers of Mark Twain materials," he added.

In this way, the college will help fulfill one of the wishes Ervin had when she donated the collection.

"I'm hoping the college can make great use of the Mark Twain books in the English department and any citizens can go over there and use them, too," she said.

As Ervin discussed her donation to the college, she said, "I think one of the dreams I have is that other Morgantonians will see the college does appreciate having books given to the library and perhaps others will give books on their favorite topics."

A family donation of her brother's library to the college also inspired Ervin to donate her Twain collection to the same institution, she said.

The Ervin family has donated the library of the late Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr., including the furniture as well as the books.

"His collection was much more valuable than mine," Ervin said of her brother's library.

"I think community colleges in North Carolina contribute so very much to the community," she said. "So many people who might not have an opportunity for an education have that opportunity now."

She gave credit for much of the opportunity at the college to local residents, saying, "The college has grown because the citizens of Burke County have supported it."