Several years ago, when I started writing a biography of one of America's greatest national heroes, Edward V. (Eddie) Rickenbacker, I had no idea that the project would intensify my already deep regard for the Auburn University Library. Let me tell you how it happened.

It was a Stanley and Livingston story. The adventure began when something kept telling me that William F. (Bill) Rickenbacker, one of Eddie's two sons, was still alive. Two people who had known him told me he was dead, but I didn't believe them. One day, while browsing in the magazine rack at a bookstore, I saw Bill's name on the masthead of a journal. Through some detective work, I found him.

In October, 1994, I visited Bill at his secluded home in the Monadnock Mountains of New Hampshire. Once wealthy, he had fallen on hard times. His few remaining material possessions included a grand piano that he had once played with great skill before he became afflicted with arthritis, and some furniture, including a large desk, that had been in his father's office when Eddie was president of Eastern Air Lines. The desk and three armchairs that went with it are now in my office at Thach Hall. Someday, I believe, they will be proudly displayed in a Rickenbacker Room at the Library. It will be the focal point of a world-famous aerospace history archive.

All this lay in the future, however, as Bill, wearing a faded sweatshirt bearing the seal of his alma mater, Harvard, welcomed us into his home on a lovely autumn day in New England. My wife, Pat, took notes as Bill gave us an interview about his famous father. He served us lunch on china that had once belonged to his mother, Adelaide. He was not well; he had cancer, and weakened noticeably as the day progressed. Knowing how tired he was, we offered repeatedly to stop the interview, but he insisted that we continue.

Late in the afternoon, a door opened and the room suddenly became electric with the presence of Bill's wife,
Nancy. A gifted painter who had studied under Pablo Picasso, she had just returned from visiting one of her art students. As soon as Nancy and Pat saw each other, it was as if a relationship that had begun years ago had been instantly rekindled. From that time on, they thought of each other as sisters. Auburn University would benefit greatly from their devotion to one another.

I had found Bill in the nick of time. He had just spent a month undergoing cancer surgery and was scheduled to begin chemotherapy the day after our interview. We never saw him again. He died in March, 1995. But Nancy kept in touch with us.

After Bill’s death, Nancy decided that a large collection of letters, diaries, photographs, and other materials that he had inherited from his father should belong at an institution of higher learning. Specifically, she wanted them to be at Auburn University. Opportunities suddenly began coming my way. In some cases, she put me in touch with dealers to whom Bill had already sold some of his memorabilia. In other cases, at great financial sacrifice to herself, she surrendered large amounts of historically priceless materials to the Auburn University Archives for a pittance. Bobby Holloway, Dean of Libraries, played a key role in helping me bring these treasures to Auburn by using gifts to match periodic amounts drawn from the support fund attached to my Distinguished University Professorship.

The National Air and Space Museum (NASM), where I had conducted part of my research as Lindbergh Professor of Aerospace History, also did Auburn an extremely good turn by giving us twenty-six scrapbooks containing many thousands of newspaper clippings Rickenbacker had collected throughout his life. They were in virtually dead storage at NASM’s Garber Center in Suitland, Maryland, and it made sense to take a message from the War Department to General Douglas MacArthur. The article has just appeared in the Smithsonian Institution’s Air & Space magazine, and features illustrations from our collections. I also found valuable information in our holdings while preparing a new edition of Eddie’s World War I memoirs, Fighting the Flying Circus, telling how he shot down 26 German aircraft to become America’s Ace of Aces. It was recently published by R. R. Donnelley & Sons, the world’s largest printing firm.

While Prather catalogued a large collection of Rickenbacker photographs that Nancy sent the Library at a great financial sacrifice, some of these photographs are now in a display case at the Archives. Dr. Martin Olliff, Assistant Archivist, compiled an inventory of the entire Rickenbacker collection and created a Web site that has drawn increasing attention to our holdings. Cox and Olliff are now planning a much more detailed electronic guide.

The Library’s help has been of incalculable value in my research. Recently I drew heavily on our Rickenbacker collection in taking a fresh look at a famous episode in World War II when Eddie was rescued by the Navy after being marooned for three weeks on a raft in the Pacific Ocean while he was on a secret mission to New Guinea to take a message from the War Department to General Douglas MacArthur. The article has just appeared in the Smithsonian Institution’s Air & Space magazine, and features illustrations from our collections. I also found valuable information in our holdings while preparing a new edition of Eddie’s World War I memoirs, Fighting the Flying Circus, telling how he shot down 26 German aircraft to become America’s Ace of Aces. It was recently published by R. R. Donnelley & Sons, the world’s largest printing firm.

We plan to hold a conference, hopefully on or near Veteran’s Day, 1999, to draw scholarly attention to the Rickenbacker collection. Nancy Rickenbacker would attend if she could. Sadly, like Bill, she too fell victim to cancer. A beautiful color photograph of her painting at her easel now hangs in the hallway of the home where Pat and I live on Lee Drive. Someday, I confidently believe, it too will have a place of honor in Auburn’s Rickenbacker Room. It was taken in the house in New Hampshire where we first met here, the day we interviewed Bill without having any idea of where our visit would lead.
In 1985, Auburn's Professor W. David Lans received a call from an old friend, historian William A. Leary at the University of Georgia. Leary had been contacted by Ben Hamilton of Hampton Books in Newberry, S.C., with an offer to sell a collection of aviation materials. Leary had failed to persuade the University of Georgia to buy the collection, but he passed the information to his friend Lewis and mailed him a partial, dated catalog of the Hampton collection. Lewis took this catalog to the Dean of Libraries, William C. Highfill, who appointed Lewis, Dr. Wesley Newton, Assistant Dean Bobby Holloway, and Boyd Childress, Librarian IV, to investigate the offer. These four men drove to Newberry to see the collection.

Hampton Books turned out to be a small farm marked with a sign that simply said “Books.” Ben Hamilton was an eccentric, elderly gentleman whose plantation house was packed with literary collections. He had acquired the aviation collection from various places and persons, including a former officer in the German Luftwaffe. Many of these items resided in a barn with a dirt floor down the middle aisle and floored bays on each side. Each bay was crammed floor to ceiling with books. Lewis picked up one item and was startled to find the skin and skeleton of a snake on it. The men drove back to Auburn very excited about the quality of the material. The library subsequently purchased the collection, but not before Holloway negotiated 25% off the asking price.

The Hampton Collection’s strength lies in its chronological and geographical breadth. The collection contains works from countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia that date from the 15th to the 20th century. Most of the materials are early 20th century with 58% of the collection (2152 titles) being in English. Foreign language materials are in German, French, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and Portuguese, with a smattering of Swedish, Dutch, Danish, Latin, Czech, Polish, Norwegian, and Japanese items.

The Hampton Collection traces the history of aviation from the earliest times through the Space Age. It contains works on civil and commercial aviation; military aviation through World War II; an amazing variety of national histories, particularly in German; and works of fiction such as William Hansboro’s Air Feud. Some of the more interesting materials are the personal narratives of aviation pioneers. These accounts concern air warfare, like Der Rote Kampfflieger by Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron; or solos around the world, such as Bluebird’s Flight by Miss Victor Bruce, an early female pilot; and more recent stories of space pioneers, such as Gemini: A Personal Account of Man’s Venture Into Space by astronaut Virgil “Gus” Grissom. In addition to the historical material, there are technical works in aerospace engineering that address the design and maintenance of airplanes and engines, as well as works on balloons, airships, and rockets. One such work is the lecture Die Eroberung der Luft, “The Conquest of the Air,” by the German airship designer Graf von Zeppelin. In addition to the books and serials on aviation, the collection includes pictures, brochures, programs from air club meetings, clippings, technical manuals and diagrams, and other ephemeral material. The collection is conservatively appraised at approximately $0.5 million, four times what the library paid for it.
FROM THE DEAN

Dr. Stella Bentley

This issue highlights some of our archival and special collections materials. We are especially pleased that W. David Lewis, Distinguished Professor of History, has prepared an essay about his role in helping us acquire a major collection. The objective of all of our collecting efforts is to acquire and make available research resources that support the teaching, learning, and research of Auburn faculty, students and staff.

Most of what we acquire, though, is also acquired by academic research libraries around the country. Our archival and special collections, however, are unique to Auburn University, and provide a special niche for us to stand out from our peers.