



# The Owl

*"The Owl of Minerva takes flight only as the dusk begins to fall."—Hegel*

## The Father of Sociolinguistics and his Underworld Friends

by Delinda Stephens Buie  
Curator, Rare Books

**D**avid W. Maurer was an English major at Ohio State when he took a summer job on a North Atlantic steam trawler. He became fascinated with the shared language of 22 men of 14 different nationalities on board, noticing words and phrases he'd learned in Shakespeare. His article "Schoonerisms: Some Speech Peculiarities of the North-Atlantic Fisherman" came out in June 1930. And, while aboard ship, Maurer also learned the language of rum-running – for which participating fisherfolk were rewarded in booze rather than cash. With two argots – language of subcultures - under his belt, Maurer was, metaphorically speaking, off to the races.



*Dr. David W. Maurer portrait, ASC reference file.*

After completing a PhD from Ohio State in 1935, and perhaps attracted to Louisville by his interest in race-track gambling argots, Maurer accepted a professorship at the University of Louisville that same year. Dr. Al Futrell, once Maurer's student and now UofL professor in Communications, documented that until his retirement in 1972 Maurer taught 23 different

courses, ranging from first year composition to Shakespeare to "Linguistic Problems in Various American Subcultures." His work covered the argots of more than 75 subcultures: criminals, addicts, jazz musicians, racetrack gamblers, moonshiners, closeted Lesbians, cockfighters, circus artists and workers, call girls, even the sign language of Trappist monks.

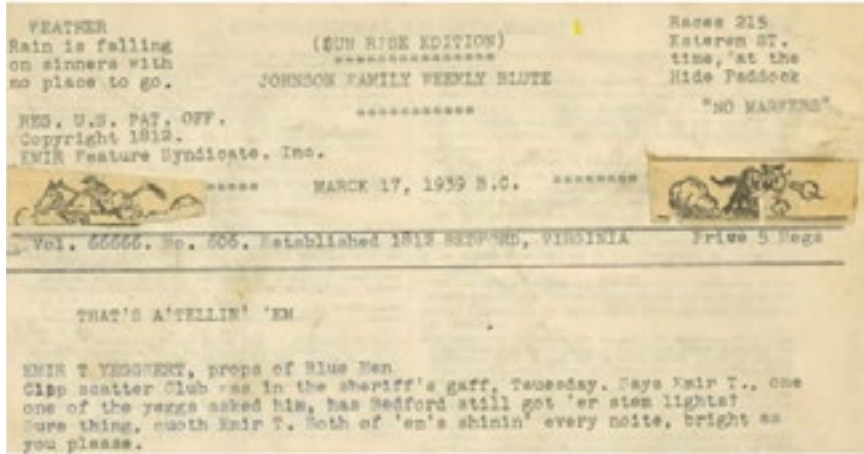


*Maurer at the farm, November 1972. photo by C. Thomas Hardin.*

Although his position was Professor of English, Maurer specialized in the field of sociolinguistics: essentially the study of how aspects of a culture impact language. In fact, Maurer is credited with establishing the field. One of his collaborators – and admirers – linguist Raven I. McDavid modestly denied writing, "If Dave wasn't the actual father of

American sociolinguistics, he was there the night when linguistics got knocked up.”

Nearly 50 years ago, I met David W. and Barbara Maurer on their suburban farm outside Louisville with sheds, gardens, mud, an enormous German Shepherd, and lots of pipe smoke. Dr. Maurer's study was absolutely crammed with documents, clippings, notes, manuscripts – and I became determined to preserve it all.



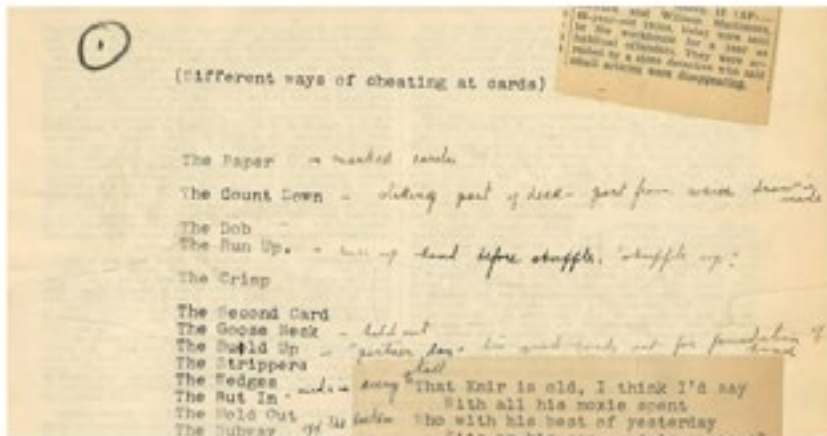
But a year later Dr. Maurer died of a self-inflicted gunshot, just after painstakingly burning all his research notes to protect his sources. He did save for our collections a huge, worn leather valise, typescripts of a few of his many books, two notebooks of clippings and cartoons, and a file of “The Johnson Family Weekly Blutes.”

“Published” from January 1939 over the next 15 months, the

“Blutes” offer a fragile record of a crime family in their own words – the argots of Yeggs (safe-blowers) and Confidence Men. Both editors were on the lam – between jobs – in Bedford, Virginia. One of the editors was a safe cracker who pasted the material for each issue on the pages of legitimate publications, most often the *Congressional Record*, which could be sent for free using the Congressional frank. The content: typed articles, observations, and notes, as well as cartoons with new captions, thought to be depicted and news clippings about criminal activity and captures, was generally the work of a Confidence Man going by the monikers Emir, Ham What Am, and The Duke of Bedford.



Well dressed confidence men.



With impossibly exaggerated claims of production schedules and circulation – both in the millions - the editors of the “Weekly Blute” wrote advice on how to swindle folks with style and the best places to do it. Advice on cheating at cards (left).

‘Slightly’ exaggerated circulation numbers in the millions – they also

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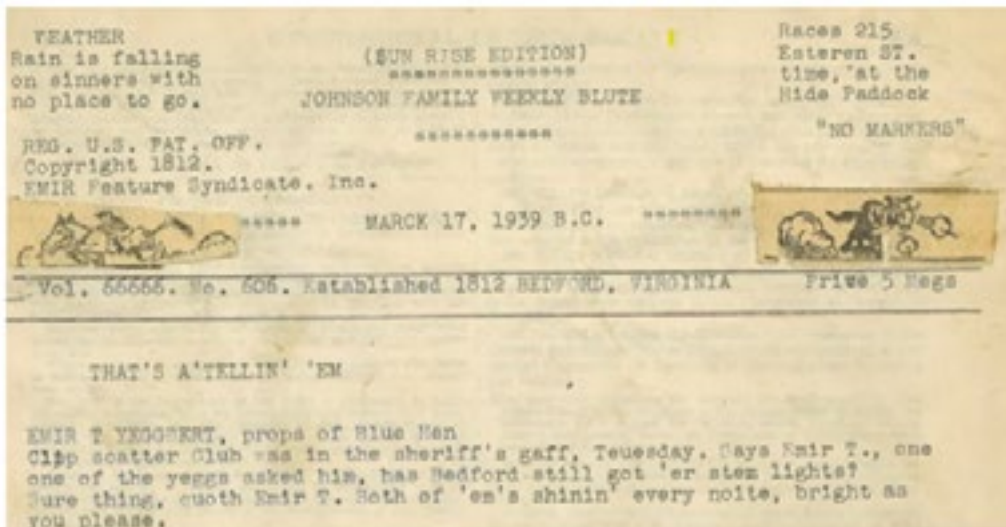
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exaggerated the number of issues (below) and disdain for those who turned crime into an honest living.



Dr. Maurer began his work before portable tape recorders came into use, so he initially relied on his prodigious memory and extensive notes in shorthand. Later, he employed a tape recorder, and as his eyesight failed, relied on his gracious wife Barbara to transcribe and type his notes and writings. Barbara also was celebrated as a contributor to "The Johnson Family Blutes."

Her moniker – The Countess or Countess De Maurer – was attached to a column for the lovelorn with the Emir providing spurious advice. She also was allegedly the censor of the "Blutes," but the editors had free rein since she only saw Blutes after "publication."

Maurer was a prolific scholar, with hundreds of books and articles. He worked in the field, and sometimes people expressed concern or admiration for his adventures. He always assured them that his job was not to have an adventure, but to gather data and stay safe.



David and Barbara Maurer, January 1963.  
photo by Kent Previette, *Courier-Journal*.

In 1973 the motion picture *The Sting*, won seven Oscars, including best picture. Maurer realized that the film copped - drew unfairly - on his 1940 book, *The Big Con* and settled out of court after a gambling consultant revealed that Maurer's book had been in use on set.

Maurer was a darling of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* (I stopped trying to count the times he was featured) and other newspapers. Folks were fascinated by his work – but his work also had other audiences. Famously infamous journalist, critic, and English language authority H.L. Mencken acknowledged Maurer's work, and authorized him and Raven I. McDavid to do an abridged version of his *The American Language*. Maurer also collaborated with drug treatment physicians to counter the then popular idea that drug addicts were violent criminals.

When Maurer began his work, the consensus was that the English language was passed down from "upper social classes" – think OED – but Maurer realized that in fact language "perks up upward from subcultures." As Stuart Flexner wrote, "He who started out with the North Atlantic fishermen has indeed caught some fascinating fish and showed us that the waters of linguistics are deeper than we had imagined."

**MAURER MONOGRAPHS:**

- Carnival Cant: a Glossary of Circus and Carnival Slang*, 1931
- The Big Con: the story of the confidence man*, 1940
- The Con Man and His Lingo*, 1940
- The Argot of Forgery*, 1941
- The Argot of the Faro Bank*, 1943
- 'Australian' rhyming argot in the American underworld*, 1944
- Prostitutes and Criminal Argots*, 1947
- The Argot of the Moonshiner*, 1949
- The Argot of the Dice Gambler*, 1950
- The Argot of the Racetrack*, 1951
- Narcotics and narcotic addiction*, 1954
- Whiz mob: a correlation of the technical argot of pickpockets with their behavior pattern*, 1955
- Word Finder List for Whiz Mob*, 1959
- Linguistic Hostility as a Factor in Intra-Cultural Conflict*, 1969
- The American Confidence Man*, 1974
- Kentucky Moonshine*, 1974

**MAURER BOOK COLLABORATIONS:**

- The American Language: an inquiry into the development of English in the United States*, 1963 (with Raven I. McDavid)
- Language of the Underworld*, 1981 (with Allan W. Futrell and Charles B. Wordell)

**SOURCES**

- The Courier Journal*, 1935 to 1981
- McDavid, Raven I. "David Maurer (1905-1981): A Memoir," *American Speech*, Winter 1982
- Maurer, David W. with Allan W. Futrell, and Stuart Berg Flexner. *Language of the Underworld*, 1981
- Maurer, David W. with Raven I. McDavid. *The American Language*, 1963
- David W. Maurer Papers, University of Louisville
- Futrell, Allan W. "Introducing the Johnson Family Weekly Blute," 1984, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations

"Slanguage" article on Maurer in *The Columbus Citizen-Journal*, March 22, 1932.



# Library and Department News

## Archives & Special Collections

### *Research Room Renovation!*

After nearly 45 years of the same carpet, the same ceiling tiles, the same funky wall covering, and the same humongous reference desk, Archives and Special Collections' research room (Ekstrom LL17) is getting a much-needed, long-overdue renovation. We'll be replacing most of the current furnishings for a more inviting and modern look that is also more functional for 21<sup>st</sup> century researchers and staff.

This means the research room will be closed from December 13 until the end of March. But while the room is closed, our work will continue in other spaces. Researchers are welcome to access our collections in our temporary research room space: the Mazzoli room in our space on the 4th floor. Our hours will remain the same (10-5, Monday-Friday; 9-10 by appointment). We can still be reached by phone at 852-6752 and by email at [archives@louisville.edu](mailto:archives@louisville.edu). We'll still be teaching – just not in the Mazzoli room, which is our usual teaching space. And imaging/reproduction services will continue uninterrupted. More information, including a list of the few collections that will be unavailable during the renovation, is available our [ASC renovations webpage](#).



Sarah Frankel photo by Tom Fougousse, 2024

We expect to reopen the research room with much fanfare at the end of March. Stay tuned for celebratory announcements and contact ASC if you have questions along the way.

### *ASC Employee News!*

Emma Beck has been accepted into the Cardinal Leadership Institute 2025 cohort.

Sarah Frankel and Colleen Eubank celebrate 20 years with the UofL Libraries this December.

Sarah Mellory has accepted the position as Image Manager for Archives & Special Collections. Her first day is December 2. Welcome Sarah!!

## Ekstrom Library Research Assistance and Instruction

### *Lightning Talk*

Kristina Bloch and Tessa Withorn presented a lightning talk at the STEM Librarians Collaborative in November, "Should I Be Doing This? Student Perceptions of GenAI and Faculty-Librarian Collaboration on GenAI Literacy."

### *Dollars and Dreams*

Fannie Cox coordinated the successful financial literacy event, "Dollars and Dreams: Financing Your Future," on November 20. Students learned about scholarship opportunities and participated in a contest to win money for college.

### *Research Sabbatical*

Lidiya Grote was approved for a research sabbatical in Spring 2026 to inform the ongoing development of UofL's campus-wide affordable learning initiative. Congratulations, Lidiya!

### *Digital Deceit Challenge*

Melissa Rothman coordinated the successful Digital Deceit Challenge on October 29 with colleagues in RAI and Learning Commons partners from the Digital Media Suite and the University Writing Center. More than 100 students, staff, and faculty stopped by to participate in activities promoting information literacy and a deeper understanding of AI-generated content.



Alex Howard and Courtney Shareef led the successful BEATS Week series on equitable entrepreneurship, November 11-15. More than 500 people from across campus and the community participated in the various events, including business pitch competitions, a workshop on personal branding, and an interactive program on business development at FirstBuild coordinated by Kristina Bloch and Tessa Withorn.

### *Article on Student Success Published*

Amber Willenborg and Rob Detmering published an article in the Journal of Library Administration, "Student Success as a Value Proposition in ARL Libraries' Strategic Plans."

### *ACRL Presentation*

Tessa Withorn and Amber Willenborg, along with their colleague, Art Library Director Courtney Stine, gave an online presentation for ACRL in October, "Librarian and Faculty Perceptions of AI in the Disciplines."

## **Law Library**

### *Scott Campbell Celebrates 30 Years at UofL*

Sunday, December 1<sup>st</sup> was Technical Services Librarian Scott Campbell's 30th anniversary working for the university. Congratulations, Scott, on a long and successful career with the Law Library!

### *Newly Completed Law Library Legos*

The Law Library has been offering our collaborative Lego sets for a whole year now. Law students are encouraged to work on the current set during study breaks and as a de-stressing activity. In August, the Law Library launched this semester's Lego set, The Notre-Dame de Paris. Students recently completed the set just in time for finals season! (right)



### *Chimp Crazy Related Reading*

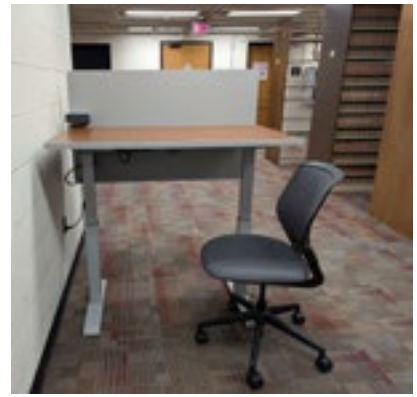
The Law Library faculty, staff, and Library Fellows spent much of August and September raving over the HBO Max docuseries Chimp Crazy. Considering our new shared interest, the law library added two titles by featured journalist Peter Laufer to the circulating collection: "No Animals Were Harmed: The Controversial Line between Entertainment and Abuse" and "Forbidden Creatures: Inside the World of Animal Smuggling and Exotic Pets." Both are available for checkout from the Law Library!

### *Library Fellow Celebration*

On Tuesday, November 26th, the Law Library recognized and uplifted our Library Fellows with a celebratory lunch catered by Safier Mediterranean Deli. We are appreciative to be able to put together this lunch each semester to show our appreciation for our student workers. Thank you to our Library Fellows; the Law Library would not be the same without them and their hard work!

### Law Library Updates

The Law Library has undergone several updates this year. The public elevator was fully updated and has recently re-opened to the public. In addition, new carpet was installed in the Sub-Basement and six new single-person study desks were added to the area. The desks are fully adjustable and can be used as regular desks or as standing desks. The new carpet and desk areas were the perfect addition to the quiet study area!



## THANK YOU

**Alice Abbott-Moore  
Delinda Buie  
Carrie Daniels  
Rob Detmering**

**Tom Fougousse  
Rachel Howard  
Cassidy Meurer  
Aiden Stivers**

Cherokee Park sledding hill,  
Louisville, Kentucky, 1926.

... for contributing to this issue of *The Owl*

**ROBERT E. FOX, JR.  
DEAN, UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES  
CORDIALLY INVITES YOU TO ATTEND THE  
LIBRARIES ANNUAL HOLIDAY PARTY**

**THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2024  
12 PM - 2 PM  
EKSTROM LIBRARY - FIRST FLOOR EAST**

# Holiday Gifts

This is a reboot of a timely article by Alice.



by Alice Abbott-Moore



The Holidays are just around the corner and for some of us it gives us a flash of panic. I don't know about you, but visions of going into debt come to mind. Now before you start thinking that I am some type of Scrooge, do hear me out. One does not have to go into hock to make it through the holiday season. In fact, going into debt is not what **any** of the holidays that will be experienced during the season are about! Unfortunately, commercialism has become so strong and so penetrating that many of us do fall victim to such ways.

Well, help is out there if one can stay focused. In fact, if one does participate in the exchanging of gifts, there are many creative and useful ways to go about finding wonderful gifts without exhausting one's budget.

Now I have been told that I am a bit more practical than most people so my perspective may be a tad tainted, but I will express the following things I have found to be wonderful gifts to give as well as to receive:

## Food and Fruit Baskets

Food and fruit baskets may be purchased, but also put together on one's own. Sizes may be tailored to the person or persons receiving the basket. Gifts of food such as cakes, cheeses, cookies, crackers, fruit, jellies, and nuts are wonderful ways to express the holiday spirit.

## Tools

Do you know a person who has moved into his or her first apartment or house? Has the person bought a new car? Tools are great. Not only are they practical, but your gift will be used again and again. Tools such as hammers, screwdrivers, wood saws, and tire irons are wonderful things to give. Plus, they will give you a challenge when wrapping them!

## Gift Cards and Certificates

Gift cards are wonderful to give to people who patronize certain restaurants and/or stores, and offer a solution for that hard-to-buy-for person. Also, homemade gift certificates make wonderful gifts. Does one or more of the people you need to have a gift need a type of service that you can do for them? I used to give quite a few gift certificates for yard work, babysitting, and so on. The receivers of my gift certificates really appreciated and used their gifts.

## Athletic Equipment

Do you know an athlete who works out a lot? Sometimes it is great to get a new gym bag, sweats, socks, a T-shirt, a towel, or a sports watch. One of the favorite gifts I ever received was a gym bag that I would not have bought for myself, but have really come to enjoy and use. These types of items can be found anywhere in an assortment of sizes, colors, and prices.

## The Gift of Time

One of the best gifts I have enjoyed from others is the gift of their time. So many of us are so busy these days that we don't have as much time to spend with each other as we would like. Spending time with friends and family, to me, far exceeds any physical gift that may be bestowed upon me.

Peace to you during this season!