In Search of the Ames Library and Estate
By Bill Wolston
Photographs by Bob Kuehn
and Russ Withrow in 1987

The Charles Lesley Ames house was the largest house in Eagan Township. The Charles Lesley Ames book collection was the largest of its kind in the United States. However, few people saw the house and fewer saw the books. Most people didn’t know they existed. Now, all that remains of the house are photos and memories. In contrast, the books are world renowned as research gems at the University of Minnesota’s Wilson Library.

In 1955, I heard we had a library in Mendota Township. Then I learned was a private South Asian library and was actually in Eagan Township. In 1987, I read a paper by Bob Kuehn, local historian, about the house and library. Bob and Russ Withrow visited the property that year. Fortunately, they took photographs for soon the house was demolished.

My curiosity about a library became an encounter with a special moment in Dakota County history.

Besides Bob Kuehn’s paper I was fortunate in being able to talk with Leila Poullada, Mr. Ames niece; Henry Scholberg, former head librarian of the Ames book collection at the University of Minnesota; Lawrence Justice, caretaker of the Ames estate for thirty years; Cliff Comfort, who lived in the Ames gatehouse; Harold Johnson, who had a summer job on the Ames dairy farm.

Charles Lesley Ames was born in St. Paul on June 24, 1884. His father’s name, Charles Wilberforce Ames, appears with Alexander Ramsey, Henry Sibley, Edward Neill and others chiseled in granite as “Builders Of The Society” at the entrance to the old Minnesota Historical Society building on Cedar Street. Charles Wilberforce founded the St. Paul Institute and was president of West Publishing Company. The Institute evolved into today’s Science Museum of Minnesota. West Publishing, founded in 1873, became the largest publisher of legal reference books in the United States.

After an extensive education in law Charles Lesley Ames followed in his father’s footsteps as president of the St. Paul Institute and in 1921 as treasurer of the West Publishing Company.

A country home in Dakota County

Seeking the quiet and freedom of the countryside Charles Lesley and wife, Linda, moved from St. Paul to Eagan Township in 1926. They purchased about nine undulating wooded acres on the south side of Gilcher’s Crossing for their home site. When people started calling the road Ames Crossing, Mr. Ames fostered the change to Blue Gentian Road.

To his nine acres he eventually added a 150 acre farm to the south of Blue Gentian and another 150 acres to the north across from their home.

When Bob Kuehn visited the Ames property in the 1987 he commented, “The Blue Gentian Road, in spite of its genteel name, was never more than a narrow, dusty country road.”

Charles Lesley selected the side of a wooded knoll for his then small country home. From Blue Gentian an entry drive skirted a pond, curved east past the back of the house, and circled the knoll to the front door which faced south. Over the next thirty years the Ames’ home grew into a country estate. The house was enlarged, buildings added, and recreational areas created. Charles and Linda Ames enjoyed the terrain and trees and carefully maintained property contours as they made additions reflecting their interests.

The Ames House

The Ames had travelled the south of France and selected a style typical of French country homes for their new home. The style was very close to English Tudor. Adapting objects and styles to their new home site would be repeated.
The original home was two stories with a high attic and a basement opening at ground level on the north. A large combination living-dining room dominated first floor interior spaces along with two rooms for the household help, and a kitchen. The second floor included a bedroom for their young daughters, Mary and Sally, the Ames’ bedroom, and a guest room. The basement provided storage and garage space.

It wasn’t long before plans were underway to enlarge the house. A suite for the servants was added to the first floor, larger bedrooms for their daughters, and a basement with office workspace, and library open to the north.

The home’s third major addition included a master bedroom with kitchenette and a huge drawing room on the first floor, and a playroom on the second. The later two rooms featured a wall of windows on both the north and south exposures.

Leila Poullada and her sister, cousins of the Ames children and about the same age, often visited the Ames home. She enjoyed the bright playroom with its balconies accessible from the attic. The room often served as a theater for lantern slide shows. A bed sheet on a wall served as the screen for glass slide images projected by an arc lamp projector from the balcony.

Leila recalls that the floors of the home were finished in beautiful wood and the drawing room in wood parquet. Interior plastered walls were tinted in cream white, sea green, or coral. She can’t recall wallpaper on any wall. However, brightly colored paintings hung on most walls.

The home’s timber and stucco exterior framed multi paned windows in various sizes. Timbers were true structural members finished with dark stain, stucco was a natural yellow. A sharply pitched roof with split wood shingles descended to wide eaves. Heavy rafters matched the vertical structural timbers. Each addition maintained a continuity in window bays, dormers, porches, and overhangs. What started as a small country home grew to over thirty rooms and seven bathrooms.

Mr. Ames interest in architectural design seemed to be a family trait. Several members of the family had pursued the arts including his grandmother who was an amateur architect. She was a member of the architectural commission for the Minnesota State Capitol building. This heritage combined with works seen in travels fostered his appreciation of design and quality craftsmanship.

Mrs. Ames had an equal interest and enjoyment of horticulture. In the 1970s, Cliff Comfort compared the Ames grounds to St. Paul’s Como Park near the Conservatory. He recalled the beautiful plantings, flowers, and shrubs selected to provide a continuous display of color from early spring into the first snow fall.

**Mr. Justice**

When I talked to Mr. Lawrence Justice in 1995 he was 90 years old. Mr. Ames hired Mr. Justice in 1932 to help with property maintenance and in 1935 asked Lawrence and his wife to move into a small house on Blue Gentian along side the entry drive. Mr. Justice served as the Ames estate caretaker for 40 years. The Justice house also carried out the French country theme. Late in the 1940s Ames made an addition to the house, which prompted it being called “the gatehouse.” The addition was a large structure bridging the entrance drive. On the ground level was a wide, high drive-through and a staircase to the second floor room which became the library for Mr. Ames’ growing book collection. This floor also had a kitchenette. A stairway to a third floor led to a bedroom and bath.

When Mr. Ames died in 1969, Mrs. Ames asked the Justices to live with her in the main house. Mr. Justice retired in 1972 at age 67.

When asked about his job as a caretaker, Mr. Justice said it included anything that had to be done to keep the buildings operating and safe. In
addition he often drove the Ames’ to the city or social events and the daughters to school.

Leila Poullada remembered the Justices very well and commented, "Lawrence and Ellen were the nicest people." She said Mr. Ames really built the gatehouse for the Justices and that the Ames placed a high value on Lawrence Justices’ assessment of prospective employees.

Mr. Justice’s "keeping things operating smoothly" comment became clearer with Cliff Comfort’s comment after he moved into the gatehouse in 1970.

**The Gatehouse and Cliff Comfort**

Cliff and Nola Gail Comfort and their young daughters moved into the gatehouse in the Spring of 1970. How he came to rent the gate house bears telling. A native of St. Paul, Cliff was with an insurance company working in Iowa but was being transferred back to St. Paul. He wanted to rent a place for his family during the transition. He saw an ad in the Sunday paper for the Ames gatehouse. The ad stated that contact must be made by phone during the week. He called Mrs. Ames that day explaining he couldn’t call on a weekday since he would be in Iowa. Mrs. Ames reluctantly agreed to see him and she agreed to rent him the gatehouse.

Cliff had fond memories of his gatehouse home which included the section previously occupied by the Justices. He described how the drive-through could even accommodate trucks. The wide oak stairway which previously ascended to the library now opened on their living room. Cliff called it "The Great Room." It was large with a pegged wood floor, sixteen inch square ceiling beams, and a huge fireplace. The “Great Room” floor also had a kitchen, small bedroom, bath, and porch. A stairway led to a third floor with two bedrooms and bath. Cliff praised the timber construction and hand crafted interior appointments. He mentioned particularly the wrought iron lighting fixtures. The Comforts lived in the gatehouse until the Fall of 1974.

Cliff Comfort also recalled seeing a large well and pump room in the basement of the main house. The well served all the property’s buildings, pools and fountains, and extensive gardens. Included in the system was a valve in the gatehouse for flooding an adjacent pond for skating. Cliff was amazed at the estate’s operating and maintenance services and how they were hidden from view.

**More than a house and gatehouse.**

Years before Cliff Comfort arrived the entrance road was extended to make a large “circle” in front of the Ames home. A long masonry wall was also extended from the west end of the house. The circle and wall were central to outdoor activities.

The 200 foot long wall incorporated two fountains by sculptor Ruth Lawrence. One with two tiger head reliefs supplied water to the children’s swimming pool measuring about eight by sixteen feet. A second featured a sculptured elephant head with Mowgli, of Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, atop the head. Water from the elephant’s trunk filled a shallow pool, probably used for goldfish. The tigers and elephant are clues to Mr. Ames’ library subject matter theme.

The wall ended at a two-story barn, stable, and greenhouse. The barn included a workshop often used by Mr. Justice.

The greenhouse was Mrs. Ames’ workshop. She enjoyed gardening and participated in several garden clubs. Her pride was exhibiting her prize winning peonies. Her approach to gardening was “elegant but natural.”

From the stable a riding path trailed into the woods. Part of the path was covered by an arbor. Mr. Ames was an avid rider. In his twenties he helped organize “B” Battery, a mounted cavalry unit, for the Mexican border conflict which preceded World War I.

The circle drive encompassed a relatively open area giving the Ames home a view to the south. On the east side of the circle was a tennis court, on the west a large swimming pool on a knoll.

Originally a large screened-in children’s sand box overlooked the pool. Later it was converted to a two room change-of-clothes house with a screened porch. The most striking features of the setting were the house’s authentic English style thatched roof and a beautiful stone balustrade.

On the circle close to the Ames home stood a structure the Ames children called the "Fish Market." It perched atop an extension of the knoll
occupied by the main house. The structure proved a curiosity for people visiting the property after it was sold. They saw a large concrete slab with a very large ornate fireplace in the middle. Under the slab was a large room open to the side of the knoll.

We don't know why the daughters called it the "Fish Market." We do know it served as an outdoor party area. The fireplace was a reproduction of a Norman design the Ames saw in France. Above the fireplace hearth was a sculpted relief of St. George and the Dragon. Actually the Ames intended to build a guest house on the slab using the fireplace as the focal point, one of the few building plans Mr. Ames did not complete. Today the fireplace is in a Minneapolis home.

The mystery room under the slab had actually housed a garage and the control room for the swimming pool's filtration system.

The Ames Farm

Directly to the south of the Ames home, beyond the circle drive, was the Ames dairy farm. The farm's entry was on Blue Gentian east of the main house. The 150 acre farm is now occupied by Northwest Airlines Administrative offices.

Harold (Harry) Johnson described the farm as a state of the art dairy operated by the resident farmer and his wife. Harry worked on the farm the summer of 1948 at age eighteen with two other part-time helpers. Besides the dairy buildings there were two farm houses. Harry and his fellow workers were lodged on the second floor of the managing farmers home. He was particularly impressed with the cleanliness and efficiency of the entire operation. Everything was stainless steel. A tanker truck stopped by each day to pick up milk. Harry also recalled the modern tractors including one with a single front wheel. An unforgettable feature of the farm house, for Harry, was its large freezer. It seemed to be always stocked with a supply of Dixie Cream doughnuts.

When Leila Poullada worked for Mr. Ames, after completing college in the late 1940s, she kept records of the dairy farms herd of Jersey cows. She laughed when she recalled that all of the cows were given names starting with the letter L. When the family ran out of people names for the cows, like hers, Linda, and Lesley, the cows were given names of cities in India that started with L.

A glimpse of Charles Lesley Ames

Without doubt Charles Lesley Ames will be remembered by most people for his extensive collection of books on South Asia. However, it is worth stepping back for a moment with the memories of Leila Poullada to understand Mr. Ames, the person.

Mr. Ames was inquisitive, liked reading, encouraged quality workmanship, approached things creatively, and had the financial means to follow his pursuits. While he thought of himself as shy he wasn't shy in design of structures he built and in assembling an invaluable book collection.

Above all, he enjoyed the pursuit of learning and sought ways to improve its accessibility. He had developed a concept for organizing encyclopedia data which he felt would serve the reader better than those on current bookshelves.

His South Asia book collection reflects some of the qualities he lived by. He developed his own cataloging system geared to saving reference time for the researcher and the librarian. He knew when and how to acquire additions for his collection. He took steps to assure his collection's continuing availability to the researcher and public. As Leila Poullada reflected, "The reason his collection of British government Indian documents surpassed those in the Library of Congress was because he got to them first."

The book that started it all

According to Henry Scholberg, who later managed the Ames collection for the University of Minnesota, Mr. Ames interest in India started with Kipling's books. As a young man he also read the eight volumes documenting the Sepoy mutiny in the British Army in India and questioned whether portions of the books were accurate.

We don't know what Mr. Ames questioned in the books he read, but the cause of the Sepoy mutiny as described in a 1903 encyclopedia is interesting. The Sepoys were Mohammedan and Hindu members of the British army. Both had served the British faithfully but their different faiths made them distrust each other. And, both were equally concerned about European attempts to Christianize their ranks. A new British army rifle, the Enfield, sparked the Sepoy mutiny. The Enfield
The fireplace duplicates a design the Ames saw in France. It was built as a centerpiece for a guest house.

was loaded with a greased powder cartridge. The cartridge required biting off the cartridge's end. Word got out that the grease was cow and pork fat. Partaking of cow fat was against the Hindu religion, and pork fat against the Mohammedan. Believing it was a Christian plot the Sepoys united in the mutiny that raged through India for two years.

The Collection

With his Sepoy mutiny books as starters, Mr. Ames embarked on his South Asian collection. Initially the books focused on India and were located in his homes basement office. Gradually their scope expanded to Ceylon, Pakistan, Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. Prior to World War II all of these countries except Afghanistan were part of the British Commonwealth.

The close of World War II gave Mr. Ames a unique opportunity to add to the collection. Thousands of career British military and civil servants returned to England after long tours of duty in India. Some were avid book collectors. Some had authored books on South Asia. Many now offered their books for sale. One of Leila's jobs was to review catalogs of books offered by British dealers noting those not already in the Ames collection. Often the Ames collection included most of the offerings. It was at this time that Mr. Ames decided to add the gatehouse structure with a library room and entrance passage to Mr. Justices house.

In October 1949, Mr. and Mrs. Ames visited India and Pakistan. Mr. Ames had long been recognized as a friend of India and wished to see the people and places that were a major interest in his life. He had developed friendships with many members of Indian trade commissions who visited the United States. The Ames visit to India lasted through May 1950.

Leila, Mr. Ames and the Khyber Pass

Leila Poullada said working with the Ames collection in 1948-49 had developed her personal interest in South Asia, Pakistan in particular. In 1949, she took post graduate studies at Punjab University followed by traveling with a girlfriend by bicycle and living at a girls schools. She met the Ames in India and they visited her when they travelled to Pakistan. She recalled how Mr. Ames wanted to see the historic Khyber Pass on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Khyber was one of several fortesssed passes. She said the Ames party was treated like royalty and were hosted for lunch at the Khyber Rifles Officers Mess. During his trip to India Mr. Ames also made contact with several Indian book dealers.

Leila's experience prompted desire to join the United States Foreign Service. She enrolled in a foreign service graduate course at the University of Pennsylvania where she met Leon Poullada, also taking advanced study. Leon, already in the Foreign Service, had served in Ceylon. Leila gave up her plan when she and Leon married.

The Library

By 1952 the gatehouse library proved too small for the Ames collection. In that year Mr. Ames built a library building east of the Ames home on Blue Gentian Road. The staff included Mrs. McGrail, librarian, and two helpers. The South Asian collection was made available to scholars and researchers. Leila said most of the visitors were scholars from the University of Chicago and eastern schools, and journalists. She said it seemed that every other week someone would be there often including State Department researchers.

The Ames library building housed the collection from 1952 to 1961 when it was transferred to the University of Minnesota.

Arrangements with the University

It was probably in the early 1950s that Mr. Ames decided to give the collection to the University of Minnesota. He had many friends among the faculty at the university. However, it took time to work out the transfer agreement. Charles Lesley wanted the collection to remain intact as a research unit using his cataloging system. The final agreement called for the transfer on Mr. Ames seventy-seventh birthday, June 24, 1961. The university hired educator Henry Scholberg to prepare for and then take charge of the university's new Ames South Asian Library to be housed on the fourth floor of the university library on the main campus mall.

According to Henry Scholberg the collection to be transferred numbered over 25,000 volumes.

Mr. Scholberg recalled, with a smile, his first days as the Ames librarian. It happened that the
From country road to freeway

This map illustrates the dramatic changes from the days of the Ames estate. The estate and farm occupied over 300 acres shown by the area with diagonal lines. At the time of the Ames estate Blue Gentian Road was a fairly straight road following todays I-494 from Delaware west to Highway 55. It formed the border of Mendota and Eagan Townships. Now the eastern portion of Blue Gentian is called O’Neill Road and the new Blue Gentian Road is rerouted.

The Ames house was located where you see the letter "i" in O’Neill. The Ames library building is at the letter "R" in Road. The library building still stands.

planned transfer date of June 24, 1961 was on a weekend delaying the actual move. He said it seemed strange that weekend standing in a library without a book on a shelf and knowing on Monday 25,000 volumes and a collection of maps and artifacts would start arriving. And, he had another problem, how to integrate the Ames cataloging system with the University’s Dewey decimal system for the 25,000 volumes. His cataloging problem was solved by more books.

Following World War II the United States shipped thousands of tons of wheat and other foodstuffs to countries recovering from the war’s devastation. Lacking money the countries were allowed to pay with various materials or products including copies of their publications. The arrangement was that books used as repayment would go to the Library of Congress. Thousands of books started arriving at the Congressional library and, for lack of space, redirected them to universities throughout the United States. Because the University of Minnesota was now a center of South Asian learning they were directed to the Ames Library. The books arrived coded with the congressional system which didn’t match either the University or Ames systems. Mr. Scholberg’s coding problem was solved by the decision to retain the Ames system for Ames books and the congressional system for Library of Congress books. Soon the Ames Library collection rapidly grew to over 100,000 volumes.

The display case

Sometime after the Ames collection arrived Mr. Scholberg acquired a secondhand glass showcase. This was his opportunity to put some of Ames hundreds of artifacts on display. Proudly, Mr. Ames was invited to see the showcase display. Much to Mr. Scholberg’s surprise it didn’t please Mr. Ames at all. He thought all of the artifacts had been on display since the transfer. It took some talking to smooth the troubled waters.

Passing of the Ames Estate

Charles Lesley Ames retired from the West Publishing Company in 1961 and died on December 7, 1969, at age 85. Maintaining the estate proved to much for Mrs. Ames and she moved away by 1972. The property passed to an investment company who among other uses promoted it as a site for a sports stadium. For eight years Ames house and gatehouse had a variety of tenants while the other buildings were unused and exposed to vandalism and decay.

In 1980 the house was purchased by the Granville Center Inc. of St. Paul for a drug and alcohol treatment center. It became known as the Eustis House. In 1987 the property was acquired by Northwest Airlines and added to its corporate office properties.

Today the Ames estate, except the library building, is gone. A cyclone fence surrounds the property. Remnants of the 200 foot wall and some gatehouse stones rest in the undergrowth. You can see the entrance and imagine the curving road ascending to the house on the side of the knoll.

The Library

Charles Lesley Ames’ interest in South Asia made the University of Minnesota the finest South Asian research center in the United States. The Ames collection is now located in the Wilson Library on the University’s West Bank Campus.

Blue Gentian Road

When Interstate 494 was constructed it followed the route of the Blue Gentian Road. A new Blue Gentian was created just south of the freeway. Ironically the portion of Blue Gentian bordering the Ames estate was renamed O’Neill Road.