

FRIENDS OF THE  
OVIATT LIBRARY  
Summer 2007

# Oviatt Friends

**A**nyone familiar with mid-20th century comic books will recognize the above word. When spoken by Billy Batson, radio reporter, he was transmogrified into cape-draped, crime fighting Captain Marvel, the most popular superhero of the 1940s and '50s. Marvel and his imaginary contemporaries—Superman, Batman and the like—long ago were eclipsed by newer paladins, but until August 3 these and many other comic book characters can be revisited in the Oviatt Library's Tseng Family Gallery.

The display begins with a copy of the first true comic book, *Funnies on Parade*, published in 1933 as a promotional piece for Procter and Gamble. From there the exhibit offers a veritable trip down memory lane with glimpses of such early action heroes as Phantasma and Smiling Jack; familiar cartoon characters, among them Tom and Jerry, Popeye, Mighty Mouse, and Scrooge McDuck; characters inspired by animated cartoons, such as the Flintstones; and classic personages such as the Lone Ranger, Jon of the Kalahari and Tarzan.

But the exhibit offers much more than mere peeks at old comic books. Drawing heavily on the Library's own archives, the exhibit traces the evolution of comic books from their origin in the Depression to the emergence of graphic novels at the end of the 20th century. We learn, for example, that comic books evolved from comic strips—the "funnies" to many—published in newspapers beginning in the 1890's. Two strips from this era are displayed: A facsimile of the *Yellow Kid*, the first successful newspaper comic series, from

# Shazam!



1895, and *Foxy Grandpa*, a 1900's strip featuring a mischievous grandfather playing tricks on his grandchildren. From there viewers are taken on an historical odyssey from the transformation of strips into books, the genre's Platinum Age, through the Golden Age that was born with the first publication in 1938 of Superman and ended twenty years later with the creation of an industry-wide code of conduct. Three more periods follow, each marked with dramatic changes in characters, up-datings of the code of conduct, and the eventual development of darker, more sinister plots. History doesn't get more graphic than this.

The exhibit's official opening on March 6 featured Dr. Charles Hatfield, Assistant Professor of English and a well-respected scholar of the genre, who spoke on "Comics in University Libraries." In his well-attended presentation, sponsored by the Friends of the Oviatt Library, Hatfield noted that though not universally viewed as serious literature, comic-related materials can be found in the collections of more than one hundred US libraries. Indeed, he said, "...comics research and teaching are thriving." His rummagings through numerous comic archives eventually led to his recently published book, *Alternative Comics*, a scholarly treatise on the underground and counter-culture comics of the 1960s. As for comic literature in the classroom, Hatfield's own popular courses at CSUN—Comic Books as Literature, and Fantasy Literature—speak for themselves.

Many items on display are from the Library's Chase Craig Collection, an assemblage of comic books, comic book-related strip art, window display cartoons and production artwork donated by its namesake. A graduate of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, Craig became a respected and prolific comic book writer, illustrator and

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Dr. Charles Hatfield

producer who drew such classics as *Little Chauncy*, *Charlie McCarthy*, and *Odd Bodkins* for the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and *Bugs Bunny*, *Looney Tunes*

and *Merrie Melodies* for *Dell Publications*.

Also displayed are items from the Library's David Somerville Collection and from the correspondence of Carl Barks. According to Hatfield, the Somerville archive, named to honor the advertising and media expert who assembled it, includes a wealth of materials "...related to classic adventure and pulp fiction, costumed heroes, and ...the granddaddies of the superhero, Superman and Batman." Carl Barks, an illustrator of great repute, was well known and admired by cartoonists but was largely unknown to the general public.

In his presentation, Hatfield made clear the critical importance to scholars of archival collections of comics. It matters not, he noted, whether a scholar is making a determined search for answers to specific questions, a common methodology, or is merely "...wandering curiously through unexpected materials and eventually (arriving) at some wholly unexpected but gratifying place," for both approaches can be productive. But the importance of serendipity in Hatfield's own research is clear, for he acknowledges stumbling onto "...some unexpected surprises" in the exhibit, "...including several items from the Somerville Collection that I want to read for my next book." Moreover, he

acknowledges knowing little of Craig's work prior to viewing the Library's collection, but he discovered in this industry pioneer's "...working life...a revealing window onto the comic book profession (at) mid-century, a profession practiced mostly in obscurity...." He credits Tony Gardner, Curator of Special Collections and the exhibit's principal architect, for his awakening to these new foci of his research.

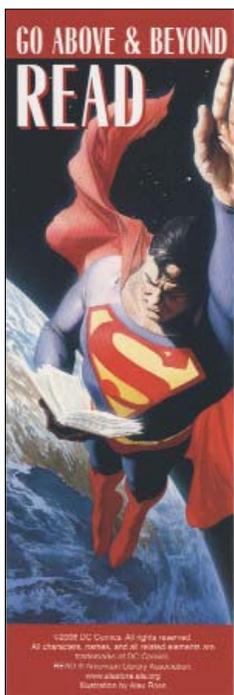
A part of the exhibit is, in fact, a commentary on Chase Craig's life and career. "Look closely," says Hatfield, "and you'll find a letter he (Craig) received in 1928, shortly before his eighteenth birthday, from the great cartoonist Elzie Segar," in which Segar, just four months prior to introducing his most famous character, Popeye, offers encouragement to the budding cartoonist. Also exhibited is an array of Craig's works and samples of correspondence between Craig and such luminaries of the genre as Carl Buettner, with whom Craig collaborated on the *Mortimer and Charlie* comic strip, and Carl Barks, a cartoonist "...whose work elevated the Disney comics to a whole new level."

But why bother with comics? Aside from enjoyment for a few fanatical fans, what is their ultimate value? To these questions, Hatfield offers three

answers: First, comics represent a distinct literary and artistic form that changes continually, a phenomenon that in and of itself deserves study. Second, comics offer graphic evidence of the pastimes, beliefs, politics and the societal norms of their time, hence are unique windows into history. And finally, comics offer a view of the business of "...publishing, popular literature, and... graphics." Indeed, comics, says Hatfield,

provide an "...enormous potential for cross-disciplinary and inter-departmental collaboration."

If the goal of a Library is to preserve knowledge and provide materials for scholarly inquiries, it appears there is more than ample justification for maintaining the comic archives!  
—jd



## Award-winning Columnist, Dennis McCarthy Speaks

“My friends have been calling all morning. They didn’t know I was dead!”

Frankie Goodman’s gentle scold were the first words to greet columnist Dennis McCarthy when he picked up his phone. Goodman’s obituary had just appeared on the *Daily News*’ front page, and he was calling to let McCarthy, the tribute’s author, know that he was pretty sure he was still alive. In a Friends of the Library sponsored talk, McCarthy used this embarrassing gaffe to illustrate how crucial it is for reporters to verify every fact before publishing. “Check your information,” said McCarthy. “Make the extra phone call. Be sure you have everything right.”

In his talk over lunch at the Orange Grove Bistro, McCarthy went on to explain how the premature announcement of Frankie’s death came to be. Informed by a friend that Frankie, a Van Nuys fight-manager and mentor to disadvantaged youth, had died, McCarthy called around to verify the fact. Sure enough, no one had seen Frankie for days and everyone to whom McCarthy spoke was convinced that Frankie was dead. Wanting to honor his friend, McCarthy wrote “...a beautiful obituary. Frankie was a wonderful guy who did a lot for the Valley. On weekends, he gave barrio kids access to his gym, asking only that they bring their report cards to prove they were keeping up their studies. I wanted folks to know about Frankie’s many good works.” But, McCarthy admitted, had he checked more carefully, he might have discovered that instead of a journey to the beyond Frankie had made a sudden trip to Georgia to care for a sick sister. “With a bit more effort, I probably wouldn’t have written Frankie’s obituary quite so soon!”

With self-deprecating humor McCarthy—named best columnist three times by the California Newspaper and Publishers Association, and Journalist of the Year by the Los Angeles Press Club—enthralled his audience with tales of his 35-year journey through the news business, from police-beat reporter to award-winning columnist. After years of reporting crime, the lot of most cub reporters, McCarthy said he wanted to “...look for the grave digger,” an allusion to a story by one of McCarthy’s journalistic heroes, Jimmy Breslin of the *New York Times*. As McCarthy explained, when President Kennedy was assassinated, “Instead of following the funeral procession

with the rest of the news media, Jimmy sought out the man charged with digging JFK’s grave.” In talking with the tearful cemetery worker Breslin discovered the man’s desire to make JFK’s grave “...the most beautiful ever,” allowing the columnist to add a unique human-interest dimension to an otherwise predictable story.

It was a visit to San Quentin, one of many prisons he frequented while covering murder trials, that triggered McCarthy’s transition from the police beat to “looking-for-the-grave-digger” columnist. “I’d gone to interview a man on death row who had ax-murdered a family. A guard put the two of us in a room together, left, locked the door behind him, and disappeared. I was alone with an ax-murderer and I couldn’t help think, ‘What if he doesn’t like my questions and decides to attack me? What’s he got to lose? They can’t execute him twice!’ I was nervous and I wanted

out of there as soon as possible. So I skipped my first twenty questions and went right to the last. ‘You didn’t do it, did you?’ And to his predictable ‘no’ I replied, ‘I didn’t think so.’ When I left I went directly to my editor and suggested I’d be great at writing a column that focused on the ‘good’ in people.”

Fortunately, his editor agreed and McCarthy’s career as a columnist was launched. Though his thrice-weekly columns are consistently upbeat and appreciated by most of his readers, what he writes apparently doesn’t please everyone. About once a month, said McCarthy, an anonymous reader sends him a photograph of one of his columns lining the bottom of a parakeet’s cage. “The bird is always perched right over my face. I don’t think this person likes me.”

McCarthy’s columns are wide-ranging, but senior citizens are among his favorite subjects. His story about 94-year-old Diana Peplow is typical. When finally permitted to re-enter her red-tagged apartment after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, Peplow walked directly to her closet and pulled from its rubble the Red Cross uniform she had worn as a WW II nurse. After donning the ancient ensemble, she reported for duty at the local Red Cross Center. “The Red Cross folks thought a ghost had walked in; Clara Barton had come back.” But in spite of the antiquated garb her help was welcomed and for several weeks she was at the shelter daily to calm fears, to hold crying babies, and to help those in need. “What Diana



Dennis McCarthy

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## Library Exhibit Acclaims African-American Experience

As I approached the Oviatt Library's Black History exhibit, about which I'd been asked to write this article, I was conflicted. I knew that I'd find photos of many civil rights icons—Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and the like—as well as reminders of milestone events in the civil rights struggle. I'd lived through the '60s and was well aware of the exhibit's symbolic and cultural importance. But what could I say, I wondered, that would be fresh, new or thought provoking? That Parks' refusal to give up her seat sparked profound societal change? That King was a leader and ultimately a martyr for the cause? That X was a prominent Black Nationalist leader who strongly advocated Black pride, economic self-reliance, and identity politics? Who in this day and age didn't know these things? Hadn't it all been said before and in far more eloquent prose that I was likely to muster?

But, the exhibit surprised me. Sure, I found the photos of principal players in the civil rights struggle, King, Parks, and X among them. But I also found Madame C. J. Walker. 'Who?' I found myself asking. And, yes, there were photos of milestone events

of the early '60s: The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing; the Washington, D.C. March for Jobs and Freedom that ended with King's "I have a dream" speech; the bloody Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, march. But I also found a case filled with photos and essays about LINKS, Inc. 'LINKS, Inc.?' Again, I drew a blank. And, prominently displayed near the Library's

entrance I found copies of *Kapu-Sens* and a short story entitled "On Humility: Cookie Monster." Whoa! This wasn't the Black History I'd expected. My interest piqued, I set out to see how it all related. I'm glad I did.

For me, LINKS, Inc. proved a revelation. My lack of awareness is most certainly my failing, for the 9,600-member women's group, I discovered, has been active, growing and highly influential for half a century. The organization, founded in 1946 by two Black women, rapidly expanded from a single Philadelphia chapter to its current nationwide, 267-chapter-strong presence. Its goals—to foster friendship among Black women; to promote civic, educational and cultural concerns; and to improve the quality of life for the African-American community—are what keep it vital. The organization's "Angels Chapter," founded in Los Angeles in 1963, and an offshoot chapter have together significantly impacted

the local Black community through sponsorship of high school students, fund-raising events and educational awareness projects. Both groups also are strong supporters of numerous other civic-minded, Black-promoting organizations such as the

Urban League, Dollars for Scholars, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Project Jordan, the Watts Tutorial Program, and the United Negro College Fund, to mention but a few. How could I not have heard of this organization?

And Madame C. J. Walker? Her story enthralled



Poster: Madame C.J. Walker



Photo of LINKS from Newspaper article

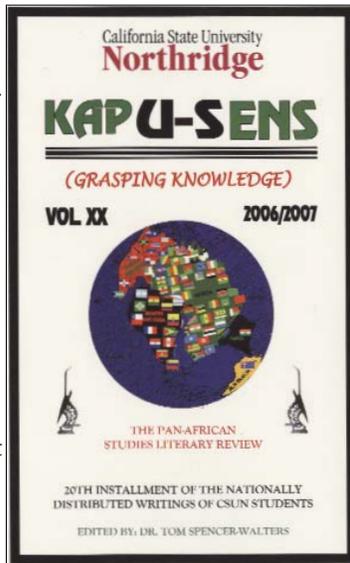
me. Born Sarah Breedlove in 1867 to former slaves in poverty-stricken Louisiana, she was orphaned at six. After her parents' deaths she survived by working the cotton fields, married at 14, bore a daughter, and was widowed at 20. Seeking a new beginning, she moved with her daughter to St. Louis where she found work as a laundry-woman. Not a propitious start but what a finish! When Walker died in 1919 she was the richest Black woman in the country, a multi-millionaire, her transformation from penury to affluence wrought by her own ingenuity, entrepreneurship and just plain hard work. After washing laundry in the daytime in St. Louis she attended school at night. Thinking her own hair unruly, she developed pomades to treat it and heated combs to straighten it. She soon discovered a ready market for these products among Black women and initially walked door-to-door peddling them. Her enterprise flourishing, she moved to Denver, married Charles Joseph Walker, and thereafter promoted her products under the appellation of Madame C. J. Walker. Until her death she traveled widely, promoting her products and her philosophy of "cleanliness and loveliness," in the process building a business that in its heyday employed more than 3,000 people, among them her sales women, called "Walker agents," who became well-known fixtures of the U.S. and Caribbean Black communities. When I entered the

Library I knew nothing about Madame Walker, but I left with a profound appreciation for this pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps woman!

*Kapu-Sens*, I discovered, is the name of a journal published by CSUN's Pan-African Studies Department. Devoted entirely to student-written works—short stories, poetry, and critical essays—the journal is now in its twentieth edition. Says, Dr. Tom Spencer-Walters, Chair of PAS and the journal's founder and editor, "*Kapu-Sens* has proven a big success, for it provides its authors a chance to express themselves in a meaningful way." Indeed, the "Cookie Monster" story to which I alluded earlier is from that journal. Reading it, I caught a glimpse of the psyche of a student admitting to her own *faux pas*—a tug-of-war with an older airline passenger over cookies she

thought hers but which ultimately proved to be his, hers still safely ensconced in her purse. How embarrassing for her, yet how absolutely delicious that she could reflect on her actions and share her experience and feelings with others. A West African Krio axiom, "Words have no feet, but they travel very far," aptly describes a likely fate of this and other stories from the students' journal, for some may well be passed on for generations.

Many items on display, among them historical photographs from the John A. Kouns Collection documenting the civil rights movement, were from the Library's Urban Archives Center. But many others were derived from an immense new resource—the Black Studies Center—to which the Library has recently acquired access. Articles from the very influential Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, about such celebrities as Joe Louis, Lena Horne, and Jackie Robinson appeared genuine enough but proved to be reproductions. "The database is a fully cross-searchable gateway to Black Studies," says librarian Lynn Lampert, one of the exhibit's creators and Chair of Reference and Instructional Services. "By providing access to the International Index to Black Periodicals, the Black Literature Index, Schomburg Studies on the Black Experiences and similar indices, scholars can retrieve essays, periodicals, historical newspaper articles, even videos." A mid-February training session on the database's use, timed to coincide with the exhibit's opening, attracted more than 200 students and faculty from diverse disciplines, among them Pan-African Studies, History and



20th Edition of Kapu-Sens

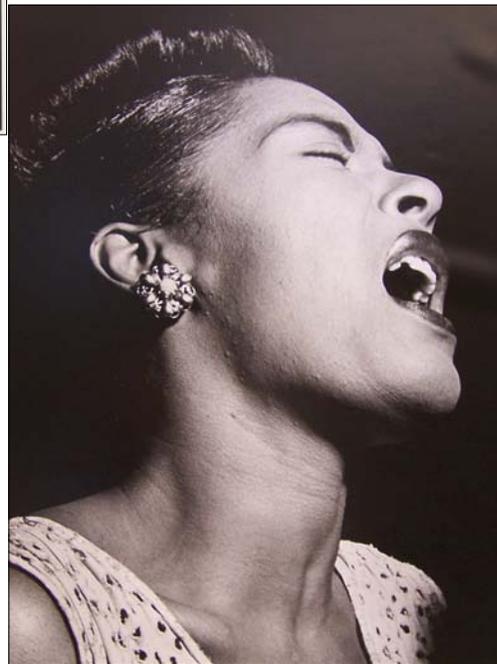
English.

As I noted earlier, my expectation as I approached the exhibit was of displays emphasizing remembrance and celebration, that is, with reminders of how things were pre-'60s and a celebration of the profound cultural changes brought about by the civil rights movement. I found



Photo from the John A. Kouns Collection

both, of course. But if I were to select two terms to apply to the exhibit they would not be



Poster: William Gottlieb *The Golden Age of Jazz* (Billie Holiday)

"remind" and "celebrate" but "inform" and "educate," for that's exactly what the exhibit did for me! Apparently, though, that was the plan all along. In response to an inquiry, Spencer-Walters commented that the exhibit's intent was not only to provide "...a compellingly visual perspective of the sacri-

fices of African American men and women in the struggle for civil rights and justice," but more importantly to open the possibilities "...for education and socialization (especially of the younger generations) about the need for a just and equitable society based on mutual understanding, tolerance, openness and respect, for all Americans." If even a few other Library patrons learned as much as I did, the exhibit did its job, and I am profoundly grateful to its creators for making it so.

—jd

*The team that created the exhibit included, in addition to Lampert, Robert Marshall, Head Archivist of the Urban Archives Center, and Joyclyn Dunham, Library Development Assistant. The Black Studies Center training session was generously supported by ProQuest, the database's creator.*

## Library Exhibits Inspire Dance

**W**ho would have guessed that a Library exhibit featuring engravings from a bygone era would inspire a dance? But that, says Dr. J'aime Morrison, Professor of Theater, is exactly what happened. A visit to an Oviatt Library exhibit honoring book illustrators, says Morrison, coupled with a perusal of costumes displayed in another Library exhibit commemorating Mozart's 250th birthday anniversary, determined the course of her Advanced Movement class. And what better place for the students to show off what they had learned than the Library's Tseng Family Gallery from whence the idea germinated. Says Cindy Ventuleth, Library Development Officer, on December 13, "The students wowed the audience with their performance. I loved the program, as did everyone else who came." Here, in Morrison's own words, is the story of the dance that two Library exhibits inspired.

### Planning our Bal Paré by J'aime Morrison

**E**ach fall I offer an advanced course in movement for theater majors. Following a semester of study, intensive research and practice in the movement styles of a historical period, the course ends with a public performance. This year my class developed a movement drama based on the movement styles, modes and manners of 17th- and 18th-century French culture.

The impetus for this year's focus was a visit to the Tseng Gallery's "Remarkable Impressions" exhibit and its beautifully presented images by Hogarth and other 18th and 19th century illustrators. I brought my students and as they circled the classic displays I was immediately drawn to the possibility of a performance that interacted with the exhibit. Might we, for example, embody in our performance the attitudes and mores evident in the Hogarth prints on display? Might we, in effect, transform the gallery into a performance space in concert with the ideas present in the images? When approached about the



Professor Morrison and her students

possibility, Tony Gardner, Curator of Special Collections generously gave us the go-ahead.

With a plan in place, I then challenged my students to research the music, architecture, fashion and tastes of the period. While doing so they learned various dances typical of the period and set about reconstructing historical choreography from 18th-century dance notation. In addition, by means of workshops, performance composition and readings the class also came to understand the historical, philosophical and social contexts in which the movement styles of the period developed.

Seeking a narrative structure for the class's final movement drama I was drawn to a children's book, titled *The Girl with the Ship on Her Head*, recommended by a colleague. Using the book as a guide, and with help from Professors Bob Miller and Steven Howard, each student then designed and constructed a wig consistent with the style of the period, but with found materials. Costumes for the performance were selected from the Theater Department's collection with the aid of Maro Parian, the costume shop supervisor. Then, as they prepared for the final showing in the Tseng Family Gallery, the students stepped out of their high tops and miniskirts and into full period dress.

I am very grateful to the Library staff for permitting my students to interact with the Library's exhibits, for doing so gave them an opportunity to observe, indeed construct a relationship between fine art, performance and text. Because of this, our drama was a true collaborative effort and I look forward to similar collaborations in the future.

*McCarthy article continued*

did was an extraordinary thing. It touched people and they responded.” And, in the lingo of the newspaper business, McCarthy’s poignant story “had legs” and was picked up by a wire service and published nationally.

One of the things that makes his job fun, said McCarthy, “...is the power of the pen, the power to change a wrong to a right.” As examples of his success in changing things for the better,

McCarthy recounted two stories he had written: Of Anna, a Vons checker-in-training and of 84-year-old Gerald. Anna’s boss fired her for taking three days off near the end of her training, in defiance of his wishes, to be with her dying mother. But the public outcry generated by McCarthy’s story of Anna’s unfair and unreasonable treatment led to her reinstatement—with an apology and a dozen red roses from the company president. Gerald’s

problem arose when, his mental faculties ravished by age, he heeded his President’s call for help and donated his entire life’s savings to the Republican Party. On discovering that her father was destitute Gerald’s daughter asked for the money back, but was told “Sorry, can’t be done.” But shortly after McCarthy’s column about the octogenarian’s plight appeared, Gerald not only got his savings back but an apology from President Reagan (who previously was unaware of the flap) along with an invitation to the White House.

“I love the newspaper business,” said McCarthy. “Sometimes I write a story and I can’t wait for the response to it. I know it’s going to touch a lot of people. It’s an amazing experience.” A CSUN alumnus, McCarthy gratefully acknowledges his professors’ contributions to his success. “The training at CSUN was first-rate, the instructors top-notch. We were taught to think on our feet. Many of us were hired on as reporters, and often times graduates of more prestigious colleges served as our copy kids.”

“But the newspaper business is changing. It’s lost a lot of its power.” Preparing a story for a newspaper, noted McCarthy, requires many hours, research to verify the

accuracy of its content, and careful writing. Television reporting, on the other hand, is often instantaneous, with folks in helicopters commonly reporting events as they happen, albeit without in-depth analysis. An even more disturbing change in the media landscape, suggested McCarthy, are Internet blogs, that are often written hurriedly and with no oversight to assure accuracy and balanced cover-

age. “Bloggers are very subjective. At least with newspapers the goal is objective reporting, kind of like a third person standing to the side and telling the story without bias. In addition, there are editors and professional people who make the



L-R: Friends President Fred Levy, June Frankenberg, Dennis McCarthy, Anne Kogen, Oviatt Library Dean Susan Curzon

extra phone call to be sure the story is accurate.”

But, because of competition among the media, noted McCarthy, “Newspapers as we’ve known them are on their way out. In just five or ten years, maybe fewer, we will probably not be picking up the paper from the driveway each morning. Soon the news will be distributed on the Internet and we’ll get it via computer.”

In spite of McCarthy’s best efforts to get things right, he admits that he has sometimes made mistakes, as when he erroneously reported the passing of his friend Frankie. But that cloud on his reputation proved to have a silver lining. On hearing Frankie’s voice—seemingly from the grave—and realizing the obituary he had published was premature, McCarthy offered a heart-felt apology for his error. “No, no,” said Frankie. “It’s not a bad thing. In fact, having my obituary published has been a real blessing. I had no idea all those people felt that way about me.” With an accolade such as this from a man he’d just pronounced dead it’s easy to see why McCarthy loves his job!

—jd

*McCarthy’s talk, open to the public, was sponsored by Friends of the Oviatt Library and arranged by June Frankenberg with help from Maurice Rotheiser.*

FRIENDS OF THE OVIATT LIBRARY

*Oviatt Friends*

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in color on the web:  
<http://library.csun.edu/friends/>

California State University  
**Northridge**

## *Coming in the Fall*

*The Oviatt Library's  
next exhibition in the  
Tseng Gallery will be on the  
life and times of Elizabeth I.*

*We look forward to  
seeing you there!*

*Expect your postcard  
announcing the exhibit and  
opening reception in August.*

