WISALTS: Whittington Interceptor Sustainable Agricultural Land Treatment Society Inc. and history of its involvement with Murdoch University Library.

Historical Sequence:

Overview:

In 2002, Murdoch Library agreed to house the private collection of Henry (Harry) Samuel Whittington (OAM.) Harry Whittington died in 1999, and had devoted most of his life to identifying and developing innovative solutions to the growing salinity problems in the Wheatbelt and SW of Western Australia. In 1978 a group of farmers who were convinced by Whittington’s ideas formed the organisation “Whittington Interceptor Salt Affected Land Treatment Society Inc. (WISALTS).” Harry Whittington’s work and the activities of the WISALTS organisation are considered important and sometimes controversial episodes in the farming history of Western Australia from 1940’ to the present time.

Over that period a large amount of important documents, reports and photographs had been collected by Mr Whittington and the organisation. On Harry’s death, the Whittington family, anxious that this collection be retained as an important historical record, approached Murdoch University Library for advice with regard to housing the collection at Murdoch. WISALTS and the Whittington Family considered that this material would be of interest both as a historical record of what happened over the period but also as a resource for researchers with an interest in this area in the future.

On advice from Grant Stone, previous Scholarly Resources Librarian at Murdoch University, an application was made by WISALTS and the Whittington family to the National Library of Australia for a National Heritage Grant to assess the value of the collection, and this was successful in 2001. John Whittington flew to Canberra by invitation, to receive the Grant, at the National Library on 10th October 2001. The grant was used to employ Susan Belford, an NLA approved assessor to review the collection and provide advice as to its value and to suggest priorities for cataloguing and preservation. *(1)*

The collection of documents and correspondence spans a period of 40 years relating to Whittington’s research into contour banks and subsequent engineering of the Interceptor bank. It also includes the WISALTS organisation’s large collection of documents since 1978. Ms Belford identified farm plans, surveyed by Whittington and WISALTS CONSULTANTS of various properties throughout the Wheatbelt’s of WA and further afield in South Australia, Victoria and NSW, as the most important material in the collection. These farm plans number over 900 and were assessed as being a priority for preservation.

Following the NLA assessment, the documents were transferred to the Murdoch Library where since 2007, Mr Whittington’s daughters, Sue Pike and Alison Brown have spent many hours, on a voluntary basis, painstakingly ordering and making sense of the material ready for cataloguing and, with the assistance of Grant Stone and other library staff have organised the copying of the farm plans onto archival quality paper ready for more permanent storage. There is still a large amount of work to complete on cataloguing this important collection and WISALTS have over the years made funds available for appropriate stationary and some additional paid assistance with data entry. It is envisaged that this process will continue over time to the point where the materials can be easily accessed by researchers and interested people, possibly in electronic format.
Murdoch Library connection:

The large quantity of documents and audio visual material had been stored, since Mr Whittington’s, death in his son, John S Whittington’s office, at Hamilton Hill, WA. John’s neighbour, Dr Laura Stocker, was at the time a Senior Lecturer at Murdoch University with the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy. Discussions between John and Dr Stoker developed her interest in WISALTS work in sustainable agriculture. Dr Stoker suggested that Murdoch Library may be interested in having the collection in their Special Collection section and approached Mr Grant Stone in this regard. As described above, Grant Stone suggested that the Whittington family, through WISALTS apply for a National Heritage Grant for funds for a Preservation Survey.

Susan Belford’s Preservation Survey Report for WISALTS, completed in May 2002, became the catalyst for finalising the arrangements between Grant Stone and John Whittington to have the documents moved into the basement of Murdoch’s Library. This move provided a secure storage place but family members were unable to begin the sorting and cataloguing of these papers until 2007. Unfortunately a written agreement was never finalised at that time between Murdoch Library and WISALTS even though letters written by John Whittington refer to such an agreement needing to be finalised back in 2002.

Additional connection to Murdoch University: Sally Paulin

Dr Laura Stocker suggested to Sally Paulin that the work done by Harry Whittington and the formation of WISALTS could be good material for a thesis on community science in action. Sally was able to access the material which at that time was still stored in John Whittington’s office. From the chaos of many boxes with unsorted material to contend with Sally completed her thesis in October 2000*(2). Sally never met Harry Whittington, who died in October 1999, but she did visit with a number of farmers who were instrumental for the development of the WISALTS organisation. Laurie and Pat Adamson of Quairading, Gavan and Sheila Drew of Gingin, Lyndon and Yvonne Henning of Koorda, Pam and Jim McGregor of Kojonup, Lloyd Richards of Geraldton, Noel and Margaret Powell, Brian Whittington, Lyn Messenger, Darrell and Suzanne Turner- all of Brookton, who added to Sally’s knowledge of WISALTS and the immense problem of salinity in farming areas.

After the Whittington family read Sally’s thesis they underwrote it’s publication as a book that was used to further publicise WISALTS’s ideas and innovations in soil conservation and sustainable agriculture. This book “Why Salt? Harry Whittington OAM and WISALTS Community Science in Action” (Indian Ocean Books, 2002) was made available to public libraries in Western Australia and sold at various field days and agricultural shows since 2002. A few years prior to this WISALTS had actually changed the focus of the organisation by changing two words in their name – from “Salt Affected” to “Sustainable Agriculture” as they understood that controlling water movement across farming lands was a major contribution to encouraging healthy microbial activity with marked improvements in soil fertility as a result. This change in focus was important as “sustainability” is more readily understood than “salinity” by the wider community. It was also clear that salinity was not the only contributor to land degradation and Sally Paulin noted this distinction in her work.

“Why Salt? Harry Whittington, OAM and WISALTS: Community Science in Action” was launched at Murdoch University’s library on 29th October 2002. About 100 people were present with the Minister for the Environment, Dr Judy Edwards opening the launch. WISALTS president, Mr Brian Whittington along with many WISALTS members and interested public enjoyed the occasion.

Sally Paulin served as secretary and a committee member of WISALTS for some years, regularly gives talks and lectures about Harry Whittington’s work and has published related research and conference papers. She was a lecturer in the School of Sustainability at Murdoch from 2008 -2011 and is currently a PhD researcher and tutor.
Progress on Collection of data held at Murdoch in 2012:

Several years passed before WISALTS and family members contacted Grant Stone to gain access and begin sorting the material. Grant was invaluable in giving assistance in the years (2007 – 2010) and life in the library basement, though not a perfect working environment gave sufficient room to sift through, discard, collate and make the material closer to an archival collection.

By February 2010 sufficient progress had been made to request WISALTS hold their AGM at Murdoch University so that queries on some of the data could be worked through with the older members of the organisation. Grant Stone agreed to address this AGM to explain the ethos of Murdoch Library and why the WISALTS collection was deemed of sufficient importance to have a place as a Special Collection item.

Professor Richard Harper, Alcoa’s Chair in Sustainable Water Management at Murdoch University also attended the AGM with a view to forming some options for future research, with some funding available from WISALTS. He offered to identify suitable students interested in undertaking research working within specific time-line projects. Once the material is digitally entered and available for farmers and researchers on-line, it will make research easier. It will also assist in identifying important areas for further research for WISALTS.

The preferred outcome for the WISALTS Collection is to progress the preservation and cataloguing of the collection so that it can be made available through Murdoch University’s web site. At that stage ownership of the Collection would have been handed over to Murdoch Library which both the family and WISALTS see as a desirable outcome for these documents which cover nearly fifty years of on-farm research into salinity, agri-politics and social history of that period.

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Attached documents:

1. Susan Beresford’s assessment report.

List of References:

2. Paulin, Sally (2000):
   Murdoch University theses, Social Ecology, Honours  
   http://prospero.murdoch.edu.au/record=b1460006~S1

3. Paulin, Sally (2002):  
   “Why Salt? Harry Whittington, OAM and WISALTS: community science in action/Sally Paulin”  
   Joondalup, Indian Ocean Books.  
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