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From the Los Angeles Times

A conservative's mother lode

A Pasadena woman carefully collected anti-communist era artifacts. Now they are at the Huntington, prized by scholars.

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Historian Michelle Nickerson still recalls with delight and awe the day she first visited a Pasadena house stuffed with a vast collection of political pamphlets, books and clippings documenting conservative and anti-communist causes since the 1940s.

"My heart was jumping out of my chest. I could not believe it," said Nickerson, now an American history professor at the University of Texas in Dallas. "It was one of those moments that you only get a few of in the course of research. I thought: Holy cow, I have found the mother lode, not to mention I found a really interesting person."

That person was Marie Koenig, a political activist who collected diligently for five decades. Nickerson's meeting with her eventually led the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino to acquire Koenig's immense trove two years ago and more recently to open it to scholars interested in the Cold War, religious right and similar topics. The result is shedding new light on conservative women in the Southland and their role in such causes as Ronald Reagan's elections to the governorship and presidency.

Koenig, who died in 2003 at 84, collected as a serious ideological pursuit, not for sentimental keepsakes. Her family and the academics who met her said she built a paper trail to what she and like-minded activists considered a communist threat and to other hot issues of that era.

The archive includes programs from the 1964 Republican Convention, where Koenig was happy to see Barry Goldwater nominated to run for president. A 1968 book is inscribed by conservative writer William F. Buckley "To Mr. and Mrs. Walter Koenig with great and long-standing admiration." Newsletters from the 1950s denounce President Eisenhower as "an appeaser" and California Gov. Pat Brown as a "communist apologist."

So she and her friends could study opposing opinions, Koenig also saved socialist newspapers along with magazines of the John Birch Society, the ultra-right group that she considered too extreme.

"The thing I find fascinating is these women were intelligent, intellectual advocates. They were prepared and knowledgeable. They weren't afraid of argument and discussion, unlike today, when people are so polarized they won't even talk things out," said Alan H. Jutzi, the Huntington's chief curator of rare books. Shortly before she died, Koenig approved Jutzi's plan for the Huntington to buy her collection. The deal was completed with her estate for what he described as a five-figure price.

To liberals who remember the red hunts of the '50s, much material seems wrongheaded and paranoid, and some items appear racist and anti-Semitic, although relatives insist Koenig was neither. Many may seem ludicrous today, including a 1962 handbill warning shoppers to avoid such communist products as Polish hams and a 1960 pamphlet from a group called the Minute Women estimating communist control of the U.S. at "30% to 50%."

But whatever their own political bents, researchers all seem impressed with the collection's scope of ground-level source material and the disciplined way Koenig got on so many mailing lists, clipped so many periodicals and picked up fliers.

About 200 boxes of materials were trucked to the library from the two-story house in east Pasadena where Koenig lived with her husband, Walter, a financial planner and a fellow conservative activist who preceded her in death. Overflowing file cabinets and bookshelves lined rooms, and "any usable flat space in the house, whether a coffee table or TV tray, was utilized for papers," her daughter Maggie Englund recalled.

"What I appreciated about Mom and Dad is that they always had research to back things up. I grew up with the ability to think critically because of that," said Englund, a teacher in Oregon.

First-time visitors to the house felt overwhelmed by the clutter, but Koenig assured them she knew where everything was. Even now much of the collection remains in her original plastic binders and manila files with such handwritten headings as "Communism," "Universities: Riots," "Atomic Energy" and "Christianity."

The Koenig's younger daughter, Susan Shiells of Pasadena, said her mother resisted hints to reduce collecting even after microfilm and the Internet became available. Today, she said, her mother would declare: "I told you so. There was a reason I kept all this."

Shiells, a marketer and fundraiser for nonprofit groups, said her mother's mission was "telling the truth, telling history correctly."

Marie Koenig grew up in the Democratic world of New Orleans and worked as a secretary to the Louisiana state attorney general. After music and pre-law studies, she moved to Los Angeles in 1944 and landed a job as a contract writer in MGM's legal department. There, she witnessed the bitter labor strikes in Hollywood and became angry at what she considered leftist squelching of dissent.

She worked in the early '50s for the Spiritual Mobilization organization headed by the Rev. James Fifield, a prominent anti-communist Protestant leader in Los Angeles. She became active in various Republican and Christian causes and in charitable and music groups. After interruptions in her college education, she earned a history degree from the University of La Verne at age 66.

Ironically, a liberal historian brought Koenig to the forefront.

Nickerson, who had been a graduate student union organizer at Yale, had a fellowship at the Huntington to work on a dissertation about conservative women in the Cold War. She expanded that into a book, to be published next year, titled "Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right."

In response to a 2001 announcement in the San Marino Tribune, about 30 women, including Koenig, contacted Nickerson. Although Nickerson admitted upfront that she was "a flaming liberal," most of the women talked to her, eager to convert her and to contend that the Soviet Union's collapse had proved their convictions correct.

The big discovery turned out to be Koenig's archive. Koenig was "frail but very alert and had a quick sense of humor," Nickerson recalled, and was generous in allowing the professor to borrow and photocopy rare items.

Nickerson asked Koenig to describe the role played by women in the conservative movement. "Without them, I think, we'd be a totally communist nation," Koenig replied, according to a transcript.

Koenig and her circle were wrong many times in linking non-communist liberal activities to communist groups, Nickerson said, but they approached their research in a studious manner, reminiscent of academics.

Liberals conducted similar studies from the other side, Nickerson noted; archives at Cal State Northridge document how labor and Jewish groups monitored what they considered dangerously right-wing activities.

In the past, university libraries in the U.S. tended to collect more archives from the left, some scholars say, in part because conservatives did not feel welcome in academia. That started to change after Reagan was elected president in 1980, according to John Earl Haynes, a 20th century political history expert at the Library of Congress who has written on Soviet espionage in America.

"Historians in the past couple of decades have come to realize that there are two sides," Haynes said.

The collection is open only to qualified researchers. Among them is author John Meroney, who is looking for insights for a book about Reagan's years as an actor and Hollywood union leader. Koenig's files include early mentions of Reagan's political speeches and efforts to draft him into politics.

Meroney said the Koenig archive "represents a real cornerstone of understanding the full story of the Cold War during that period. It seems to be a perceptive, astute acquisition on the part of the Huntington."

Darren Dochuk, an assistant professor of history at Purdue University, is scouring the Koenig material this summer for a book about how Southerners who moved to California pushed the religious and political culture to the right after World War II. Dochuk, who interviewed Koenig a year before she died, described her as "a very dynamic and sharp woman" whose own life story mirrored his thesis.

During the Cold War, Koenig "truly believed that the system itself was teetering on collapse and California itself was especially volatile," Dochuk explained. "She felt it was her duty to monitor it and make those in power recognize the danger."

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