

Mysterious wand work

Thursday, December 6, 2018 by Katie Turriff



Hello readers! My name is Katie Turriff and I have been a co-op student at Special Collections & Archives (SCA) since September. I'm studying planning here at the University and I will be in my 4A term in January. Working at SCA has been so thrilling – every day I learn something new and interact with so many intriguing objects and documents we have in the stacks. I'm writing this blog post today to introduce you to one of those interesting parts of our collection.

Prior to starting my co-op placement, I browsed the [Waterloo Digital Library](#). One item that definitely piqued my interest was an album titled [Senior Wand Work](#) containing photographs depicting a woman with a 'wand' in different

positions with explanations of her positioning captioned under each photograph. The 'wand' seems to be a metal rod about three feet long and an inch or so in diameter, and the woman is dressed in what looks to be a gym suit made of a thick, dark fabric similar to [this dress from the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). This type of fashion is not surprising considering the date on the album is 1906 – formal-looking attire is typical of the era in Western society.

The title of the album is 'Senior Wand Work,' and this initially had me excited – is this something to do with witches? What's going on here? The album remained a mystery to me and the rest of the team at SCA until I committed some time to research. Unfortunately, there is no metadata (information about the item) to go with the album, so we can only make assumptions about what we might learn about the piece from research and it still remains quite mysterious.

'Wand Work' is likely referring to a calisthenics exercise – repeated / rhythmic motions done to achieve bodily fitness and graceful movement – that was popular in physical education curricula across America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The exercise involves swift movements of the body with a metal rod, or 'wand,' supposedly to develop balance and facilitate exercise. The wand was used as a calisthenics tool along with dumbbells and 'Indian clubs' (weighted objects resembling bowling pins) in physical education settings, and students often exercised in synchronization with each other to live music.

The album itself looks like a school assignment that a student – perhaps the 'M. Lucile Adams' whose name is written in the album – did in describing the movements and routines she was taught. Still, this is all speculation; M. Lucile Adams could have been the woman in the photographs, the photographer, the owner of the album, or all three. Not making assumptions is a challenge in archival practice – it is not up to us to pass judgment on an item without having complete information about it, and this can be frustrating when complete information is not available. It would be wrong of us to assume that, for example, M. Lucile Adams is the woman in the photos, or that 1906 is the year the album was compiled. All we know is that that name and date are written on the album, and we must leave the interpretation up to you – the researcher! For all we know, she could indeed be a witch with her wand...