

Culinary History Collection at the Smithsonian Institution

By Shirley Cherkasky

A few months ago, when Dara Wingreen-Mason became involved with the CHoW Culinary History Collection at the Smithsonian, she asked me for a history of how the CHoW Collection came into being. She wanted the history to be filed with the Collection. I went back through about ten years of *CHoW Lines* and put together some information for her. At the February 11 CHoW meeting, someone asked me when we had started the Collection. It occurred to me that the brief history might be of interest to CHoW members, and it should be in our CHoW records for the future.



The Culinary Historians of Washington, D.C. (CHoW) was founded in October 1996, by Shirley Cherkasky, a retired Smithsonian Institution staffer and food historian. CHoW is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational organization dedicated to the study of the history of foodstuffs, cuisines, and culinary customs—both historical and contemporary—from all parts of the world. The organization was based on similar groups in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Boston, Massachusetts.

CHoW began meeting monthly, September through May, in the Eckles Library of Mount Vernon College, a women's college in Northwest Washington, D.C. At that time, the College was indicating interest in establishing a course in food studies. Immediately after CHoW's organization, a monthly publication called *CHoW Line* began to be mailed to members as a combination meeting notice and newsletter. In March 1998, it carried a long article by Andy Smith, a New York culinary historian, titled "Everything You Wanted to Know about Culinary History Books but Didn't Have Time to Find Out." CHoW began to collect books that might be of interest to its members.

With Mount Vernon's potential interest in food studies, the Washington

chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier saw an opportunity to find a place to house the very large collection of cookbooks (approximately 8,000) it had acquired through book donations from Goody Solomon and other members. Since CHoW and Les Dames shared several members, talks began about combining the two organizations' accumulated books to establish a culinary collection at Eckles Library. The Library was amenable, and by November 1998, the combined books were shelved there, with Sue McWilliams of CHoW and Anna St. John of Les Dames heading up the project. Also by then, a regular column in *CHoW Line*, "The Book Forager," was encouraging members to seek and contribute appropriate culinary history books. It also listed local used book sales and shops and other pertinent information.

However, by January 1999, the Mount Vernon College campus had been purchased by the George Washington University. CHoW continued to meet at Eckles Library and to contribute books. In early 2000, GWU was contemplating offering courses in food studies, and in mid-February, the culinary collection was formally opened in a ceremony with remarks by Grae Baxter of GWU, Anne Emery of the Eckles Library, and **CiCi Williamson**, then the president of Les Dames Washington, D.C., Chapter. A cataloging system was established. Collecting continued by both organizations. CHoW purchased a large set of Mexican regional cookbooks brought to the collection by a member, and *CHoW Line* reported that CHoW charter member Rodris Roth, a National Museum of American History (NMAH) Domestic Life curator, who died in September 2000, left a number of her culinary history books to the collection. From 2000 through 2003, the Book Forager column continued to carry information on additions to the collection and lists of suggested books to seek for it. But by April 2004, GWU had changed its mind on the Mount Vernon campus future, and asked Les Dames and CHoW to release the shelf space at Eckles. Both groups were taken by surprise and CHoW members hastily worked to separate its books from the much larger Les



Dames accumulation, since the latter did not have plans about a new location. CHoW books were temporarily stored in members' homes. Les Dames contacted Mary Augusta Thomas of the Smithsonian Libraries but, so far as I know, she felt that the 8,000 or more books could not be accommodated. Eventually the entire number were sold to a large used book seller and disposed of by that means. In October 2004, **Francine Berkowitz**, **Laura Gilliam**, and **Shirley Cherkasky** of CHoW met with Mary Augusta to discuss the possibility of transferring the 300-plus CHoW books to the SI Libraries. Eventually, an agreement was reached that the books would be fully catalogued and acknowledged as the CHoW Collection, and the transfer was made to the NMAH Library in November. The deed of gift was signed by Francine Berkowitz, CHoW secretary, and completed in February 2005.

CHoW ceased meeting at GWU's Eckles Library and by March 2005, was holding its meetings at Bethesda-Chevy Chase Services Center. Its interest in and support of the Culinary History Collection has continued unabated. Books are contributed almost every month from members who review new food books or who purchase primarily used books from various sources. *CHoW Line* continues to carry information about the collection. The Summer/Fall 2005 issue of SI Libraries "Information" on page 9 carried an article about the receipt of 333 volumes on culinary arts.

The Libraries also have a complete set of *CHoW Lines* from October 1996 to date. The current total of about 750 titles and all related materials are now housed at the Smithsonian Libraries Research Annex. The SIL-CHoW collection also is expanding with additions at the discretion of the librarians there.