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Hidden Collections — Kentucky Historical Society

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Hidden collections is a term sometimes used by special collections libraries, archives, or museums when referring to un-cataloged or un-processed items that are temporarily unavailable to researchers for short or long intervals due to a variety of reasons. This column will interview different special collections, archives, or museums across the United States of America to get an inside look surrounding the challenges and issues that come with processing or caring for unique materials, while providing access for research purposes. There are a lot of factors involved in getting donated or purchased materials readily accessible for researchers and we cover many of these aspects in this column.

In this *Against the Grain* issue, we were fortunate to speak with **Louise Jones**, Director of Special Collections and Library, at the **Kentucky Historical Society** in Frankfort, Kentucky. The **Kentucky Historical Society (KHS)** was formed in 1836, chartered as a state society in 1838, and became an agency of the Kentucky government in the 1950s. According to the **KHS** Website, the **Kentucky Historical Society** “collects, preserves, conserves, interprets, and shares information, memories, and materials from Kentucky’s past.” Please find additional information about the **Kentucky Historical Society** at <http://history.ky.gov/>.

This column discusses hidden collection challenges to reveal general obstacles that naturally follow working with rare or unique materials in special collections and museum environments. **Jones** correctly pointed out that “attic” wording like hidden collections needs to be “jettisoned” from the vernacular of archives or special collections, when referring to the delay between accepted donated items and the time it takes to accession or process the new materials. **Jones** explained that “hidden collections” terminology makes special collections or archives “look like we are keeping secrets and hiding treasures” that could “break the public’s trust.”

Special collections libraries, archives, and museums continually work towards providing the best service and access for all researchers to their unique collections as quickly as possible. However, there are unavoidable delays between the item coming into the special collections or museum and the item being immediately accessible for research. Access issues commonly occur because of processing concerns with the donated or purchased item that delays accession or cataloging the materials.

Access Issues

If special collections libraries or archives remain as “places where the public can come to find information,” then as **Jones** later responded to a different question, “knowing your audience and how your researchers look for something should have some bearing on how you make it accessible.” Access to rare mate-

rials by interested researchers is the ultimate goal of all special collections, archives, and museums. **Jones** also responded to a question about ways to prevent hidden collections from happening with, “Until we professionals spend adequate time thinking about how researchers will access a collection and act accordingly, collections will remain hidden.”

Access for the researcher usually occurs after all the processing, describing, organizing, digitizing, conserving, and cataloging for the new collection materials is finalized by special collections or museum personnel. Accessioning and processing a collection quickly and accurately to provide better access for the public propels special collections and museum personnel into action. However, specific conservation treatments may be needed because there are different types of materials contained within a donated item that slow down the process to provide public access. Preservation issues delay public access to certain collections, while special collections and museum personnel determine the conservation needs for each item. There could be mold or insect problems, fragile or brittle condition issues, and archival storage methods that special collections personnel need to address quickly to preserve the material before providing researcher access. For example, a scrapbook may contain food, baby teeth, plants, fur, balloons, or newspaper clippings. Each item requires different ways to conserve the materials to prevent bugs that might be attracted to the food or fur and acidity problems from the newspaper clippings to prevent further damage to other items within the scrapbook. Seen below are two photographs from the **Camilla Herdman** scrapbook at the **Kentucky Historical Society** that illustrate some conservation issues associated with special collections materials.

An additional **Kentucky Historical Society** example of a collection with preservation concerns was described by the director of the Special Collections as...

“A handful of letters about a particular topic in reasonably good condition will be put in a folder and cataloged. A collection of scrapbooks containing hundreds of pieces of ephemera glued to pages made of construction paper will be looked at long and hard to determine just how to house it and under what conditions it can be brought out into the reading room for public review.” As Louise Jones further explained, “Each collection needs to be assessed for its unique attributes.”

In a different response to another question about the challenges, problems, or frustrations when dealing with hidden collections ... **Jones** answered,

“Determining at what level to catalog/describe a collection can have an immense impact on the use of that collection. We have a collection entitled ‘The Ronald Morgan Postcard Collection (Graphic 5).’ Graphic 5 consists of 12,000 postcards documenting Kentucky prior to 1940. It is arranged alphabetically by town with three subseries for Kentucky rivers, bridges, and railroads. We have an item level inventory. We have digitized at least one image from each town/river/bridge/railroad. The catalog record describing the entire collection would have 1,000 subject headings if cataloged for greatest access. Instead we are creating local catalog records for each town and

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Images courtesy of Special Collections and Library, Kentucky Historical Society

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linking them to select digital images and an inventory page for the entire holdings for that town. We are doing this because many of our researchers search our collections by place name or county. Because they are so focused on the locality, they would never, without direction from staff, think to look for statewide collections at the state level.”

Thereby, the **Kentucky Historical Society** provides access to unique collections with innovative ways for description and cataloging to connect the researchers with the items needed.

Processing Collections

Prominent issues that can delay public access or processing of a new collection include preservation concerns, arrangement of the materials, cataloging problems, archival storage containers, staff availability, space, and specialized or conservation equipment.

There will always be some type of delay for items coming into special collections with all the resources or time required to get the item safely available for use by the public. Most special collection libraries, archives, or museums will continue to have backlogs for processing and accessioning materials for a variety of reasons that include time, resources, equipment, staff, storage, cataloging, and condition of the material.

Jones reminds library and museum professionals to, “Leave behind guilt over perfectly normal backlogs.” **Jones** also commented about un-cataloged or un-processed items within **KHS** that ...

“It would be impossible to stop bringing in collections until we are completely caught up. However, we also have collections that are in various stages of processing. Sometimes, a collection comes in well-organized but in poor housing. We work with our volunteers to re-house these, create folder level finding aids and collection descriptions, and get them out for public use. However, we also welcome input from researchers themselves. We view the finding aid as a fluid document that can and must change as researchers identify materials of rich information pertaining to their study.”

The question about whether there is enough technical or financial support available to help process and uncover hidden collections in today’s libraries, archives, or museums brought the following answer from **Jones** ...

“There will never be enough grants funding to item catalog everything we have. However, in my humble opinion, archivists and librarians rarely use technology to their advantage. You can link a catalog record to digital content, but very few archives do. You can break down a collection into more descriptive series with detailed finding aids linked to these catalog records. MARC

cataloging gives a formal structure to descriptive catalog information but can be made to appear far friendlier than most librarians think. One reason our researchers don’t use our catalogs with success is that they are filled with intimidating professional jargon which is largely abbreviated.”

Digitization

Description and arrangement of a collection can make items difficult to locate by researchers, if the key words or metadata within the catalog records have not been updated or contain obscure word choices. However, digital images or documents are helpful for researchers to identify key information, people, or research materials. Detailed catalog records can also aid researchers with additional information to narrow their topic or broaden their search.

Jones explained aspects of access problems as ...

“the real obstacles to researchers are poorly described collections in correct but unfriendly MARC catalog records. When we can achieve finding aids that really help people to find things they want, then we will be able to say we are good stewards of our collections. I think graphic collections are particularly difficult to make accessible, as traditional finding aids aren’t useful. We have used “digital collections” to help with access, but who among us can digitize everything? To me, a descriptive catalog record, with lots of natural language and Library of Congress Subject Headings, a decent finding aid, and a selection of digital content goes a long way toward opening up an otherwise under-used collection.”

The question about whether digitization or special equipment like overhead scanning stations might speed up the processing/accessioning of collections to eliminate or slow down backlogs returned this response from **Jones** as, “I think that digitization enhances access to a collection, but METADATA is how the researcher finds it in the first place.”

Therefore, accurate and up-to-date electronic finding aids assist researchers in locating specific collections or individual material records. Although digitization of collection listings or descriptions helps researchers to understand whether a certain collection contains what they need before travelling to the library or requesting the materials.

Specialized overhead scanning equipment assist special collection personnel to gently handle fragile materials in specially designed book cradles that won’t break the book binding or damage brittle pages. These V-shaped book

scanners can also be adjusted to allow for full scanning of oversized printed materials like documents, maps, or atlases. The digital images can then be quickly accessed by researchers online, after some processing for cataloging or describing has been done by special collections personnel and before archival storage is assessed. However, expensive equipment like overhead scanners, as well as content management systems and Website capacity, may not be available to smaller special collections, archives, or museums because of high costs or personnel issues.

Sometimes, a general online listing in the catalog or on the Website about certain collections that may be in the early or later stages of processing or accessing can alert researchers to materials that may be of interest in the future. However, the special collection, archive, or museum would need to make sure that clear wording in the digital record specified that the collection was currently unavailable until the entire accession process was completed.

This may raise some concerns about potential high expectations and disappointment risks for impatient researchers that most special collections, archives, or museums might want to avoid.

Conclusion

Special collections, archives, and museums depend on the generosity and support of their community, university, and private donors. Every effort is made to keep the public and private supporters actively engaged with the special collections, archives, or museums unique collections, special events, valuable displays, and rare materials. Therefore, un-processed or un-cataloged collections are only temporarily hidden from public view until vital processing, accessioning, describing, cataloging, and conservation needs of each unique item are satisfactorily done. Thereby, collection materials are safely available for future researcher use.

The ideal arrangement for all special collections materials would include everything stored neatly in designated archival boxes that were filled with detailed acid-free folders, acid-free paper, and archival enclosures to protect each unique item. However, adequate resources, personnel, time, and funding are not always available to accomplish these important tasks. Special collections, archives, and museums daily strive to achieve reasonable results to protect rare and unique materials, while providing access for research purposes.

We look forward to visiting with another special collection library, archive, or museum to gain valuable insights and real information about hidden collections in future **ATG** issues. 🌱

