2014

From a University Press: Taking Special Collections Digital

Leila W. Salisbury

University Press of Mississippi, lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us

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Recommended Citation

Salisbury, Leila W. (2014) "From a University Press: Taking Special Collections Digital," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 5, Article 46.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6880>

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From A University Press — Taking Special Collections Digital

Column Editor: **Leila W. Salisbury** (Director, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 39211; Phone: 601-432-6205) <lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us>

As a lover of the book and other physical manifestations of scholarship, I've long been attracted to special collections within the library. The summer after graduating from college, I was employed by my advisor as a research assistant as she collected information for her work in progress, a book on characters named Antonio in Renaissance drama. One day I found myself at a table in the **Davidson College** library, donning white cotton gloves and preparing to handle an edition of the *Bishops' Bible*, at the time one of just a handful of copies in North America.

I distinctly remember that book's smell, which seemed to collect vast, far-away worlds and condense them into a heady odor. I can picture the many small wormholes in the binding and pages, as well as the textual glosses at the side of the pages. These glosses were my primary reason for handling this volume, and they were to help me understand how readers such as **Shakespeare** (who was said to be familiar with this particular edition) might have interpreted certain passages of scripture. The experience made such an impression on me that in graduate school, I'd sometimes go over to special collections during lunch just to handle some of the intricately illuminated devotionals, to examine the delicate gold leaf and the vibrant blues and reds of the illustrations.

In my current work, I've remained interested in special collections, in the beautiful gems they contain and the knowledge and wonder that reside in these reams of books, documents, old reports, ephemera, and other material objects. I have enjoyed meeting with special collections staff at our university libraries to hear about the remarkable items their institution holds, and often to brainstorm about how the holdings might be used as the foundation for a book project. Librarians have frequently told me how they wish more people knew about their particular collections, and also how they wish they had more hours in the day to begin a research project involving the materials under their care.

Therefore I was delighted to see notice of the launch of an **ASERL/DPLA** collection of agricultural resources, ranging from diaries to business ledgers and from field notes to photographs, that will be called the "Deeply Rooted" initiative. The foundation of the collection will come from the Consortium for the History of Agriculture and Rural Mississippi (CHARM), which is overseen by the **Mississippi State**

University Libraries. A couple of years ago, I sat down with **Mattie Abraham**, one of the CHARM project contacts, to talk about these materials. We discussed the development of the national 4-H program, which began as an initiative at **Mississippi State University** (I'd still like to publish a book on that topic!), and about **WPA** workers who conducted extensive field interviews and food and nutrition education programs as part of their efforts in the state to modernize local foodways. The raw material for many a fascinating book on these and other topics was waiting in that archive, ready for use and study. Both **Abrams** and I wished aloud that the collection was better known outside the institution.

The "Deeply Rooted" program is the answer to that wish. According to **Mississippi State Libraries** project coordinator **Stephen Cunetto**, the program "is a great model for other special collections. Getting content into one central national database makes it much more discoverable than in individual silos." **Cunetto** notes that at the beginning of the "Deeply Rooted" initiative, the library discussed creating their own portal for the content, but they decided that the **DPLA** would already

have an impressive technological infrastructure and built-in reach, both of which would help ensure the ongoing success of the project.

Such programs will have a direct impact on scholarship. **Mark Hersey**, a History professor at **Mississippi State University**, says,

"As libraries digitize their collections and integrate them in places like the **Digital Public Library of America**, my research as a historian gets exponentially easier. Easier, perhaps, is the wrong word: broader, faster, more wide-ranging are probably at least accurate." **Hersey** continues, "Clearly, the promise of such digitization projects (not just at **Mississippi State University**, but around the world, really) is enormous — revolutionary, really, for historians. I tell my graduate students that they can do more research in a couple of hours than historians could have done in a week a generation ago."

Once the materials are digitized, they can also be contextualized to enhance learning and interpretation. The September 1, 2014 issue of *Library Journal* included a product spotlight on time line and mapping software that will allow "libraries to present digital collections in new ways, facilitating serendipitous exploration for

researchers." The article features, among other products, the **Library of Congress's** free Web application Viewshare. A former librarian at the **University of Mississippi** digitized the university's **John Elon Phay** Collection and then used Viewshare to present a portrait of school segregation in Mississippi during the 1940s and 1950s.

I'm delighted to see this project at **Mississippi State** move forward, as it represents a critical way that libraries can serve the scholarly community by making their primary source materials and special collections even more accessible — and even more meaningfully presented — to researchers and patrons. In the same way, university presses are undertaking this same service mission by publishing materials electronically, whether as part of library-rooted open access initiatives or as part of new eBook platforms or collections. The student who needs a particular source in the middle of the night for a paper can now most times access an eBook or other version, and rather than having to find travel funds and take time for a road trip to Starkville, Mississippi, scholars will soon be able to peruse the agricultural life and history collection from the comfort of a living room or coffee shop. (I will add that I am not one to discourage tourism. The **Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library** is newly located at the university library, so it is indeed worth a trip.)

Talk to a university press administrator and you'll find that partnerships and collaborations are the focus of much of our thinking and efforts. We're often asking, how can we develop content and models that will allow us to work with museums, historical societies, university departments, and other learning and cultural centers to educate and to disseminate knowledge? I'm sure libraries are asking themselves these questions as well, and along these lines **MSU's Cunetto** noted that the libraries there are in the process of becoming a **DPLA** service hub. As a hub, they will partner directly with the **DPLA** to upload metadata records, "but more importantly, we will also be the 'on ramp' for other libraries, museums, and cultural heritage entities in Mississippi to get their content into the **DPLA**," **Cunetto** says.

This is good news indeed, and I'm heartened to know that such library initiatives and partnerships will open up access to so many remarkable documents, artifacts, and photographs. As the **DPLA** grows in this way, it should further encourage new and creative scholarship, which is, of course, a university press editor's dream. 🌸