

2013

Hidden Collections--Are There "Hidden Collections" in Special Collection Libraries?

Allison Day

Western Kentucky University, allison.day@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

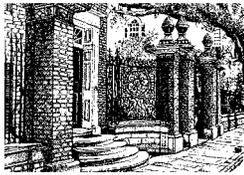
Day, Allison (2013) "Hidden Collections--Are There "Hidden Collections" in Special Collection Libraries?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 6, Article 40.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7435>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Subscribe to **The Charleston ADVISOR Today!**

6180 East Warren Avenue • Denver, CO 80222
Phone: 303-282-9706 • Fax: 303-282-9743



The Charleston ADVISOR

Critical Reviews of Web Products for Information Professionals

“The Charleston Advisor serves up timely editorials and columns, standalone and comparative reviews, and press releases, among other features. Produced by folks with impeccable library and publishing credentials ...[t]his is a title you should consider...”

— *Magazines for Libraries, eleventh edition, edited by Cheryl LaGuardia with consulting editors Bill Katz and Linda Sternberg Katz (Bowker, 2002).*

- Over 750 reviews now available
- Web edition and database provided with all subscriptions
- Unlimited IP filtered or name/password access
- Full backfile included
- Comparative reviews of aggregators featured
- Leading opinions in every issue

\$295.00 for libraries
\$495.00 for all others

Yes! Enter My Subscription For One Year. Yes, I am Interested in being a Reviewer.

Name _____ Title _____
Organization _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____
Phone _____ Fax _____
Email _____ Signature _____

Collection Management Matters from page 66

Listening to **National Public Radio (NPR)** is a major addiction for me. If I don't like what's playing on Nashville's FM station, I move over to the AM station. I go online to listen to the programs that my local stations do not carry. I even listen to it at my desk while I am working on spreadsheet lists. Consequently, I hear a lot of author interviews and book reviews. I started going to the book page to find the title that I heard discussed on the drive home, but could not remember the author or the title. There are several fiction and non-fiction lists for adults and juveniles on the **NPR's** book page (<http://www.npr.org/books/>). What is unique about some of their lists is the crowdsourcing method they use to compile them. They will request readers' recommendations for their favorite books in a genre and compile a list of the ones that get the most votes. I am not a science fiction reader, so I know very little about the popular authors in that field. I used **NPR's** Best Science Fiction books list to update our collection.

Doing book selection on the side does not have to be labor-intensive or time-consuming when you have a few trusted places that you can turn to for quality reviews. The key is to not let too many months go by and have a backlog of lists, so I try to check my sources on a monthly basis. 🍷

Hidden Collections — Are there “Hidden Collections” in Special Collection Libraries?

Column Editor: **Allison Day** (Kentucky Librarian / Assistant Professor, Special Collections Library, Western Kentucky University) <allison.day@wku.edu>

Special collection libraries house a variety of rare and unique materials within their collections. The majority of special collection library collections include rare books, manuscripts, photographs, letters or diaries, newspapers, broadsides, scrapbooks, or ephemera. Researchers search for new ways to access these special collection materials for vital information that might be crucial to their research.

However, there may be “hidden collections” within a special collection library that are unavailable for researcher use. Unprocessed or uncataloged materials are inaccessible to outside research while library personnel work with the items. The underlying problems and overwhelming workload associated with hidden collections have drawn my attention for new ways in which we could process inaccessible materials to provide that critical research potential that otherwise would remain undiscoverable. For example, historic newspapers that are extremely rare are unavailable to researchers because of inherit preservation issues associated with the extremely brittle and acidic makeup of the paper that prevents

researcher use without great care and supervision by conservators.

Why Collections Remain Hidden

Several challenges can delay or prevent rare collection materials from being processed for researcher use. Inadequate personnel, small budgets, unavailability of special scanning equipment, and preservation issues can also prevent the quick processing of various collections. Although hidden collections may become available to the public faster with new researcher interest, increased preservation needs or more funding opportunities are usually needed.

Internal collection management software like Past Perfect that is used by several special collection libraries, archives, or museums may not be completely compatible with on-line library catalog or management systems, depending on the needs of the facility. Some collections or objects may not display properly for researchers to locate the items without time-consuming backup assistance from software or content managers. However, Past Per-

continued on page 68

Hidden Collections from page 67

fect is a content management system that allows library or museum personnel to connect their accessioned items for viewing by researchers over the Internet in a visually appealing way to look at photographs, pictures, drawings, or three-dimensional objects.

The Experts Agree

The **Association of Research Libraries (ARL)** 2009 report, entitled *Special Collections in ARL Libraries*, revealed “the hoard of unused evidence that is still locked up in our undescribed, “hidden collections” is incalculable.”¹ The **ARL** report discussed the problem of backlogs and processing priorities for special collections. Processing priorities for what collections should be processed or remain as a hidden collection is a daunting task for many special collection libraries. External funding can sometimes generate enough interest in a specific collection to warrant immediate processing and accessibility for researchers. The historical and local community connections of a rare item may expedite the processing method for increased researcher access.

Mark Dimunation, Chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division in the **Library of Congress**, shared interesting insights about hidden collections at the **2011 Charleston Library Conference** that covered a background history, overall challenges, and cataloging problems about hidden collections. **Dimunation** stated, “For it struck me that the powerful impact of pulling the curtain back on collections previously hidden is that the results sparked a desire to see even more.”² The knowledge that special collection libraries, archives, and museums across the United States and around the world still hold undiscovered hidden collections is an exciting prospect that there are valuable treasures waiting to be revealed.

Discoverability and Access Concerns

Online finding aids initially provide a general listing of what can be found within a certain collection that can be helpful for researchers to search and locate more information about a topic. The researcher gets a small taste of the special collection library holdings. For example, a researcher from another state called to check on a family name that was mentioned within an online manuscript collection finding aid. The family was excited to acquire new information about their ancestors and the location of a vital family document. Electronic catalogs and library Websites reveal the majority of large and small library collections, but they are dependent on at least minimum processing by library personnel. Digital access to the special collection materials, what most modern researchers expect and demand, is a challenge for many special collection libraries to acquire, maintain, and provide to researchers without the proper funding assistance or administrative support.

In-house finding aids present other types of access problems for researchers who are hampered by time and distance. Paper finding aids like card catalogs and information binders kept at



reference desks can create hidden collections, if the information is not updated on a regular basis or there are incomplete item listings. However, the paper finding aids assist the library personnel with the location of materials not yet available for online research. Paper finding aids also help researchers to locate microfilm, county files, family files, or local history files that may only be available to researchers within the library research room. The card catalog seems daunting for some modern researchers, therefore delaying research access to collection materials. It can also be a very time-consuming task for library personnel to look up each card catalog record and then transfer the vital information to an electronic version. There are a lot of detailed listings in old card catalogs that need to be transferred to online catalog records to assist researchers with valuable yet hidden information. Sometimes there are handwritten notes from retired librarians on old catalog cards that have not been transferred to the online bibliographic records.

Special collection libraries rely heavily on personal donations and welcome unique family treasures to their collections. Occasionally, gift agreements can complicate access to certain materials, and full photocopy/scanner usage by researchers with restrictions may also create hidden collections. Donated items to special collection libraries may include unique items or duplicate materials already held within the collection. Large donations require a lot of staff time, material assessment, and storage space before cataloging or even initial processing can begin.

Preservation and Digitization Issues

The preservation needs of special collection items may require careful handling by staff and researchers. Historic newspapers that are highly acidic and become brittle over time are a great source of concern for many special collection libraries which may wish to retain unique stories, obituaries, advertisements, local and national topics, and political information before the paper breaks down completely. The fragility of older newspapers or brittle books prevents regular usage by library patrons until electronic access can be established. Digitization stations that require special equipment like overhead scanners and microfilm processes may be labor intensive or too expensive for some special collection libraries to acquire. Digital projects or consortiums can assist in recovering hidden collections like newspapers by providing better access. There are programs, grants, and funding opportunities that invite applications or proposals to obtain much-needed resources to assist in uncovering hidden collections within special collection libraries or archives.

The **Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR)** administers the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** program to help catalog hidden collections within special collection libraries and archives across the United States. Since 2008, the **Mellon Foundation** has provided funding to several special collections or archives with “eighty-seven grants totaling nearly \$20M.”³ There are innovative ways to connect with other institutions through the **Council on Library and Information Resources** and the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**

with the Hidden Collections Registry, Hidden Collections Symposiums, or their applicant / recipient information portals.⁴

Reveal Hidden Collections: Good Staff and Specialized Equipment

Special collections personnel continue to be a valuable — and sometimes the only — resource for researchers. Library personnel have great insight into helping researchers to find more information than originally anticipated for diverse library collections. Library materials that are being processed, removed for preservation needs, or waiting to be cataloged can usually be located by special collection personnel to meet most of the researcher requirements. Therefore, it’s always a great idea for researchers to contact special collection library personnel to glean as much information as possible about a research topic while visiting the library.

Special equipment like overhead scanners can facilitate access to hidden collections that require careful handling of the materials. Overhead scanners are usually equipped with v-shaped cradles that allow fragile materials to be easily scanned digitally from an overhead position that doesn’t break the book bindings or damage brittle pages. Archival boxes, acid-free paper/folders, and archival plastic sheets also help to protect library materials from the damaging fluorescent lights in most reading rooms or processing areas. There may be many special collection items that are unprocessed and uncataloged while librarians or conservators are working on the preservation needs of the materials. However, soft book cradles or modern book pillows can increase researcher viewing or ease the library processing of fragile materials.

There are a variety of reasons why certain hidden collections within special collection libraries are not always readily accessible to researchers. However, library personnel continue to work on innovative ways to provide viable access to thousands of rare items waiting to be discovered by interested researchers. Special collection libraries look for new funding opportunities to decrease hidden collections and to process backlogs of rare materials. Hopefully, the amount of “hidden collections” will be reduced over time with increased staffing and funding for special projects to promote better researcher access while still preserving the rare materials. 🌱

Endnotes

1. **Association of Research Libraries**, “Special Collections in ARL Libraries,” March 2009, accessed online at www.arl.org/bm-doc/scwg-report.pdf.
2. **Mark Dimunation**, “Everything We See Hides Another: coping with Hidden Collections in the 21st-Century Library” (2011). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
3. **The Council on Library and Information Resources**, “Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives,” accessed online at <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/index.html>.
4. **The Council on Library and Information Resources**, “Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives,” accessed online at <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/index.html>.