

RESEARCH, TEACHING & LEARNING

Crit Stuart, Director, ARL Research, Teaching & Learning Program

ON THE NEED FOR A NEW, OPEN ACCESS, ONLINE DIRECTORY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

by Jeffrey Makala, Assistant Special Collections Librarian, University of South Carolina

One year ago this month, ARL published an impressive book and Web site to commemorate its 75th anniversary: *Celebrating Research: Rare and Special Collections from the Membership of the Association of Research Libraries*.¹ With this joint publication, a significant and surprising gap in our contemporary information environment has been highlighted: there is no current, freely available directory of major research collections or academic and research library subject strengths in North America. ARL's *Celebrating Research* Web site could serve as the springboard for the library community to create one.

For the *Celebrating Research* project, each of the 123 ARL member libraries was asked to contribute materials for a two-page spread that would highlight one significant research collection with a narrative description and multiple illustrations. At the back of the printed volume is a lengthy section of special collections overviews and profiles of ARL member libraries. This section gives each library an opportunity to describe their special collections by subject as well as by format or particular strength (see accompanying illustration). The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation underwrote the publication of this volume and its attendant Web site, the latter of which fully reproduces the complete text and illustrations from the book. ARL, OCLC, Brown University Library, EBSCO, and Harrassowitz also provided support, making this project a substantial collaborative undertaking.

Even if one is an old library hand, after a quick page-through, one senses that the corpus of significant research collections in North American libraries is much, much broader and deeper than one had imagined. The nature of personal and institutional collecting has

changed considerably over the past few decades: social history, popular culture, and collections of widely mixed media are now as much the norm for special collections interests as are traditional author and subject collections.

Nicolas Barker, editor of *The Book Collector*, contributes a long introduction to *Celebrating Research* where he surveys the changes in American special collections during his

lifetime. In attempting to comment upon each library's entry, he is nearly overwhelmed at the profusion of research material at hand, often in places where he least expected to find such material. His surprise is justified; when we look carefully, beyond just the major collections at a select few universities, there is a wealth of cultural heritage material being preserved in all of our libraries that is not always readily apparent, or easily identified.

These were my first thoughts as I browsed through *Celebrating Research*. But a noticeable absence also came to light as I began to think about the several other projects and directories that attempt to document materials in our libraries: *Why is there no current directory of special collections resources at the collection level?* And then, attendantly, is it too retrograde to even suggest the need for something like a comprehensive online directory of such things in the post-Google information universe?

Our current print reference tools only partially meet this need. Information Today's *American Library Directory* is not meant to be a comprehensive collections guide, as it does not even index its brief collection entries separately or by subject. Gale's *Directory of Special Libraries and Information Centers* allows major collections to be listed, but does not provide contributors enough length in the collection field for a complete list, or for narrative collection descriptions. Nor do all libraries contribute to it.

David Stam's excellent two-volume *International Directory of Library Histories* (2001) contains historical essays and collection profiles of many major libraries, but only a handful are located in North America. Lee Ash's *Subject Collections: A Guide to Special Book Collections and Subject Emphases as Reported by University, College, Public, and Special Libraries and Museums in the United States and*

University of South Carolina Libraries

The University of South Carolina, then South Carolina College, started building its library collections in 1803. In 1840, it opened the first purpose-built freestanding college library building in the nation, and by 1850, with 25,000 volumes, it had the largest library collection south of Washington, DC. Many of the books acquired then survive, either in Thomas Cooper Library's Special Collections or in the South Caroliniana Library: incunabula, Theodor de Bry's *Greater Voyages*, Stuart's *Antiquities*, the complete Piranesi, the *Description de l'Égypte*, Kingsborough's *Mexican Antiquities*, Karl Bodmer's *Travels in North America*, and even South Carolina College Book 1.

The focus for acquisition in the earlier 20th century was on South Carolina, on earlier British fiction, and on such high points as the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), the King James Bible, and the Blaeu *Atlas*. Over the past 25 years, Thomas Cooper's Special Collections have grown six-fold, to over 120,000 volumes and several modern literary archives. Areas of significant growth include: philosophy (Hume, Russell); history (Garibaldi), exploration (Renaissance city maps), military history (Civil War, World War I), and military aviation (World War II); natural history (garden books, 18th-century watercolors, Abbot) and the history of science (Darwin, Babbage); English literature (Milton), Scottish literature (Burns, Carlyle, Stevenson), and American literature (Emerson, Fuller, Whitman, Johnson, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Rawlings, Heller, Dickey, Jakes, Ellroy, Higgins); children's literature (particularly African-American); and the history of the book.

Over the same period, the department has added new initiatives in the areas of teaching, exhibits, digitization, and scholarly and public programs. An extensive series of Web exhibits and Web projects based on the collections has been attracting over 25 million hits a year.

Collection Profile and Overview: Patrick Scott
Illustrations: Keith McGraw and Jeffrey Makala

University of South Carolina
Rare Books & Special Collections
Thomas Cooper Library
Columbia, South Carolina 29208
<http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/rarebook.html>
tclrarebooks@gwm.sc.edu
(803) 777-8154 (t)
(803) 777-4661 (f)

Sample Collection Overview from
Celebrating Research

Canada, the definitive reference work on the subject, had been updated every few years since it first appeared in the 1960s, but now has not been printed since 1993.

The University of Idaho Library's "Repositories of Primary Sources" Web site is the only current resource that lists major repositories and provides links to them, browsable by state.² It is a homegrown product that is unique and immensely useful for geographically locating a library or archives Web site, but it was not created to provide collection-level information.

Finding the location of the papers of a major author or corporate body is now fairly painless thanks to Google and the profusion of online finding aids in many formats. Subscription databases such as ArchivesUSA and OCLC's ArchiveGrid, and free services such as the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) perform similar tasks for this type of archival collection for which clear metadata in the form of collection inventories or finding aids already exists.

But how would, say, a graduate student systematically learn which libraries in North America have the most substantial collections of John Milton? Or American advertising? Or the history of science in the Arab world? The days when seasoned special collections librarians and faculty members would draw up shortlists of the major collections in multiple fields off the tops of their heads are now long gone, as the sheer number of repositories, changing collection patterns, and newly acquired collections have exploded in recent memory. New scholarly works will often thank and credit our colleagues in libraries across the country; the best provide clear citations to unique items and to the occasional collection. But on the whole, comprehensive collection knowledge across multiple disciplines has now passed beyond even the best subject specialists in academic departments and university research libraries.

At the micro level, individual volumes can of course be located through our standard suite of bibliographic tools. But the collection-level printed bibliography has mostly become a relic of the past. So quite often, full collection-level information, especially concerning an institution's subject strengths, areas of collecting focus, or unusual depths or breadths, is not located anywhere except in a narrative or separate page on the institution's own Web site. In addition, subject collections now regularly comprise many formats of material, from books and manuscripts to smaller archives, collections of clippings, realia, photographs, digital files, etc., that may not be as readily located as a single volume. How would we know an institution collects broadly in the history of radio and television, in materials produced by American utopian communities, or the works of 19th-century French authors unless they themselves tell us so, overtly, on their own?

We need an aggregator for this type of information, a way to bring our collective knowledge of our own

collection strengths into a browsable and searchable format to benefit our readers and the research community. We need to fill the gap that exists between item-level cataloging and broad general collection summaries by documenting the special collections in our libraries within the framework of one reference tool. Doing so in an online environment, perhaps updatable by its own membership, à la wikis, should not be too terribly difficult if a concerted effort is made. So let this be a call:

Let ARL's *Celebrating Research* Web site be the start of a new, open access, online directory of all special collections in North American libraries.

What I propose is essentially a simple online tool, and not nearly as sexy as creating interactive learning objects or a large comprehensive collaborative digitization project. But it is a way of filling a significant gap between current efforts at comprehensive, page-level digitization in our libraries and the brief, macro-level collection information currently available, mostly for purchase. It should be a tool that all North American libraries will want to contribute to, as it is in our communal best interest to share our collection strengths with our colleagues, faculty, and the larger research community. It should also be a tool that is easily updated, that will permit both casual browsing in index form and more complex searching, and that will contain narrative collection descriptions.

Research, at whatever level one defines it, is currently conducted in every special collection in the country, and serious special collections can be found in nearly all academic libraries, many public libraries large and small, independent research libraries, numerous historical societies, and private libraries. The work of the ARL Special Collections Task Force earlier this decade has led directly to large-scale efforts to catalog or process many of those collections that may have existed but were "hidden" without the proper access tools. Partly as a result of the task force's initiatives, the library profession has come to a general consensus on the utility of collection-level descriptions, the posting of collection summaries and inventories, and to innovation in exploring new projects that enhance access to new and previously undescribed items and collections in our libraries. Likewise, the recently established ARL Working Group on Special Collections plays a role in advancing issues related to collections stewardship and the role of special collections in research, teaching, and learning.

Sherrie Schmidt and Duane Webster, in their preface to *Celebrating Research*, state that the collection essays "represent a window into the future of research libraries." Especially in the book's partner Web site, ARL has created the beginnings of a tool that can fill a present void in the scholarly world. I urge all organizations with an interest in special collections to consider the broader implications of such a resource, and seek out partners to create a

complete directory of special collections, for all North American libraries, that is freely available on the Web. Individual libraries working with organizations such as ARL, OCLC RLG Programs, the Oberlin Group, and especially the Association of College & Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section could be strong partners and advocates for such a collaborative project.

One of the more interesting biblio-futurist predictions that has emerged in the past few years states that, since all major research libraries are now subscribing to essentially the same databases and have standing orders for the same serials and for monographs from the same university presses, we are moving toward a grand uniformity in what we own or pay to access. Therefore, in the future, what will distinguish one library from another, and what will increasingly tend to define it, is its rare, special, and subject collections. If this prediction comes to pass (which, given today's library business models, may well happen), a directory such as this will be of increasingly significant utility.

In the spring of 2008 a question was posed on the ExLibris electronic discussion list, which is composed primarily of special collections librarians, scholars, and antiquarian book dealers. A Spanish bookseller was trying to identify significant collections of Dante in American libraries. He had done the necessary Googling beforehand and had come up mostly empty. But after his query was posted to the list, he quickly received from the collective knowledge of the group quite a few more positive responses than anyone following the original query probably expected. Questions like this, no doubt asked in our libraries every day, illustrate perfectly the information gap we should attempt to bridge. A researcher should have a freely accessible tool at their fingertips that brings to light the collection strengths of our libraries, that serves as a gateway to research, and helps expose even more of the "hidden" collection information that is present but not always overtly stated, certainly not in one common location.

We all know our own collections and their strengths better than anyone and want to share them with others. So let's not just celebrate research, but truly support it by creating a new reference tool that will do our collections and our great libraries justice.

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¹ Philip N. Cronenwett, Kevin Osborn, Samuel A. Streit, eds., *Celebrating Research* (Washington DC: ARL, 2007), <http://www.celebratingresearch.org/>.

² Terry Abraham, comp., "Repositories of Primary Sources," University of Idaho Library, <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html>.

ON THE NEED FOR A NEW, OPEN ACCESS, ONLINE DIRECTORY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS: A RESPONSE

by Alice Prochaska, University Librarian, Yale University

As chair of ARL's Special Collections Working Group, I am delighted to see Jeffrey Makala put forward this proposal for a systematic directory of special collections. Coming from a long career in archives and special collections in the UK, I have always found it surprising that there is in North America no real counterpart to the British National Register of Archives (NRA). Of course, there are several useful resources, which are mentioned in the article, but the UK example might be a helpful point of reference. The NRA is a central point for the collection and dissemination of information about the nature and location of manuscripts relating to British history. It currently consists of over 44,000 unpublished lists and catalogues that describe archival holdings in the United Kingdom and overseas. (See <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/>.)

There can be no doubt that compiling and maintaining any such registry would be exponentially more difficult for North American holdings, given the huge size of the task and their distribution over an entire continent. Furthermore, the British NRA has existed for some 80 years or more, with a systematic process for repositories to record new accessions each year. Jeffrey Makala's proposal for a more modest profile of each repository's main special collections, however, would be useful and workable. Over time, it could build up to being a reliable source for researchers across North America and overseas.

The ARL Special Collections Working Group will consider adding this proposal to their list of recommendations to be included in their report, now in the final stages of compilation and expected to be published early in 2009. Any suggestions from readers of this newsletter, for ways to make such a register workable and sustainable, would be received most gratefully. The working group's report will contain some 20 or more recommendations for good practice in the collection, care, and accessibility of special collections, in all formats including those that are born digital. The group believes that special collections define, more than ever before, the distinctive character of each research library at a time when electronic publications and digitized books are commonly accessible. We will argue that the time is now to advance an agenda for special collections. Jeffrey Makala's proposal brings timely support to that argument.

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