

Reflections on Creating Raiders of the Lost Archive

As Exhibit Designer and Fabricator these last 20 years at the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, my job is to present and publicize our collections through exhibits. Often the purpose is to let the public know that we have a new collection, and that it is open for research. Through the years, I have worked with many curators here who have given me items to display with the instructions to “make it look good!” Sometimes old, faded photographs need a bit of retouching so they can be read more easily. Many times the original item is scanned and printed out in order to create a facsimile. Once the items are printed, they are mounted on foam board with a mat board backing for color to enhance the object, and then cut to size. If the item is a copy of a scanned book, the printout will become a book cover. Next, the text provided by curators to explain the items is formatted to fit the design of the exhibit. Lastly, the items are carefully positioned in an exhibit case or placed on panels for the final display.

I have had the pleasure of working with wonderful historic documents, photos, and books. Some of my favorite exhibits have been “William Morris and the Kelmscott Press;” “The 75th Anniversary of Texas Tech Theatre;” “Buffalo Soldiers;” “A Season of Photography;” and “Medieval Southwest.” I have also enjoyed my work with the National College Baseball Hall of Fame, creating their baseball cards and installing an annual exhibit of its memorabilia. Other favorites were “Exploring the Natural World of Ro Wauer, Wyman Meinzer and Clyde Jones;” “Native American Women Through the Eyes of Edward Curtis;” “Tarahumara Indians;” “From Behind the Sound Board: The Wayne ‘Hatch’ Hatchell Photographs;” “Women Who Shaped Texas Tech;” “From Here It’s Possible: West Texas Goes to the Stars;” “Texas Tech: Then and Now;” and “Celebrating 20 Years of Exhibits in our New Building.”

For our latest exhibit, I asked each collection to submit one item that epitomized their holdings. Somehow, that was interpreted by our archivists as “Hidden Treasures,” which transformed it into an exhibit perfectly titled “Raiders of the Lost Archive.” The exhibit is filled with the unusual, the charming, and the historic. Many of the items in the exhibit have never been exhibited before. To begin with, from the Southwest Collection comes the adding machine and the Ranching Records Ledger from the JA Ranch. Portions of that collection are some of the earliest items collected at the SWC/SCL. Another unusual item is from the Sowell Family Collection: the Silver Creek paddle of John Lane, an author who has written about his travels by water. Our Rare Books collection submitted a unique book of John Milton’s poetry, published in 1851, with a painted fore-edge that can only be seen if the pages are spread out. The Texas Tech University Archives included a miniature saddle made to honor the 50th anniversary of Texas Tech’s mascot, the Masked Rider, as well as an image of the Ghost Rider, found in a game program from 1941. The Ghost Rider was possibly the inspiration for the now-famous Masked Rider. The Crossroads of Music Archive provided a gold record from the Odis Echols Collection that was given to Echols for his part in producing the hit song, “Sugartime.” Included along these lines is a vinyl record from the Audio/Visual Department by Gordon McLendon, a well-known broadcaster of radio recreations from major league baseball games. This vinyl disc is part of a series of McClendon’s historic recordings of events and speeches.

Also included in the exhibit are objects from two collections currently sharing the SWC/SCL building. The first is The Remnant Trust, Inc. It shared a facsimile of the Magna Carta ca, 1350. The second, from the Vietnam Center and Archive, is a helmet bag with unit patches from the Jennifer Young Collection.

As an art major working among historians and librarians, I've found that a wonderful perk of this job is learning something new from each exhibit I have designed and fabricated. From the Southwest Collection, Cataloguing and Technical Processing, the University Archives, Oral History, Audio/Visual, the Sowell Family Collection, the Crossroads of Music Archives, Rare Books, and even the Vietnam Center and Archive and the Remnant Trust, each collection has taught me something about their archive, the items they collect, and the people represented in their collections.

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