

THE STORY OF US: INSIDE THE LIBRARY'S SPECIAL COLLECTIONS VAULT

By Erin Ryan

At 68 degrees and 42 percent humidity, Hemingway sleeps on the second floor of Albertsons Library. The iconic American author is buried in Ketchum, but hundreds of definitive books by and about him are stored in the Boise State stacks a few steps from the diary of an unknown schoolteacher. Boise Junior College annuals are on file, as are Senator Frank Church's records of his bid for the presidency. Letters from Martin Luther King Jr., Bing Crosby and Buffalo Bill Cody, photographs of serial murderess Lyda "Lady Bluebeard" Southard and even a metal teething ring that belonged to notable outdoor writer Ted Trueblood tell the story of Idaho, the West and beyond.

Preserving that story is the mission of Special Collections, a department founded in 1974 to house precious artifacts that don't belong on a regular library shelf.

The department's head librarian and veteran archivist, Alan Virta, moved from Maryland for his job at Boise State in 1988. After two decades, he still thrills in the discovery of things that tell us something about who we are.

"The books, photos, manuscripts and archives in Special Collections are important sources for documenting the history, culture and physical environment of Idaho," Virta says. "The

LIBRARIAN AND ARCHIVIST Erin Passehl and assistant archivist Mary Carter-Hepworth examine posters in the Idaho Shakespeare Festival file in the Special Collections department in Albertsons Library.

Library has assembled not only a comprehensive collection of secondary works but also an irreplaceable archive of unpublished primary source materials, which are the first-person accounts of history, the original papers and documents that chronicle history being made."

Many of these materials are organized in a system of compact mobile shelves that are 18 feet long, seven feet tall and two feet deep. All are packed with 40-pound boxes, one of which holds former Boise State President Chaffee's daily desk calendars spanning more than 30 years.



Carrie Quinroy

“This could be considered archival overkill, but now we know what he was doing and what went on at Boise Junior College on Nov. 22, 1963, when JFK was shot,” Virta says. “The key is knowing what to look for and where to find it.”

“Some of the things I find fascinating are things you’d find mundane,” says assistant archivist Mary Carter-Hepworth, who has worked in Special Collections for 24 years. “It changes everyday. It’s constant learning.”

One of the biggest changes last year was the addition of the John Robert Bittner Collection on Ernest Hemingway. Bittner was a Hemingway scholar and acclaimed professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. During his career, he amassed 300 books on Hemingway’s life and writings as well as supplemental works on Spanish bullfighters, Hemingway’s editor Maxwell Perkins and the expatriate experience in Paris during the Roaring Twenties. Bittner’s widow, Denise, who lives in Eagle, donated the collection in September in honor of his dedication to one of the most innovative, influential American writers of the 20th century.

“It doesn’t include Hemingway’s personal papers. Most of those are at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston,” Virta says, “but it is a very distinguished collection with some hard-to-find works.”

Another recent boon is the expansion of the Basque Collection with a gift of more than 3,000 volumes

previously housed at the University of Idaho and then Boise’s Basque Museum and Cultural Center. Carter-Hepworth is in the process of organizing the collection and gingerly turned the pages of a hand-printed specimen from the 1600s. To her, the scars left by parchment-loving invertebrates are almost as interesting as the meticulous scrollwork.

“There really are bookworms,” she says, smiling.

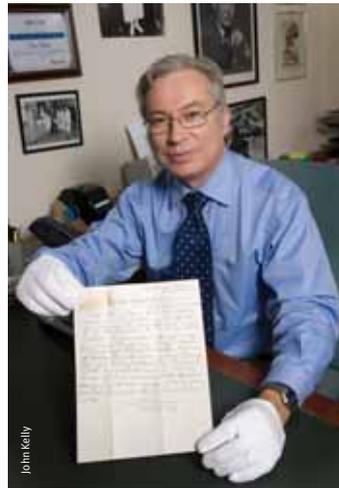
Virta also is enthusiastic about historically relevant imperfections. One of the prize pieces in Special Collections is “Historia Scholastica,” a biblical abridgement printed in 1479. While the embellished Latin text is a striking example of medieval scholarship, the cursive notes in the margins (also in Latin) equally intrigue Virta.

His most exciting purchase of late is a music book written and bound in canvas in 1864 by an Idaho pioneer named Peter Beemer. He lived in the mining town of Warren and transcribed dance tunes played by travelers and friends.

“It’s a cultural treasure. It comes from the earliest years of Idaho,” Virta says.

Idaho materials in the archives range from Beemer’s book to a first edition comic called “Real Stuff” by Idaho artist Dennis Eichhorn to Janet Dailey’s paperback romance, “Ride the Thunder,” which tells the epic tale of a beautiful huntress trekking through Idaho’s backcountry. Some might think the last piece doesn’t belong in an academic framework, but Virta says anything that speaks to life in Idaho is worthy of consideration.

But Special Collections is not just significant to Idaho. Thanks to the



Archivist Alan Virta displays a 106-year-old letter written by William Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody.

Internet, the archives are impacting people all over the world. A doctoral candidate at the University of London recently used primary source materials in his dissertation, and the American Library in Paris borrowed photos and artifacts for a fall exhibit with Boise State ties. The library’s growing list of databases is a wellspring of peer-reviewed research tools, but Virta says nothing compares to the feel of a book older than you are.



A first edition comic book by Idaho artist Dennis Eichhorn.

“It never wears off, the thrill of holding something so authentic,” Virta says. “Sometimes it’s all you have left of an individual, and that’s part of the magic.”

No one knows this better than Olivia Umphrey, a graduate student in the Department of History and former library employee who transcribed the diary of an ordinary young woman named Metta Ellis.

After reading a few pages of the 118-year-old document, Umphrey says the project went from a job to a personal crusade. She felt strangely close to the teacher from Kansas who moved to Boise in 1890 and chronicled what was to be a pivotal year, both for her and for Idaho.

“I think it adds to the fascination that she was a regular person,” Umphrey says. “We have this ‘Little House on the Prairie’ image of life in the 1800s, but then you get to read the words of someone who actually lived it.”

Once she was accustomed to the handwriting, style, dated terminology and curious abbreviations in the diary, Umphrey

was free to focus on the drama of Ellis’ life. In a single year she held teaching jobs in Boise and Sweet and side work as a seamstress and cleaning woman. She rode one of the first trolley cars in downtown Boise, was present the day Idaho became a state and met the wife of President Harrison. She was engaged to a man named Charlie whom she left for a mysterious character known alternately as Will, Dangle, Dankle, D and Dunlap. Umphrey assumes she did this to throw potential diary poachers off the trail, though public records revealed that Metta Ellis eventually became Mrs. William Powell.

Umphrey knows this because she went beyond the walls of Special Collections. The diary ends mid-sentence with the writer’s life in limbo, and Umphrey was too attached to leave things unresolved. A public records search eventually lead her to the microforms in Albertsons Library, where she found a front-page Idaho Statesman story detailing the tragic car accident that took 70-year-old Metta Powell’s life in 1941.

Umphrey was shaken. It’s still hard for her to imagine such a vibrant woman meeting such a terrible end, but Metta



Graduate student Olivia Umphrey holds the 118-year-old diary of a schoolteacher that she transcribed for Special Collections.

in her own handwriting, in stories of days long past but somehow familiar.

“Reading Metta’s diary, you see how times have changed and how they haven’t, that being human is being human. It’s reassuring,” Umphrey says.

“Special Collections is a great resource for Idaho. I took fourth-grade Idaho history, but I’ve learned a lot more spending time in those archives.” ♦



Left: Former Idaho Sen. Len Jordan’s seat from the senate floor in the state Capitol. Above: A metal teething ring used by Idaho outdoor writer Ted Trueblood; an illustrated BJC college football poster from 1934.

