



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
**LIBRARIES**

THE MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA LIBRARIES

# continuum

**INSIDE:**

**THE PRESERVATION  
JAM**

**OUT OF THE BOX  
AND INTO THE  
ARCHIVES**

**THE CONSERVATION  
OF A UNIVERSITY**

**CURATING  
CULTURAL  
HERITAGE**

**BOOKS WITHER...  
WHITHER LIBRARIES?**

**ISSUE 7**

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UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN  
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*continuum* supports the mission of the University Libraries and our community of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends by providing information that:

- > highlights news, events, developments, and trends within the Libraries
- > examines issues facing libraries globally
- > provides a forum for dialogue
- > connects the many constituencies of the Libraries

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- 2 **Short Stacks**  
News from the University of Minnesota Libraries
- 4 **The Preservation Jam**  
The Libraries are fighting a slow fire burning between book covers
- 7 **Ford W. Bell and John P. Borger**  
Two important Libraries benefactors are profiled
- 8 **Friends of the Libraries**
- 10 **Out of the Box and Into the Archives**  
A recently opened collection celebrates the life of eminent Minnesotan Max Lowenthal
- 13 **The Conservation of a University**  
The University Digital Conservancy is capturing the scholarly culture of the University
- 15 **Curating Cultural Heritage**  
Two of the Libraries' many special collections strive to save the heritage of a culture and the cultural arts



COVER: This book, yellowed and crumbling, is one of many the University Libraries are working to preserve.

For more information about the University of Minnesota Libraries visit <http://www.lib.umn.edu>

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In an election year, we're offered countless examples of the value (and risks!) of recorded knowledge. The media eagerly comb through the available records dealing with candidates' voting patterns, speeches, and other evidence of policy positions or behavioral flaws. And, of course, we also see analyses in the news that help us understand contemporary issues through the lens of past events. Recorded knowledge—the cultural record—offers tremendous value to our society and to scholarship.

When the University of Texas purchased the Norman Mailer archive, the literary world was amazed (and delighted) to learn of the unprecedented depth of his collected works; as the story goes, his mother was convinced he was a genius and began saving his writings and memorabilia when he was a mere child. Often the historical record has no such prescient caretaker. There are countless stories of resources being discarded because no one thought that they might have future value.

Libraries and archives know all too well the challenges in sustaining the cultural record. Paper produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries is highly acidic and over time becomes too brittle to use. Our estimates suggest that several million volumes in the Libraries' collections are at risk due to this "acid paper problem." Pieces of text may fall out or pages break as they are turned. The 1987 award-winning documentary *Slow Fire* provided the world with a chilling picture of what was at stake. As narrator Robert MacNeil (of the MacNeil/LehrerReport) noted: "What is endangered here if any book rots from within is a piece of the history of the human race." The "slow fire" is an ongoing process, day by day the chemical reactions continue and the useful shelf life of our books is diminishing.

While today's computer-generated record does not have the acid paper problem, it too needs care over time to maintain its integrity. How do we ensure that digital content is preserved for future scholarship, how do we make decisions on what will be useful to keep?

This issue of *continuum* deals with preserving the cultural record. It describes the enormity of the challenge as well as the steps the University Libraries are taking to be good stewards of history. Behind the scenes, staff deal with aging paper and take steps to repair books to keep them in usable form. Our two underground storage caverns beneath Andersen Library provide an environmentally controlled environment that extends the lifespan of older, endangered volumes. Selected rare resources are sent to professional conservators to create protective enclosures.

We are also taking steps to create and preserve the digital record. Our *University Digital Conservancy* captures the important digital content created by faculty or University units and keeps them accessible in a digital archive.

While all these steps are critical, they seem modest in comparison to the size of the challenge. And, with the passing of every day, the problem grows and more items fall into the endangered category. Our caverns are full and we will soon need to lease additional, off-campus space with the right environmental controls. Many of our peers have a conservation/preservation studio on-site so that treasures don't have to leave the library for treatment. Our digitization capacity, which offers hope to preserve intellectual content, is straining to tackle the demand for collections to be made available over the network so that students, scholars, and the general public can tap these extraordinary Minnesota resources.

#### *An Opportunity for Minnesota Leadership*

The "preservation problem" is one in which we all have a stake in finding solutions. At the University of Minnesota we have an opportunity to seize the problem and put our state on the map with cutting edge strategies to preserve our cultural heritage, strategies that share our resources with all Minnesotans, and the world. We can marry our rich collections with technologies to enable long-term access.

Generations to come are counting on our leadership.



WENDY PRADT LOUGEE  
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN  
MCKNIGHT PRESIDENTIAL PROFESSOR

## A SMART Use of Space

Walter Library's Learning Resource Center has spent the past year undergoing a makeover. Attendees at the September 24th grand opening for the newest SMART Learning Commons toured the one-stop study/research/learning spot and learned of the plentiful and free SMART services, including one-on-one and group learning support; research assistance; technology and academic workshops; computers with media creation capacity; free loans of camcorders, microphones, and tripods; films to check out or watch in a state-of-the-art group viewing and presentation practice room; and group study spaces equipped with whiteboards and laptop outlets.



The Walter SMART Commons is one of four on campus, all of which are described at <http://smart.umn.edu/>.

## A Catalog By Any Other Name...

Users of the MNCAT catalog noticed a big change on July 31. More a discovery tool than traditional catalog, the recently launched *MNCAT Plus* allows users to easily find print and electronic books and journals, audio and video materials, databases and indexes, and the articles within them.

Users will find many familiar features, including Google-style searching, relevantly ranked results, *Did You Mean?* suggestions, and links to Google Books and WorldCat. The powerful filters allow a broad search's results to be refined and real-time availability information show at a

glance whether materials are available online or at one of our libraries. Social networking features allow users to write reviews and add tags, and materials found can be easily saved and shared using bibliography and bookmark management tools.

Early reviews are tremendously positive, with one user commenting, "It's extremely thorough—I can't imagine needing something more than this right here." Try it for yourself—and give us feedback—at <http://www.lib.umn.edu/>.

## Meet Michelle Brasure, Informationist Fellow

Michelle Brasure has long been involved in health policy and public health promotion. In January, Brasure began a two-year "Informationist Fellowship" at the University's Health Sciences Libraries (HSL). Funded by the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, the fellowship immerses professionals like Brasure in settings where they can gain the expertise needed to become informationists.

What's the difference between an informationist and a librarian? Informationists are information specialists, typically in public health and healthcare, who have contextual training in their field. For Brasure, this training will involve developing librarian skills, an

in-depth project in public health outreach, and extensive coursework resulting in a master's degree in library and information science. Brasure, who sees this as a unique opportunity, recalls, "When I saw the fellowship announcement and realized that there was a demand for individuals cross-trained in public health and library and information science, I felt this would be the perfect way to supplement my education and experience in public health." The fellowship is co-sponsored by Linda Watson, Director of HSL at the U of M, and Mary Wagner, Director of the Graduate Program in Library and Information Science at the College of Saint Catherine.

## New Research Partners Netted

Three research collaborations including the University Libraries are giving scholars and students new ways to research, collaborate, and take on some of the most challenging issues we face today.

Through funding provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Libraries are partnering with the University's Center for Bioethics, the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, and several other institutions to develop **EthicShare**, a virtual community for scholars of bioethics and practical ethics. For more information, see: <http://www.lib.umn.edu/about/ethicshare/>.

The National Science Foundation-sponsored **Antarctic Geospatial Information Center**, based in the U of M's Department of Geology and Geophysics, intends to

collect, create, synthesize, distribute, and archive Antarctic geospatial information. Over the course of the grant, the Libraries will provide digital conversion and archiving services. For more information, see: <http://www.agic.umn.edu/>.

Funded by the Gates Foundation, **HarvestChoice** undertakes "broad-ranging evaluation of technologies and strategies to inform policy and investment choices designed to raise the productivity of the agricultural systems most beneficial to the poor." The Libraries are contributing to the project—led by the University's Center for International Science and Technology Practice and Policy and the International Food Policy Research Institute—by providing Web site information architecture and technology development, among other services. For more information, see: <http://harvestchoice.org/>.

## Instituting Support for Current and Future Leaders



In the past year, the University Libraries have participated in two unique programs important to the development of librarians across the field—and across the nation.

In April, the Libraries hosted the Research Library Leadership Fellows Program, an initiative of the Association of Research Libraries. Designed to give participants the opportunity to develop the skills, global perspective, and preparedness necessary to advance to leadership roles at large research libraries, the program consists of week-long institutes held at sponsor institutions. Assembled from across the U.S., the 23 leadership fellows had dinner with President

Bruininks, toured the underground caverns at Elmer L. Andersen Library, and participated in programs and discussions about initiatives and programs at the University Libraries.

In July, the Libraries celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups. The biennial Institute, developed here at the University Libraries, brings together 24 academic librarians (pictured here) for a week-long program that equips participants with the skills needed to succeed in academic librarianship, while building a strong, lasting network of peers nationwide. The Institute now has over 100 alumni, and the momentum it has built promises to perpetuate the invaluable tradition for years to come.



## THE PRESERVATION JAM

BY LUCY VILANKULU

When I was a kid, I was really hard on books. Aside from my mania for reading and re-reading everything within my grasp, I also scribbled in them, read them in the bathtub and—most appallingly—used the smooth paperbacks to “skate” around the carpet of my bedroom.

All of this, of course, took a toll on the books. As the spines gave way and the paper covers tore off, my mother patched them back up with brown gaffer’s tape. The repairs bought them many more years, and some of the relics from my childhood remain in my personal collection.

If only the preservation and conservation of the University of Minnesota Libraries’ books could be as easily effected with an eraser and some gaffer’s tape. The care of the University’s holdings is carried out differently depending on whether items reside in the general collections on the open shelves or in Archives and Special Collections; each collection has specific goals and different techniques for achieving those goals.

When I visited Collection Support and Preservation manager Karl Isely in his Wilson Library workshop, he showed me two books—*La Rêve* by Emile Zola and *La Colonisation du Nord de L’Afrique* by Aristide Guilbert—and asked me which one was older. Not being strong on French authors, I went entirely by the appearance of the books. While *La Colonisation* looked pretty sturdy, *La Rêve* had parted from its fake-marble cover and was flaking apart faster than a piping hot brioché. Wrong! *La Rêve* was published in 1905, while Guilbert’s paean to French imperialism was printed on rag paper in 1844. It looked like it could have come off the presses this year. What could account for the difference?

IMAGE: A staff member repairs the binding of one of the Libraries’ books.

Well, we have to go back to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which is when many of the general collection books were published. As rising literacy rates in America and Europe created a demand for more books, publishers abandoned the time-honored method of making rag paper (paper made from linen and cotton) in favor of wood pulp paper. Wood pulp paper was a good deal cheaper, but unbeknownst to producers and publishers, the high acid content of this paper made it vulnerable to yellowing, cracking, and flaking. By 1844 nearly all books were printed on high-acid wood pulp paper and over the decades the quality of the pulp decreased with the price. Whether or not the switch to pulp paper put rag men out of business, it did make books cheaper to produce and purchase. But this access came at a price; by the 1930s librarians had noticed the deterioration of acidic paper in their collections.

Isely and his small band of preservation workers have the gargantuan task of triaging, repairing, and preserving the library’s alarmingly large number of damaged and at-risk books. Today most books are printed on acid-neutral paper, but there are still the masses of books that were published during the reign of acidic paper. In 1998, the University Libraries did a study of millions of volumes in the general collection and found that, on average, 78% of the books reviewed were “acidic” and approximately 30% were brittle and damaged. At first glance the worst news seems to be the number of books already damaged, but the really chilling number is that 78% next to “acidic.”

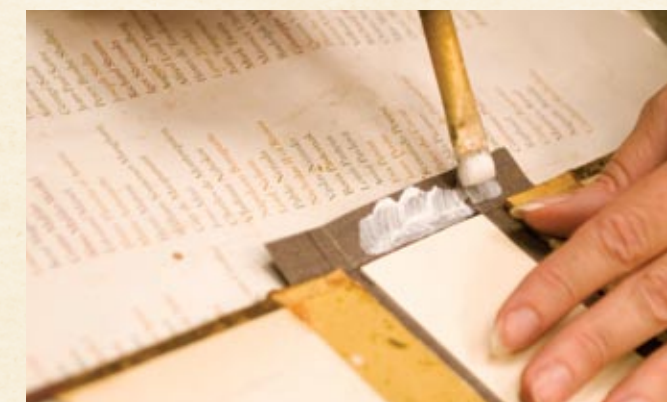


IMAGE: After new bindings are glued, repaired titles dry in a book press.

These book “patients” are heaped around Isely’s office on shelves and trucks, mutely awaiting their moment with the glue-pot or a transfer to the bindery. “With our general circulation collection,” says Karl Isely, “the priority is to preserve the intellectual content by whatever means necessary.” While 50% of the books that come to Isely’s office are declared fit for re-binding, the other 50% of the books are withdrawn from the collection after the book has been replaced by a reprint or later edition, or as a last resort, a bound photocopy.

... on average, 78% of the books reviewed were “acidic” and approximately 30% were brittle and damaged. At first glance the worst news seems to be the number of books already damaged, but the really chilling number is that 78% next to “acidic.”

Microfilming brittle books was once the preferred method of preserving intellectual content, but the popularity of microfilm is waning with the exciting possibilities of digitization. The University of Minnesota is one of the thirteen Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) universities (“Big 10” plus University of Chicago) partnering with Google on digitizing up to 10 million volumes from these collections. When the news of the partnership was released in June 2007,

University Librarian Wendy Pradt Lougee pointed out that: “Through Google, individuals will be able to search every word in millions of books. Researchers will be able to conduct in-depth searches and make connections across works that would have taken weeks—or even years—to make in the past.” Part of the CIC agreement is to feature “Collections of Distinction”: collections that are strong specialties of a



given university. The University of Minnesota, for example, is nominating its collection of Scandinavian history and literature, its forestry research collections and its entomology (specifically bee-keeping) materials for status as Collections of Distinction.

While the preservation focus in the general collection is on saving the content, the aim in Special Collections is also about the care of the book or other item—usually something quite rare and valuable—as an artifact. The University Libraries do both preservation and conservation work with these special collections, Director of Archives and Special Collections Kris Kiesling tells me. “With preservation,” says Kiesling, “we are concerned with maintaining the proper environmental conditions for materials. In Andersen Library’s caverns, where these collections are stored, the temperature is cold, it’s dark and the humidity is constant, and materials are housed in acid-free folders and acid-free boxes. Conservation, on the other hand, provides treatment of some kind of rare artifact, like a rare book or a valuable document.”

Because the University does not have the facilities for such treatment and repairs, materials like the ones Kiesling mentions get sent out to private conservators on a contract basis. Andersen Library and the caverns below, the home of Archives and Special Collections, has recently sent two architectural drawings for conservation treatment to the Midwest Art Conservation Center. “One of them is a drawing by John Howe [an architect who worked with Frank Lloyd Wright],” says Alan Lathrop of the Manuscripts Division, “and the other is a drawing for the facade elevation of Landmark Center (formerly, Old Federal Courts Building), St. Paul. The Howe drawing had a portion of it cut off from the rest of the drawing and the work involved hinging the two pieces to make a whole. The Landmark Center drawing was torn down the middle and needed to be patched together.”

Sometimes conservation is about improving access as well as protecting materials. Dr. Marguerite Ragnow, the curator of the James Ford Bell Library, describes a special project they undertook last year to have a special frame and container system created for their 1507 Waldseemüller map—the “Map that Named America.” “We wanted scholars to be able to study the paper and the watermark on this map, so the enclosure had to be see-through, but we also wanted to protect the map from damage, as well as be able to display it and present it to classes conveniently. The old container was a plastic sleeve resting inside a 50 lb. wood clamshell case—not so good. The new system involved encasing the map between two sheets of special conservation-quality plexiglass that were then sealed around the edges. A two-part frame was then constructed for it, so that one could place the plex-enclosed map into the base of the frame and then set the facing piece of the frame on top, held on by magnets. The entire framed piece then rests in a cloth-covered conservation-quality cardboard clamshell box.” 📖

## Reflecting on Minnesota’s Past

While the University of Minnesota Libraries prepare for the book digitization project with Google and the other Big 10 Universities, they are also partnering with the Minnesota Digital Library, a project to create a digital collection of resources and materials specific to the state of Minnesota. The coalition of professionals from libraries, archives, historical societies, and museums all over Minnesota has already completed its first ambitious project. Minnesota Reflections, which can be accessed at <http://reflections.mndigital.org/>, is a collection of over 20,000 images and documents related to Minnesota, mostly before 1909. Minnesota Reflections is searchable and can be browsed by topic, region, and collection. The collection items, which were contributed by over 75 cultural organizations in Minnesota, include images from The Barr Library’s State Board of Health Reports for the years of 1872–1882, photos from the North Star Museum of Boy Scouting and Girl Scouting, the archives of Carleton College, and many other representations of Minnesota history.

## Supporting Cultural Heritage Is His Heritage



**Ford Watson Bell** spent his childhood visiting the University of Minnesota’s Bell Museum of Natural History, named for his grandfather James Ford Bell, the founder of General Mills. Bell would grow up to become a veterinarian, and later an activist for museums, culminating in his current position as President and CEO of the American Association of Museums.

Dr. Bell, who is also an Associate of the James Ford Bell Library, spoke with *continuum* about his support for the University Libraries.

*continuum:* Could you discuss your connection to the James Ford Bell Library?

**FWB:** I have memories of trips to the James Ford Bell Library, when it was in Walter Library, going back almost 50 years. My grandfather’s love of books was very apparent to me and my siblings, because we loved going down the little winding staircase in his bookvault at Belford, his home on Lake Minnetonka. As you walked down the little metal stairs, there were rare books all along the way, so we had a keen awareness of his passion for book collecting.

*continuum:* How has being the grandson of a major industrialist and philanthropist like James Ford Bell affected your life and work?

**FWB:** My grandfather was a Quaker, and he had a very strong sense of public service. During World War I, he worked with Herbert Hoover, another Quaker, on the effort to feed people in the devastated countries of Europe. He was in charge of sugar and flour, and he devoted significant time and effort to this lifesaving campaign. The important pieces that he collected in his life—his remarkable silver collection and his books—were donated to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the University of Minnesota because he believed that he had collected them, ultimately, for the enjoyment of the community. I have been very influenced by his example of public service and commitment to give back to one’s community. He was a very powerful role model for me.

*continuum:* What roles do museums and libraries, especially those with special/unique collections, play in contemporary times?

**FWB:** Museums and libraries play an essential role in society today. They are an indispensable component of

*continued on p. 17*

## A Heroic Gift



Earlier this year, local attorney **John Borger** donated almost 40,000 comic books to the Children’s Literature Research Collections at the University of Minnesota Libraries. The Faegre & Benson Foundation provided a related grant to support the initial processing of the John Philip Borger Comic Book Collection, thus making it accessible to students and scholars. Borger, partner at Faegre & Benson, spoke with *continuum* about his love of comic books and this important gift.

*continuum:* What got you started collecting comic books?

**JPB:** I got my first comics from my parents, Phil and Jane Borger, and read them, liked them, and kept them. Putting “Philip” in the name of the collection is one way of thanking them for buying my comics as a kid, and not throwing them away when I went off to college, even though they took up a lot of room.

*continuum:* Did your children like comics?

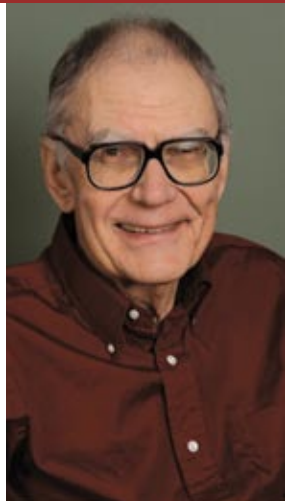
**JPB:** In different ways. My daughter Jenny loved to wear Superman shirts and capes, and when she got older mourned the injuries of Christopher Reeve. My older son Chris laughed at the satiric tales of Groo the Barbarian, who had a penchant for cheese dip and phrases like “Now Groo does what Groo does best” and “Did I err?” Our youngest child, Nick, loved nearly all comics, and we spent many hours reading them together and testing each other’s super-hero savvy.

*continuum:* What made you decide to donate this collection to the University of Minnesota Libraries?

**JPB:** When we decided to move from our house after nearly 30 years, there just wasn’t enough room to keep them all. After more than 50 years of reading and collecting, I couldn’t just sell them off piecemeal. It would have been like Bruce Wayne auctioning off the trophies in the Bat-Cave, or Clark Kent putting the contents of the Fortress of Solitude up on eBay.

But the collection needed a new home, and I’m lucky that the University of Minnesota is providing a spectacular one—

*continued on p. 17*



## DEAR FRIENDS,

This issue of *continuum* sets forth how the University Libraries have experienced nothing less than a transformation during the past half-century. It is a change that has ushered in an array of new programs and obligations. These pages should help all of us recognize that our Libraries have become a national leader in capturing, preserving, and enhancing

culture—from its local to its global manifestations. It is a change that has taken the Libraries well beyond the passive attitude toward the realm of culture that had generally prevailed in the field of library science until recently.

Those of us who were among the new students flocking to the University's Twin Cities campus at the end of World War II were greeted by a library whose professional outlook would now be unrecognizable.

It was a September day in 1945 when I first beheld Walter Library standing in its majestic prominence. To the right of Northrop Auditorium at the head of the mall, Walter was then the University's principal library, for the West Bank campus with its Wilson and Andersen buildings was far in the future.

In those days, what went on in Walter Library splendidly exemplified the meaning of an academic library—to assist patrons who came to check out books, consult reference material, and read periodicals. The grand beauty of Walter's interior, and especially its reading rooms, invited scholarly behavior. There was then little space assigned for "special collections," so many of which our Libraries now possess. I suspect that many library patrons found the most memorable aspect of the Walter Library to be the heroic bronze doors at the main entrance where they can still be admired.

How the comparatively simple nature of the University Libraries of sixty years ago has since been altered can be glimpsed in these pages of *continuum* which explain how active Minnesota's Libraries have become in capturing, preserving, and making accessible our culture. Not even Walter Library has been untouched by this

transformation, for its interior has been redesigned as a temple of science and the highest technology.

Today, the Andersen Library on the West Bank is the primary site of stellar programs to preserve and to promulgate an understanding of all aspects of American and global culture through special collections. Two of the many instances of these efforts are described in this issue—the Performing Arts Archives and the Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies. There are many others, so many that while it was but a few years ago that Andersen Library opened, the building's capacity has already been overwhelmed. The same fate has come to the much publicized caverns beneath Andersen that were built to provide the latest in preservation environment. They too are full.

Consequently, just as our Friends organization was active in helping the University raise additional public and legislative support for the Andersen Library (named for Governor Elmer L. Andersen), the time draws near for us to work on behalf of the Libraries to support continued investment and expansion of its role in preserving cultural heritage. Another cavern will be needed in the very near future and a capacity to preserve and conserve special collections will be essential to support the Libraries' role as stewards of cultural heritage! It will be equally important for the Friends to support the development of new technologies as part of the Libraries' preservation program, as digitization is now the strategy to preserve content for the future.

These astonishing goings-on in the University Libraries are another justification why all Friends of the Libraries should continue and, if possible, enlarge their support, while encouraging others to join. It is no longer the quiet of 1945 in the University Libraries—they need our help if they are to meet the demands described in this issue as well as many other requirements implied by the watchwords of collection, preservation, digitization, and accessibility. Keep these terms in mind, for they help in understanding the University of Minnesota Libraries of today and tomorrow.

**PAUL NAGEL**

PRESIDENT, FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARIES

## Libraries, Writers, and Friends – It's Been a Very Good Year

Members of the Friends help the Libraries accomplish great things, the most visible of which are the broad range of programs sponsored by the Friends. The past academic year saw the following events hosted at the Libraries:

- › The first-ever Members Appreciation Reception was held in February 2008 at the Campus Club. University of Minnesota alum and Jazz Hall of Fame member Dave Frishberg performed for nearly two hours.
- › "The Map that Named America" exhibit, featured in the previous issue of *continuum*, brought in over 1,500 visitors ranging from local school children to internationally recognized scholars during its October through

December 2007 installation.

- › January 2008 saw University of Minnesota professor Theofanis Stavrou as the featured speaker at "A Feast of Words: Gleanings from Modern Greek Writers."
- › Mark Dimunation, chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division at the Library of Congress spoke in December 2007 about how the Library was "Forged in Fire" when, in 1815, Congress purchased Thomas Jefferson's personal library to replace the congressional library destroyed when the British burned Washington.
- › A partnership with the Givens Foundation for African American Literature led to the presentation

of the fourth annual NOMMO African American Authors series. In this three-author series, University of Minnesota professor Alexis Pate hosted essayist, biographer, and novelist Randall Kenan in February 2008; poet Lucille Clifton in April 2008; and playwright Amiri Baraka in April 2008.

- › To celebrate John Borger's gift of almost 40,000 comic books to the Children's Literature Research Collections, David Hajdu spoke in July 2008 about the "ten-cent plague," a term used to describe the proliferation of comic books in the mid-20th century and the fear of their influence on the young generation of readers.

## Become a Friend of the Libraries

Did you know each year University of Minnesota Libraries staff lead more than 1,500 workshops and classes? Or that the 14 libraries on the Twin Cities campuses see over two million visits, accessing the Libraries' nearly 78,000 serial subscriptions and 6.8 million volumes? Or that the University Libraries rank first among North American research libraries in the number of loans to other libraries? Innovative programs like the Undergraduate Virtual Library, SMART Learning Commons, and Copyright Information and Education Initiative demonstrate ingenuity as we strive to meet user expectations for immediate, customized information, 24/7. The Libraries must preserve and make accessible the rare and unique materials from our special collections and archives while staying current with the print and electronic information demands of faculty, students, and scholars from here and around the world.

### WE NEED YOUR HELP!

Private support is essential as we seek to fulfill our mission to inspire learning and discovery through information resources, collaboration, and expertise; your financial contributions enable us to remain at the forefront of academic libraries. Basic membership in the Friends is \$40 each year; at the \$80 level, you will receive borrowing privileges.

Other benefits include:

- › Invitations to lectures, exhibit openings, author readings, and other special events at the University Libraries. Recent events have featured speakers and performers like Don Shelby, Robert Bly, Lou Bellamy, Dave Frishberg, and Lucille Clifton.
- › A subscription to *continuum* and the *News and Events* newsletter
- › Discounts at the University of Minnesota Bookstore, located in Coffman Memorial Union

For more information about the Friends call 612-624-9339 or e-mail [stangret@umn.edu](mailto:stangret@umn.edu).

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# OUT OF THE BOX AND INTO THE ARCHIVES

BY DAVID LOWENTHAL

Minneapolis native and University of Minnesota alumnus Max Lowenthal was a lifelong defender of civil liberties and a prolific writer. His papers include correspondence relating to his 1950 exposé of the abuses of power in J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, his work on railroad bankruptcies and sedition laws, and his key role behind the Truman administration's recognition of Israel.



This article was written by his son, David Lowenthal, who is professor emeritus of geography at University College London and the author of several books including *The Heritage Crusade* and *The Spoils of History* and *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.

Close to a hundred people gathered on March 14, 2008 to celebrate the opening of Max Lowenthal's papers, deposited at the University of Minnesota soon after his death in 1971, and now finally organized and catalogued thanks to a generous gift from Harold Rosenthal, James A. Rosenthal, and Brent and Diane Rosenthal.

Susan Hoffman, project archivist, spent three months selecting and

ordering an overwhelming mass of materials. Neither Max's execrable penmanship nor his pack-rat habit of gathering and distributing news clippings on every topic under the sun prevented her from bringing his papers into coherent order.

As Max's son, I can attest that the family had spared her the worst of Max's omnivore accumulation. She had to deal only with clippings; in his later years he had not bothered even to clip, but merely marked and tore out entire pages from newspapers. We had had to dispose of many piles of such pages that reached from floor to ceiling.

But Max's hoarding of every scrap that might conceivably be useful did on occasion pay off. When his book *The Federal Bureau of Investigation*—an indictment of J. Edgar Hoover and

the FBI—made him the target of Hoover's manifold harassments, his federal income tax return was subjected every year to intense auditing. On his treks from our family farm in Bridgewater, Connecticut, to the tax office in Danbury, he would load the car with records of every single transaction, down to five cents for a newspaper. These records he then dumped on the tax agent's desk, demanding scrutiny of every item to ensure he came away squeaky clean. After four or five hours the agent would give up in despair. When the IRS ceased its surveillance some years later, Max demanded that he continue to be audited, lest when he died his wife would be left with the worry. Given the fruitless expenditure of time, it is little wonder the IRS refused.

Max was equally scrupulous in recording and documenting dates and details and anecdotes of his family history, especially about early life in Minneapolis. Among other piquant memories he recalled how he and his older brother Archie, then eight and nine years old, sold newspapers and joined street-gang gamblers from their own Lithuanian Jewish and other immigrant groups (German, Polish, Irish, Swedish), playing dice or cards in the alleys until horrified Lowenthal parents forbade it. At age twelve, Max peddled newspapers in what was then the red light district, wondering why there were so many blowsy women about. His tales to us kids about how cold it was on his bike in those days elicited our ritual response that "Life wasn't worth living when Dad was a boy in Minneapolis." (It was still pretty cold when I came with him on visits back to his mother and brother in the 1930s.)

Max remained fond of Minneapolis and devoted to Twin Citizens, an affection long reciprocated, as I can attest from a stint at the University in 1972. Indeed, Minnesota featured his first civil liberties cause célèbre, the infamous Schaper case. One of Max's University of Minnesota teachers, the political scientist William A. Schaper, was summarily dismissed

IMAGE: Max Lowenthal, courtesy of the Lowenthal family.

in the anti-German war hysteria of 1917, when Supreme Court justice and Board of Regents' member Pierce Butler accused him without a shred of evidence of pro-German sympathies. (Some said that Butler's ire was really aroused by Schaper's advocacy of publicly owned street railways for the Twin Cities.) Max helped to rectify this injustice; twenty years later Schaper got an apology and some back pay.

Max's methods of persuasion on civic matters that specially concerned him—labor relations, wiretapping, constraints on freedom of speech, police immunity, corporate malfeasance—were unusual in his time; today they seem bizarrely antiquated. He was not given to public protest, engaged in no marches or demonstrations, rarely served as spokesman for his causes. Rather he worked quietly behind the scenes, through personal links with hundreds if not thousands of influential folk. A midwesterner at heart, an exemplar of old-time "Minnesota Nice," he was intimate with myriad notable men in public affairs, especially but by no means exclusively midwestern senators, Democrats and Republicans alike.

Max often spoke warmly of, and was often with, men like Warren Austin of Vermont, Charles Tobey of New Hampshire, Hugo Black of Alabama, the LaFollettes of Wisconsin, Woodrow Borah of Idaho, Alben Barkley of Kentucky, George Norris of Nebraska, and of course Burton Wheeler of Montana and Harry Truman of Missouri, who in turn headed the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce's investigation into railroad receivership of which Max was chief counsel. To thirty-odd senators he would hand-deliver letters he felt warranted their attention, which he typed out three times, ten carbon papers between onion-skin sheets. Such letters were quite frequently effective; for example, he almost single handedly got the Senate to ban wire-tapping.

Equally idiosyncratic and effective were his methods of self-defense when, in 1950, he came under attack for exposing the misdeeds of the FBI. He had long been troubled about the excesses of federal police operations, starting with attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer's raids of 1918–1921 in the post-Russian revolution Red scare. This concern resurfaced for Max himself in the mid-1940s. As head of the Board of Economic Warfare's refugee resettlement agency, he was repeatedly summoned by FBI officials to explain why he had hired such-and-such a shady character, not only suspect as, say, an Albanian but as an anthropologist to boot (anthropologists

were seen as ipso facto subversive). These inquests—time-wasting, demeaning, ridiculous, and counter-productive—together with J. Edgar Hoover's blackmailing shenanigans, led Max to write the book—vetted in proof by President Truman, among others—that Hoover scared several publishers from accepting, before the courageous William Morrow took it on.

J. Edgar Hoover's chief crony in the House of Representatives was George Dondero of Michigan, famous for terming modern art "a Moscow conspiracy" to spread communism in the United States. Just before the FBI book came out, Dondero told Congress that Max was "a menace to America" whose exposure would prove him a Soviet spy more dangerous than any since Benedict Arnold. To achieve that exposure, he got the House Un-American Activities Committee to subpoena Max. On September 15, 1950, Max appeared with his counsel, ex-Senator Wheeler, whom the FBI had failed to dissuade from representing him. The hearing was chaired by Morgan M. Moulder of Missouri; also present were representatives Richard M. Nixon of California, thrust to fame by the Alger Hiss–Whittaker Chambers case, and Harold H. Velde of Illinois, an ex-FBI agent who in 1953 sought to subpoena former President Truman for appointing economist Harry Dexter White, thought to be a Soviet spy, to the International Monetary Fund.

Max's responses throughout were, to begin with, totally, even maddeningly, disarming. Time and again when asked if he had met so-and-so or knew of links to someone, he said he had no memory of that, but was happy to accept any evidence the committee might have to the contrary. "Anything



the committee has that would correct what I say on this or anything else, I will accept. If it is a fact, I will accept it." This meaningless but conciliatory throwaway line, uttered very slowly ten, twenty, fifty times in a deep, sincere tone, drove his inquisitors round the bend. So too did his disarming asides, countering guilt by association by noting some victim's impeccable Wall Street position with, for example, Cotten & Franklin, and "Joe Cotten had been Under Secretary of State under [President Herbert] Hoover, a wonderful man."

Sardonic humor was the second string to Max's bow. The FBI and Dondero hoped to tar him with a Russian brush. Had Max ever been to the Soviet Embassy? Indeed, he went there once, about 1940, to try to get two endangered children out of Lithuania. But that needed Supreme Council approval, never given; consequently the children perished. "That is the only time I was ever in the Russian Embassy. I don't think I ever went to any of their parties, even when everybody else in Washington thought it a nice thing to do." Here Senator Wheeler interjected, "If everybody was accused who went to the Russian Embassy, I am afraid a lot of people would be accused, because they went to the Russian Embassy and ate caviar." This was too much for Harold Velde: "I don't think the committee intends to accuse Mr. Lowenthal because he went to the Russian Embassy." The charge crumbled into farce.

Indignant hauteur, along with *reductio ad absurdum*, was Max's third line of resistance. He had served in many branches of government for almost four decades. A few years back, he told the committee, he had rebuffed queries from a Civil Service Commission agent. "For some little investigator to come around and ask me questions about my record, which had already been passed upon by some of the leading men in the U.S. Senate, and by men who have been president, on both the Democratic and Republican side, seemed to me rather ignoble. . . . I would be willing to be questioned by my peers, but not by some little investigator who may not have been born by the time I had begun to serve the Federal Government with some honor."

This should have warned investigator Louis J. Russell what he was in for. Asked his views on ex-colleagues, Max scolded Russell: "If you keep up this process of making charges, there isn't a corporation in the United States that won't be charged with being communistic or anti-American." Noting many suspects' Wall Street law and business ties, Max hit home: "There are investigators who have no knowledge of that

part of American life, and never will, . . . because they couldn't get a job in such places under any circumstances, except maybe as a detective." Goaded, detective-investigator Russell unwisely demurred: "I was also employed in private industry, Mr. Lowenthal." Max pounced on his hapless prey: "I am not saying anything about members of this staff, I will reserve that for another occasion." He didn't need to. Russell ended his detective career as a pip-squeak plumber in the Watergate scandal.

Max's primary lesson, reiterated again and again, was the toxic self-destructive effect of guilt by association. "If people are accused who were recently members of prominent Wall Street offices and their clients, what happens to those offices and their clients? What happens to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who lived a year with Alger Hiss as his law clerk? Would Holmes be blasted for that? . . . If you keep up this process, there will be no American who will be known as an American; and I am sure the members of this committee would not want that to happen."

The transcript of Max's testimony, released just before his FBI book came out, showed the House Un-American Activities Committee to be a shambolic travesty. No less inept was the FBI itself. In vain did the agency seek the mystery woman to whom Max had dedicated his book. Countless detective days were wasted trying to trace Mrs. T. J. P. Poppingham, who was in fact the made-up heroine of a dinner-time story Max used to tell his children. And when my brother finally gained the FBI's file on Mrs. Poppingham under the Freedom of Information Act, its pages were entirely blacked out.

Max's last public statement on civil liberties appears in an essay entitled "Police Methods in Crime Detection and Counter-Espionage," from a University of Chicago Law School conference on criminal law enforcement in March 1951. Its present pertinence is obvious: "In recent years," he concluded, "the thoughts, the beliefs, the ideals, the words, the circles, the acquaintances of large numbers of our population have been subjected to police scrutiny. That dragnet is no good. It did not get us a spy of importance. It harmed a lot of people and it harmed our society. . . . The emergency that we face calls for a renewal of our faith in a system of freedom, not for stripping its strength away. . . . freedoms not worn threadbare by Federal or any other police officials raised high above the general population." Max's admonition is as applicable to America today as it was two generations ago. 🗣️

The campuses of the University of Minnesota have been fertile ground for intellectual work for over 150 years. In this time, a rich culture of scholarship has grown from the excellence of the University's faculty, staff, and students. This culture is rooted not only in the production of scholarly work, but also in the preservation of cultures at the University. The University Digital Conservancy is now helping to capture this scholarly culture for future generations.

A partnership between the University Libraries and the Office of Information Technology, the Conservancy serves the University with two main functions: as a venue for the long-term preservation of and open access to faculty, staff, and student works; and as a digital archive for institutional materials such as minutes of the Board of Regents and Strategic Positioning documents, which have traditionally been made available in the University Archives, part of the University Libraries' Archives and Special Collections.

A resource like the Conservancy can also prevent the loss of resources that can arise as an institution like the University evolves. The Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy, for example, will close in 2008, though it will not be lost as an asset to the University community or to its nationwide audience because all of the books, monographs, proceedings, and research reports produced in the Center's ten years will be preserved in the Conservancy and publicly available and fully searchable in one location: <http://conservancy.umn.edu>.

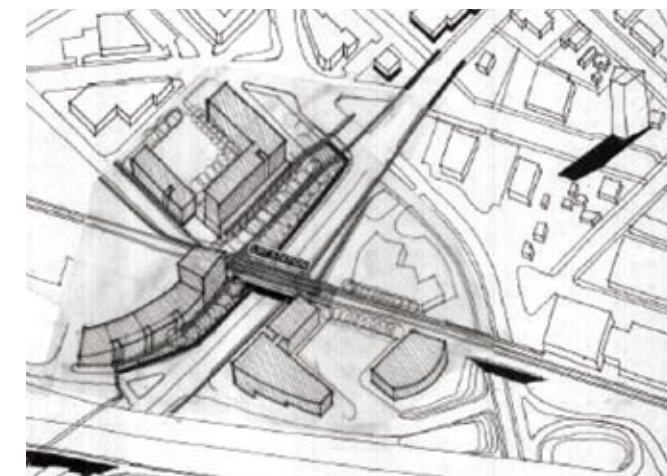


IMAGE: From *Linking Light Rail Transit to the City: Six Neighborhood Station Districts, 1999*, Minnesota Department of Transportation.

What's so important about preserving these works while making them widely accessible? Conservancy Co-directors Beth Kaplan and Philip Herold make a convincing case. "Over the long term, the Conservancy provides a means of preserving/organizing/representing scholarly and institutional culture(s) at the University," says Kaplan. "The U is made up of multiple cultures and traditions, many of which intersect and overlap. The Conservancy provides a way to represent those intersections in multiple ways."



## digital conservancy

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

And represent it does. In addition to receiving permanent Internet addresses, all materials in the Conservancy are accessible to the general public. Herold, reflecting on the Conservancy's role in increasing the accessibility and visibility of scholarship, explains, "It's an excellent mechanism for sharing. One that allows great findability through Google—better than what other Web sites and most types of databases can offer, because our rankings are higher thanks to preference in Google's search algorithm."

In other words, works deposited in the Conservancy are now more likely to be seen by a worldwide audience. This is crucial for certain scholarly cultures, like the field of mathematics, in which researchers routinely share prepublication versions of their works with others in the discipline. For a clear example of this, one need only peruse the Conservancy's archive of more than 2,200 "preprints" of works by mathematicians and scientists supported by the University's Institute for Mathematics and Its Applications (IMA). The IMA Preprint Series, as it is called, fosters the rapid exposure of research—before it is published—that is necessary in this interdisciplinary culture of mathematics and science.

The rapid, worldwide visibility afforded by the Conservancy is good news for the students of the Primary Care Clerkship (PCC) at the University's Medical School as well. As third- and fourth-year medical students, participants of this



interdisciplinary course gain experience in primary care settings while continuing their University course work. A particularly practical aspect of the PCC is the students' development of patient education tools, modeled after informational pamphlets you'd find in a doctor's office. Beginning in 2007, these student-made tools are searchable in the Conservancy. The original works give the students an opportunity to channel their new experience into a practical application: educating the public about real health risks. Granted, the patient education tools are a PCC course project, but their real-life relevance is undeniable.

Wayne Loftus, a librarian in the University's Bio-Medical Library who has helped students develop their PCC course projects, considers the place these tools have in the Conservancy: "These materials may be of actual clinical relevance out in the wider world. . . . Clinics will be able to use or adapt them and distribute them to the patients who need them." Loftus says that faculty look at this arrangement as a benefit to the students as well. Having their names on publicly available educational tools certainly won't hurt their advancement toward residency opportunities. "The Medical School shares that hope," adds Loftus, "and also hopes to reinforce their reputation for excellence by making high quality works openly available."

Dr. David Power is eager to see this arrangement continue. He's the course director for the PCC and has worked closely with University librarians to see that his students' work gets the attention it deserves. "For years I have felt badly that students were going to such trouble and creating such wonderful patient education pieces, and basically no one was ever seeing them," says Dr. Power. He clearly believes that these materials exemplify the excellent scholarship achieved at the University every day, and he's happy that an avenue like the Conservancy potentially allows the patient education tools to serve their intended purpose: to communicate with real patients.

In fact, Dr. Power's students are getting a taste of what has become an international movement in open access publishing. Depositing scholarly articles in open access repositories is now required for all Harvard arts and sciences faculty, according to a mandate announced in February

2008. Harvard is the first American university to formally join this movement, which gives authors more control over how their works are preserved and disseminated, and which has picked up speed at universities around the world over the last five years. A policy change at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provides a new catalyst for this trend: all articles resulting from NIH funding must be deposited in PubMed Central, NIH's open access digital archive for research in biomedical and life sciences.

Naturally, granting public access to more resources in health sciences can foster advancements in the field, but a service like the Conservancy has the ability to take the University community back in time, to early moments in the history of the culture of scholarship that permeates the University today. Take, for example, *n*, the alumni news magazine of the University of Minnesota Department of Plant Pathology. The complete archive is now fully searchable in the Conservancy. The department, which celebrated its 100th anniversary this year, has captured the mores of plant pathology in their magazine for more than 80 years. The typewritten premier issue takes the form of a journal, "Wherein," the preface reads loftily, "are recorded the recollections, the ruminations, and the respirations of those who have drunk from the foaming fount in the Department of Plant Pathology of the University of Minnesota and who now spout forth in divers [sic] ways." We can all examine the scholarly record at the University first-hand through digital archives like this and countless others held in the Conservancy, which continues to grow rapidly, collecting more of the past and keeping it accessible to future generations of scholars. ☺



IMAGE: Cover from *Aurora Sporealis*, the alumni news magazine of the University of Minnesota Department of Plant Pathology.

## CURATING CULTURAL HERITAGE

BY KATRINA VANDENBERG

When a curator gets into the elevator on the first floor of the Elmer L. Andersen Library and slides his security card through an electronic card reader, he descends one hundred feet below the main floor where two caverns, each two stories high and the length of two football fields, have been carved out of sandstone and limestone. The caverns, referred to by one curator as "an engineering marvel," are the home of the University of Minnesota Libraries' special collections, which are protected by the natural temperature and climate control of the caves. Lights are on timers so the books and other items receive limited direct light.

Why do these books, manuscripts, and other items merit additional care? Because special collections are miniature libraries, museums, and archives, all at once. Not only are their materials grouped around a theme or subject matter—Sherlock Holmes, children's literature, and cuneiform inscriptions are just a few of the collections you might find here—but the items themselves are often rare or valuable; they matter as artifacts, not just as information. And two of these collections, the Performing Arts Archives and the Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies, are among the richest of their kind. Who knew they could be found within bluffs overlooking the Mississippi?

### The Heritage of a State's Cultural Arts

In 1970, a newly hired curator at the Libraries began work on an archive. Alan Lathrop, who retired in October 2008, has spent much of his career helping to build the Performing Arts Archive. The archive was established in 1971 and is now composed of 85 to 90 collections, devoting more than 300 cubic feet to materials from the Guthrie Theater alone. The Performing Arts Archives preserves records related to theater, music, and dance throughout the state, and aims to document as fully as possible the activities of individuals and groups in professional and amateur performing arts here. But when Lathrop arrived, the Libraries had only six of these collections, and many of them were small. "There were odds and ends," he said. "We've been actively building ever since."

After 38 years of active building, here are some items Lathrop could bring you from the caverns: costume bibles from

IMAGE: Costume sketch for *The Cherry Orchard* designed by Desmond Heeley, 1996, Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, MN.



the Guthrie, containing sketches by internationally renowned designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch. Costume designs like this one by Desmond Heeley ("the originals are exquisite" remarked Lathrop). Posters from the James Sewell Ballet Company. But you don't necessarily have to be in the library to explore the archives. Fully digitized and searchable at <http://digital.lib.umn.edu/scenery/> are drawings of scenic backdrops, including the Holak collection of

turn-of-the-century designs for fraternal organizations' stage ceremonies, salvaged from a building moments before a wrecking ball destroyed it.

With his knowledge of the area arts, Lathrop is an archive himself. If you're part of an arts group in Minnesota, chances are you've received a phone call from him or his staff over the years. "Most arts groups are too busy staying alive to take care of their records themselves," Lathrop said. "We tell them we think their records should be at the University, where they can be maintained and used by others."

People contact the archive staff, too, like the Theatre de la Jeune Lune did when it closed. The Minnesota Historical Society and Minneapolis Public Library often refer people to Lathrop when they receive offers of documents. Sometimes, people call out of the blue, as in the case of a former actress with a Minnesota fringe theater group, the Alive and Trucking Theater Company, which existed for only a few years in the early 70s. Lathrop drove to the woman's house to pick up the scrapbooks she'd made and kept for years.

While these archives are extremely useful for interested students and researchers, they're also an active repository of ideas for working artists in one of the most vibrant arts scenes in the nation. When the Guthrie stages a play, the

stage management team might come to see the prompt book used the last time the play was performed there. A theater company planning a performance might be interested in how another theater once staged the same play. From the 1903 program of the very first performance of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra (which would become the Minnesota Orchestra), to oral histories of Hmong refugees done by Creative Theater Unlimited, to peruse these archives is to peruse the history of the people of Minnesota, filtered through their drama, music, and dance.

After Lathrop retires, he hopes this growth in the archives is sustained. “This is a very rich area, and we have contacts in most performing arts groups that are extant,” he said. “I don’t see any reason it just can’t keep flourishing.”

### The Heritage of a Culture

Curator Jean-Nickolaus Tretter holds out a thick black book. The bottom half of its front cover and the edges of its pages are discolored.

“Large books don’t burn very easily,” he says.

The book, *Le Marquis de Sade et Son Temps* by Dr. Eugène Duehren, is a volume salvaged from Magnus Hirschfeld’s library in Berlin. Hirschfeld was both gay and a Jew, and on May 6, 1933, the brownshirts destroyed more than 10,000 of his books in a fire. After the soldiers left, street cleaners found the book Tretter is now holding, and had it smuggled into Switzerland. From there, it went to a book dealer in California.

“The National Holocaust Museum doesn’t have one of these, and they were very interested in it when they were here,” Tretter said.

“People assume that everything in a GLBT collection is going to be about sex,” he said, putting the book down. “There’s a lot more to it.”

There is a lot more—60,000 to 65,000 items more, in fifty-eight languages, including a tiny book of sixteenth-century

gay male love poetry from the Netherlands, medieval books, and photographs. The Tretter Collection is also the exclusive archive for countries intolerant of homosexuality, like Sri Lanka and Belarus. People who live in those places smuggle materials out and mail them from other countries to the University of Minnesota.

Jean Tretter’s career in curating began when, as a social and cultural anthropology major at the University of Minnesota in the early seventies, he wanted to specialize in GLBT anthropology. This was around the time the American Psychiatric Association was debating whether to remove “homosexuality” from the “Sexual Deviancy” section of their diagnostic manual of mental disorders, and Tretter was told gay culture and history did not exist. So he started proving its existence himself, building the collection in his two-bedroom apartment. “Floor to ceiling, boxes and boxes and boxes,” he said, with room for a sleeping bag, a television, and not much else.

So why did Tretter offer his collection to the University of Minnesota Libraries? He cites the Libraries’ facilities, plus an infrastructure that helps people find what they’re looking for. “I’m not wealthy,” he said. “You’d have to be, to preserve and maintain a collection like this. And the University helps make it known. I now get requests from places like the London School of Economics. People look for collections like this in a university. We’re part of the cultural heritage of the world,” he said.

“Jean is very committed to the long-term preservation and availability of those materials,” adds Kris Kiesling, the Elmer L. Andersen Director of Archives and Special Collections. “It’s good that we have him here, continuing to build the collection.” The Tretter Collection’s ambitious acquisition program, which has grown to be one of the top ten of its kind in the world, relies on donations of material from around the world.

The Tretter Collection was popular from its first days at the University in 2001, and remains one of the Libraries’ most heavily used. Tretter also takes the collection’s show on the road, across the United States and even to less open societies, like Moscow’s, in the form of a world history exhibit. “It’s so easy to think *I’m the only one*,” Tretter said. “When you say to someone, *Here is four thousand years of your history*, it helps alleviate the sense that they’re alone.”

There are similarities between the Performing Arts Archives and the Tretter Collections. Both collections were primarily

IMAGE: Excerpted from a poster featuring Lesbians and Drag Kings, circa 1995, Takarazuka Theater, Japan.

built by their current curators. Both collections’ curators emphasize that the archives they maintain do not belong to them or to one group of people, but to everyone. In fact, the University of Minnesota Libraries’ special collections are open to the public. Anyone can walk in off the street and see the world’s largest book or Alice Walker’s script for the movie version of *The Color Purple*. And people do, alone or by the busload, whether they live down the block or continents away.

Finally, both collections were first assembled by people—whether Jean-Nickolaus Tretter or a young actress in *Alive and Trucking*—piecing together items that the dominant culture did not yet recognize as having value.

“People always say, *History is written by the winners*. I’m not sure that’s true,” Tretter said. “It’s written by those who save the most stuff.”

CONTINUED

### FROM P.7 SUPPORTING CULTURAL HERITAGE IS HIS HERITAGE

our educational system, from pre-school to post-graduate studies. They provide important opportunities for lifelong learning, for people of all ages. And, they are critical to our understanding of our heritage—as individuals, and as a

country. Museums and libraries provide a unique window into our shared past—the proud, the glorious, the tragic, and the shameful—and as such they offer us the opportunity to shape a better future for people everywhere.

### FROM P.7 A HEROIC GIFT

and it’s close enough that I can still visit just by walking a few blocks.

*continuum: How would you respond to critics who don’t see comic books as something worthy of keeping at all, let alone preserving in the archives of a research library?*

**JPB:** Some comics, yesterday and today, are just plain bad. Some are wonderfully goofy, asking readers to suspend their disbelief and accept that super-strength and a heavy chain are enough to pull Manhattan Island out of the path of danger. Of course, bad taste and low quality can be found in any medium of communication, whether it’s oral storytelling, parchment, books, newspapers, motion pictures, radio, television, plays, dance, or music. Why would anyone expect comics to be different? Comics, sometimes wittingly, sometimes unwittingly, channel the culture from which they come, and comics are a wonderful window into that past culture for those who want to understand it.

There’s also great art in some comics, and it is no longer obscured by crude printing. Even the jaded should enjoy the painted storytelling of Alex Ross, for example. There

are well-turned phrases like local author Neil Gaiman’s line from *Sandman* that “the price of getting what you want is getting what you once wanted.”

Comics at their best reflect the central lesson of Spider-Man, that “with great power, there must also come great responsibility.” Comics display the nobility of Superman, a being so powerful he could take whatever he wanted for himself, but whose internal morality compels him to live, and even die, protecting and helping others. In those comics, might does not make right. Instead, might serves right.

I’m now enjoying reading comic stories to my four-year-old grandson Joseph. Each time we finish a story of Green Arrow or Batman, he begs for another. Because of comics, he encountered the words “pachyderm” and “reverberate” and listened attentively to explanations of what they meant. Comics can inspire. They can teach.

The care that the University will take to preserve these comics means that someday my grandchildren’s grandchildren can delve into the paper and ink that fascinated generations before. This legacy should last beyond a lifetime.





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### OUT OF THE DARK, INTO THE LIGHT

When local photographer Peter Martin was teaching a History of Photography class at the U of M School of Journalism, he sought out a genuine volume of *The Pencil of Nature*, the first book to be illustrated entirely with photographs and authored by William Henry Fox Talbot, generally regarded as the inventor of the negative-to-positive photographic process. Martin was thrilled to learn that an incomplete copy of the work was held in the Joseph S. Mertle Collection on the History of Photomechanics, a distinguished part of the Special Collections and Rare Books unit in the Elmer L. Andersen Library.

More remarkable is what Martin discovered when he arrived to examine the book: an original paper negative created using Talbot's technique. Understanding the value of having not only one of the rarest books in the history of photography, but an actual negative from the collection of Talbot himself, Martin worked with the Libraries to digitize the negative, thus creating a surrogate for the fragile original.

The photograph, thought to be of a tree lined Coley Avenue in Reading, England, is printed here. The reproduction demonstrates the effect that chemical aging has had on the negative over the past 150 years: the once black-and-white image now has a blue sky and the road and trees are different shades of brown.

