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Cultivating a Special Collection: How the Personal Touch Can Sow the Seeds for a Major Acquisition

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How the personal touch can sow the seeds for a major acquisition

Serendipity is often the best friend of special collections librarians. Sharing our passion for history and preservation can create happy accidents, connecting us with the caretakers of the remnants of past generations. In fact, libraries come to acquire many cultural treasures, often discovered in the contents of someone's attic, basement, or storage space, because we nurtured a relationship with a potential collector over time.

Western Kentucky University's most happy accident happened more than 10 years ago when I [Sue Lynn McDaniel] was sitting in a dentist's chair. The hygienist was making small talk and asked a standard ice-breaker question: "What do you do for a living?" My reply led to her inquiring: "Would WKU be interested in my Uncle J. T.'s suitcase?" Uncle J. T. turned out to be John T. Scopes, the defendant in what has come to be known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. He was charged with violating the Butler Act (Tenn. HB 185, 1925), which criminalized the teaching of "any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."

As his niece explained, Scopes did not necessarily believe in evolution, but he thought all students had the right to access all information so they could make educated decisions. Another characteristic she remembered about him from family gatherings was that "Uncle J. T. liked to stir things up!"

Experience has taught me that my passion can overwhelm others, so I restrained myself from following her home that very day to see the contents of the suitcase. But I had planted a seed, from which my colleagues could then nurture the idea that Uncle J. T.'s suitcase and its contents had a value beyond family ties.

Over the next few years, Jonathan Jeffrey of WKU's Manuscripts and Archives Department had several opportunities to cultivate that seed, although there was no harvest until this past summer when Nancy Richey answered her phone and heard: "My wife is John Scopes's

Photo: Courtesy of the Kentucky Museum, WKU

The treasures John T. Scopes kept in a suitcase include a 1929 letter to him from Albert Einstein (upper left) and a keepsake poem from R. E. H. Carrud ("A Rockhound to a Fossil") about Scopes's 29th birthday party, held in Venezuela (brown paper, lower right).

niece and we have a suitcase full of his stuff that we've been meaning to bring to WKU for years. We have talked to someone before and want to bring it in this morning."

Harvest time

Unbeknown to Scopes's niece and nephew, we at WKU cultivated the acquisition of that suitcase as a team. McDaniel planted the seed, Jeffrey nourished it with details and gentle pressure, and Richey welcomed that suitcase to the world's research doorstep by being available to receive it.

For the family, the suitcase was a multigenerational metaphor. It held the frustration of Scopes's parents, who saw their son as a pawn in an emotionally charged controversy pitting the Bible against science, and their daughter-in-law as a pariah by association who was fired from her private-school teaching job near Chicago. The suitcase also contained evidence of the remorse expressed by Scopes's generation about the unwanted national attention and fallout the family received—an experience, they told their children, that "just caused a bunch of trouble."

As for those children, including the niece who donated the suitcase to WKU, the items represented their curiosity, understanding, and respect for their famous uncle, whose death in October 1970 received coverage on national TV news. Like so many family trustees, she knew better than to throw the suitcase away. It held pieces of a story that belonged to the nation, to historians, to social scientists, to each of us.

By opening the latch of that suitcase, we found not only artifacts from the 1925 trial but documentation of how the experience affected Scopes for the rest of his life. He had collected items that retold his story in articles and books, and on stage and screen. The images that Scopes held onto humanize him for us: Some photographs were taken in 1925; others were taken in later years around the family table, during his travels, or with friends and authors.

One telling image embodies the ridicule he endured. In it, his face and that of his wife Mildred are superimposed on a drawing of two monkeys' bodies. Movie stills and ephemera from the making of *Inherit the Wind* (1960) document the celebrity status achieved by his attorney, Clarence Darrow (fictionalized as the thinly veiled Darrow stand-in Henry Drummond, portrayed by Spencer Tracy). Scopes's collection also includes evolution-themed postcards, greeting cards, books, programs, magazines, letters, and news clippings that date from 1925 to three months prior to his death. They attest to how his decision to stand trial affected his career choices and outlook for the remaining 45 years of his life.

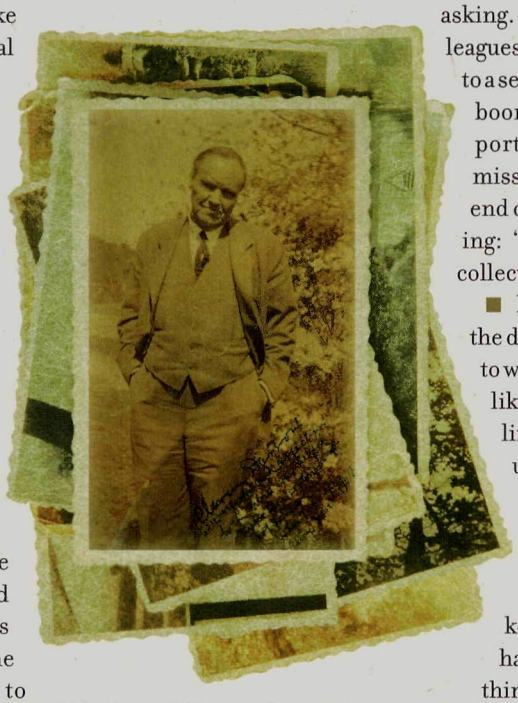
Lessons learned

Our foray into acquiring the Scopes collection is a lesson for librarians. The profession is on the front lines of protecting local, national, and global history for researchers. We are well aware that those potential donors' possessions can present a more complete political, religious, economic, and social snapshot of the past.

But what is common knowledge among librarians is news to the general public. Donors want to know what you do and how it relates to them. It may take years to persuade friends or casual acquaintances that the family heirlooms they have kept are never "just stuff," and that one person's junk really can be another's treasure. Collectors need time to accept that, rather than betray the family trust by destroying long-held items, they can donate those inheritances to a special collections department and share their story with the world.

Fruitful acquisitions can come about when we operate according to proven concepts:

- Like a good salesperson, know your hook. If you are handed a ticking stopwatch with three minutes left, what sentences would you use to pique a potential donor's interest? McDaniel calls herself the "trash cataloger" and responds to listeners' bewildered reactions by adding, "I not only keep what many would put in the trash, I catalog it and put it online so others can find it."



This photo of Clarence Darrow, the attorney who defended John Scopes in 1925 for teaching evolution, is now part of the Scopes collection at Western Kentucky University.

- Know your collection's strengths and interests. Would you have taken Uncle J. T.'s suitcase if it had been offered to you? If someone asked you what your collection goals are, what would you say? Richey has said yes to such questions as "Do you really want my childhood photos from 1963?" and "This photograph is damaged but I'm told it was taken in Bowling Green in 1865. Want it?"
- Know how far to push. For some potential donors you are asking for their most prized possessions, but for an equally large population you are offering freedom. A June 26, 2008, *New York Times* article ably describes the ambiguity that family members feel when faced with "the tyranny of the heirloom." In many cases, WKU's potential donors have been reluctant caretakers of their relatives' belongings—unwilling to pitch the items, yet tired of feeling responsible for the memorabilia of loved ones or, sometimes, family members they barely knew. Such potential donors welcome relationships with special collections librarians who offer a solution. Not only can a repository take the caretaking burden off their shoulders, but they can brag that experts value the family's heritage enough to give their items a home. As a result, the family story lives on.
- Remember that people give to people, not to organizations. Maintain your integrity as a professional interested in preservation of the past. Let your enthusiasm be contagious.
- Don't expect to always score the big donation just by asking. Recognize the role that your colleagues can play. Often the talk you give to a seniors group or to a meeting of baby boomers with aging parents is an opportunity to share your collecting mission with the general public. At the end of the presentation, consider saying: "You are now all honorary field collectors. Tell your friends about us."
- Maintain your relationship with the donor even when you have to say no to what is being offered. Repositories, like closets and attics, have space limitations. Is it worth accepting an unimportant item to seal the bond of trust necessary to acquire the real prize? As the gatekeeper, be ready to offer alternative solutions. A donor may not want to keep an artifact, but it's still hard to have an expert explain that something he has held on to for years belongs in the trash.
- Let your previous harvests, many now digitally available to the public, provide seed and nourishment for future acquisitions. Capitalize on the donor's delight that what he or she once had hidden away now gets "hits" on the internet. Nothing is more effective than a donor turned special collections promoter.

Digital special collections increase the appetite of researchers and the general public to explore previously inaccessible resources. These serendipitous acquisitions of irreplaceable items ensure the future of our repositories. As we sow the seeds of academic and general interest, we enable a wider audience to feast on our bounty of unique collections, even as we preserve their enduring value. ■

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Photo: Courtesy of Special Collections Library–WKU