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Preserving the Past

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The Abram Plum collection is a case in point. Plum was a professor of music at Illinois Wesleyan and a prolific and noted composer of a wide range of music. When he died in May 2002, his will instructed that all of his papers and compositions be given to the University.

Anke Voss-Hubbard, who is the University's archivist/Special Collections librarian, quickly made organizing the Plum collection a priority. According to Plum's widow, Jane Nygood Plum, "Anke was an angel. She came to the house and helped gather things up. She made copies of everything for me and my son, plus an index."

Compositions in this collection are stored the way Plum had filed them. They are clustered into categories — sketchbook, vocal music, wind music, and carillon music. Such sections are known in library speak as "access points."

"Dr. Plum knew what he was doing," Voss-Hubbard says. "Had he simply filed his pieces by title — alphabetically or sequentially — it would be hard to figure out what was what.

“Recently a man came in who was doing research on carillon music,” Voss-Hubbard says. “With this system, we were easily able to access what he wanted.”

The story neatly illustrates what the Tate Archives & Special Collections, located on the library’s top floor, is all about. These archives provide a safe repository for materials that are rare or even one-of-a-kind and offer researchers a chance to explore those holdings, often unearthing exciting discoveries in the process.

Some objects offer tantalizing mysteries to bring out the Indiana Jones in all of us. Other pieces of the collections carry an emotional charge, such as Minor Myers’ hard hat, which the late president wore on tours of The Ames Library when it was under construction. Still other materials serve as vivid reminders of our connection to the past, such as a student’s diary, circa 1930, that details the highs and lows of college life uncannily similar to those experienced by IWU students eight decades later.

Items that relate specifically to Illinois Wesleyan history are part of the Tate Archives; items collected or donated from outside the University are usually housed in Special Collections. Overseeing both with an equal mix of precision and passion is Anke Voss-Hubbard.

Voss-Hubbard is the University’s first full-fledged archivist — the job was previously one among several duties held by a member of the library’s faculty. A native of Germany, Voss-Hubbard holds advanced degrees in both history and archives/preservation management, and her background in archival work includes experience as an assistant editor on the Margaret Sanger Papers Project at Smith College and a position as archivist/preservation officer for the Rockefeller Archive Center in New York. She joined IWU’s faculty in 2000, less than two years prior to completion of the \$25.7-million Ames Library.



Above, archival assistant Ashley Locke '05 catalogs a photo collection that spans IWU’s history, documenting student life and notable events.

It was among Voss-Hubbard’s first tasks to coordinate the move from the archives’ old digs at Sheean Library to a new suite of rooms in The Ames Library. Although that move was complicated by the fact that the new archival space in Ames was actually opened several months later than the rest of the library, it also gave Voss-Hubbard time to develop a plan to better organize the materials.

Fine Arts Librarian Robert Delvin — whose job used to include working with the archival collections — remembers the old days at Sheean. “The collection was divided in two places,” he says. “Special Collections were upstairs in what was a group study room and the archival collection was in the lower level, where the Les Arends Room was.” Arends served as an Illinois congressman from 1935 to 1974, and donated his papers and other materials to the library.

The archival collection was easily accessible, Delvin says, but Special Collections was “a mishmash” and it was hard to find anything. “We had a rudimentary finder,” Delvin says, “but it had become unwieldy.” A “finder” is an archivist’s term for an organizer. Think of organizing and cataloging an attic full of unrelated stuff. Where do you begin?

Voss-Hubbard says that organizing collections and documents is a tricky business and she relies on what she calls “finding aids.” Take, for example, a person who has donated papers, photos, and letters. Do you organize them sequentially? Or by subject? It’s the job of the archivist to make those difficult decisions, with the ultimate goal of providing easy accessibility for people using the materials.

An added bonus for visitors to the new library is that the space itself is so inviting. The windowless basement archives in Sheean provided little ambience. Contrast that to the Tate Archives/Special Collections' sunny, well-appointed reading room, furnished with upholstered chairs, oak tables, and mahogany bookshelves. Offices for Voss-Hubbard and her staff are also designed with comfort in mind.

The two rooms that house most of the archived materials are kept at a brisk 64 degrees and the relative humidity is held at a constant 40-percent. Controlling the humidity is key, Voss-Hubbard explains, because absorbing and expelling moisture will strain and eventually break paper fibers. The storage rooms are equipped with compact shelving on rollers that provide twice as much space for materials.

In processing these materials, as in many other areas, Voss-Hubbard relies on help from project archivist Meg Miner and six student workers. "Archives and Special Collections would have to shut its door without student assistants," she says. George Coontz '04 credits his four years of work in the Tate Archives and Special Collections with teaching him valuable research skills that he plans to use in law school next year.

Changes made by Voss-Hubbard and her staff have improved accessibility to the collections, and increased usage. Carolyn Nadeau, Illinois Wesleyan associate professor of Hispanic studies, made use of the Tate Archives twice last year. She had two scholarly papers to deliver, one on the history of IWU study abroad and the other on the history of January (now May) Term. "I went into the archives thinking I'd look at X, Y, and Z," Nadeau says, "but Anke and the student workers were so helpful; they came up with lots of materials I wouldn't have even thought of."

* * *

Voss-Hubbard believes that the role of a contemporary archivist is not to sit in a darkened room and catalog items, but rather to make deliberate decisions about what is being documented and why. "The decisions of today," she says, "will determine what's there tomorrow."

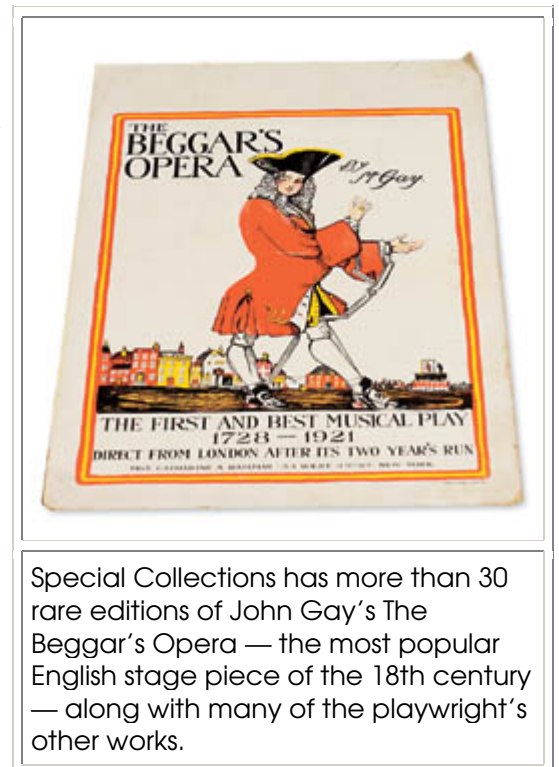
Being choosy is a practical necessity. "Collecting is expensive," Voss-Hubbard says, "and while gathering a little bit of everything would be fun, we do not have enough resources or space. So we pick certain areas and try to be comprehensive enough so that someone can do productive research in those areas."

"Comprehensive enough," in library lingo, is termed "critical mass." This approach yields rewards in two ways. First, a critical mass allows students to do in-depth research on campus, often with "primary sources," (in other words, the actual "history" as opposed to what someone wrote about it). Secondly, if people want to give a gift to the collection, Voss-Hubbard can say to them, "This is what we collect."

Some primary areas of the University's Special Collections include:

Beat Writers: Special Collections welcomes examples of the counterculture coffeehouse poetry that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. The University has amassed a group of books and journals, some in serial form, containing the work of many of the beat poets, plus related ephemera (a term used to describe a wide range of documents that were mostly intended for short-time usage, such as posters, postcards or programs).

Environment and ecology, with a special focus on the Midwest: World renowned ecologist, activist, poet, and author Sandra Steingraber '81 recently announced that she is donating her papers to this area of the



collection. Among the materials she has donated so far are hand-edited galleys of her first book, *Living Downstream*. Also in this collection are the records of both ParkLands, a local land conservancy organization, and the local Ecology Action Center.

Works by and about John Gay and the 18th- and 19th- century British stage: This is an example of Special Collections “building on what we already have,” says Voss-Hubbard. The library has more than 30 different editions of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* — the most popular English theatre piece of the 18th century — along with many of the satiric poet/playwright’s other works.

Sara Freeman, assistant professor of theatre, is using this collection for a theatre history class this spring. She wanted her students to have an “in-depth project” and the Gay collection fits the bill perfectly. As her students spent three weeks poring over the materials, not only did they experience the excitement and discovery of handling rare, early editions but they also aided Voss-Hubbard in analyzing the content of this collection.

Many other interesting Special Collections items fall outside the primary collecting areas. Here are three examples:

Letters from a soldier: Fred Brian (1924-1999), noted artist and professor of art at IWU for 32 years, served in the Air Force during World War II. He wrote dozens of letters home to his mother, which she kept, neatly stored in the original envelopes. Voss-Hubbard is in the process of re-folding those letters now and, if she can find grant money, may publish them online.

Fifty feet of documents: Leslie Arends (1895-1985) was a Central Illinois native and the longest serving minority whip in the House of Representatives. He left over 50 linear feet (a librarian’s form of measurement, which describes occupied shelf space) of his papers to Illinois Wesleyan.

Unfortunately, Voss-Hubbard says, these Nixon/Ford era papers have been “carefully weeded” to exclude certain materials deemed as sensitive. Still, they provide a fascinating portrait of a time when a constituent received the “top copy” of a public servant’s letter and a tissue-thin copy was kept on file.

Books by visitors: Voss-Hubbard says she is making a consistent effort at a cause that has been haphazard in the past. She is trying to get signed editions of books by authors who visit the University. Additions to this collection include works by recent visitors such as John Updike and Isabel Allende.

Unlike Special Collections, the Tate Archives have one central focus, providing a rich mine of University history just waiting to be dug up by researchers, students, faculty, administrators, or alumni. Included among the thousands of documents stored in gray manuscript or white record boxes are IWU’s founding charter; various directories, annual reports, and course catalogs; and records of every trustees meeting. Selected publications of student organizations and athletic programs are also available, as are newspapers and newsletters spanning more than 150 years of University history.

It’s surprising to note that the archives’ older documents are often in better shape than newer ones. That’s because 19th-century paper was made from durable cotton. Open the leather-bound book containing meeting minutes from 1850, the year of IWU’s founding, and you’ll find perfectly preserved records in handwriting that, to modern eyes, looks like calligraphy.

Many of these documents are simply lovely, remnants of a time when printed documents were produced less frequently and more carefully. Some of the 19th-century IWU commencement programs have engravings, rice endpapers, and leather covers that are tied with silk cords.

Mona Gardner, the Adlai H. Rust professor of insurance/finance and special assistant to the president, is a frequent user of the Tate Archives. “We often search the archives for background and context for our current

policies, such as curricular changes or changes in promotion of tenure,” Gardner says. For example, she used the archives to put together a history of foreign language programs at the University since 1850. Using the archives, she says, is “an invaluable asset in understanding how we got to where we are in many cases.”



Back issues of *The Argus* are now available online — thanks, in part, to the skills of student archivists Karen Malek '04 and Ashley Keith '06, who indexed articles. George Coontz '04 (above) reviews the digital version of a bygone edition..

By far the most requested of all archival documents, Voss-Hubbard says, is the student newspaper *The Argus*, which first appeared in 1894. In the past, those wishing to read old editions of *The Argus* had to manually browse heavy, dusty, bound volumes.

Now, *The Argus* has gone digital. “There’s an expectation out there that archivists will put things online,” Voss-Hubbard says. But it’s a challenge because such projects are expensive and time-intensive. She chose *The Argus* to digitize because she knew it was something that would appeal to many. Now friends and alumni can read 100 years of history as told by *The Argus* from the comfort of their own computers. Browse through 26,000 images, available at: www.iwu.edu/library/services/argus1.htm, or click here.

Another aspect of *The Argus* project was to take the digital images and use them to make reproductions on acid-free paper (newsprint is notoriously fragile). Both these copies and the original volumes are available for hands-on browsing.

For Voss-Hubbard, the “hands-on” quality of the University’s archives is among its most appealing qualities. She wonders what our current digitized culture will yield when its “virtual” materials become fodder for future generation’s archives.

“It is true that an e-mail probably doesn’t reveal as much about the person who wrote it as a hand-written letter,” she says. But more modern mediums such video and audio recordings may provide equally valuable portals to our past.

Voss-Hubbard says that providing such vivid glimpses into the past remains one of the most appealing aspects of her job. She lauds Illinois

Wesleyan for its dedication to archival resources — a commitment that she says is all too rare.

“Our federal government only spends a fraction of its GNP on preserving America’s cultural heritage, in comparison to what European governments invest in preserving their past. Unfortunately, many dedicated archivists and curators at historical societies, museums, and private and public archives in this country continue to cope with scarce resources in their mission to preserve our cultural heritage.”

To explain why that mission is so important, Voss-Hubbard cites the French historian Fustel de Coulanges’s declaration, “No documents, no history.”

“I think that motto still informs the enthusiasm and determination with which I see my role as archivist today, which is to preserve our documentary heritage for history’s sake.”