



CIDC

CORNELL INSTITUTE FOR DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

First Bi-annual Report

“Preservation and Digitization of Political Americana”

Grant number ND-10037

1 October 2001 - 1 April 2002

We anticipated in our initial grant that three months would be needed for the project startup. During our startup phase, five primary activities occurred:

Staff hires

We advertised for and hired two new staff members for the project. Personnel tasks, which are always challenging, became more so because Cornell University implemented a hiring freeze shortly after the jobs were posted. We applied for and received a waiver, allowing us to continue with the searches.

Kurt Jordan was hired to serve as the project cataloger. Kurt is completing a Ph.D. in Anthropology (archaeology) at Columbia University and has extensive experience with the organization and cataloging of artifact collections. Prior to his arrival at Cornell, Jordan co-directed the Townley-Read/New Ganestage Archaeological Project in Geneva, New York, and spent four years with the Congressional Research Service in the Library of Congress. He has been involved in historical material culture collections research, management, and cataloging since 1991. Peter Schlough was hired to work as a Preservation Assistant on the project.

Equipment purchases

CIDC staff identified and acquired new flatbed scanning equipment to support the project. A Dell Precision WorkStation 530 with 160 GBs of storage and an Epson

1640XL scanner were purchased to support the project. It became apparent to us that workflow would be improved if more storage space were available for the digital camera, and so CIDC also purchased with its own funds an additional file server. Preservation purchased a large quantity of supplies in order to rehouse and treat the physical objects.

Space modifications

A workspace was created in the stacks are of the Rare and Manuscripts Division of the library so that conservation and preservation work could be carried out on site. A workspace was also created for the cataloger.

Project Management

To support the project, we established a weekly hour-long meeting of the project team. Minutes of the meeting are posted to a portion of the project web site accessible only to project staff. Among the decisions reached at these meetings were:

- Agreement was reached on a consistent box and item numbering system. The unique identifiers added during initial cataloging are then used as tracking numbers during digitization.
- Problems associated with timing and tracking items as they move from the stacks to preservation to the digitization stations and back to the stacks were addressed.
- Curatorial approval of the different digital benchmarking guidelines for different sorts of materials was also achieved. For example, many posters have on them a very small label identifying the poster as having been printed in a union shop. Curators agreed that it was not necessary to scan the poster at a resolution such that the notice could be read; to do so would have greatly increased the time necessary to scan and the final file size of the resulting scan.

Project Publicity

Shortly after the grant was awarded, we issued a press release announcing the grant (attached). In addition, a project web site has been established at <http://cidc.library.cornell.edu/political/>. Eventually this page will serve as the interface to the database of images.

Preservation

Background

The preservation component began November 2001 and focused on the Susan H. Douglas collection, the largest collection of Political Americana with a range of artifacts in many sizes and formats. The storage of this collection deteriorated over the years as old packing materials and disorganization took their toll. Fragile artifacts of different composition, weight, and size were stored haphazardly, with little protection, in a variety of boxes, most over-filled. Coupled with the storage problems, serious condition concerns, including fragility, composite structures, and physical damage, put the collection at risk of significant damage at all points of use and handling.

Preservation Strategy

The diverse Political Americana collections require a comprehensive treatment and housing plan to preserve the items as historic artifacts. Because of the poor storage and fragile condition of the collections, conservation treatment and rehousing are the necessary first steps to stabilize and organize the collections and result in improved handling and workflow for cataloguing and digital imaging. Specialized treatments are stabilizing the wide range of artifacts with varying compositions and condition concerns, and custom storage solutions fit this diverse group of objects into a library and archives setting while meeting national standards. To date, work has commenced on the paper-based materials, textiles and artifacts.

Preservation of Paper-based Materials

The paper-based items include posters, prints, sheet music, broadsides, cartoons, pamphlets, scrapbooks and bound materials. Some paper items, such as posters, were in fair to good condition, requiring only minor cleaning and mending, and rehousing. The prints, many Currier and Ives portraits of notable figures, exhibited disfiguring and damaging surface dirt, water and mold staining, tears, and brittleness. The broadsides and cartoons had numerous tears and serious damage from former mounting methods including adhesive staining and attachment to poor quality boards. Most sheet music had been reinforced heavily with pressure sensitive tape restricting the opening of the folio. While some paper items were stored in acidic folders, many had no folder, allowing for more physical damage to occur.

Paper items were gently cleaned by brush, cleaning sponge, or erasers as needed to reduce dirt, improve appearance and to reduce contamination of housing supplies and other collection materials. Considerable mending with Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste was conducted to stabilize tears and losses. Pressure sensitive tape was mechanically removed. Creases and folds were reduced by humidification and flattening. The paper items were individually stored in a modular system of standard size boxes and folders. To date, 450 posters, prints, broadsides, cartoons, and pamphlets have been cleaned, mended and rehoused. Work remains on bound materials and approximately 100 items requiring more complicated treatment to stabilize their condition.

Preservation of Textiles

Bandannas, scarves and handkerchiefs are the largest group of textiles and most exhibited sharp creases, folds and wrinkles due to storage in small boxes. Some early textiles are quite fragile with tears and losses, and some were mounted with various adhesives or tapes to poor quality mounts. Some textiles had no protection within boxes; others were interleaved with a very thin tissue that offered little support.

Textiles were removed from poor quality supports. Humidifying and flattening the textiles to reduce creases and folds greatly improved the physical condition and appearance. New protective enclosures were constructed of museum-quality matboard

covered with cotton muslin free of size, optical brighteners, dyes, and bleach. The treated textiles were placed on the covered boards with no attachment as the nap bond between textile and cotton muslin holds the textiles, even fragile textiles with tears and losses, sufficiently in place. Each textile was then individually housed in a pH-neutral folder and stored in archival boxes by size. With the new enclosures, the textiles are fully supported and protected and direct handling is greatly reduced since the covered boards can serve as supports during research and scanning. To date 77 textiles have been treated and rehoused. Work remains on oversize textiles and wearing apparel.

Preservation of Artifacts

The artifacts (glass and ceramic plates, drinking glasses, metal trays, plaques, busts, statues, clocks, vases, coins, ribbons and buttons) were carefully unpacked and sorted by type (ceramic, glass, metal, wood, and plastic), and by size. This was the first time in decades that the entire group of artifacts could be safely viewed and assessed. Little breakage was noted, owing to the fact that many artifacts remained inaccessible for so many years. Many artifacts show evidence of use and dirt. The ceramic and glass artifacts are frail with chips or hairline fractures; and some metals show minor corrosion.

All artifacts were gently cleaned with a non-abrasive dusting cloth and surveyed for condition concerns requiring the attention of an objects conservator. “Flat” artifacts like plates, trays, and plaques, were stored by size and type in small, manageable groups in drop-front storage boxes custom-fitted with inert padding materials such as polyester foam or Volara®. Larger artifacts were stored in custom-fitted triple-wall storage cartons. The storage boxes were custom-fitted in a way to be self-explanatory and easy to reconfigure after use. As of April 2001, 82 artifacts have been cleaned, surveyed and rehoused. Work continues on the oversize artifacts, ribbons, trinkets and buttons.

Cataloging and Indexing

Our initial thinking was that the first step in indexing the collection would be to transfer the information found in the card index to a spreadsheet. A test of conversion indicated that this was possible, but once we had decided on using MultiMIMSY 2000, a museum cataloging system, for organizing the artifacts, we also determined that it would be more efficient to train clerical staff to enter skeleton records into the MultiMIMSY system. Catalogers then update those skeleton records with additional information, including information on the elections, candidates, and subject terms.

In addition to cataloging, the cataloger undertook a number of other important tasks in support of the project. They include:

- Verification and/or assignment of project catalog numbers for approximately 750 items;

- Verification of Douglas Collection locations within the RMC facility;
- Training in Multi MIMSY, cataloging procedures, and vocabulary thesauri;
- Creation and authorization of MIMSY Subject and People/Organizations Authority records for a large number of politicians, creators, organizations, and new subject terms; and
- Evaluation and streamlining of cataloging practices.

Digitization

Since we had a photographer on staff, digitization of the collections started as soon as the grant was awarded – even before all of the workflow processes were fixed. Work started with large flat items, such as posters. They were shot in the digital photo studio using a PhaseOne Powerphase camera. A new image editing station was acquired to speed the color correction and editing phase of the project.

During the course of the project, we have moved to smaller flat items that can be successfully scanned on a flatbed scanner. Work is now underway to benchmark the capture of three-dimensional items with the digital camera and flatbed scanner. Preliminary indications are that a smaller, faster camera may be needed to capture items that do not require high resolution scans (such as come from the existing digital camera).

Quantitative Summary

Quantitative Summary, 10/01/2001-4/01/2002	
Preservation treatment and rehousing	
Paper items	450
Artifacts	82
Textiles	77
Cataloging	
Skeleton records	825
Full records	80
Digitization	
Digital camera scans	210
Flatbed scans	257

Appendix: News release on IMLS grant

January 31, 2002

CU Library gets \$297,000 grant to digitize its Douglas Political Americana collection



A selection of various items from Cornell Library's Douglas Collection of Political Americana.

Cornell University Library

Thanks to a \$297,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Cornell University Library will preserve and digitize a unique collection of ephemera, published materials, and artifacts from U.S. national political campaigns (1800-1976) and make the information available and searchable on the web. The grant is one of 18 IMLS 2001 National Leadership Grants for Libraries.

The goal of the project is to make more widely known and accessible the Susan H. Douglas Collection of Political Americana in Cornell's Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections. Cornell Library acquired the collection from an individual collector in 1957. Notable for its range and variety of content, the collection includes buttons, badges, posters and prints, songbooks and sheet music, cartoons, parade equipment and souvenirs, such as plates, cups and games. There are approximately 5,500 objects of political memorabilia dating from 1789 to 1960. In addition to the Douglas collection, the library also will conserve and digitize approximately 1,500 similar items covering campaigns from 1960 to 1972, which are found among its other manuscript collections, and several hundred other works of campaign literature found in its rare books collection.

Cornell expects to finish the project in time for the next presidential election, making available an important collection of material of broad interest to historians, political scientists and children in K-12 educational institutions. The finished collection will be represented by more than 35,000 online images. Cornell Library will create an online database with linked images that can be searched by year, by candidate and/or by format, bringing the riches of this collection to anyone with access to the Internet.

These items have a broad appeal for students, historians and the general public. The campaign memorabilia in the Douglas Collection are a particularly rich resource for the study of, not only American political history, but its social and cultural past as well. Through their images and text, design and materials, the pamphlets, posters, political cartoons and souvenir items offer direct access to an important aspect of the lives of everyday people. Beyond the immediate goals of promoting presidential candidates and their parties, these campaign objects speak their own language. While they often

incorporate words, they primarily convey visual images with strong emotional overtones and social implications that transcend verbal communication. Although individual items are often used as illustrations for books and articles, the fragile nature of many of these objects limits the use of the originals for research and teaching to those who can make the trip to Cornell's Carl A. Kroch Library, where the collection is stored. By creating digital surrogates, the library will dramatically increase the availability of these artifacts and printed materials to both scholarly and popular communities world wide.

The conservation component of the project will entail a comprehensive survey of the material in the Douglas Collection. Over the next two years, Cornell Library's Department of Preservation and Conservation will examine the fragile glass, ceramics, metals, textiles, posters and prints in the collection and conduct appropriate conservation treatment, including cleaning, stabilization, and repair. The conservation staff will also construct new archival boxes and folders to meet the specific preservation and storage needs of the artifacts.

Cornell's digitization project also will serve as a model for other institutions that possess artifacts and wish to integrate them in their digital libraries. Cornell Library has been a pioneer in the conversion of traditional printed library material to digital form. More recently, and in collaboration with the university's museum, the library has turned its research attention to the digitization of artifacts. Through this project Cornell Library will develop a methodology that will be of use to any library or museum engaged in digitizing printed materials and artifacts. Cornell is committed to developing and maintaining high-quality, reliable digital image collections. The Political Americana Collection will be an integral part of this larger effort.

The project is a joint venture among Cornell Library's Department of Preservation and Conservation, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections and the Cornell Institute for Digital Collections. The Institute of Museum and Library Services is an independent federal agency that fosters leadership, innovation and a lifetime of learning by supporting the nation's 15,000 museums and 122,000 libraries.

For more information, contact Susan Szasz Palmer in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, at 255-3530 or by e-mail at sms5@cornell.edu.