A Conversation with Archivist Alan Virta

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by Julia Stringfellow

Alan Virta, the Head of Special Collections and Archives at Boise State University’s Albertsons Library, retired on Friday, October 28, following a career of nearly 24 years at the university. I had the honor of sitting down with him recently and asking about his journey to Boise State University and some of the key events in his position as Head of Special Collections.

1987, when I applied. Well, I'd been working at the Library of Congress for 12-13 years and I was ready for a change. I had spent really what would have been my twelfth year at the Library of Congress on a fellowship. The Mellon and the NHPRC had a fellowship for mid-career archivists, people who'd been working for a while to go to another institution and do their work. There were three fellows a year, and my supervisor who may have suspected I was getting bored said, “Here’s the flyer, maybe you should apply for this.” So I went through the application process and the institution I went to, one of three, was the University of Southern Mississippi, Special Collections. There was an archivist and an assistant, and a clerk and it was mainly local history, and I really enjoyed working there for an academic year.

Then I went back to my old job at the Library of Congress, which I loved, but any particular job can get old. And I got back there and just got to thinking, “You know, I really want to work in a situation like the University of Southern Mississippi.” So I started looking at the job ads, and I think I applied for 1 or 2 jobs, including one at SUNY Stony Brook and one at Boise State University. BSU called me first and brought me out for an interview. So I was looking, I really figured I'd probably need to be an assistant archivist someplace first. And I think that was mainly the type of position I was applying for at that time. And I know it was, but Boise State's job was the Head of Special Collections and I figured I'd apply for it anyway and got the job.

I've always had the same job title.

I was wondering if you could tell the story of traveling out here from Maryland in the middle of winter.

Oh yes. Well, my first trip here was about this time in October for my interview. It was just a beautiful, clear pristine day, and just beautiful, that was October 1987. When Tim Brown who was then head librarian called me, it was October and offered me the job and said, “How soon can you get here?” And I said, “Well, it should be after Christmas.” In January, I headed out by car from Maryland to here and my brother came along with me. And it was clear sailing all the way to the Nebraska state line and then we hit Wyoming. It took 3 days to get across Wyoming because it wasn’t snowing but there was so much wind and they closed the interstate.

And I think it was Rawlins where we got off the interstate in the middle of the day and from the truck-stop where we parked our car and were hanging out in the lobby or the entrance to the truck-stop and a jeep pulled up and the guy said, “Anyone want a ride to the Holiday Inn?” And we jumped in that jeep and we were in our hotel room by 2. That night on the news, six o'clock, they talked about the National Guard bringing people in who were trapped on the interstate, sleeping in the basements of churches, American Legion Hall, and I thought about how lucky we were.

And at the same Holiday Inn, a Harlem Globetrotter bus was there. I think it was an advance bus or crew bus, didn’t see Meadowlark Lemon or anybody like that there. But it was something to see, to drive across Wyoming. Those tall posts along the side of the road that you sometimes wonder why they are so tall, well you know, you found out why they needed to be that tall. Driving across Wyoming was scary, seeing those trucks across the interstate; it kind of felt like a scene from Mad Max. But we got here.
When you got here and started in January, what was the Special Collections staff comprised of, and could you talk about where it actually was?

It was located on the second floor of the library where the books with call numbers A-E are now. There was a big counter for CRC (Curriculum Resource Center) which was about where it is now, it was an old-fashioned counter. We were in what I guess would be the south side of the floor. There was a huge space defined by a counter with file cabinets and shelves that was not accessible to the public. And behind the counter was the Government Documents collection. In the lobby type area where the computer labs are now, there were map cases and then there was a table that was at the very south end across from the Administration building. The archives and rare books were in that room. The third floor where all the study rooms are now, there was a room where basically all the manuscript collections, including the Frank Church Collection, were housed, so if someone wanted one of those collections we had to go upstairs.

But the staff was just me and Leslie Pass, who was a Library Assistant III, and Leslie had been there many years. And she is the one who got me oriented to what we have and the procedures, and took me around and introduced me to people like at the Athletic Department, to Communications and Marketing, and Photo Services. And so it was just Leslie and I with some student assistants. And we had responsibility for Special Collections and Archives plus the Map Department, so we spent a percentage of our time doing maps. And then out at that counter there were four of us, myself and Leslie and then the Government Documents librarian Daryl Huskey and the Library Assistant III Karin Eyler who were the Government Documents people. And the four of us had specific shifts to man that counter, including evenings, one evening a week. And so we also did a lot of Government Documents work, so it wasn't exactly 100% full-time Special Collections because we had maps and then Government Documents reference.

But Leslie then was here for maybe four or five months, then she got a job elsewhere on campus, over in the Administration building, that probably would have been the spring of 1988, late spring. Mary Carter, who had done some work in Acquisitions, she was one of the applicants to take Leslie’s place. And I hired her and she stayed for 21 years. So it was Mary and I for quite a few years, then we got a half-time Technical Records Specialist, and the first person to hold that position was Sue Masoner and she did it for a couple of years, and slowly but surely has been upgraded and now it’s a Library Assistant II, and that’s the position Jim has.

Do you remember what your first project or the first collection that you processed when you got here?

Really Tom Trusky in English was waiting for me to arrive because he and Ralph Hanson, Ralph was the assistant librarian, we didn’t call them associate deans, we didn’t have those titles, but he was essentially an associate dean. They had been talking with the Shipman family about getting the Shipman collection, Neil Shipman’s papers, from the family. So once I got here the negotiations were turned over to me. I talked with Barry Shipman and that was pretty much the first collection that came in after I was here.

As far as what I was processing first I can’t exactly remember. But I know Leslie and I were finishing up the processing of the Robert Limbert Collection. The Limbert collection had come in before I got here, and even before I got here, there was one person who was even finishing up the processing of the Frank Church Collection.

One of the first jobs I had to deal with was Leslie came into my office on the very first day and sat down and said, “You know, there’s a student assistant who’s not working out and we’ve got to let them go.” So I thought she meant she was asking me to fire them. Gosh, my first day here, I’m being asked to fire someone already? What do I say? Do I say, well let me investigate his work? You know, it’s kind of something to be asked to fire someone on your very first day. So I said, “Do you want to send him into my office?” And Leslie said, “Oh no, they work for me. I just wanted to let you know, I hire and fire, I just wanted to get your approval before I do it.” I said, “Well, you’ve been working with them for however long. You hired them, you fire them if you think it’s necessary.” So she did, but I thought I was glad I wasn’t being asked to fire somebody on my first day. That would really be a bang-up start!

I was wondering if you could talk about some of the acquisitions to Special Collections through the years that you were really happy about, or that really stick out in your mind as being really significant.

The Shipman collection being about the first that came in through the installment plan. Barry Shipman, already in his late 70s, 80s, sent his late mother’s papers to us, there have been 20 or 30 shipments coming, he’ll bundle them up and send a package. We really had to wait until all arrived before we processed it, so when it comes down to it, that was probably not the first collection I ever processed.

There’s just so many of them, getting huge collections like Cecil Andrus really was a big deal. I remember the day we went out to the storage facility on Federal Way ‘cause Pete Cenarrusa had gotten in contact with us and his storage unit was flooding.

Flooding with water?

Water, yes. And so it was a rescue attempt to get that out, get all his papers out of that storage facility before, they wouldn’t all have been inundated with water, but leaking roof and water running through it, that would have been bad. We’ve been able to buy a few things, like the two diaries from the nineteenth century that we have, the Metta Ellis diary from 1890 and the William H. Chapman diary from 1866, those are highlights. You know, they are all interesting in their own way, so it’s hard to single out any single collection.

If you had to pick an aspect of your job that you like the most, what would that be?

Well, it’s looking at an unprocessed collection and figuring out, looking at it, going through it, picking out through out, in your mind deciding what series it will be divided into, and then doing the processing work and doing the finding aid and then seeing that finding aid finished and the collection looking in good order, that’s the best part of the job. Unfortunately what I don’t get to do much of anymore, when it was just Mary and I we would spend 85% of our time doing that and enjoying it. But the department’s grown and the patronage has grown and outside administrative work has grown. That’s right up there, I guess I should say equal to working with people, the patrons and the staff.
Patrons come in and 99% of them are just wonderful people and just thrilled to find materials on their topic and a lot of them, it's the first time they've ever been to an archives and they can be excited about that. And then others have done work in archives a lot and it's nice to hear them say nice things about our operation, the way we have collections organized. But if there was one single project that was probably the most stimulating, it was designing the new Special Collections quarters.

**I was going to ask you about that.**

In the early 1990s, because groundbreaking was 1993, I remember it was at a rally or a meeting or something in the amphitheater right outside the library and all the library staff was there. It was announced, I think it was the Fourth of July or something like that, it was announced that the money had been appositional or decided to fund the addition to the library. And Tim Brown said that Special Collections would be moving into the new part of the library and start designing your space. Mary and I being able to plan out what we wanted the Special Collections to look like, that was a lot of fun, and we got pretty much what we asked for.

**What were some of the main components that you wanted?**

AV: Well, we wanted, we knew we were a small staff and couldn't have someone sitting at the door in the reference room and a staff person sitting in the reading room, so we designed a space so that as we did our work, me in my office and she and the students in the work area, together we could observe the reading room at the same time. And so that was the core of what we were designing. And then we also knew that we had to have an entry sort of situation so we wouldn't worry if we turned our backs someone would be out the door, we wanted to be between the patrons and the door. And so that's why we designed it the way we did, was so we wouldn't have to have someone sitting in the reference room at a table watching patrons all the time. So that's worked out pretty well. We do our work, and we observe the reading room, but designing it so that function was the main goal. And the architect said, "It's kind of convoluted to get into your department." They wanted to put the front door in the middle of the reading room out at the hall and we said, "No, we want people to have to pass a staff member, which is Jim's desk before they go into the reading room. We don't want them going out a front door."

**How long from start to finish did that take?**

I think it was announced in 1990 that it was going forward. And really we did most of our design planning, it was probably by 1991, 1992, and the groundbreaking, and by that time, by the groundbreaking the plans had been drawn. Groundbreaking was in May of 1993 because it was the Monday or Tuesday right after the Conference of Inter-Mountain Archivists. CIMA met in Boise in 1993, that was the year I was president of it, and we had the conference, and that very next week was when we had the groundbreaking. I think people were out in front of the fountain with shovels and Governor Andrus was there and quite a few others, we have pictures of it. That's how I always remember it.

We also wanted display windows in Special Collections, and it was late in the process, after the groundbreaking, when I was looking more closely at the design and it didn't, it looks like they gave us windows, but I didn't see any space for shelves. And so we had to consult with the architects and they said, "Oh no, we gave you display windows." But what good would display windows be without shelves to put things in? The space for the shelves and then the cabinets underneath, thankfully we caught that before the building was done.

As far as other things we wanted, I didn't want carpet in the back because you've got to vacuum it and in theory it could off-gas. We were told, oh no, every room has to have carpet, but a concrete floor would have been fine for me. And I also wanted, the old front wall of the library is in the storage area, and I wanted that just to stay brick and they said no, the regulations say every interior wall has to be plaster so they wouldn't leave it brick. But then I said no windows, and they said okay, so you know, I got no windows. That was good, so there are no windows in the back storage room, even though there is carpet and plaster on the front wall.

When you all moved into the new space, about how many manuscript collections were there, just like a ballpark number?

Oh gee, when I came here we had like 80 manuscript collections and that was in 1988, it had increased somewhat by the time we moved we had 120, something like that. I guess we could really tell by the accession books. And also some of the moving labels are still on some of the boxes, those labels with the green frog indicates it was moving. So we probably could tell by those, but we moved it all ourselves, with the help of a lot of student workers, not only our own, but some special hire student workers. And we had determined where everything would go on a shelf, so we weren't just trying to move it in order, we knew where things were going to go.

**You knew the Frank Church collection...**

Was going to go on a certain shelf, yes. So we didn't have to do a lot of rearranging. In fact, we pretty much mapped it out that we knew Box 131 was going to go on Range, whatever shelf, so that was pretty simple. You know it took a lot of planning, but once the plan was developed, it was easy to execute. So that wasn't too bad.

The hardest part was when, because of course there was no compact shelving, both sides were equal shelving. But when we went to compact shelving, we had to decide what we were going to do with everything on the right side of the aisle. And one option was to send it out to storage, but we didn't want to do that, so basically it filled up the reading room, that boxes were stacked four high. I think we felt four was as high as we'd stack them without being tipsy, and we basically filled the reading room and the Frank Church Seminar Room. And we had to announce that for a couple of weeks, the certain collections in those stacks would be unavailable because there's no way you could get to them. Some were on the bottom box in the middle of the reading room, these rooms were just packed.

It was in the summertime, and that was the summer we had the fire in the, not in the library itself, but in the annex that's over on the east end of the building. And the building had absolutely no electricity for 2 weeks, not even exit signs. The building was deemed not fit to be in, without exit signs or emergency lights going, you can't occupy a building. So in the midst of building the compact mobile shelving, that crisis happened, and so basically the library was totally closed for two weeks. That was the summer of 2000.
So everyone had a two week vacation?

Everyone had a two week vacation. They asked that if you were doing any work from home, to write that down and somehow that could come out of the regular accounts, whereas the forced vacation, people weren't charged leave or anything, but that sort of emergency they could draw less. That was long before things were as well developed in terms of the internet, working at home capability was nowhere near what it is today, so it was basically a two week free vacation for everybody. And I had probably the worst summer cold that I've ever had in my life.

So you were sick.

I never get summer colds, but that one I did. Well, it was two weeks off.

I was wondering if you could share the story about why you decided to become an archivist.

At first I was a history major and what's a history major to do?

And you were at the University of Maryland.

I was attending the University of Maryland and taking history courses, and in the back of your mind, you wonder what you're going to do because I knew I really didn't want to be a teacher. At that point, I was a Junior or something, already getting burnt out and not necessarily wanting to go the Ph.D. route and all that. But I took a Maryland history course, history of Maryland, and the professor made us or told us to do a paper and you had to consult primary sources. And so I picked a topic and I had to go to the Maryland Historical Society and read through a man's diary from the year 1739.

And what was the topic on?

The topic was on a slave uprising in my home county, Prince George's County, in 1739. It had been reported briefly in the Maryland Gazette, the man had written in his diary and made references to it, and then of course there were court records about the trials of these slaves, once the insurrection was quashed. But never in detail was anything written in a secondary sense about it. People knew it had happened and there were brief references to it but no detail, so I decided to put all these sources together, use the Maryland Gazette which was the only newspaper in Maryland at the time, read this man's diary, go through all the court records and testimony and like, and do my paper on that slave revolt.

But I found working with the original materials was just so wonderful, I thought, “How do you get to work in a place that has things like that?” I found out a library degree and luckily the University of Maryland had a library school and that was really easy. You just graduated and you stuck around for another year plus the summer afterward and got the M.L.S. So then I applied for jobs all over the country, and the one that hired me was the Library of Congress right at home. I didn't have to move, and so I went to work there and that was just a wonderful place, wonderful place to work, 21 million books at your command! I worked on the staff of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, and I really liked it. After 12 years of doing that, I wanted to get out and kind of run my own shop, and that's what I did.

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