Article Headline (Page Title): U of I Special Collections Chronicles Regional History

Article Subhead: U of I’s New Special Collection Records Science Fiction and Fantasy Fandom in the Northwest

In September 1979, science fiction and fantasy fans descended on Moscow for the first MosCon, a local science fiction and fantasy convention. They discussed the future of their fandom, learned about the anticipated “home computer revolution,” and gazed upon new pictures of Jupiter. And they brought costumes.

A pile of programs from the first MosCon resides in one of the 326 boxes of science fiction and fantasy materials that was bequeathed to the University of Idaho Library’s Special Collections and Archives by U of I alumna Victoria E. Mitchell in the spring of 2017. An exploration of the boxes unearthed not only thousands of books, costumes, manuscripts and collectables, but also the history of science fiction and fantasy fandom across the Northwest.

After a whirlwind six months of cleaning and sorting the collection in U of I’s Integrated Research and Innovation Center (IRIC), archivists moved the [Mitchell collection](http://www.uidaho.edu/news/news-articles/media-coverage/2017-fall/121417-scificollection), as it is currently being called, to a locked cage under the [U of I library](https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/). The collection shares the basement with U of I’s other special collections, which chronicle the culture, politics, industry and daily life of the university and the Northwest United States.

**SUBHEAD: Why Is It “Special”?**

“Unless you have used Special Collections, you may have never heard of it,” said Erin Stoddart, a U of I associate professor and head of Special Collections and Archives. “But we are always looking to change that.”

A library’s special collections are an accumulation of artifacts and documents of permanent historical value. Although U of I stores some physical artifacts, such as a shovel used by former President [Theodore Roosevelt](https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/troosevelt/about.html) for a tree planting ceremony, paper documents and photographs compose the bulk of [U of I’s Special Collections](https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/).

“The artifacts in a library’s special collections offer faculty, scholars and students rare and unique opportunities to enrich their research,” said Lynn Baird, dean of University Libraries at U of I. “It’s basically a zoo for rare and unique materials. Viewing our archives often gives researchers new ways of looking at their work.”

Special Collections archive the history of the Northwest as well as the university’s past. For example, two of U of I’s most popular collections — documenting the [Bunker Hill mining company](https://digital.lib.uidaho.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/bunkerhill?_ga=2.161593340.1575610966.1519664879-1269105900.1515195739) and the [Potlatch Forest, Inc.](https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/forestry.html) — fill more than 500 boxes a piece. In addition, the [International Jazz Collection](https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/jazz/) attracts jazz enthusiasts from around the world while the [Barnard-Stockbridge Photograph Collection](https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/barstock/) contains more than 30,000 photographs of the Coeur d’Alene mining region, its industries, labor unrest, and town life at the turn of the 20th century.

The worth of a collection is associated with its monetary value as well as what researchers can learn from it. With archives on campus, professors and students have direct access to the history of the region going back to the 1800s. In addition, Special Collections assist university departments in tracing their history. For example, the library helped the [College of Natural Resources](https://www.uidaho.edu/cnr) investigate their past as part of their [100th anniversary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=k0O_Gp4jicU).

And requests for information aren’t always local. The library archives are a revolving door for visiting scholars, genealogists, private historians, podcasters, historical societies and national museums.

“Being able to contribute to all those different scholarly and general interest conversations is really important,” Stoddart said.

Each year the library adds more records to Special Collections, and the collections tend to build upon each other, Stoddart said. Records of a politician’s service might be joined by papers from a political opponent or documentation concerning legislation proposed during their time in office.

“You start to have these conversations between collections, which is the most interesting thing about Special Collections to me,” Stoddart said. “You get one person or group’s perspective but then you have these other perspectives, so you can start to see things from different ways.”

**SUBHEAD: Journey to Historical Preservation**

Most special collections come to the U of I library as donations. Mitchell’s bequest, which included everything in her house related to science fiction and fantasy, took the U of I archivists by surprise.

“Soon after learning about the bequest, we boxed up the majority of the collection on the hottest day of the summer and moved more than 300 boxes into the IRIC building,” Stoddart said. “I knew that there was no way it was going to fit in the library at that time.”

IRIC provided the space the Special Collection’s team needed to complete an initial evaluation of the collection and clean the material. Armed with specialized vacuums, the team of university employees and student workers furiously attempted to clean everything before Christmas, which was when their space in IRIC cycled over to another research group. Stoddart pulled in students from other library units to help, training them in conservation and cleaning techniques.

“There was dog hair and general dust on the books, so we were cleaning everything so that we could bring it into Special Collections,” said Katie Colson, a senior from Bonners Ferry who worked on the Mitchell collection. In addition, the materials needed to be checked for mildew and mold.

The preliminary [evaluation](http://uispecialcollections.tumblr.com/tagged/scifidaho) of the collection documented almost 10,000 books, approximately 3,000 serials, and Mitchell’s personal manuscripts; Mitchell was a published author and even wrote a Star Trek-themed New York Times bestseller, “Enemy Unseen.” The collection also included costumes that Mitchell created for conventions and collectables such as games, cards and pieces of art. Some of the artwork was created by famous science fiction and fantasy artists, including work by George Barr and Alex Schomburg.

“But the most valuable part of the collection is the local manuscript materials,” said Stoddart, who notes that Mitchell was a founder of MosCon. “These are a collection of materials that document the history of fandom in the inland and Pacific Northwest, including the history of MosCon and other regional conventions.”

U of I archivists will need years to organize the collection so that visitors can find materials pertinent to their research. Some items, such as the artwork, will likely receive detailed descriptions. In other cases, similar items, such as “MosCon programs,” may be boxed together. Whether a single painting of a nude Spock or a box of homemade fan magazines, the item’s description, along with searchable keywords, will be added to the library’s online catalog for easy sleuthing.

“She had a lot of signed author copies of books. Those I think were my favorite,” said Colson, who is earning her bachelor’s degree in English literature in the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences. “She had stuff signed by George R. R. Martin and Frank Herbert.”

U of I will not keep everything in the Mitchell collection, but will evaluate each piece on its historical value, condition and overall fit with the collection. Not all of the costumes likely have historical relevance, Stoddart said. But, while exploring one box of photographs, Stoddart stumbled upon pictures of Mitchell at cons in costume. Rushing to the bags of costumes, she discovered a number of the outfits in the photos.

“Suddenly there is a connection and that makes it more important and more interesting,” she said.

**SUBHEAD: Access to Primary Sources**

Ashlyn Velte, an archivist and assistant professor who worked on the Mitchell collection, hopes that the science fiction collection may entice more than history students to venture into Special Collections. She said that the Mitchell collection incorporates a broad range of information on science fiction, fantasy and their fandoms.

“I hope it will attract a national audience in some way,” Velte said. “I think there is an opportunity for people interested in fan culture to see what early fandoms were like, especially before the internet.”

For example, art enthusiasts and scientists may be interested to learn that MosCon was the first science fiction convention to feature an artist and a scientist as guests of honor, according to the 1992 MosCon program. Stoddart said that students and professors from American studies, English, anthropology and sociology also will find topics of interest.

Like all special collections, the Mitchell collection is an assortment of primary sources — a record of fandom that is not filtered through journalists or authors. By having special collections available on campus, students have the chance to work with primary sources and draw their own conclusions.

In addition to using the special collections as research materials, students may find a personal connection within the archives.

“I’ve had a student pull out a book of fraternity songs and say, ‘Hey, we still sing these songs.’ And the book was from the 1940s,” Velte said, “Going through the archive, students get to see what a legacy looks like.”

For other students, special collections provide an opportunity to dedicate themselves to the exploration of people’s lives.

“I definitely want to pursue library science as a career. It’s really interesting to see what sort of records people leave of themselves,” said Colson, who is looking into earning a master’s in library science.

**SUBHEAD: Growing Space Constraints**

One goal of U of I’s strategic plan is achieving R1 status as a research institution. Special collections are a bedrock of historical research at R1 universities, Baird said. The stories that are tucked away in file cabinets and boxes can fuel future theses, nonfiction books and documentaries concerning the formation and success of Idaho. Growing its Special Collections is an important part of reaching U of I’s research goals.

“Just like scientists need high-tech labs to produce research, scholars need resources,” Baird said. “We are trying to stock our lab.”

But as Special Collections continue to expand, physical space has become a hot commodity. In addition, the library requires more secure server or cloud space as the need to store electronic files increases. Stoddart realizes that asking for “empty space” is a hard sell but said that a lack of shelving and digital space will stymy the growth of U of I Special Collections.

“As a land-grant university, Special Collections is really important for helping to preserve, maintain and curate our local and regional history,” Stoddart said. “We are here to serve everyone, we are open to everyone, and we take care of things for everyone. If we don’t, no one will get to enjoy them.”

Pull Out Box: **Manuscripts from Father of ‘Space Opera’ Expand Collection**

University of Idaho archivists are already expanding the university’s new science fiction and fantasy collection. In February 2018, the library invested endowment funds to acquire an assortment of manuscripts and correspondence associated with [Edward Elmer “Doc” Smith](https://www.britannica.com/biography/E-E-Smith), a U of I alumnus who is considered the father of the “space opera.” This subgenre of science fiction is defined by space adventures that often incorporate larger-than-life heroes, epic love stories, and dramatic battles.

While at U of I, Smith dabbled in music and theater, but was not known as a writer. After graduating in 1914, Smith put his chemical engineering degree to work in the food industry where he designed doughnut mixtures. When he delved into writing, Smith specialized in space adventures in which his heroes use powerful technology and spaceships in their battles for the cosmos. He is most famous for his Skylark series and Lensman series.

The collection includes handwritten drafts of Smith’s manuscripts, which were then typed by Smith’s wife and sent to his publishers, as well as edited manuscripts from the publishers. In addition, the library acquired letters between Smith and Dr. Richard W. Dodson, the owner of the collection. The two started writing each other when Dodson was 16 and continued their correspondence for almost 20 years. Smith gave Dodson the manuscripts at various points throughout their friendship, including as a wedding present.

Smith, who died in 1965, has had a persistent influence on the Moscow community. The 1992 MosCon program refers to Smith as the “Patron Saint” of the convention. His daughter, Verna Smith Trestrail, spoke at the first MosCon in September 1979 about her father’s work and was a fixture at future MosCons. Smith was inducted into the U of I Alumni Hall of Fame in 1984.