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Meeting the Past Face to Face

Falvey Library’s stacks hold far more books than any Villanova student will ever read in four years at the university. The library’s collection covers nearly every subject area you could imagine, from literary criticism and historical analysis to cutting-edge scientific research, but even the newest books on its shelves have their limits. To what page should you turn if you truly want a hands-on experience with history?

If you want to touch something that’s 4,000 years old, visit Laura Bang, the Digital & Special Collections Curatorial Assistant at Falvey Library, and ask her about the Sumerian cuneiform tablet housed in the secluded shelves of Special Collections. While the red clay tablet, only a few inches long and cracked from previous centuries’ mishandlings, seems like a mystery from the past waiting to be solved, Bang says that its contents describe the tax record on a goat or a cow.

“Everything goes away except for your taxes,” Bang says, as she moves on to explain a number of items that, like the tablet, seemed to have defied the currents of mainstream history by surviving into the modern day, bruised and beaten but still capable of providing unique and important insight into the past.

Bang, along with Special Collections and Digital Library Coordinator Michael Foight, works what she calls “at least five full time jobs.” All of them focus on preserving, studying, and educating students about the about 15,000 resources, paper or otherwise, in Falvey’s Special Collections. She operates as a librarian, a digital archivist, a social media manager, and as the Coordinator of Digital Humanities, a program that works with undergraduate and graduate students using the Digital Library for academic research.

One item housed in Special Collections and online in digital format is the photo album of Frank Steed, an American soldier deployed to France at the tail end of World War I. Bang says she worked through the album with a Digital History graduate class as a part of the “Remembering WWI” digital exhibit, one of the many exhibitions that Special and Digital Collections curates throughout the year. Bang says the album is a personal favorite of hers for showing a war experience “that is not what you think of” when you imagine the life of a World War I soldier.

Steed didn’t see much fighting during the war and worked on a cleanup crew in Paris in the days after the armistice. Most of his pictures appear more like vacation photos than documents of wartime; they’re mementos of trips Steed took and friends he made during his year in France. He saved playbills and train tickets as well as photographs of women, sometimes with personal messages written on the back.

According to census records, Steed never married despite his collection of images of lovely French women. His family line died out, and his wartime photo album ended up on eBay. Bang says that although the bidding site “is not a rare book dealer in the traditional sense,” Special Collections acquires many texts from its online auctions. Since the album arrived at Villanova, Bang has pored over its pages, and she even found a way to experience Steed’s journeys in real life.

“I actually went to Paris three years ago,” she says, “and I recreated some of these photos.”

She points to a lamppost in the very edge of a photo Steed took of the Petit Palais, which houses the City of Paris Museum of Fine Arts, and says that the post is still there, with the modernizing touch of a traffic light added sometime in the last century.

Photo albums like Steed’s give Bang a unique look into the lives of average citizens that something like the coat of Union General William Tecumseh Sherman cannot. Like the photo albums, though, students can see and even touch the coat, which sits behind a glass case in the center of the room.

“He wore that during the burning of Atlanta,” Bang says as she opens the door to the case.

There are no scorch marks on the somewhat petite coat’s fabric, golden buttons, or brown fur cuffs, “so you can tell how far he was and how tiny he was,” Bang says. “He rode a big horse, of course.”

Although Special Collections houses many items and papers from notable names in history like Sherman’s coat and a first edition printing of Gregor Mendel’s *Experiments on Plant Hybridization* in the original German, Bang says her favorite items to study feature people like Frank Steed.

“What’s more interesting is the ordinary people living their lives at any given time,” she says.

Sometimes those lives can be just as colorful and amazing as anything found in a history textbook. The scrapbook of the Oxford Trio, a Vaudville performing group from the 1910s, shows the trio playing basketball on bicycles—a performance that would certainly be out of place in the Pavilion. The group saved reviews from their shows and pasted them alongside photos of their travels around Europe and America. One photo shows a darkened silhouette of a stranger off to the side of the frame, with a written-in caption—“God knows”.

“Photobombing from 1914,” Bang says.

The handwritten notes on each of the pictures play a similar role to comments on Facebook photos: tongue-in-cheek inside jokes and comments that add a more personal touch.

Bang finds another precursor to modern social media in the magazines of the early 20th century. She uses two hands to gently lift the page of an edition of *Anniversary Comfort*, a family magazine printed in Augusta, Maine in 1910. The cover boasts that the magazine reached 1.25 million homes; although, Bang says it’s hard to tell if that was truly the case.

“This was like their internet,” she says, pointing to a write-in column for women. In columns like this, women shared ideas and information with peers, trading anything from recipes to advice on raising chickens.

One issue of a contemporary magazine ran a list of recipes including both bananas and bacon, much like lists today on websites like Buzzfeed. Bang sees it as another link from the past reaching into the present.

“Everyone loves bacon with everything,” she says. “Bacon is such a craze right now.”

According to Bang, preservation of delicate paper resources like *Anniversary Comfort* is a major problem for Special Collection departments at Villanova and elsewhere. Some printings from the periods of the World Wars disintegrate on their own because they were printed on paper with a higher acid content than usual, falling apart earlier than older material simply because of their makeup. Special Collections, along with most of its partner departments at other institutions, does not have a preservation budget. So what is the main goal for preservation right now?

“Do no further harm,” Bang says.

Harm done by past librarians clearly shows on the centuries-old title page of a pocket-sized, illuminated manuscript of St. Augustine’s minor works. A hole-punched stamp marks the volume as belonging to Villanova Library. Bang notes that preservation and handling techniques changed greatly in the decades since a librarian made those holes.

The Digital Library plays a large part in preventing further harm to books today because it allows scholars to use Special Collections resources without needing to access the physical materials, which can be very fragile. Bang explains that Falvey Special Collections used to have a “really robust” scanning operation, digitizing items from Falvey’s holdings as well as resources from other institutions.

“We scan for them free of charge,” Bang says. “Our payment is we get to add that content to our digital library.”

The scanning lab was temporarily shut down in 2016 due to renovations in Old Falvey. Yet, the Digital Library’s holdings grew and continue to do so as the Falvey staff adds video and audio content from a variety of sources, including a collection of paperbacks from the turn of the 20th century.

Bang’s interest in the everyday hobbies and activities of past Americans fed into her love for dime novels, books that were first published in serialized form in magazines like *Anniversary Comfort*.

The library staff found the dime novels Bang has been studying “in a dark corner of the library basement” while looking for a missing science fiction paperback collection. Instead of science fiction, they found “three shelves of very, very sad looking books in very terrible condition” in the office of a retiring professor. Thanks to this surprise discovery, Bang and her colleagues were able to rescue the dime novels, some of the earliest examples of paperback printing, “from the trash bin of history.”

The plotlines, Bang says, can be closer to a soap opera than to what most consider fine literature, and some contain racial and gender stereotypes that would be offensive today; however, the novels give researchers a sense of American pop culture in the early 1900s, and Bang believes it is important to preserve them. She has done extensive research on the collection in Falvey and presented her work at meetings of the Pop Culture Association, including their national meeting in San Diego in the spring of 2017.

Bang and Demien Katz, the Director of Library Technology, made strides in preserving their favorite dime novel, Alex McVeigh Miller’s *The Bride of the Tomb*, by transcribing it into a Project Gutenberg e-book, something Katz does with a number of texts from Falvey’s holdings. They even narrated a full audiobook version of the novel, which is accessible, along with a growing audio archive, on the Digital Library website.

The audio archives in the Digital Library began with a collection of Irish music recordings and videos of performances from the Philadelphia Ceili Club. Some of the recordings and videos date as far back as 1977. Special Collections staff converted the original cassettes and videotapes into digital files that anyone with access to the Falvey catalog can access.

Most academic citations of items from Special Collections come from Irish scholars, especially citations of the Joseph McGarrity collection. Named for the Irish-American businessman and active member of the IRA, the collection contains letters and books from McGarrity’s personal papers as well as those of other central figures in the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish fight for independence.

The McGarrity Collection has also been valuable for scholars at Villanova like Dr. James Murphy, one of the founders of the Irish Studies Program at Villanova. Murphy donated a large collection of first-edition, signed Irish poetry books to the library in 2015.

“A collection like this is a living organism with a life of its own,” Murphy writes about his donation. “Given my commitment to Irish Studies at Villanova the already wonderful Falvey Library holdings in Irish Studies, our library was a logical home for the collection.”

Murphy hopes that his donation will give Villanova students a chance to “see the human side of the poets,” some of whom, such as Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, Murphy counted as a personal friend.

Many of the volumes Murphy and his wife donated are “inscribed with warm wishes” from Heaney to the couple. Murphy writes that he wants his collection to encourage students to “seek out the friendship of talented, creative people” as he did.

Personal connections certainly bear importance to Laura Bang and the staff of Special Collections who preserve the stories of the famous and the not-so-famous with equal reverence and care. As part of its archive on local history, Special Collections maintains past editions of neighborhood newspapers. Many contain what Bang calls “status updates,” simple reports of the comings and goings of residents, births, weddings, deaths, and other events that national newspapers would hardly even notice.

“It’s not big news,” Bang says, “but it’s important to them.”

For those who want to be true students of history, maybe it should be important to them as well.

Photo captions:  
(Photo album): The photo album of Frank Steed, an American soldier deployed at the end of WWI. Special Collections acquired the album through an EBay auction.  
(Woman standing): Laura Bang holds the cargo bag of a WWII soldier. The drawing of the front is a portrait of his sweetheart, whom he later married.