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### Preserving a Special Collection - Ten Things You Can Do When You're on Your Own

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# Preservation a Special

by Stacy Etheredge

We deal with books and paper. The reality of books and paper is that they are organic materials that will deteriorate over time. The environment surrounding your collection affects the rate and degree of this deterioration. Therefore, the most fundamental thing you can do for your collection is to provide the most suitable environment you can.

Preservation is always an important consideration in libraries, but especially for special collections. And small special collections can be particularly troublesome.

Small collections usually do not fall under the purview of a special collections librarian, but instead become just one tiny part of a regular librarian's duties. And most likely that librarian, although having a bona fide interest in special collections, won't have any particular training or expertise.

As with most things where we know a little bit, but not a lot, it is easy to feel out of one's league when it comes to preservation. Thus the temptation is to not address any issues at all but to wait for an expert to come along. But in our world of limited budgets, that expert may never show up.

So how does a librarian who is not trained in preservation issues assess the preservation needs of a special collection? What do you do when you have a special collection with special preservation needs, but you're on your own?

The first thing you need to do is relax and stop worrying about not knowing everything there is to know about preservation. There is a lot of science and art in preservation, true, but there is also some common sense as well. For example, we all know from our daily lives that extremely hot temperatures tend to bring mildew with them. Team this piece of common sense with recommended

A librarian uses a HEPA vacuum cleaner book attachment to clean books in a special collection.

Photo by Stacy Etheredge

# Preserving Collection

Ten things you can do when you're on your own

temperature ranges for books, and now you've got a starting point for a preservation problem. A little bit of thought and a little bit of fact-finding and already you are way out ahead.

Here, then, are 10 preservation issues for special collections that any librarian can monitor and usually control. They are, of course, just the tip of the iceberg. But they do show us that even if we aren't preservation specialists, there are steps we can take to safeguard our collections.

## 1 Temperature: The Cooler, the Better

The number one cause of paper deterioration is high temperatures. Increases in environmental temperature increase the rate of both the chemical and biological reactions that occur within paper. Most preservation specialists advise that books in low-use areas be kept at a temperature of 62-65 degrees Fahrenheit (with 60-62 degrees even more optimal for books in storage).

This may not be a problem for most special collections, as they tend to be kept in rooms set apart from working staff and visiting patrons. However, if the special collection is part of a high-use area, or if it cannot be physically maintained at a separate temperature, then 68-70 degrees will most likely be the lowest acceptable temperature for human comfort. Although the optimal lowest temperature may not be affordable or practical, the rule of thumb here should always be the cooler, the better.

## 2 Keep Relative Humidity Low and Consistent

Books are "hygroscopic" materials, which mean they take in and give off moisture in response to the ambient relative humidity.

Although low moisture content can cause materials to lose flexibility and become vulnerable to fracturing, high moisture content increases the rate of chemical and fungal deterioration. Thus, a lower relative humidity is generally best, with the preferred range being 30-50 percent.

Even more critical is keeping the level of humidity constant, as fluctuations in humidity are the most damaging of all. The first thing everyone should do is purchase a small monitoring device that measures humidity and temperature; they are accurate, inexpensive, and can be placed in an unobtrusive spot in your collection. You should also record and review the temperature and relative humidity periodically.

You may not have absolute control over the relative humidity, but you can at least try to stay as near to the suggested range as possible and with minimum fluctuations.

## 3 Lighting: Eliminate it When You Can

We would all love our libraries to be full of light and airy rooms, but unfortunately the hard truth is that light is very damaging to books. Light accelerates deterioration on the molecular level; damage is a function of intensity and time and is cumulative and irreversible.

Preservation issues involving light, both natural and artificial, is a complex subject and proper prevention can be expensive. But there is one basic rule that can be followed by everyone—eliminate whatever

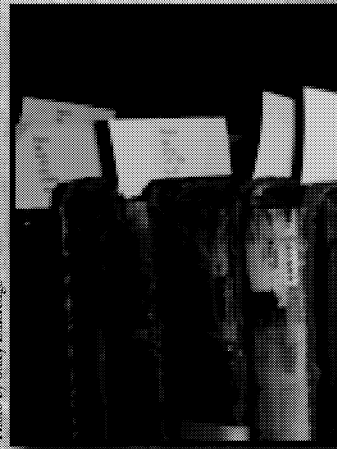


Photo by Stacy Ehrenfeld

To minimize damage from glues and inks, cataloging information should be printed on non-acidic cards, which can be inserted into the books.

light you can, whenever you can.

The best solution is to put your special collection in a room without windows. If there are windows, and they are not tinted or reflective

glass, then they need to be covered with shades or closed blinds.

If the collection is in a low-use area, take advantage of this and turn off the lights whenever possible. The point with light is, if you can get rid of it, do so.

## 4 Food and Beverages: Zero Tolerance

With special collections, the only policy involving food and drink must be zero tolerance. Food and beverages can lead to a variety of ills, such as staining, insects, and vermin.

There is an increasing trend for libraries to have cafes or snack shops either in close proximity to the library or even within the library. And in an effort to maintain the library as a gathering place, librarians everywhere have become increasingly flexible (some would say lax) in enforcing food and drink policies. But with special collections, there is absolutely no room for flexibility, as these materials are usually difficult to acquire if not irreplaceable.

You will likely receive no resistance to such a strict policy; most people understand that these special materials need special protection. However, what with people being people, library staff should still engage in heightened monitoring of any special collections area.

(continued on page 19)

For more photos of good preservation practices, visit [www.aallnet.org/products/pub\\_sp0702.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub_sp0702.asp).

## 5 Don't Forget about Micro-Environments

A micro-environment is a separate environment contained within a larger environment, such as display cases and archival boxes. Micro-environments bring up their own preservation issues because their distinct environments are usually not in sync with the main environment.

Display cases, for instance, add a wonderful dimension to a special collection because they contain artifacts that help bring the collection alive. But if you don't control those cases for such things as temperature, humidity, and light, you are doing your artifacts a disservice by keeping them in there.

Unfortunately there are usually no easy answers when it comes to micro-environments. With display cases, for example, you should either buy special cases with separate environment controls or have very minimal display times or no displays at all. Whatever you do, do not ignore micro-environments such as these. They are a serious preservation concern whose effects will be felt later.

## 6 Follow Storage and Handling Rules

If there is one area of preservation where a single librarian can exercise a great deal of control, it is storage and handling. Since there are many little ways we can go wrong here, there are many little things we can fix immediately.

One easy preservation practice is good storage technique. For instance, books should always be shelved upright and never put in piles. The shelves should be full but never packed tightly; if the shelves are not full, non-damaging bookends should be used to prevent leaning, which causes strain on bindings.

Another simple practice is to remove everything from the books that doesn't belong there. A short list of things to get rid of would be paper clips, staples, post-it notes, gummy labels, acidic inserts like bookmarks or scraps of papers, and anything with ink on it. A good rule of thumb here is if it wasn't originally a part of the book, then it shouldn't be in it or on it.

## 7 Attempt to Control Air Quality

Airborne pollutants, basically gases and particulates, are a major cause of deterioration of library materials. Gases cause chemical reactions that produce acidic substances while particulates soil, disfigure, and abrade materials. Controlling pollutants is a difficult and expensive proposition but there are things you can do.

To control gases, for instance, do not allow tobacco smoke or photocopy machines near the collection, avoid the over-use of cleaning compounds, and do not use carpet or wood in the area (yes, even wood shelves) because both "off-gas" continuously.

To avoid particulates, allow no open windows, clean with magnetic wiping cloths only, use a vacuum instead of a broom (using a HEPA filter if possible), and store books in archival boxes in order to keep pollutants off of them.

Although various standards have been suggested in this area, just about the only agreed upon one is simply to reduce the amount of pollutants in the air as much as possible.

## 8 Repair Only What You Can

There are repairs, and then there are *repairs*. There is a broad range of minor book repairs that can be done after a little training, including basic cleaning and mending, simple hinge and spine repair, treatment of slightly wet or moldy books, and making protective enclosures for damaged materials. Tools, supplies, and books on archival repair are both affordable and available.

But, and this is a strong but, there is a difference between preservation and conservation. Conservation involves techniques and materials that chemically stabilize and physically strengthen an item in order to assure its longevity while altering its physical characteristics as little as possible.

Repairs or treatment involving, for instance, deacidization, rebinding, serious water damage, serious mold, or severely marred pages are major issues that absolutely require a conservator. If you have any doubts or questions about what needs to be done or what you are able to do yourself, then send for the expert.

## 9 Have a Written Security Policy

If you have a special collection that is small and not a major focus of the library, it probably doesn't contain books that are rare or valuable enough to require special security measures such as staffed reading rooms. Unfortunately, though, theft and vandalism are issues that lurk everywhere. The key is to establish a written security policy with set rules and procedures, and then follow it.

You should consider a number of security options, but with a small special collection, you probably won't have to get too draconian. The very least you should

consider are access and circulation issues, registration and recordkeeping of patron usage, inspection of patron belongings, and whether photo IDs should be required.

You should decide what is best for your collection, but you absolutely need to have well-established procedures in place. Security measures can be inconveniences but unfortunately they are necessary ones.

## 10 Make a Disaster Plan Now

There is only one thing to say about disaster plans—get one and get it now. Even if your library already has a plan, you still need to make sure there is a separate one for your special collection so you can detail exactly what you need to do in case of emergencies.

Where is the nearest fire extinguisher located? Do you have plastic drop cloths to cover bookshelves in case the sprinklers go off? Are there boxes or carts available to carry materials out of the area? Do you know exactly which books you'd rescue if you could only get 25 of them out? Are there emergency salvage procedures in place?

These are the kinds of questions that we hope never come up. But if they do, we'd better have quick answers for them. The only way to accomplish that is to set out your plan in advance.

## Time to Step up to the Plate

Preservation in libraries is an involved and challenging subject. Overseeing the preservation needs of a special collection can be a full-time endeavor, and these quick tips will in no way solve all preservation problems everywhere. However, there is good news, and that is that there are some basic and simple preservation issues that can be monitored and controlled by any librarian who works with special collections. And, in fact, it is imperative that we librarians begin to do so.

It is true that we do not live in a perfect library world, and the most efficacious solutions may not be readily attainable. We may never get all of the expertise and the resources that we need to protect our collections in the best way possible. But a working philosophy of "let's do the best we can with what we've got" is better than "let's do nothing and let the damage happen." It's time for us to step up to the plate and do whatever is within our power to save our collections. ■

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