Preserving Vaudeville and Early-Film History at the University of Iowa

BY BETHANY DAVIS

This year, the University of Iowa Libraries began a three-year project to stabilize, digitize and rehouse 150 scrapbooks in the Keith/Albee collection. The project, funded in major part by a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities Division of Preservation and Access, began in May 2014. After months of preparation, two new hires, and a few challenges along the way, project work is resulting in an ever-expanding Keith/Albee collection in the Iowa Digital Library.

The Keith/Albee Collection

The Keith/Albee collection documents the activity of a prominent vaudeville theater company through more than 40 years of business, roughly 1894-1935. The Keith/Albee circuit got its start in the late 1880s when Benjamin F. Keith and Edward F. Albee (adoptive grandfather of Edward Albee, the famous playwright) embarked on an ambitious venture to promote “polite” vaudeville along the East Coast. They remodeled extravagant theaters, censored indecent content and forbade untoward remarks from the audience. Based in Rhode Island, the partnership grew into an empire. The dominance of the Keith/Albee vaudeville circuit stretched along the East Coast and into the Midwest.

The collection consists of 150 oversize scrapbooks and several linear feet of boxed materials. Generally speaking, the scrapbooks were compiled by theater managers and press agents; they contain managers’ reports, newspaper clippings and other printed publicity. The scrapbooks can be divided into 24 managers’ books, 123 clipping books and 3 volumes of financial records covering the zenith of Keith/Albee activity in the early twentieth century. Arguably, the most important volumes in the Keith/Albee collection are the financial records and managers’ books which collectively contain more than 6,000 managers’ reports. These reports describe the acts on the Keith/Albee circuit: what they were, where and when they performed and how they compared to previous performances. The reports also describe how performers were compensated, how profits rose and fell, and ultimately, which acts were the most lucrative. The collection’s focus on the business of vaudeville provides an understanding of the industrial evolution of a major form of popular entertainment. Later volumes allow researchers to track the conditions that contributed to the decline of live entertainment and the rise motion pictures.

As a rich resource for anyone interested in vaudeville and early-film history, the Keith/Albee collection has been heavily used by researchers since its arrival at the University of Iowa in 1976. By their very nature, the scrapbooks present challenges for access and preservation. Accessing the information contained in scrapbooks is difficult because they have no index. Intellectual control is limited to the original organization of the collection: bound volumes labeled according to
theater and year. Looking for specific information requires turning page after page through volumes ranging from 100 to 350 pages. Preservation of the scrapbooks is challenged by access itself. The scrapbooks’ inherent vice is they are largely made up of acidic newspaper clippings attached to acidic substrate pages. Over time, many of the scrapbooks have seen their pages turn from flexible to brittle. Pages crumble along the edges and crack at the gutter as researchers use the scrapbooks.

**The UI Libraries Project**

With the scrapbooks’ physical condition, it was impossible to provide continued access to the original volumes and ensure their long-term preservation. In May 2014, the University of Iowa Libraries received $300,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities in support of a project to stabilize, digitize, and rehouse the scrapbooks. The successful completion of this project will create online access to the collection and protect the original volumes from extraneous handling.

Until now, Keith/Albee-related projects had been discussed but never implemented due to the sheer size of the collection, conservation and digitization challenges presented by scrapbooks and limited resources. The grant award allowed the UI Libraries’ Preservation & Conservation department to overcome resource limitations (i.e. staff time) by funding two new positions. The project conservator (50% FTE), Elizabeth Stone, and digital project librarian (80% FTE), Justin Baumgartner, joined the department in July. They are managing the two major components of the project: conservation and digitization which must function cooperatively and simultaneously in order to be successful.

In addition to the grant-funded staff, the project team includes: Bethany Davis, Digital Processing Coordinator Librarian; Greg Prickman, Head of Special Collections & University Archives; Giselle Simon, Senior Conservator; and Rebecca Routh, Cataloging and Metadata Librarian. Collectively, the team represents three library departments while working with a fourth department, Digital Research & Publishing, to add digital content to the Iowa Digital Library.

The Iowa Digital Library (IDL) features more than one million digital objects from 100 digital collections which include illuminated manuscripts, historic maps, fine art, newspapers, scholarly works and more. As content from the Keith/Albee collection is digitized, it becomes freely accessible to audiences worldwide at digital.lib.uiowa.edu/keithalbee.

**Conservation**

Before collection materials are digitized at the UI Libraries, they are assessed and treated, as needed, by staff in the conservation lab. To date, conservation activities—led by the project conservator—have focused on surveying Keith/Albee scrapbooks and stabilizing the collection for digitization. Beginning in May 2013 and resuming this year, the Preservation & Conservation department conducted a collection survey, gathering data about the format and condition of the scrapbooks. The collected information includes binding styles, measurements, levels of embrittlement, condition of clippings and other comments.

In order to quantify the scrapbooks’ conditions, Candida Pagan, a conservation student specialist, created a metric to determine a scrapbook’s overall brittleness, measuring brittleness on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being very brittle and 5 being not brittle at all. Survey data has shown that more than 60 percent of the scrapbooks...
have incurred some degree of loss or damage as a result of brittle paper and normal handling. Using the survey data, the project conservator groups the scrapbooks by type of treatment needed. Beginning with the 24 managers’ books, the conservator identified six volumes that were rated as 4 in the survey, meaning their paper is still relatively flexible. Stabilization of these volumes has included dry surface cleaning, mending and reattaching or foldering of loose items, and some interleaving of pages with offsetting inks. Items attached to substrate pages near the gutter have been flattened to ease opening and ensure legibility in digital imaging.

Conservation work has also included dry surface cleaning and minor mending of four-document-boxes’ worth of newspaper clippings and business correspondence from the RKO Albee Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island. These materials are being digitized along with other flat materials as the UI Libraries.

**Digitization**

In addition to the grant-funded hires, the UI Libraries has invested in new digitization equipment for overhead digital image capture of bound and fragile material. Preservation & Conservation is replacing a six-year-old Zeutschel OS12000 overhead scanner with a Digital Transitions Reprographic System (DTRG3040). The system includes an 80-megapixel digital camera back which will capture the Keith/Albee scrapbooks’ pages at a resolution of approximately 600 ppi with a 95 percent sampling efficiency. The new equipment boasts the technical capabilities required for the creation of preservation-quality digital images.

As Preservation & Conservation awaits the equipment’s arrival, the digital project librarian has focused on digitizing the Keith/Albee collection’s loose materials including theatre programs, newspaper clippings and business records of the RKO Albee Theatre, circa. 1930s/1940s. The business records include correspondence between theater managers and various companies including RKO Service Corporation, film booking and box office sheets and other incidentals, such as accident reports and patron complaints. These materials are being digitized at 600 ppi using two Epson Expression flatbed scanners (10000XL and 11000XL).

When the Digital Transitions system entered service, the focus of digitization shifted to the scrapbooks. The project estimates a total of 37,300 pages to be digitized. Digital processing work, which accounts for image capture as well as pre- and post-capture processing, will occur on a near full-time basis – 30-40 hours per week – for 2.5 years to meet the project’s production goals.

**Next Steps**

The new digitization equipment arrived and scrapbook digitization has begun. To facilitate scrapbook digitization, conservation constructed a book cradle to support the volumes during image capture. Next steps will also include rehousing the scrapbooks into custom clamshell enclosures. After stabilization and digitization, scrapbooks will return to the UI Libraries Special Collections so more scrapbooks can come to the conservation lab and begin the process all over again. 150 scrapbooks to go.

Bethany Davis is the Digital Processing Coordinator Librarian at the University of Iowa. She can be reached at Bethany-davis@uiowa.edu.
Contact Us

Phet Louvan
Account Representative
phetl@archival.com
866-658-1083

Janice Comer
Division Manager
janicec@archival.com
866-518-1081

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