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Even Small Libraries Can Have Special Collections

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Special collections can be one of the crowning jewels of a small library, but not without a price. Harney County Library felt honored when two prominent men thought enough of the community to bequeath their valuable personal libraries so anyone could visit and access the material. With this gift came responsibilities we had never contemplated, including the extra staff required to make it happen.

The theme for a special collection is determined from the majority of the material received. Our benefactors, both serious Northwest historians, placed in our care approximately 1,500 volumes of rare and first edition books covering Indian history, exploration, fur trade, immigration, and development of the Northwest. In addition the collection included copious research notes for four published books on Eastern Oregon history, along with clippings, maps, pictures, and much more.

It was a natural step to include the 465 local oral histories started in 1970, the Harney County newspaper collection starting with 1886, a complete set of the *Oregon Historical Quarterlies*, and historical pictures dating from the 1870's.

At this point the Claire McGill Luce Western History Room took on a life of its own and began to demand space, staffing, equipment and all the planning for it. Our small library staff had no idea how to go about this process, so holding on to each other for support, we began to plan, re-plan and plan again. Perhaps the following guidelines will help other small libraries contemplating a special collection.

Guidelines for Getting Started

Get people excited about the prospect of adding a special collection

Meet with county commissioners if yours is a county library. They will need to okay the project and finances.

- Present the proposed project at community meetings e.g., Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, Lions, etc. for community buy-in.
- Stress that this project will encourage economic development by bringing researchers to the area.

Do your homework

If you don't already have a library foundation in place, start one. This is necessary when asking for and receiving grant monies.

- Visit other libraries with special collections and ask lots of questions.
- If you already have the collection, get it appraised for insurance purposes. The value of the collection may help as "in-kind" contributions in seeking grants.

Plan the room

Find money for planning—at least \$5,000. Harney County Library's came from a grant from the Oregon State Legislature in 2001.

- Hire an engineer or architect to do the initial planning with lots of input from library staff.



Fundraising & grant writing


Make friends with the local media. In some way the library should be in the news every week—exposure is very important now.

- Decide on the type of fundraising most likely to take off in your community. Harney County Library had a dinner with county commissioners serving, and a silent auction of “author baskets” sponsored by individuals, organizations, schools and businesses throughout the county.
- Local fundraising is essential BEFORE grant writing. Charitable foundations want community buy-in before they will contribute to the project.
- If you can afford it, hire a grant writer. If you can't, do it yourself. Think of it as “other duties as assigned...”
- Be patient and persistent. It took Harney County Library over three years to get enough grant funds to proceed with the Western History Room.

Hire an architect & contractors

Library staff should work as a team with the architect—when he/she is long gone, you'll still be working there.

- Advertise for construction bids (the architect usually does this).
- Prepare for six months to a year of mess (if a renovation).
- Speak up while they are still around if something doesn't seem right.
- Move in, say “Thank You” and have a party!

The Western History Room is a research area only. This was a new concept to the patrons who are used to a circulating library. We are fortunate our county government has provided staffing to make this material available every day the library is open and support its continuing growth. A special collection needs protection, care, and knowledgeable staff to make it accessible. By meeting this mission, the community can rely on a safe repository for its history while the collection continues to grow through donations and support of community members. 

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