Special collections did not emerge at some singular point in library history, and there was not an overarching thought process behind their creation. In this essay, special collections are defined as departments, libraries, historical societies, or similar settings in which rare books, other rare print materials, manuscripts, and sometimes film and photographs are held. This is important to note since any non-standard library, such as a corporate library, could potentially be referred to as a special collections library.

To put it simply, rare book and manuscript departments and libraries grew out of necessity. Special collections find their roots in America at the end of the 19th century, as noted by William Joyce in his 1988 article concerning special collections in American research libraries.¹ Though today special collections can be found in public libraries or in independent institutions, special collections in the United States developed first in the university library system. As university library systems changed and grew, special collections began to take shape and acquire meaning. The first separate university library in the United States was not built until 1840 at the University of South Carolina.² Many others followed, and library systems became increasingly complex.

The special collection was often initially established to provide protection to rare or expensive items within the university’s growing print collection. The segregation of rare books away from other items in the library system occurred in the 1890s at Yale University, and many

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² Ibid, 21.
other universities, including Princeton and Columbia, followed suit for a variety of reasons.\textsuperscript{3} Some of these rare book collections were established through gifts by donors, oftentimes alumni, whose book collections had been established due in part to the increasing popularity and status associated with book collecting. By the 1930’s ‘treasure rooms’ and rare book reading rooms were in existence in many university libraries. These early iterations of special collections were very focused on rare books, and had not yet begun to collect the wide array of materials we expect in special collections today.\textsuperscript{4}

When special collections departments first came into being, they were often elitist institutions and were generally run by men. Access to the collections was limited, as were outreach efforts, and the librarians’ time was spent building collections. By the 1980’s, the practices of special collections had changed substantially. There had been a shift towards collection management and away from collection building. This was due to a variety of factors, but two intermingled reasons were the inflation in prices in the book trade and the shrinking budget of libraries. By this time, there had also been significant changes in access to collections, and outreach efforts by special collections departments were increasing. As noted in a 1987 Library Trends article written by Daniel Traister, special collections had become much less exclusionary and sought to welcome in a wider audience than ever before.\textsuperscript{5} This was the case in the 1980’s, and the trend has only continued in the last two and a half decades. Today more than ever, special collections seek to bring in a wider audience and engage the public.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, 24.  
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.  
Through reviewing current literature and looking back at literature from the 1980’s and before, we can see the trend of the opening up of the special collection. Certainly everyone in the field has not wholeheartedly embraced this trend, and many institutions choose to maintain their insular practices, but, in general, special collections are more open today than at any other point in history. How and why special collections got to where they are today is the result of many factors. One such factor is the explosion in popularity of higher education in the United States. Special collections have traditionally served an educated class, and, as such, the opening of the special collection has coincided with the opening up of higher education. In 1945, only 15% of high school graduates went on to pursue higher education; by the 1960’s this had jumped to 40%, and in 2011 over 68% of high school graduates were enrolled in a college or university program. Graduate school enrollments have similarly grown, increasing the student body to be served by the special collections department or library.

Two other related factors that have contributed to the need to open up special collections are the assessment and funding of the special collections library. Today, universities, and by extension their libraries, and other cultural institutions that may support a special collections department are strapped for funds. This has led to the close scrutiny of many items on the budget. In order to understand the worth of something, it must be assessed. In the library world assessment generally comes in the form of circulation figures or patron counts. These metrics put special collections at a distinct disadvantage as their collections generally do not circulate, and they do not often attract the general studier or inquisitive wanderer as their policies and

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atmosphere, even in the most liberal institutions, do not offer an environment of comfort and ease. For example, a student or faculty member may wander into the university library today to browse the shelves, or get a coffee and study; both of these activities are not possible in most special collections libraries.

The university library, or public library, is a catch-all space today, while the special collection is, by nature, specialized. To bolster usage numbers and receive favorable assessments, and to continue to receive funding and support, special collections need people walking through their doors or otherwise using their resources. Today more than ever before, special collections libraries need their public; this need has spurred on the creation of increasingly large and creative outreach programs. Though special collections are more open than ever before, they are still the guarded, conservative bastions within the library system. A culture of learning and outreach is percolating, but still has some way to go. Special collections are moving towards inclusiveness, however, and, as many suggest, it is their duty to do so. “If special collections are billing themselves as ‘custodians of culture,’ they have an ethical obligation to make their collections accessible to any who are interested.”

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9 Ibid, 89.

Bibliography


Additional Resources


The San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection is an enormously important part of special collections and contains photographs of San Francisco and California scenes from 1850 to the present including views of San Francisco streets, buildings, and neighborhoods, as well as photographs of famous San Francisco personalities. They add immeasurably to our understanding of the City’s diverse communities and to the Library’s Special Collections. Together, these valuable and fascinating collections, which together form the Special Collections department here at the San Francisco Public Library, are extremely important resources for all San Franciscans as well as for our patrons far beyond the city. Our Teacher Edition on A Brief History of Seven Killings can help. Introduction. Plot Summary. Again Jamaica is shown to wield a special, seductive power over white American men in particular. Jamaica may be violent and chaotic, but there is evidently something about this that Barry finds appealing. Meanwhile, the depth of secrecy that characterizes the actions of the CIA is further emphasized in this passage by the fact that CIA business is even kept secret from American ambassadors. Active Themes. Louis Johnson is on a mission to end apartheid in South Africa. Sapiens and Homo Deus: The E-book Collection: A Brief History of Humankind and A Brief History of Civilizations: A Brief History of Humankind. 439 Pages·2014·6.72 MB·97,852 Downloads·New! future. It -- and its discovery Heroes of History: a Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to The World Is Flat 3.0 A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century. 674 Pages·2009·9.44 MB·4,579 Downloads. of it or print it out our program does not allow it. A Brief History of Ancient Astrology - Vedic Illuminations. 173 Pages·2007·1007 KB·3,931 Downloads. A Brief History of Ancient Astrology Roger Beck A Brief History of the Olympic Games David C