

Interview with Nancy Down Head Librarian at Bowling Green State University Popular Culture Library, Ohio

By Cybèle Elaine Werts

About this Interview:

This interview with Nancy Green, Head Librarian of the Popular Culture Library, Bowling Green University, describes one of the largest and most comprehensive special collection of popular culture which has been digitized and put into a searchable database system.

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Introduction

About the Bowling Green State University Popular Culture Library (BPCL)

The BPCL, founded in 1969 and dedicated to the acquisition and preservation of research materials on American popular culture (post 1876), is the most comprehensive repository of its kind in the United States. Archives include over 10,000 volumes of popular fiction in addition to 10,000 periodical issues. Its strengths are American magazines (1926-1960), pulps, and fanzines.

Cybele Werts: You've been with Bowling Green State University Libraries for twenty years—starting out as a cataloger for Humanities and Social Sciences for the Main Collection. Since 1996 you've worked at the Popular Culture Library, first as Popular Culture Cataloger and Reference Librarian and now as Head Librarian. How have you seen the popular culture collection change in terms of focus?

Nancy Down: “The popular culture collection started out as a collection designed to support the new courses and program in popular culture studies which Dr. Ray Browne was starting at BGSU some forty years ago. The original approach was to collect a little of everything that could be called popular culture—romance books, movie posters, postcards, pulps, science fiction magazines, manuscripts, etc. We collect United States popular culture primary materials from about the 1890s to the present. Our collection has grown through the years in large part through gifts. Even today about ninety percent of our collection has come through gifts.

“Forty years later our collection can be described as both selective and comprehensive. We have certain strengths in our research level collections—popular literature, popular entertainment, and the graphic arts—and in other areas we select materials that will give some idea about popular culture in this area, but are not meant to be inclusive. We are running out of space and have become more selective in what we add to our collections. We also belong to the *Consortium of Popular Cultures Collections* (<http://popcult.lms.kent.edu/>) in the Midwest and have some informal cooperative collection development agreements.”



Head Librarian Nancy Downs
Bowling Green State University Popular Culture Library (BPCL)

Many readers, particularly younger students, do not recognize the importance of vintage material as historical documents because they were oriented toward entertainment. How do you help explain the place of material of this kind in our literary history?

Down: “Our collection is designed to show the development and history of popular fiction in the United States from the 1890s. Having these older materials helps students understand that popular fiction has a long, rich history. The same type of stories—adventure, science fiction, Western, spy, mystery, romance, etc.—that we are familiar with today in print and on screen were the stories that entertained people in the 1880s and 1900s. Looking at some of the pulp stories, you can see the beginnings of superhero stories in the comics.”

There’s a difference between my approach as a collector of say, vintage magazines, and your approach as a librarian. Can you speak to that?

Down: “As a librarian I want to collect and preserve these vintage materials because of their importance to scholars and researchers. I try to collect materials in different genres and different time periods in order to give researchers the materials they need to answer their research questions. I try to anticipate what questions researchers will ask both now and in the future. I am not as concerned in collecting materials because of their monetary value or because of my own interest in a particular theme as I might be as a collector. I also view these vintage materials as part of an overall collection of popular fiction.”

There are many websites that showcase collections of different kinds of vintage materials, but you’re focused more on the kinds of research that academics and students need. What are some of the kinds of questions that people ask for help with?

Down: “People have a variety of interests in these materials. I remember one researcher who was looking at how the planet Mars was pictured in popular fiction. Some researchers are interested in a particular author and tracking down stories that author wrote for the pulps. Another person I know looks at early portrayals of technology in the nickel weeklies and pulps—such as the “Steam Man.” Another researcher was interested in the Charles Atlas ads in the pulps.”

My collection is focused on books and magazines that feature women as strong protagonists, which is something that is actually fairly rare because the pulp magazines were published mostly from the 1930’s to the 1950’s. What are some of the other themes around race or gender that you’ve observed in these collections?

Down: “Race and genre questions always come up around vintage materials. These research questions are always hard to answer because there is no comprehensive subject database for materials from this time period. I had one patron who was looking for any portrayals of Arabs. Most depictions of ethnic groups in the nickel weeklies and pulps tend to be negative. The same can be said about women, but they are instances of strong women characters now and then especially in the pulps. We just



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received a pulp called Saucy Romantic Adventures from May, 1936, and it contains a story by Lars Anderson called “The Domino Lady Collects.” The Domino Lady is a “feminine Robin Hood” who sets out to deal with a blackmailer.”

I read on the website that you add one thousand new items a year to the collection. How do you decide what to buy each year?

Down: “We have certain collections that are not complete, but are research level in quantity and one of our chief collecting areas—collections like the story papers and nickel weeklies, pulps, vintage paperbacks, etc. I buy materials to fill the gaps and I also buy new books in certain genres. I also buy materials to support the curriculum—books on television, movies, DVDs, etc.”

Some of the covers of items in your collection are scanned. Being as this is a very time consuming task, how do you decide which items to scan?

Down: “We scan some materials as examples of our larger holdings for our web page. We have two projects where we have been scanning materials—the *Vintage Paperback Cover Index* and the *Nickel Weeklies Database*. Basically we have been scanning all the materials we have that are in a condition to be scanned. This means full text of the nickel weeklies we hold and the covers of all the paperbacks in the vintage collection. These databases are meant to be as comprehensive as we can make them so they have more research potential.”

I’m sure that you’ve seen some major changes in technology as well in these sixteen years you’ve been at Bowling Green. What software applications are you using to digitize these special collections? What are some of the metadata fields you chose to describe the products?

Down: “According to Bob (Robert Heidler) we use the following. First for cover scans—300 dpi color TIFF master and Epson perfection scanner. For page scans: Minolta PS7000 overhead planetary scanner and 600 dpi binary TIFF image. For software: xnview image viewer, adobe Photoshop (advanced editing), and Adobe Acrobat professional which creates searchable PDFs.”

What’s the most effective way to access your online databases?

Down: “The best way to access our databases is through our catalog. Under all databases the Vintage Paperback Database is under “V” in the alphabetical list. We will eventually have a link for the Nickel Weeklies in the OhioLINK Digital Resource Commons (<http://info.drc.ohiolink.edu/>). You can google “nickel weeklies” and see what it looks like. This database is still a work in progress. For example for nickel weeklies—the metadata fields are: title, alternative title, author, series title, date, volume/issue, publisher, description, subject, coverage spatial, coverage temporal, and persistent URL.”

You’re in the process of scanning and entering a large number of what are called *Nickel Weeklies* which date from the 1890’s to the 1920’s. Can you tell me more about these, and how you manage what I presume must be very delicate condition materials?

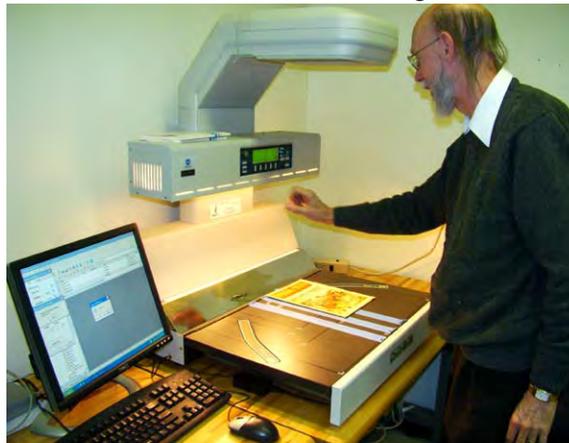
Down: “Nickel weeklies are a form of popular reading that circulated from the 1880s to 1920s.

They are often serialized stories that were later collected into the book length dime novels. They are usually adventure stories, mysteries, etc.”

You’ve mentioned that you only fully scan items that were published before 1923 because they are free from copyright. What are some of the other copyright issues that you deal with around these kinds of materials?

Down: “The nickel weeklies have mostly been published before that date and we aren’t scanning any after 1923 so we are scanning the entire issue. The vintage covers we use thumbnails or lower resolution scans.

“The nickel weeklies are in OhioLINK’s Digital Resource Commons. As my colleague Gwen Evans (Co-coordinator, Library Information & Emerging Technologies) explains: ‘We don’t have the staff resources in the library or on campus to maintain our own server and Digital Library installation plus OhioLINK has taken on the task of ensuring the conversion and stability of digital objects into the



Archivist Robert Heidler scans a vintage magazine

future. More than that, an OhioLINK central installation allows federated searching across all OhioLINK digital repositories—it's a way to get digital collections outside of individual institution resource silos. Sharing hardware and software and especially technical expertise across the state just makes more sense, especially in these times.”

Broadly speaking, what are the particular challenges around managing and archiving the vintage materials in your very large collection?

Down: “One of the greatest challenges is preservation and how to balance preservation needs with access. We want patrons to use the materials, but need to control to some extent how they interact with the materials. Also security—some vintage material, depending on its rarity, is very expensive.”

What are some of the challenges around making these kinds of items accessible to the public (when they are so delicate) versus being able to store them safely in a temperature and humidity controlled facility that may not even be located at the library?

Down: “These materials are very fragile and any handling does put some wear and tear on them. The *Story Papers* which are newspaper size are more fragile, especially since many of them were stored folded in half. We try to balance preservation with accessibility. We are scanning them, not so much for preservation, but more for accessibility. After we have finished scanning we are planning to store them offsite where we will have more control over

temperature and humidity. Like much popular culture materials, they were just not made to last over time. We store materials using the best archival practices, but we are a working library and patrons ask to use materials. We don't allow photocopying of the vintage materials and scanning is a case by case basis. The materials have to be used in our reading room. But even materials stored offsite can be requested and, with advance notice of a few days, available for use in our archives.”

Dr. Ray Browne founded the Popular Culture Association and library in 1969, and I understand that he continues to teach as well. This makes your collection probably the largest and most comprehensive in the country. What are your thoughts about moving forward in the next few decades?

Down: “As far as the popular culture of the past, I imagine we will still be collecting the same types of materials over the next few decades—pulp, comics, zines, greeting cards, scripts, etc. What will be challenging will be how to collect popular materials that are increasingly more electronic in format. At present we operate on the print based model. Also as space becomes a concern for future growth, we might have to rely on other institutions collecting certain types of material—as long as someone is preserving them!”

Thank you for chatting with me!

Down: “Thank you as well, I've really enjoyed it.”