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## David Pullen oral history interview by Andrew Huse, November 14, 2003

David L. Pullen (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Early positions at USF; Experiences in preservation*

Mr. Pullen was first hired at USF in 1986 as a security guard at the library, “because they needed someone who looked kind of like a hippy that could blend in.” After some time, he transferred to a position in physical processing where he had his initial experiences with preservation. “It was real early in the preservation game ... [it] consisted ... of a little bit of white library glue and staples. And that was a start.”

### *Transfer to preservationist position*

When the administration began to phase out the physical processing dimension of library work, Pullen “had to think of something else to do.” It was at this point that he made the move to preservation work. He began learning the trade by attending a number of workshops on book preservation, and refined his newfound skills through a great deal of practice. “I was kind of caged into doing it. ‘Look what David can do. [He] can cut a straight line!’ So [I] became a preservationist.”

### *Learning the trade*

When he first began working as a preservationist fifteen years ago, many of the damaged books had to be sent out for binding and repair. The work that was done in-house was largely treated with staples, tape, and a hot-glue gun. Since there were so few training workshops available in the early years, “If you wanted to learn ... it was up to the individual.” He read a great deal on the subject in order to better educate himself on the skills of book preservation. “Basically, all the way through I’ve been self-taught. I’ve attended a lot of workshops [but] there still isn’t a lot out there on basic book repair.”

### *Expanding responsibilities*

Mr. Pullen’s responsibilities soon expanded beyond exclusively doing book repair and preservation. He would often be presented with something that needed to be accomplished, and be left to find a way to do it. It was in this way that he picked up a number of valuable skills as he sought creative methods of solving problems. “If there’s a procedure I need to get down, I have to be able to learn how to do it without damaging the book, without causing more damage to it.” To get his practice, he accumulates books

removed from circulation and refines his techniques on them. The more he accomplishes, Mr. Pullen explains, the more problems are brought to his desk. Though he has had a number of difficult projects, he confidently declares that, “I haven’t gotten one [that] I haven’t been able to handle.” He stays busy at his post, doing approximately ten to twenty projects every week. Some of the more difficult projects, however, have been map reconstructions in which damaged sections have to be rebuilt.

#### *Appeal of preservation*

Asked whether he considers himself a preservationist, Mr. Pullen modestly replies, “I’m not sure ... there’s so much to learn. The technology changes all the time.” Though he has no background at all in preservation, Pullen has always worked well with his hands; picking up and using an instrument such as a scalpel “is almost second nature” to him. Since he served as “Dungeon Master” for a popular role playing game for almost fifteen years, he was responsible for crafting and painting miniature figures.

#### *Projects*

One of the projects Mr. Pullen has been working on over the past year is the recovery, restoration, and preservation of a cigar-label collection. He has also been involved recently in the preservation and encapsulation (a process similar to lamination) of historic maps.

#### *Mold & insect infestations*

Mold represents a particular problem for preservationists, Mr. Pullen explains, and one which requires constant attention. To combat latent mold issues, the temperature and humidity must be maintained at specific levels. While all libraries have mold issues, Pullen remembers a particular occasion when sections of the library had to be closed because the problem was especially bad. Among the other potential infestations are silverfish and roaches, for which incoming books must be carefully screened.

Because food is allowed in the library, Pullen cites a particular problem fighting insect infestations in the stacks. Both roaches and silverfish eat paper, and do a great deal of damage to the books. He is not aware of any past or present problems with termites.

#### *Book damage*

His worst nightmare as a preservationist, Mr. Pullen explains, would be a broken water pipe because of the potential damage that it could cause. This makes hurricane threats particularly menacing.

#### *Additional responsibilities*

In addition to his responsibilities at the library, Mr. Pullen also teaches classes frequently on book repair and preservation. He was recently trained as an archivist in the national archives at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. “A lot of times I just get the type of things that [the] administration or Special Collections doesn’t know [what] to do [with].”

*Rewards of the job*

One of the most rewarding aspects of his job, Pullen notes, is taking “something that’s not usable and coming up with a nice end product ... So there is a sense of accomplishment.”

*End of Interview*