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It’s a treasure trove of memorabilia

Hampton Dunn gift brings Florida’s history to life

By RICH BERUBE

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A hand-colored French map of Florida dating from 1848. More than 3,000 photographs of Florida taken between 1880 and 1940. Three Florida court dockets dating from the 1840s—when the area was still a territory. Twenty-seven reel-to-reel
and cassette tapes with interviews that focus on the history of WDAE, Florida’s first radio station. A large bronze sign bearing the name, THE TAMPA DAILY TIMES, which was mounted for more than half a century at the entrance to Tampa’s oldest brick building.

They’re just a tiny part of a veritable treasure trove of Florida historical materials that now belong to USF, thanks to journalist and historian Hampton Dunn, who in January, 1982, presented the first installment of his vast collection to the University.

"We’ve got a great story to tell, and until now, it’s been a well-kept secret," said Dunn in making the presentation. "We must go into our attics and bring it to a safe place." For his collection, that safe place is now the University Library’s special collections department, where future historians will be invited to discover, in Dunn’s words, "Florida’s rich and colorful history."

COLLECTION IS ‘ENORMOUS’

While that rich and colorful history may have been until now a well-kept secret, the size of Dunn’s collection has been no mystery. It’s enormous.

The foundation of the collection is its reference library—more than 1,100 volumes relating to the state’s history. Added to that are more than 3,500 photographs (a group believed by one St. Petersburg appraiser to be the largest collection of Florida photographs in private hands), 5,000 postcards, tens of thousands of newspaper clippings, and assorted prints, paintings, maps, documents, tapes, reports and various other pieces of memorabilia.

One of the books has a special meaning for Dunn. It’s a copy of the controversial Cross Creek autographed by the author, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Miss Rawlings was being sued by a character in the book for invasion of privacy, and as reporter for the Tampa Daily Times, Dunn was covering her trial. He won the Associated Press Award for the Best News Story of 1946 in Florida for his coverage of the trial.

PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIAL

The gift, says Jay Dobkin, director of special collections, will vastly increase the library’s primary source material for early Florida—particularly photos.

The bulk of the collection, says Dunn, was put together during the past 25 or 30 years—primarily through a process of "haunting antique shops, flea markets and second-hand stores." Many items were also given to him by friends. His son’s roommate found the three aging court dockets, which Dunn considers to be one of his prizes, while he was renovating a dilapidated old house in Gainesville.

The Citrus County native, who is considered by many to be himself a walking history book of the area, says he assembled the materials to use as reference sources for his own writing. "I’ve been recording history day by day for many years now, and so I just got into writing history." He’s written more than a dozen books, including Yesterday’s Tampa and the recently published Wish You Were Here—A Grand Tour of Early Florida via Antique Post Cards.

WORLD WAR II VET
Dunn’s writing career began in 1932, when he published his first article as a Boy Scout correspondent for the Citrus County Chronicle. "I always wanted to be a reporter, although to this day I don’t know why," he says with a chuckle.

During World War II he served as both a public information officer and war correspondent, and later spent a brief period providing news commentary for WCKT-TV in Miami. Prior to joining the Peninsula Motor Club of the American Automobile Association as editor of its monthly magazine, Florida Explorer, he spent 22 years on the staff of the Tampa Daily Times, as both a reporter and managing editor.

The energetic 65-year-old Carrollwood resident says he decided to donate his library to USF as a way of celebrating his "golden anniversary" as a journalist. (Another account he gives has "his wife playing a major role in the decision: "Charlotte was about ready to throw both me and my junk out of the house!")

"Seriously, though," he says, "I wanted a good home for my collection. I like Jay (Dobkin) and I have a lot of confidence in him, and USF was an ideal spot because of their fine, new library. Everyone was quite gracious and Steve helped out a great deal with the transition."

"Steve" is Steve Lawson, an associate professor of history at USF and managing editor of Tampa Bay History, a local historical journal. In his work with Tampa Bay History, Lawson had often used Dunn’s photos and information for the semi-annual publication, and had even recruited him for its board of advisers. Through their working relationship Lawson realized the unusual nature of both the collection and the man.

"Although Hampton is a journalist, he is special in that he has a historian’s sense of the need to preserve," says Lawson. "My main concern was that such a valuable collection could be damaged or destroyed if a natural disaster, such as a fire or flood struck his house. If we didn’t protect our collections, we would lose a way of recording our past."

'THE REAL BEAUTY OF IT'

Dunn surveyed his cluttered den where most of his collection would remain until its transfer to USE He too spoke of the danger of loss, but in a different light: "There are treasures like these stored in every family, but once Ma and Pa die, their sons and daughters often throw it all away."

He gently lifted an old photograph from one of the shelves. It was a picture of Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, taken while she was visiting the Tampa area during the Spanish-American War. The only other known copy of the picture is on display at the Smithsonian Institution. His finger slid deftly across the photo to remove some dust.

"You know what the beauty of this is?" he asked, looking around at 30 years of work. "It’s all going to be taken care of. That’s the real beauty of it."

Rich Berube is a senior majoring in mass communications.