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UNLV Special Collections in the Twenty-First Century

Thomas Sommer

University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Special Collections is consistently striving to provide several avenues of discovery to its diverse range of patrons. Specifically, UNLV Special Collections has planned and implemented several online tools to facilitate unearthing treasures in the collections. These online tools incorporate Web 2.0 features as well as searchable interfaces to collections.

The University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Special Collections has been working toward creating a visible archival space in the twenty-first century that assists its patrons' quest for historical discovery in UNLV’s unique Southern Nevada, gaming, and Las Vegas collections. This effort has helped patrons ranging from researchers to students to residents. Special Collections has created a discovery environment that incorporates several points of access, including virtual exhibits, a collection-wide search box, and digital collections. UNLV Special Collections also has added Web 2.0 features to aid in the discovery and enrichment of this historical information. These new features range from a What’s New blog to a digital collection with interactive features.

The first point of discovery within the UNLV Special Collections website began with the virtual exhibits. Staff created the virtual exhibits as static HTML pages that showcased unique materials housed within UNLV Special Collections. They showed the scope and diversity of materials on a specific topic available to researchers, faculty, and students.

One virtual exhibit is “Dino at the Sands” (figure 1), a point of discovery for the history not only of Dean Martin but of many Rat Pack exploits. The photographs in this exhibit come from the Sands Collection. It is a static HTML page, and it provides information and pictures regarding one of Las Vegas’ most famous entertainers. This exhibit contains links to Rat Pack information and various resources on Dean Martin, including photographs, books, and videotapes.

A second mode of discovery within the UNLV Special Collections website is its new “Search Special Collections” Google-like search box (figure 2). This is located on the homepage and searches the manuscript, photograph, and oral history primary source collections. The purpose is to aid in the discovery of material within the collections that is not yet detailed in the public online catalog. In the past researchers would have to work through the Special Collection’s website to locate the resources. They can now go to one place to search for various types of material—a one-stop shop. The search results are easy to read and highlight the search term (see figure 3).

The third point of access is the digital collection. These collections are digital copies of original materials located within the archives. The digital copies are presented online, described, and organized for easy access. Each collection offers full-text searches, browsing, zoom, pan,
side-by-side comparison, and exporting for presentation and reuse.

The newest example of a digital collection is “Southern Nevada: The Boomtown Years” (figure 4). This collection brings together a wide range of original materials from various collections located within UNLV Special Collections, the Nevada State Museum, the Historical Society in Las Vegas, and the Clark County Heritage Museum. It even provides standards-based activities for elementary and high school students.

This project was funded by the Nevada State Library and Archives under the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) as amended through the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The newest digital project - Southern Nevada: The Boomtown Years, 1900-1925 - is now live. Access this fabulous collection of digitized photographs, correspondence, maps, ledgers, and more - along with a teacher's guide providing activities for grades 3-12. In eleven subject areas - at: http://digital.library.unlv.edu/btboomtown
and Library Services (IMLS). UNLV Special Collections Director Peter Michel selected the content. The team included fourteen members, four of whom were funded by the grant. Christy Keeler, PhD, created the educator pages and designed the student activities.

New collections are great, but users have to know they exist. To announce new collections and displays, Special Collections first added a What’s New blog that includes an RSS feed to keep patrons up-to-date on new messages (figure 5). Another avenue of interaction was implemented in April 2009 when Special Collections created its own Facebook page (figure 6). Students and researchers are encouraged to become fans. Status updates with images and links to southern Nevada and Las Vegas resources lead the fans back to the main website where the other treasures can be discovered.

Special Collections has implemented various Web 2.0 features within its newest digital collections. Specifically, it added a comments section, a “Rate It” feature, and an RSS feature to its latest digital collections (figures 7, 8, and 9). These latest trends enrich the collections’ resources with patron-supplied information.

As is apparent, UNLV Special Collections implemented several online tools to allow patrons to discover its extensive primary resources. These tools range from virtual exhibits and digital collections with Web 2.0 features to blogs and social networking sites. Special Collections has endeavored to stay on top of the latest trends to benefit its patrons and facilitate their discovery of historical materials in the twenty-first century.

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As previously mentioned, these easy-to-use tools can allow screencast videos and screenshots to be integrated into a variety of online spaces. A particularly effective type of online space for potential integration of such screencast videos and screenshots are library “how do I find . . .” research help guides. Many of these “how do I find . . .” research help guides serve as pathfinders for patrons, outlining processes for obtaining information sources. Currently, many of these pathfinders are in text form, and experimentation with the tools outlined in this article can empower library staff to enhance their own pathfinders with screencast videos and screenshot tutorials.

Reference