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Using the latest in technology to search the secrets of history

By Michelle Gregoire
UNH News Bureau

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Searching for bits and pieces of history, researchers these days increasingly turn to the Internet, browsing a museum or library collection from afar. Genealogists look for family names. Historians seek critical documents and personal papers. Collectors scan long lists for a specific item and then decide whether it's worth the trip to see it.

In 1995, when the University of New Hampshire's Dimond Library established its Web site for the Milne Special Collections and Archives (www.izaak.unh.edu), it recorded an average of about 5,000 "visits" a month from researchers off campus. A visit is a series of consecutive hits by a single user to a Web site for the purpose of retrieving content. In other words, people don't just hit and run, they stay and visit a while: typically four minutes at the Special Collections site. During the last year, that monthly average has grown to 13,000, with a peak of 19,000 visits in October. That's more than 10 times the number of people on campus who visit the site.

Researchers who come to the library after browsing the Web site know exactly what they are looking for and where to find it. Those who are too far flung to make the trip are able to find out what documents can be photocopied and mailed, and what is available in electronic copies.

"Now someone can sit at a computer anywhere in the world and learn what's in the collection," says Bill Ross, Special Collections librarian. "The sustained high use of the Web site indicates that we have done of good
job of describing materials, especially the manuscripts." And what an exhaustive job it is: There are nearly 100,000 published items in the 12 collections, ranging from state documents and early New Hampshire publications, to literature, jazz recordings and the photographs of Lotte Jacobi, and papers of 20th century New Hampshire poets and statesmen. The library also has early papers of environmental groups such as the Clamshell Alliance and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests.

The careful cataloging effort is beginning to pay off in unexpected ways. "About a year and a half ago, we started getting e-mails from prospective donors who have materials related to what we have presented on the Web," says Ross. "Many of the gifts have been Civil War items which have enhanced our collection. We have also purchased a few items from dealers and collectors, who have contacted us after using our Web site. These range from the letters of an 18th century Portsmouth merchant to first-edition 20th century books," he says.

One of the most noteworthy gifts came from descendants of a Civil War soldier, Thomas Carleton Cheney, who served in the 1st New Hampshire Battery Artillery for three years. Don and Edie Cheney, surfing the Web from Texas, found the Special Collections site with its holding of Civil War materials, and decided this was the place for Don's great-grandfather's personal items.

They donated the soldier's 50 letters and four diaries, his mess kit, and several small items he made to pass the time, such as wooden rings and several pairs of wooden pliers. "Cheney was a machinist and he did a lot of carving at the front," says Ross. Among the items is a scale model brass cannon, which Cheney made after the war, and a knife that he carried in his backpack, which carries the unmistakable imprint of a spent musket ball. "This knife probably saved his life," says Ross.

"Cheney's unit was in virtually every major battle of the Army of the Potomac -- Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, the Virginia Campaign of 1864," says Ross. In one letter, written from Culpepper Courthouse, Virginia, dated
Sept. 27, 1863, Cheney sounds weary: "Dear Father, Having a little leasure (sic) time today. I will improve it in writing to let you know where I am and that I am well. As you probably have already learned, the Army of the Potomac has been on the move again..."

Edie Cheney transcribed the letters and is in the process of transcribing the diaries. "In time, these documents will be among the manuscripts available in electronic form on the department's Web site," Ross says.

Other noteworthy recent acquisitions are letters and poems of poet May Sarton; a Web-based index of English country dances from 1651 to 1728; and a handwritten poem and an accompanying two-page letter by Robert Frost. The literature collection also includes papers of poets Jane Kenyon, Donald Hall, Galway Kinnell and Charles Simic, and materials pertaining to prominent writers Edwin Arlington Robinson, R. P. Tristram Coffin, Kenneth Roberts, Sarah Orne Jewett, Celia Thaxter and e.e. cummings.

Photographic collections include 1800s images of the Portsmouth Naval Ship Yard and the White Mountains; the Edwin Jay Roberts Collection of New Hampshire Lakes Region photographs, from 1913; and photos taken as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project and Historical American Building Survey.

Book collections include the Milne Angling Collection of more than 3,000 volumes; the Lewis M. Stark Early New Hampshire Imprint Collection, with more than 1,250 titles printed before the Civil War; and the David R. Proper Shaker Collection, with more than 200 titles, which complements a growing collection of materials relating to the New Hampshire Shaker communities.

"We really want to keep these kinds of materials in New Hampshire in public ownership," says Ross. And, increasingly, they are available at a glance from a computer halfway around the world.

For more information about the Milne Special Collections and Archives at UNH's Dimond Library, contact Ross at 862-0346.

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