ARCHIVING NEWSPAPER COMIC STRIPS:
THE SAN FRANCISCO ACADEMY OF
COMIC ART COLLECTION

BY AMY MCCORORY

ABSTRACT: This article describes a two-year project at The Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library (CGA) devoted to processing and describing newspaper comic strips from the collection of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art (SFACA), a nonprofit corporation founded by Bill Blackbeard in 1968. The SFACA collection is the largest known collection of cartoon art from American newspapers, so preserving its contents and making them accessible to researchers was essential to the study of this art form. Writing the finding aid to the collection required accommodation of Blackbeard’s collecting philosophy, observance of the rules of archival description, creation of a descriptive scheme that would meet researchers’ needs, and an approach that would fit within the framework of Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Although the challenges of processing the SFACA collection may seem unique to the comic strip format, archivists accustomed to working with more traditional documents will recognize shared concerns with original order, points of access, and other archival principles.

Introduction

In 1997, The Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library purchased the collection of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art, an institution founded in 1968 and devoted to collecting a variety of popular culture materials, including printed cartoon art. Over a two-year period, the staff of CGA organized materials from the SFACA and assembled a finding aid to the collection. We intended for the finding aid to reflect and expand upon the SFACA’s 30-year effort by pulling together the diverse parts of the collection while at the same time giving each part its adequate measure of description. The usual tasks of organizing the materials and writing a finding aid for them were complicated by the fact that printed cartoons appear in a variety of formats in publications owned, operated, and supervised by various publishing companies. Within this collection, some of the cartoons remained in the newspapers in which they were originally published. In other cases, the SFACA’s creator had removed them from the news-
papers, casting them into new formats—the clipping and the tear sheet—that lacked contextual information. One of the primary challenges of the project was to design a finding aid that would encompass this variety of formats. EAD emerged as a useful tool, both in encoding text and in unifying diverse electronic files into a descriptive whole.

**The Blackbeard Collection from San Francisco to The Ohio State University**

Bill Blackbeard began the SFACA collection in the late 1960s at his home in San Francisco. His stated goal was to collect “popular narrative art” in all its forms. The entire collection is too complex to describe in detail here, but merits a brief overview. Its materials included, in addition to comic strips, bound newspapers (more than 1,600 volumes dating from the 1880s); popular fiction (more than 25,000 volumes dating from the mid-eighteenth century); periodicals (more than 11,000 issues dating from 1890); dime novels and story papers (more than 700 titles dating from the Civil War); Victorian cartoon-illustrated fiction (more than 250 volumes, including illustrated novels by Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and others); British boys’ papers and “penny dreadfuls” (more than 100 titles dating from 1860); comic books and graphic novels (more than 7,500 dating from 1929); popular films; reference works on narrative art; newspaper comic strip reprint books; and science fiction fanzines, among other things. The collection filled 14 rooms of a two-story, 4,000-square-foot house.

Blackbeard’s choice of the expression “popular narrative art” is as good as any to describe the holdings of the SFACA. The phrase encompasses both written and pictorial art and points to the interrelatedness of words and pictures in many of the books, magazines, and story papers he chose to collect. This relationship reached a highly developed and refined form in the modern comic strip, for which cartoonist Will Eisner coined the term “sequential art.” Blackbeard’s sizeable collection, which turned his home into a floor-to-ceiling maze of vertically stacked materials, represents an attempt to trace and preserve the evolution of storytelling that combines words and pictures to produce this third, entirely different kind of narrative. Because the mass-published art and literature of the nineteenth century informed the comic strips that emerged in the twentieth, Blackbeard actively collected both.

The impulse to collect comic strips arrived in the late 1960s when he decided to write a history of the newspaper comic strip in America. He quickly found that no comprehensive collection of such materials, suitable for research, existed. During the same period, he learned that many libraries were disposing of bound newspapers after microfilming them. To acquire these materials, he founded the nonprofit SFACA. He began collecting newspapers from California libraries, later expanding his collecting activity to institutions nationwide, including the Library of Congress. Some of the newspapers he acquired were still intact in their binders, but many had been cut apart for microfilming, the separated pages stacked in the order of their original pagination. Blackbeard kept some of these disjointed newspapers as they were and cut others apart in order to create chronological runs of comic strips. This meant either cutting several years’ worth
of single comic strips out of the pages or removing comic sections whole. He kept the bound newspapers intact.

Cartoonists and comics historians have long understood the importance of the collection, but its research applications may not be immediately apparent to others. Most people see cartoon art on an almost daily basis, perhaps so often that they fail to grasp one of its most valuable features: that cartoonists are quite precise (often merciless) in their jests at dress, mannerisms, posture, speech, assumptions and prejudices, modes of political dishonesty, styles in the decoration of domiciles and public spaces, and the pointed discomforts of domestic and social discord—in short, all of the elements that show, in the most immediate manner, what individuals and their larger environment are like in a given time and place. Paul Bourget noted this fact in an illustrated piece on American humor, written for the *New York Herald* in 1894. On the subject of “comic newspapers,” he wrote: “Without exaggerating the importance of these pamphlets, we must recognize in them, in every country, a certain documentary value. They characterize the humor of the race and its delight in mockery. Besides, you will find in them a thousand details of habits, noted on the spur of the moment, and which their exaggeration renders still more perceptible to the traveller.”

In 1996, Blackbeard learned that he would lose the lease on his home and be forced to sell his collection. Selling items piecemeal to individual collectors would have netted a substantial monetary return over time, but it would also have destroyed the most comprehensive collection of American newspaper cartoon art extant. Recognizing the importance of keeping the collection intact and making its contents widely known, The Ohio State University Libraries negotiated with Blackbeard over the course of a year regarding its disposition. They reached an agreement, and the materials, 75 tons in all, were transported to Ohio in six moving vans.

CGA was well equipped to process and house this valuable collection. One of five special collections in The Ohio State University Libraries (OSUL), it was established in 1977 with the gifts in kind of the Milton Caniff and Jon Whitcomb collections. Its mission is to collect printed cartoon art of all kinds, including comic strips, editorial cartoons, sports cartoons, magazine cartoons, comic books, and graphic novels, and to provide access to these materials. Its collections include both published and original art, as well as materials documenting the careers of cartoonists and the activities of cartoonists’ professional associations. Altogether, it holds more than 370,000 graphic materials, making it the largest academic research facility documenting printed cartoon art in the United States.

The curator applied for a two-year grant to support work on the collection and received funding from the Getty Foundation, the Scripps Howard Foundation, and the Charles D. Farber Memorial Foundation. In July 2000, I was hired as the project archivist and began deciding, in consultation with the curator, how to process the materials. I hired several university students to assist with the project; all descriptions of activities in this article that begin with the pronoun “we” signal that these were collective activities in which my assistants’ ideas and observations shaped my decisions about processing the collection.

CGA’s organization and description of the SFACA collection were influenced from the start by the fact that this collection was already well known and had, long before its
arrival at Ohio State, an active user community. Often referred to as “the Blackbeard collection,” it had for many years provided researchers with source material for cartoon histories and reprint volumes. Numerous articles and over 75 books had been produced using SFACA materials, most notably the Fantagraphics reprint library of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, Winsor McCay’s opulently surreal classic. Comics historians were accustomed to making the trip to Blackbeard’s house in San Francisco to view cartoons and other illustrated materials dating back to the nineteenth century.

CGA had already been in operation for more than 20 years when it purchased the SFACA collection, so the curator could anticipate the nature of researchers’ requests. When historians were, for instance, interested in researching a particular comic feature, their interest was often focused on a limited span of years because the creative personnel had changed several times during the life of the feature. Often, a request centered on a single date or small group of dates, particularly if these examples were missing from privately held comic strip collections. When material was needed for reprint books, it was important to know how complete the holdings of a particular title were. There was tremendous interest in the creative giants of cartoon art, such as McCay, George Herriman, and E. C. Segar, so that individual works—particularly early or obscure works—by these highly prolific artists were of great importance.

**The Challenges of Preserving and Arranging Clippings, Sections, and Tear Sheets**

The goal of the two-year project was to organize and make available the newspaper comic strips from the SFACA collection. (Monographs, serials, and bound newspapers were excluded from this work flow; existing library staff in the OSUL Special Collections Cataloging Department cataloged them.) The newspaper comic strips consisted of some 2.5 million comic clippings, comic sections, and tear sheets, dated from 1894 to 1996. Some explanation of the three different formats is helpful in illuminating the unique problems of organization, storage, and description that presented themselves with this collection.

The *clippings* were single comic strips Blackbeard cut from newspapers in an attempt to establish a complete, or near-complete, run of each comic feature. The *comic sections* were primarily Sunday color sections, which Blackbeard kept intact. These dated from 1894, the first year in which American newspapers published four-color comic sections. The *tear sheets* were single pages Blackbeard cut from Sunday comic sections. They featured either half-page or full-page comic strips; devoting an entire Sunday page to a popular comic feature was common in American newspapers until the 1950s. The tear sheets made it possible to establish a long Sunday run of a single feature in its best presentation, that is, in the largest format possible. The versos of the pages included additional comic strips.

The two major tasks to be accomplished were organizing the comic clippings and tear sheets and providing access to the contents of the comic sections. The comic sections carried contextual information—newspaper titles and dates of publication—about the comic strips on their pages. The clippings and tear sheets usually retained the date
information (though not always); the names of the newspapers had, in most cases, been lost when the comics were cut out. Each format had to be considered separately in decisions about processing, storage, and description.

As with most collections, the SFACA materials ranged in condition from excellent to very poor. The usual issues in deciding about storage and use of fragile materials were shaded by the fact that these cartoons existed on newsprint. CGA’s longstanding practice was to retain newspaper cartoons in their original printed format, a commitment supported by the university libraries’ administration. A literature survey undertaken to further explore newspaper preservation practices turned up very little. Most of the articles assumed a short life span for newsprint and recommended preservation photocopying or microfilming. Advice about preservation of the paper itself was available at the Web sites of the Library of Congress (LOC) and the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC). We incorporated the LOC and NEDCC guidelines into existing CGA practices, keeping the paper stored away from light, heat, and humidity; providing adequate support for materials so that they could be handled without causing damage; and repairing tears when necessary.

Comic clippings varied in size from 3 x 10 cm (1 1/4" x 3") to 20 x 50 cm (8" x 20"). We arranged these chronologically in stacks, usually of one year each, wrapped them in acid-free paper, and stacked them in appropriately sized archival boxes. We placed tear sheets, usually 41 x 52 cm (16" x 21") in heavy folders and stored them in larger archival boxes. We interleaved fragile tear sheets with acid-free bond paper so that they could be lifted by the edges of the interleaving paper instead of by their own edges. We enclosed extremely fragile tear sheets in clear polyester folders.

Sunday comic sections required more elaborate storage. We processed the oldest sections first, since these were often rare and contained little-known material. So that researchers would be able to page through them, seeing the Sunday supplements as a casual reader would have a century ago, we placed these in clear polyester folders, sealed along one edge, and interleaved them with bond sheets. This method of storage ensured that even fragile pages could be carefully turned, using heavy acid-free strips of paper to lift their edges without damage occurring.

After consulting the LOC and NEDCC Web sites and working with OSUL’s conservator, I decided to repair damaged items with heat-sensitive tissue. The conservator tinted the repair tissue with aniline dyes to match the various tones of older newsprint. A small percentage of the pages were so brittle that the application of heat-sensitive tissue could have increased the damage. Therefore, we simply placed them in polyester enclosures with written instructions that only CGA staff were allowed to handle them.

Our efforts to arrange the SFACA collection were complicated by the fact that Blackbeard had never created a written index or catalog for his collection. Having lived with the collection as it grew over 30 years’ time, he knew the locations of the groups of materials in his house and could retrieve items without reference to any printed guide. The original order of the collection as a whole was lost during the packing and transport of the materials from California to Ohio. However, within some of the boxes, Blackbeard’s arrangement of the materials was plain: he grouped some items in order to emphasize a particular comic feature, others to show the work of a single artist, and
others to establish the output of a newspaper or syndicate during a certain period. Our task was to reassemble the items in a way that would reflect their collector’s intentions.

We sorted comic clippings by title and date. The entire run of a single comic feature could range anywhere from two days to seven decades. Each feature was generally dispersed among many boxes: a year of clippings in one box, several years in another, a few months in another, perhaps a stray week or two in each of several other boxes. Some groups of clippings arrived at CGA neatly stacked and in date order; others needed substantial reordering. Given that there were hundreds of boxes and several filing cabinets full of clippings, it was necessary to create a system of temporary numbers to track the strips as we sorted them and recorded their dates.

Previously accessioned collections of comic strips at CGA had been accounted for on a photocopied month-and-date grid. Each grid represented a one-year run of the comic; location numbers had been written in by hand. I decided to replicate this system electronically in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. This not only provided a compact presentation of holdings information for the public, it served as a simple environment for library staff to track dates, and could be edited as necessary. In particular, it was very easy to replace temporary location numbers with permanent numbers when processing was completed. We converted the spreadsheets to Portable Document Format (PDF) for on-line presentation (figure 1).

Sorting continuing runs of comic strips by date was not as straightforward a task as one might expect. To begin with, date information was not always available. Usually, the cartoonist had written the month and date on the original art used for reproduction; the year, as a part of the syndicate’s copyright notice, was printed on the item at the time of its initial publication. However, some comic strips—particularly those published in the first quarter of the twentieth century—lacked date information. As clippings, they had, by definition, lost the contextual publication information provided by the newspapers, unless they had appeared near the top of the page and Blackbeard had clipped them to preserve the banner date.

Sometimes, text on the verso of a clipping provided clues. Movie advertisements, war and other news coverage, new car sales, baseball scores, and boxing match decisions were helpful in identifying years. Dated wire stories could help to establish the correct sequence for a group of clippings. Most welcome of all were legal notices, since these had to include the month, date, and year. Some groups of clippings included both dated and undated material so that it was necessary to read the comic strips, relying on a continuing story line to infer chronological order (this was not always an unwelcome task).

In some cases, it was impossible to assign dates to a group of clippings, for example, when Blackbeard had clipped them from various newspapers that had run them on different days. We used the cartoonist’s handwritten date in these cases, since it transcended the differences in the publication schedules of the outlets in which the work appeared. Lacking such information from the artist, we concluded that such comic strips had no single identifiable date; it was often impossible to determine whether SFACA holdings for the feature were truly complete.

At times, gaps in the date run were the result of factors other than missing items. Although historians agree that the first continuing daily strip appeared in 1903, not all
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>December</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-4</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-1-5</td>
<td>SFS18-1-8</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-1-9</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-1</td>
<td>SFS18-2-9</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFS18-1-1</td>
<td>SFS18-1-7</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-2</td>
<td>SFS18-3-9</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-4</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-10</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-10</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-2</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-7</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-1-8</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-3</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-6</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-3</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFS18-1-1</td>
<td>SFS18-1-5</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-11</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-2-8</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-5</td>
<td>SFC20</td>
<td>SFS18-3-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dailies published in the New York World; duplicates and date conflicts may exist when checked against other holdings for 1919.

SFS18 Sundays published in the Nashville Banner; SFS20-2-1 Sunday published in the Washington Star.

Includes four panel strip entitled "Bolsheviki" in the month of March.
“daily” features ran every day; the reasons for this varied. The early years of Bud Fisher’s *Mutt and Jeff*, which began publication in 1907, provide one example. Gaps in the SFACA run of *Mutt and Jeff* might be attributed to missing copies in the collection or, just as likely, to Fisher’s sudden, self-elected vacations, during which he would abruptly leave work for a month to travel in Mexico (and was always welcomed back, as his work was hugely popular).

To finally establish the completeness of this collection, one could research every issue of the relevant American newspapers back to 1894, but there would still be uncertainties. Newspaper strikes and mail strikes could interfere with the regular appearance of a comic feature in a particular publication, as could a publisher’s decision to stop running a feature that continued to run in other newspapers. The existence of a comic strip both as an artist’s creation and as a commercial entity, reprinted in hundreds of different outlets, complicates its reassembly in a single collection.

Comic sections and tear sheets required slightly different working methods from that of the clippings. By definition, each item always contained more than one comic feature. Early comic sections, in addition to containing comic strips, could be the subject of research themselves as examples of turn-of-the-century graphic design, each publication incorporating comic strips, illustrations, stories, advertisements, and other features presented in a distinctive style. Accordingly, we treated comic sections in two ways. First, we tracked their comic strips in the same spreadsheets we used for the comic clippings. Second, in the finding aid to the collection, we recorded each comic section as a physical item, noting the title and date of the newspaper from which Blackbeard had removed it.

Tear sheets possessed some of the qualities of the comic sections. They contained multiple comic features and, in some cases, had banners presenting the newspapers’ titles and dates. Blackbeard’s treatment of them, however, established that their role in the collection was closer to that of the clippings. He had assembled each group of tear sheets with an eye toward creating a run of one particular comic feature; identifying information about the newspaper from which they had been taken might or might not be present. The contextual information was clearly secondary to the goal of assembling one comic title in one place. Accordingly, we processed them in much the same way as the clippings. The tear sheets were not described as items in themselves, but were treated solely as carriers for comic features.

Illustrated advertisements, often presented in the form of comic strips, were a common element in both the comic sections and the tear sheets. We created spreadsheets for these as well, the file names corresponding to the name of the product advertised. Advertisement comics were usually unsigned or signed with a pseudonym. In most cases, the artists were unknown, but in the few cases where the creator’s name was a matter of record, we added it to the description.

**Digital Imaging**

The other major activity of the SFACA project was the creation of digital images of selected items in the collection. We chose a single representative panel for each comic feature, either scanning or photographing the material, depending on its size. A digital
imaging specialist established standards and procedures for the project and trained the rest of the staff in creating images.

We scanned color and black-and-white materials alike in 24-bit color, creating a thumbnail and reference image for each. General guidelines for the project stated that the size of reference images should not exceed 100K, but allowances were made for cartoons whose details could not be appreciated unless the entire digital image were larger. Sometimes, the colors produced by the digital camera were markedly different from those of the original item. In these cases, we adjusted color levels in Photoshop, aiming to make the digital surrogates as close to the originals as possible. However, we made no attempt to digitally “clean up” images or correct flaws such as tattered or torn edges, yellowed newsprint, or faded inks; such characteristics were all considered inherent parts of the objects, telling much about their creation and subsequent history.

We considered batch processing of images for presentation on the Web, but decided against it. The size and proportions of newspaper comic strips one hundred years ago were quite different from what they are today. In general, they were much larger overall and the relative size of the lettering in relation to the images was smaller. In the interest of transmitting to viewers a sense of these differences, we resized each image individually, choosing the most suitable dimensions for each.

**Describing a Popular Culture Format**

Once the work flow for sorting materials, creating spreadsheets, and scanning images was established, work on the central part of the finding aid to the collection began. This was conceived as an on-line document that would present simple records for the materials, those records linking to the more detailed holdings information in the PDFs. The finding aid was divided into two series, the first for comic features, the second for comic sections. (Two additional series, one for the illustrated advertisements and one for early noncontinuing cartoons by important artists, are in development at the time of this writing.) The entire finding aid can be viewed on the Web at <http://dlib.lib.ohio-state.edu/cga>.

**Series I: Comic Features**

I organized the first series alphabetically by the titles of the comic features. This arrangement was best suited to the needs of researchers who, as noted earlier, would be interested in particular creative works and would want to locate titles easily. Each record included creator names, when possible, and beginning and ending dates of SFACA collection holdings for the feature. Container numbers were not a part of the records in the first series, since they already appeared in the spreadsheets. A sequential listing of container numbers would have been impossible for many of the records, since the comic features were stored in multiple, often nonadjacent boxes as a result of their varying sizes and formats.

We followed CGA’s established practice of using the general term “creator” to credit all creative personnel: writers, artists, and those who assumed both roles. We assigned credit according to names appearing on the comic strips; no attempt was made to list all
of the artists and writers who might have assisted, without credit, on a given strip. Primary information about "ghosts" is available only through personal accounts or through syndicate records, which may be incomplete or nonexistent, and that require careful research to weed out inconsistencies and false claims. *The Stripper's Guide*, a database of information about comic strips and their creators, already contains abundant and detailed artist and writer information. Rather than repeat it, the SFACA finding aid referred researchers to *The Stripper's Guide* for the more in-depth history.

Assignment of titles to the comic features could be complicated. Contemporary readers of comic strips are used to stability in feature titles and may assume that a 50-year *Peanuts* or 72-year *Gasoline Alley* is typical. But the medium in its youth was often unpredictable and subject to sudden changes of all kinds, and titles were no exception. Title changes might occur as a comic strip evolved over time, with the strip's most prominent character giving way to another or the theme of the strip changing significantly. The feature *Joe Jinks*, for example, which began as *Joe's Car* in 1917, went through the succeeding titles *Joe Jinks*, *Curley Kayoe*, *Buttons*, and finally *Davy Jones*, ending in 1971.

Many early comic strips carried a new title each day; some appeared with no title at all. Occasionally, newspapers printed their own versions of titles above the strips. Some apparent title changes were simply alternate titles the artist used, never settling on one choice. Rube Goldberg, a prolific artist who was apparently never troubled by the primary demand of newspaper comic work, namely, coming up with a new idea every day, frequently produced more than one comic a day, nesting an additional one-or-two-panel gag inside of the already complicated main feature. He was not overly concerned with consistency in naming his creations, so that his daily strip and the secondary strip might each carry one of several different titles, which were recycled on no particular schedule. Bud Fisher was even freer in his early work, changing the format and theme of *Mutt and Jeff* as it suited him, often leaving gag-a-day conventions behind and veering off into political satire or odd essays on contemporary slang, and titling the creations at will.

Even more difficult were features whose artists jumped from newspaper to newspaper and syndicate to syndicate, taking their creations with them, sometimes able to retain their original titles, at other times forced to change them due to a copyright suit brought by the original syndicate. In some cases, it was impossible to determine whether two differently titled features drawn by the same artist and looking very much alike should be described as two separate creations or a single feature with a title change. *The Stripper's Guide* was often helpful in this regard, although on some occasions we had to make an arbitrary call based solely on the materials in hand.

We chose a uniform title for each comic feature, basing the choice either on the uniform titles used in *The Stripper's Guide*, information from a reference book or Web site on comics history, or a local decision made by looking at the complete run of materials and choosing the most likely candidate for an overarching title. With an eye toward simplicity in the finding aid, all title changes—earlier and later titles, alternate titles, and unstable titles—were identified in the finding aid as "alternate titles." They were listed in the order of their successive appearance (if there was any order), usually with little or no annotation. More detailed explanations, if they were necessary, were provided in the PDFs with the detailed listings of holdings. In addition to a title or titles,
creator names, and dates, each record in the first series included a link to the representative image of the comic feature and links to the PDFs.

**Series II: Comic Sections**

I organized the second series alphabetically by the titles of the newspapers in which the comic sections appeared. Individual records for each comic section were filed chronologically below the appropriate newspaper titles. No attempt was made to record the history of newspaper title changes. I simply created a record for each separate title, filing the records alphabetically along with the appropriate span of dates.

It became apparent that, for the oldest comic sections, an additional level of description would be needed to account for some of the items in their pages. Had their content been entirely stable with the regular appearance of the same continuing comic features, these features could have been tracked in spreadsheets. But in the comic sections of the late 1890s and early 1900s, there was a proliferation of material that occurred only once, much of it in some format other than the comic strip. Librarians and archivists accustomed to describing avant garde collections will recognize many of the problems that arise when one tries to apply standardized description to materials created by artists enjoying the freedom of a new, experimental format.

This creative freedom is what makes reading comic sections from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth so rewarding. The pages are crowded with artistic inspiration, ranging from simple, middlebrow genre pieces to freewheeling experiments in storytelling, employing virtuoso illustration and antic wordplay. The generous page space allotted to comics at the time fostered all types of expression. Some works depict high-speed physical comedy, their punch lines a wild scramble of objects pulled into a chaotic and inevitable clash of forces; others are stately in their narrative pacing and pictorial elaboration, slowing the reader down so that every detail may be absorbed (figures 2 and 3). Though this was the period when the standard six-panel, half-page allotment for the newspaper comic strip emerged, it was also the period when the best artists regularly deviated from the format. In their work, the action crosses panels or bursts out of them altogether; perspective and layout are bent and twisted in order to reflect altered states of perception or heightened emotion. Some artists decorated the margins of the pages with additional illustrations, embellishing, commenting, or expanding upon the theme or action of the central cartoon.

These experiments were possible because comic sections were a new invention and no one knew exactly what they should look like. In many newspaper comic sections, comic strips and panel cartoons shared space with editorial cartoons; paper dolls, puzzles, models, and decorations meant to be cut out; illustrated poems, stories, sheet music, and vaudeville-style, two-line exchanges; feature articles with spot illustrations; and full-page cover art. Staff artists might work in several of these genres, in addition to the comic strip. A single artist often created several new comic strips in one year, some of them running for decades afterwards, others appearing only a few times before they were abandoned. There were strips that appeared one time only (“one-shots,” to use today’s term), with vividly imagined characters—either human or animal, or talking, thinking, havoc-wreaking inanimate objects—never to be used again.
Tracking of these additional materials began during the two-year, grant-funded project, but time did not permit describing the artistic content of all of the comic sections included in the finding aid. Furthermore, it was not called for in the terms of the grant, where the emphasis was upon recording continuing comic strips. However, recording the one-shots and other obscure items was important because, in many cases, they were the work of major newspaper cartoonists, either those who were already well established in nineteenth-century American and British humor magazines or those who began their careers at turn-of-the-century newspapers and went on to become famous. Recording of most of these items had to be postponed until after the end of the initial two-year project. After the project deadline, we undertook the creation of records of artists’ early works and are still adding these records to the on-line finding aid. We employ format and genre terms for printed cartoons created by the Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest, expanding upon them as needed.

Figure 2: Hungry Hal, “The Glorious Fourth of July in Funnyville” (detail), by DeVoss Woodward Driscoll. From the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, July 3, 1904.

Figure 3: Little Nemo in Slumberland (detail), by Winsor McCay. From the Oakland Herald, May 12, 1906.
Incorporation of EAD

The Getty Foundation grant required that the finding aid be written in Extensible Markup Language (XML) using the Document Type Definition (DTD) for EAD. I used an authoring environment created and distributed by Christopher Prom at the University of Illinois, which incorporated EAD Cookbook templates into NoteTab Pro software. The image files and the PDFs listing the extent of holdings for each comic feature resided on the same server as the main body of the finding aid. Two types of EAD linking elements, one for descriptive elements external to the main finding aid and the other for digital images of collection items, joined them in a complete collection description.

OSUL’s Web librarian designed a style sheet for the finding aid in Extensible Stylesheet Language (XSL). Transformation from the XML file to a single HTML file would have presented researchers with a lengthy Web page containing more than 1,000 individual records so, instead, the output was broken into multiple files. The main page of the finding aid included the overview of the collection and the two series titles with their accompanying scope and content notes. These notes were followed by links to the HTML files containing the records of comic features and comic sections. The style sheet, while outputting the alphabetical list of comic titles in the first series, generated a separate HTML file for each initial alphabetical letter. Second series records were output according to newspaper titles with a separate HTML file for each title.

As more finding aids are developed for on-line presentation, it is likely that archivists will stop thinking of linked objects as “external” to the on-line document. The finding aid may then be seen as a group of files of varying types rather than as a single XML or HTML instance. The fact that some large on-line finding aids already exist as a group of separate HTML files, with or without other file formats involved, may lead practitioners to adopt this view.

Conclusion

Every archival collection, in addition to reflecting the ideas of its creator, is made up of materials that have their own history. Archivists are expected to describe these materials in a way that informs researchers of their potential usefulness, but often the features to be described are elusive in nature. In the SFACA collection, information about the elements that constituted our records—creator, title and date—was at times difficult to identify. Additionally, the comic strips’ existence as printed items, appearing in a variety of formats in numerous publications, meant that grouping them and describing them collectively could be complicated. This fact runs counter to assumptions about mass-produced materials: that they will be highly standardized, with little deviation from the recognized standard. In fact, these items demonstrate that the products of industrialized culture can possess as many idiosyncrasies as the more personal objects—manuscripts, correspondence, and photographs, for instance—that make up traditional archival collections. Both types of materials can require archivists to expand existing subject vocabularies and to rethink the intellectual organization of collection descriptions.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Amy McCrory is an archivist and EAD specialist at The Ohio State University Libraries in Columbus, Ohio. She received her M.L.S. from Clark Atlanta University, and her B.A. in art from Northwestern University. The author would like to thank Lucy Shelton Caswell, Michael Doylen, and Beth M. Russell for the advice they offered on the writing of this article.

NOTES

1. The acronym “CGA” was assigned to the Cartoon Research Library when its former appellation, Cartoon and Graphic Arts Library, was still in use. “CGA” remains the abbreviated form used within the university libraries, both in automated records and in everyday communications.


9. A large and growing database of information about comic strips in American newspapers does, in fact, exist. The Stripper’s Guide, a subscription database distributed on CD, is based on research of newspapers, materials from comic strip collections, and reference works such as the Chronology of American Comic Strips. Though it contains thousands of records, its creator states in the introduction to the database that it is “nowhere near comprehensive” and the beginning and ending dates of many comic features are uncertain.

