

Report to Alpha Chi National Office and National Council on the May 21, 2019 Visit to the Alpha Chi Archives

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1. Introduction and content

As the Alpha Chi national office is aware, I visited the Library at Southwestern University on May 21, 2019 and had a meeting with the Library staff members who currently are most involved with the Alpha Chi Archives collection. This is a report of that meeting.

I begin with an introduction to the campus, and more specifically the Library where the collection is maintained, which may be of interest (and use) to those not intimately familiar with the location. Included is some specific information on the Alpha Chi holdings. This is followed by a summary of our discussions during the meeting and a report on the state of the collection and current work being done on it. Finally, since use of the Archives will be critical during the next several years, I include in Appendix A some guidelines for on-site use of the collection.

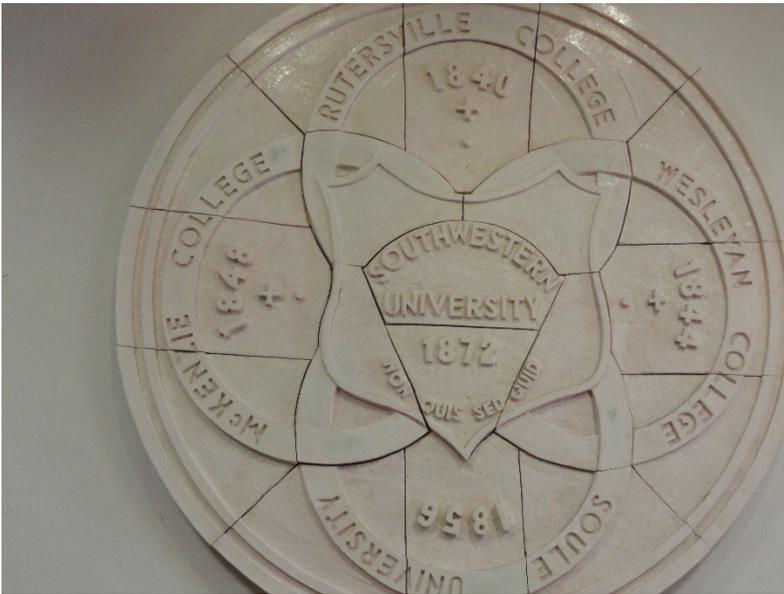
2. The campus, the Library, and the Special Collections areas

Southwestern University is a small school with a beautiful campus and a prominent University atmosphere. One gets the feeling that there is a strong sense of tradition and history (see photo of University seal below) on its campus, which enhances its relevance as a location for the Alpha Chi Archives. As befits a small, historic school, even campus service organizations are housed in old, historical stone houses and similar structures. The campus conveys well a sense of what some of the host colleges of Alpha Chi chapters might have been like during the early days of the Society (see photos below).





Campus views



University Seal

The main library is housed in an older stone building of very attractive construction. Its interior is well lighted and very conducive to its intended use. The facilities of the building are modern while maintaining a historical ambiance.





Views of main library and a typical study area

The **Special Collections** area houses, other archive collections as well as that of Alpha Chi, one of the more notable being the papers of Senator John Tower, for which the archives area of the Library is named.

The Special Collections reading room is spacious and well lit, with tall windows reflecting an earlier era. An interior balcony, accessed by means of an attractive stairway, enhances the sense of unhurried quietness, and the visitor senses an encouragement to do quiet reading or research.







Views of Special Collections entrance, lobby, and reading areas

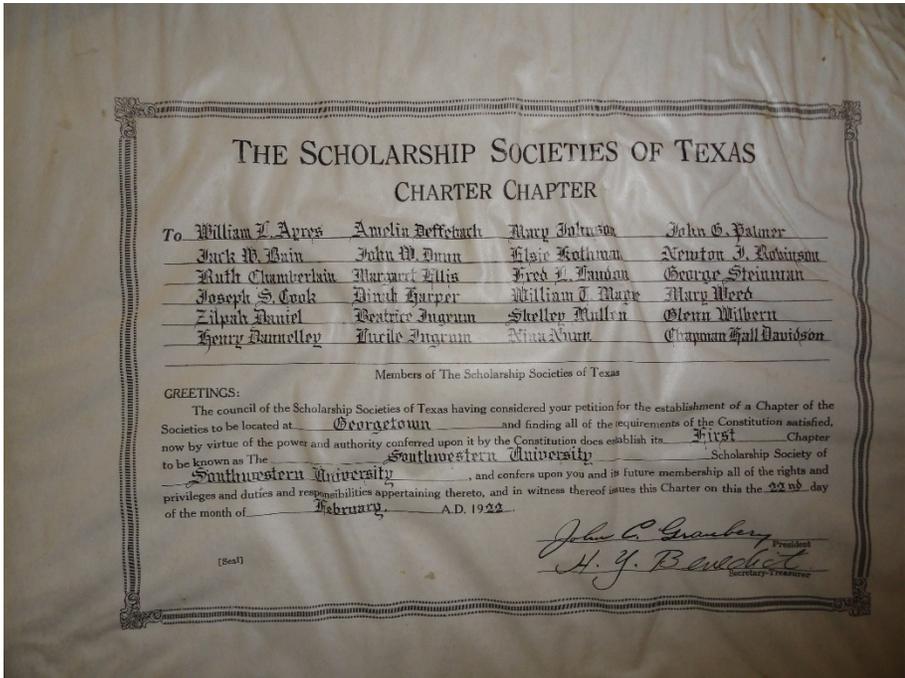
Archived collections are housed in a secured vault area (see photo below). Documents are typically kept in “boxes” as shown, whose contents are identified. These boxes are brought to the reading room by Library staff as requested. A group of these boxes positioned in accessible cases in the reading room for my use can be seen in the last photo above. The collection contains some memorabilia items as well, which may be viewed if desired.

For those interested in visiting the collection, some of the use policies and hours are outlined in Appendix A of this report.



Items in vault

The Alpha Chi collection contains a wide variety of items, including documents relating to significant historical milestones. For example, an original first charter from the predecessor organization is shown below. All of this material appears to be very well cared for.



An original first charter from the predecessor organization of Alpha Chi

2. The May 21 meeting

Arriving on time, I was impressed to find staff from Special Collections, as well as the Library director, Carol Fonken, waiting near the Library entrance for me. Earlier in the Spring I had several cordial email exchanges with Carol Fonken, who assumed that position recently, and it was she who referred me to the (also new) head of Special Collections, Megan Firestone. Also present was Anne Veerkamp, who as I recall was the person who set up several of my early visits to the collection and in fact had prepared the collection for my inspection on my first visit, under the direction of Kathryn Stallard with whom I had several contacts prior to her leaving the position. A photo of Megan Firestone and Anne Veerkamp taken at the time of our recent meeting is shown below.



Megan Firestone (left) and Anne Veerkamp

Also present for our entire meeting was a summer student, Jax Luera, who I understand will be doing some maintenance work on the Special Collections this summer. As in all of my previous visits, I sensed a real interest on the part of all of the staff regarding the Alpha Chi collection and a willingness to work with the society in maintaining it and making it appropriately available. In all, our meeting, which lasted a good part of the afternoon, was very pleasant and productive.

As mentioned earlier, Megan Firestone is relatively new to the position (I think that she assumed it early this year). Although she appears young, she has some very impressive experience with collections in government (e.g., the U. S. Air Force) and the private sector and it was evident that she brings a real enthusiasm, as well as impressive credentials, to the position. Anne has been with the Library for some time, and I recall that she was one of the persons who showed me around the collection in one of my early visits. Thus there is some meaningful continuity, as well as "new blood", in the staff.

From the director (Carol) on down, there seems to be a real interest in working with Alpha Chi, in maintaining and making the collection more accessible (for any interested researchers as well as to a designated Alpha Chi historian) and in preparing for the upcoming centennial visit.

You may recall that I had not visited the Library for about two years, although during the first year after my last visit I had had some continuing contact with Jason Dean, who had been hired to head special collections with the title of Director. With his departure last summer, and the resulting staffing changes, not much has evidently been done to the collection this year. Megan has been familiarizing herself with the component collections under her Special Collections auspices and has been reviewing and establishing some policies regarding acceptance and cataloging of materials as well as their preservation and use.

3. Issues discussed

We began by discussing some general ideas concerning Special Collections use, care, and management. I learned that the Special Collections office hosted approximately 700 users during the past year, and that use of these collections seems to be "picking up". Since the archives include the Senator John Tower collection and other items of importance to Texas history, no doubt the largest amount of use has been in those areas.

I raised the issue of regular contributions from the Alpha Chi national office, the National Council, and the regional officers. Megan did not have any information immediately available on this (which is understandable considering that she is new to the position), but I pointed out its importance and the fact that material from the national office was routinely received and incorporated into the collection in the past. We are not sure at this point if this is still happening; once or twice in the past we had to seemingly “jump-start” the process. ***Over the coming months, Megan will be reviewing the Alpha Collection with special emphasis on making sure that the pathway is open for timely receipt and documentation of new items from the national office, as well as from the regions and from individual chapters.*** She agreed to get back with me on developments in this process. Of course, I emphasized the upcoming centennial and the planned Austin meeting. I got the opinion that the Library staff will cooperate fully with the Alpha Chi national office in hosting visits to the collection and working with whoever will be updating the organization’s history volume.

In reviewing the collection preliminarily, based on her past experience with similar organizations, Megan expressed some surprise at not seeing much local material, such as initiation programs and meeting minutes. She considers it a weakness that some of the very meaningful types of submissions have been from only a few interested chapters. Of course, this has been a topic of concern on myself and the Alpha Chi national office for some time. She mentioned that she has some ideas on encouraging this and offered to put together a list of the kinds of things the library should see from chapters, and a set of guidelines for routing and submission of materials, which I look forward to seeing factored into national-office announcements. Addressing issues such as this should be useful as the Library staff review the collection’s holdings and limitations. As before, tradeoffs involving a representative sample of material versus space limitation were raised.

Of course, in today’s world, it may not be necessary for chapters to box up a large number of physical documents to provide; good digital replicas (in color if warranted) can be easily made in locations, and in fact, much correspondence will be in digital form already. Such factors, we noted, might make chapter submissions more likely, and will certainly make them easier. Furthermore, I have sensed from time to time over the past few years that a reluctance to part with originals might be a factor in limiting what has been placed in the archives, and the ease of quality digital copying will overcome this. Furthermore, it is likely that local chapters will be motivated to provide digital copies of what they consider of importance simply out of local pride! Of course, we should encourage the continued submission of a certain amount of memorabilia for its historic and general-interest value (the Archives contain a moderate but quite impressive amount of this kind of materials already).

Quite a bit of **cataloging** has evidently been done on much of the Alpha Chi collection in recent years. Some digitization of documentary materials has been done as well. Some of the material is therefore available for remote access. With submission of more documents, photos, etc. in digital as opposed to print form, we can expect the amount of material accessible remotely to increase.

We had some discussion concerning **digital storage** and digital media. Effective and reliable electronic storage is obviously a significant issue as libraries face concerns such as

- Limited and rapidly-filling space
- Submission of materials in a variety of digital formats
- The move to more open, standardized remote access
- Preservation of material content

Much of this follows on the discussions I had with previous heads of Special Collections, such as Jason Dean.

There is presently a digital storage policy in planning in Special Collections, and media-conversion topics are being addressed. The librarians seem to have kept themselves well aware of some of the known concerns and

limits of digital storage, to an extent that most of us do not even think to address, such as reliability of storage methods and media, and the most resilient and useful storage formats. As an example, I was told that compact optical disk (CD) storage is probably one of the worst long-term storage formats, from the standpoint of errors and deterioration, with even more serious problems with CD-RW technology, and especially where disks are “written” on typical local computer CD/DVD drives. Of course, much material is still likely to be submitted on disk, although the extreme cost reductions in flash memory might be changing this. Beyond digital copying errors, a major concern is of course longevity, suggesting the need to copy to other formats upon receipt. If I understood correctly, the library uses a cloud-based system with the Portal of Texas History in Denton, Texas for virtually all of its digital archiving, and stresses “considerable redundancy”. I sense that once material is received and effectively copied, there is little likelihood of loss of the content.

The librarians also recognize the need for access to materials contained in “older” technologies, such as cassette tapes, LP discs, and VHS tapes, as well as conversion of such material to more modern formats where deemed necessary. In fact, I was shown several older machines which had been acquired and recently tested to access some of these legacy storage modes. Probably most of these older formats are not too important to the Alpha Chi collection, but of course the quality and longevity of digital storage in general is a topic of great concern and I was impressed by the librarians’ emphasis in that regard. (I would be interested in exploring some of these latter issues with library staff and other experts in the future for my own personal benefit, since I have a large personal audio and video collection, and would of course be happy to share what I learn in that regard.)

Megan is well aware of our upcoming organizational centennial and stresses the need to begin working now to make all that is desired happen in an effective way.

Overall, I am very pleased with the new staffing and I think that my meeting with these folks was very appropriate and timely. Over the coming months, and as I hear more from Megan, I plan to be in touch with the national office to keep you up to date on anything relevant that I learn. Also, I would appreciate being “in the loop” on these topics and will be pleased to help in any way possible. This includes making visits to the Archives over the next several years, with a little advance notice, as may be necessary.

Respectfully submitted,
-Howard

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Appendix A: Some guidelines for on-site use of the collection

Because visits to and use of the collection will no doubt be critical as we move into Alpha Chi's Centennial, I inquired about specific policies and summarize the following information regarding access to the Archives, which will be useful to anyone desiring to access the actual materials:

The Archive collections are open Monday through Friday (except holidays) during the hours 9:30AM-12:30PM and 1:30-4:30PM. Researchers, and all other visitors, should check in at the Special Collections office complex first.

Use of the materials is restricted to the spacious, lighted reading room (see photos above) and items requested will be brought to that room from the nearby controlled-storage location by box (Content of the boxes can be searched by computer in advance). The last call for materials is at 4PM. Researchers will, of course, need to adhere to certain rules regarding general security and for the protection of the materials; e.g., certain items (including writing instruments) must be checked with the staff prior to handling any materials (pencils will be provided). Users can photograph materials with cell phone or camera, but no flash is permitted. The Library can do some scans on request and will place these in a Dropbox location. I assume that users must also agree to submit to a search upon leaving the area. It is best for prospective researchers to make arrangements a day or so prior to their anticipated visit.

One may contact the head of Special Collections as follows regarding remote use of the collections:

Megan M. Firestone
Head of Special Collections & Archives
A. Frank Smith, Jr. Library Center
Southwestern University
512.863.1221
firestom@southwestern.edu

For reference, the contact for the library director is:

Carol Fonken
Director of the Library
A. Frank Smith, Jr. Library Center
Southwestern University
512.863.1550
fonkenc@southwestern.edu