

## A Look Inside Special Collections With Veronica Reyes-Escudero

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A University of Arizona yearbook from 1922. Hand-drawn maps of the moon's surface. Photographs of Mexican immigrant families from the 1800s. These are just a few of the historical treasures housed in the University of Arizona's [Special Collections](#) [1], which is part of [University Libraries](#) [2].

More than 1,600 unique collections, including more than 80,000 published materials, fill the first floor of Special Collections, next door to the University's Main Library. Most of the materials are what are called flat-surface items, such as books, letters, maps, photographs and other historical documents. Audio and video recordings and oral histories are also included in the collections, which provide a glimpse into the culture and history of Tucson, the state of Arizona and beyond.

All of the items, thanks to the University's land-grant mission, are accessible to students, researchers and members of the local, national and international community. More than 10,000 people a year visit Special Collections to view free exhibits or access materials for research and other projects. The current exhibit, which runs through Dec. 20, is "[Moon](#) [3]," dedicated to the science, history and culture of the moon in honor of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing on July 20, 1969.

[Verónica Reyes-Escudero](#) [4], who holds the Katheryne B. Willock Director of Special Collections endowed chair, manages the department. A University of Arizona alumna, she started in the role in August after previously serving as borderlands curator and instruction coordinator for Special Collections.

Reyes-Escudero talked with *Lo Que Pasa* about some of Special Collections' goals, projects and oddball holdings.

### What's the mission of UA Special Collections?

As a repository, we are a cultural heritage institution. We are a mirror to our cultural heritage and who is here and whose voices are represented. But we not only keep the material, we create opportunities in which our community, our faculty, outside scholars and students can engage with the material to create new research and new areas of research, and that helps us with expanding our historical record.

### What are your top priorities in your new role?

I'm going to be looking broadly at what Special Collections needs and what my colleagues need to be successful in the areas that they work in. I'll also be making sure we are focused on what the campus strategic plan goals are and how we can support those. For instance, we

have a lot of experience in the borderlands [5], so that's an area where we can contribute. Space is also huge on campus, so that's one of the areas that we have been focusing on. We are slowly situating ourselves to make sure that we are aligned with and fulfilling the strategic goals of the University, but also as a land-grant institution and archival repository, we have obligations that go beyond the University.

### **How do you determine what you accept into Special Collections?**

We have seven collection areas, and we have a collection development policy that guides our acquisitions program. Those areas are the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Arizona Southwest, history of science, performing arts, literature, political affairs and UA history. We have collection management meetings where we discuss materials our donors have come in with. We discuss whether or not it's in scope and whether it's something we can take care of.

### **Who are your donors?**

A lot of our donors are local. We've also gone as far as Mexican families in Guanajuato and Hermosillo, Sonora, because we've been approached from these and other areas in Mexico. Then there are some people who have a strong connection to the University of Arizona and that's what compels them to bring materials, whether they're UA history or other types of materials that fit our collecting scope.

### **Who accesses the collections the most?**

Most of our visitors come from outside Pima County, and that can be anybody from Arizona or across the United States, but a lot of global scholars also come in. The second largest demographic is our undergraduates. That means faculty are introducing them to archives early in their academic careers. Faculty is our third group, and our graduate students are a close fourth.

### **What is the oldest item in Special Collections?**

Our oldest book is an incunabulum, which is a book printed before 1501, during the early years of typographic printing in Europe. The book title is "Naturalis Historia" and was printed in 1472 by Nicolas Jensen. It was authored by Pliny the Elder and is basically a description of our Earth's natural history.

### **What's one of the weirdest items you have in Special Collections?**

One of our most unique things is scorched earth, supposedly from an alien landing. We have the James McDonald collection; he was a well-respected astrophysicist on campus, whose scientific interests also led him to contribute writings and testimony to contemporary issues of his time such as the supersonic transport debates, placement of Titan II missiles around the Tucson basin, and scientific dismissal of unidentified flying objects. People would send him things from all over the world because he was known for doing that research. Someone sent him envelopes of soil from a reported UFO landing site in South Hill, Virginia, in 1967.

### **Are there special handling requirements for the materials?**

The nice thing about Special Collection is you get to sit down in comfortable seats and the staff bring the requested materials out to you. When it's a book that needs special care because of the binding or because it's an older item, supports will be brought out. These are

foam boards that allow the book to be protected while people leaf through it. When it comes to photographs, we do require visitors to wear gloves. Photographs are much more easily scratched and it's easier to leave oils on them.

### **What's the date range of the items you accept?**

We take things up to the present day. For instance, one of the projects that I worked on was "The Documented Border <sup>[6]</sup>." We partnered with faculty in journalism ? professors **Jeannine Relly** and **Celeste González de Bustamante** ? who interviewed journalists who report along the border on both sides under threats of violence because of the cartel situation. At the point when they started the projects, it was the deadliest period for journalists, so we wanted to offer the voice of those reporters and how they work there. It works now as sort of a training piece for journalism students and others across the world. We also worked with fine arts professor **Lawrence Gipe**, who was sketching Operation Streamline deportation proceedings for migrants who were caught at the border. Because federal court proceedings don't allow for video, his illustrations are used in national news media to capture some of the essence of the people going through those proceedings.

### **How do you choose what Special Collections exhibits?**

We like tying in our exhibits with other events going on across campus, locally or nationally, and working collaboratively with campus departments. For instance, the suffragists anniversary <sup>[7]</sup> is coming up in 2020, so we're already working toward creating an exhibit with our colleagues in history and gender and women's studies. There's another event coming up around gastronomy because Tucson was named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy. The UA Museum of Art is doing their own exhibition on food, so we're hoping to do that for spring 2021. We have a good cookbooks collection and (Arizona researcher) **Gary Nabhan's** materials (about food in the Southwest) so that will be a nice pairing.

### **What's the most exciting part of working in Special Collections?**

For me, it's working with the community, faculty and students. Students come in to learn how to use primary source material in their research or how to incorporate primary source material in their research. Oftentimes, it's their first time seeing this kind of material and you get to see their responses to stories that they can relate to, particularly our Hispanic or Mexican American students or students of color. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution, one of the biggest things we can do is have what we call culturally relevant pedagogy, and when students of all kinds can see themselves in the collections and the historical record, it really engages them. When we bring out UA history materials, it engages them and connects them more to the institution as well. When the collections inspire new areas of research or are used to broaden our understanding of the historical record, I feel like we've done our job.

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## Links

[1] <http://speccoll.library.arizona.edu/>

[2] <https://new.library.arizona.edu/>

[3] <https://uanews.arizona.edu/calendar/117656-ua-special-collections-exhibit-moon>

[4] <https://new.library.arizona.edu/people/ver%C3%B3nica-reyes-escudero>

[5] <http://speccoll.library.arizona.edu/collections/borderlands>

[6] <http://speccoll.library.arizona.edu/collections/documented-border-collection>

[7] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s\\_suffrage\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage_in_the_United_States)