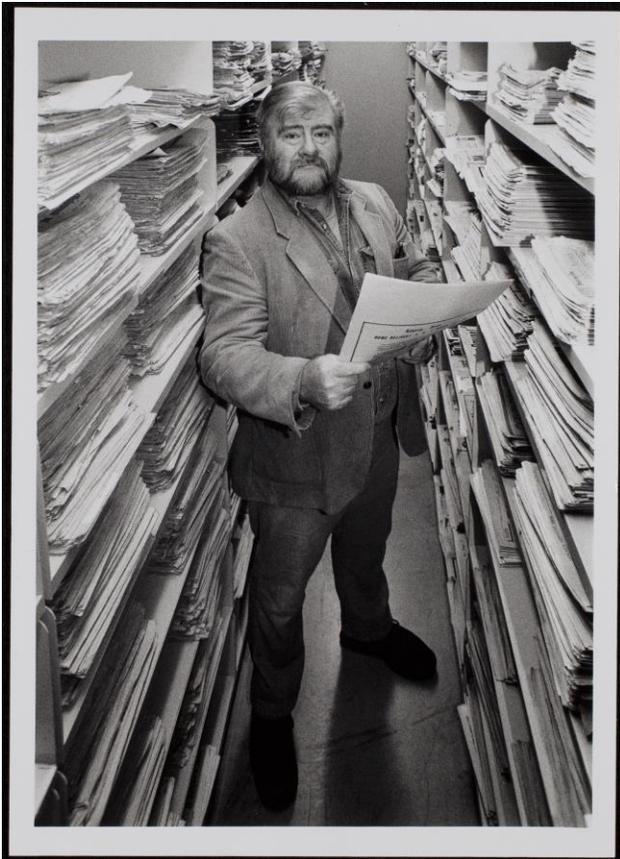


Curating the Controversial
The Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements
University of Kansas
Paper presented at SAA 2016, Atlanta, Aug. 5, 2016
By Rebecca Schulte

This presentation will be different from ones that I've given in the past about the Wilcox Collection. I will spend some time describing the collection and its primary donor, Laird Wilcox, but I'll also reflect on my own experiences as the curator of the collection.



Laird Wilcox in Wilcox Collection stacks, 1990s

I want to acknowledge Sherry Williams as the person that I “learned the business” from. As the curator of the Kansas Collection where the Wilcox Collection resides she has worked with the collection and with Laird Wilcox for even more years than I have.



Sherry Williams and I picking up an addition from Laird Wilcox

But first to set the stage here is some background information

Laird Wilcox

Fifty years ago the world was a very different place. Laird Wilcox was a slightly older than the norm University of Kansas student who had been collecting American Left and Right wing political materials since the age of 15. At KU he was active in the KU branch

of the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, and served as chairman of the KU Student Union Activities Minority Opinions Forum.



Laird Wilcox with George Lincoln Rockwell in 1964

Laird brought several unusual speakers to campus that year including George Lincoln Rockwell, the well-known leader of the American Nazi Party. Protests arose as to whether Rockwell should be allowed to speak. Students and townspeople on both sides of the issue picketed on campus. The Chancellor finally intervened declaring that Rockwell would be allowed to speak.



Page from Laird Wilcox scrapbook

An article from the student newspaper stated that chairs for 500 had been set-up in the Student Union Ballroom but that an estimated twenty-five hundred 2500 actually gathered to hear him speak. Because of the attendance loudspeakers were set-up in the Union lobby and outside so that others could hear the speech.

Here's one of the Letters sent to the KU student newspaper, The University Daily Kansan, written by a KU professor after the Rockwell event. In the letter the professor opposes the decision to allow Rockwell to speak. A cartoon of Rockwell is shown next to the article. Note the caption under the drawing "I'll bet they notice me now".

Page 2 University Daily Kansan Tuesday, Feb. 25, 1964

Rockwell Reconsidered—

Free Speech Distorted--

The American Constitution guarantees to every man the right of free speech in public, and this right can, therefore, prima facie not be denied to Commander George Lincoln Rockwell under the existing laws. The question arises, of course, as to whether an abstract principle such as the right to free speech is an ultimate aim in itself or whether it should not be subservient to some vaster end such as—for lack of a more obvious goal of human endeavor likely to command a maximum of agreement among all men—the lives, the happiness, and the further development of mankind as a whole. Some people might indeed take the view that just as man does not exist for the sabbath, but the sabbath existeth for man, the right of free speech is not an ultimate goal in itself, but must be subject to certain restrictions safeguarding the positive rights of other men, of which the right to live surely is the first.

IT MIGHT then be argued further that if a man incites his fellows to the physical extermination of others or approves of such extermination, his right of free speech regrettably has to be

curtailed for the sake of the very lives of his fellow creatures. Rockwell approves of the acts of that most heinous criminal in all history, Adolf Hitler, on whose orders millions and millions of people were processed into soap, etc., for a reason absolutely beyond their control: that is, their racial origin.

It must be borne in mind, further, that men like Rockwell, if they had their way, would be at least as good as their word. Let nobody say to me "All this is just a lot of bravado, he won't be half as bad when he is in power," for I have heard this said many times about the Nazis. Our abstract principles must unfortunately be tempered by a knowledge of human nature and our sad experiences in the very recent past. It might, for instance, be argued that the Weimar Republic (and many other countries besides) would have fared better if that country had maintained its original ban on the Nazi Party and on the public performances of its Fuhrer. For one thing, but for the unleashing of the last war and its consequences, the Communists would not now have emerged as the

Big Powers they are, confronting the United States.

OUR ARGUMENTS must never move in a vacuum, but must make allowance for the world such as it is, not as it ought to be; and this means in the first place human nature such as it is, with its tremendous range from good to bad, from weak to strong. Nazism began with a few people who were the laughing stock of the others; Hitler had to leave his native Austria in ridicule, yet when I recently spent six years in that country, I found that a large percentage of the people there were really still unredeemed Nazis, although the war had been lost. Let us not close our eyes to the fact that Nazism prevailed among a people not exactly the last in culture and civilization.

HOWEVER LET US for argument's sake concede the right of free speech in public to George Rockwell. That concept, if defined strictly and not bandied about loosely, surely does not amount to more than a forbearance of interference with a person's right to air his views in



(Continued on page 3)

"I'll bet they notice me now."

Distortion—

(Continued from page 2)

public. Under the cloak of this catchword, however, very active efforts indeed are made to help in conveying his poisonous views to the broadest possible strata of more or less mature people at an impressionable age. "Surely there must be something in Rockwell's views that merits such a treatment"—such will be quite naturally the reaction of many students and others when they see that man being invited by various responsible bodies at the University of Chicago, the University of Kansas, and so on. His antics are thus given to prestige which they could not have aspired to attain if he were left to his own devices for making his views heard.

I do not wish to impugn the nobility of the motives of those who invited Rockwell and placed the ballroom facilities at his disposal, but then unfortunately

history is strewn with the mischief (calling it by a mild term) wrought by people actuated by noble motives but less mindful of human nature. Why go out of one's way to have that wicked fool here?

EVEN UNDER the generous terms of the American Constitution, the right of free speech cannot by any stretch of the imagination be interpreted as conveying a duty to disseminate morally wrong views like a sort of vaccine. Yet this is apparently how Mr. Laird Wilcox understands his duties. But let us be consistent and also invite, say, a die-hard Communist — of the Peking brand, please — to treat us to a speech here. They at least do not preach the extermination of certain human races. But why boost the ego of any people like that?

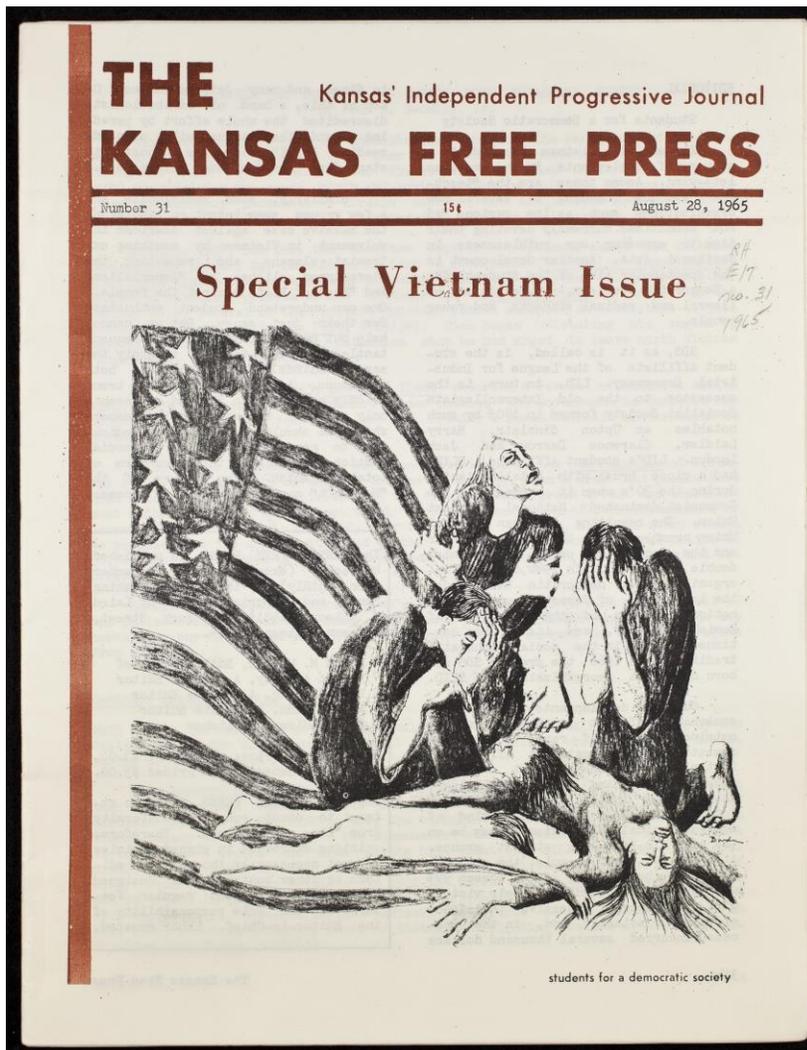
Dr. Herbert Galton,
Asst. Prof. of Slavic Languages and Literatures

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Page from Laird Wilcox scrapbook

Just a year later in 1965 Laird sold his collection that filled four filing cabinets to the KU Libraries and the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements was established.

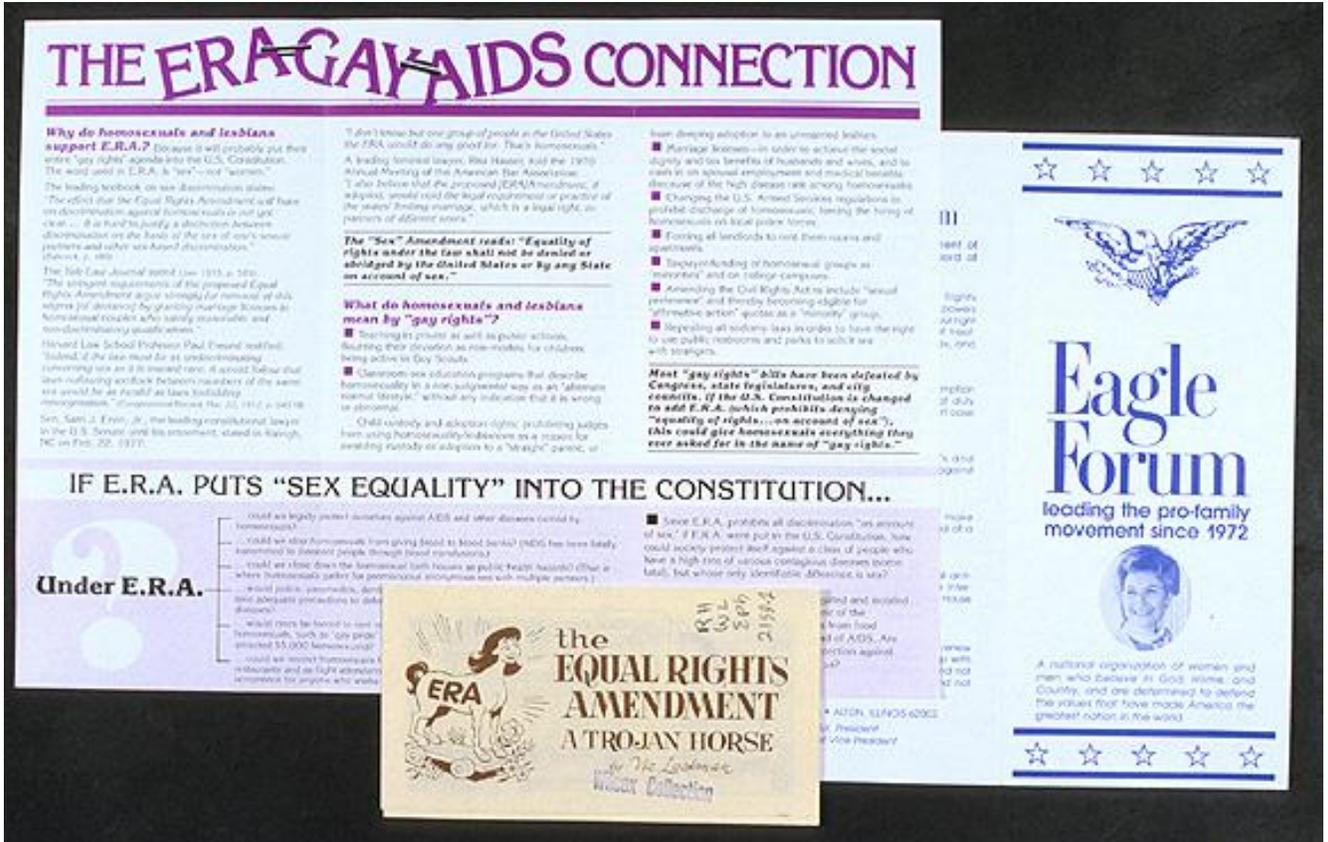
Laird has maintained a close relationship with the University making regular additions to the collection and actively involved in its on-going growth and development. He also published a magazine called The Kansas Free Press



and produced guides to the American Left and to the American Right and has continued as an outspoken proponent of free speech. In the fifty years that have passed, that

original collection that filled a few filing cabinets has grown to occupy more than 3,500 linear feet of shelf space in Spencer and numbers more than half a million pieces.

Here are slides of a few examples from the collection:



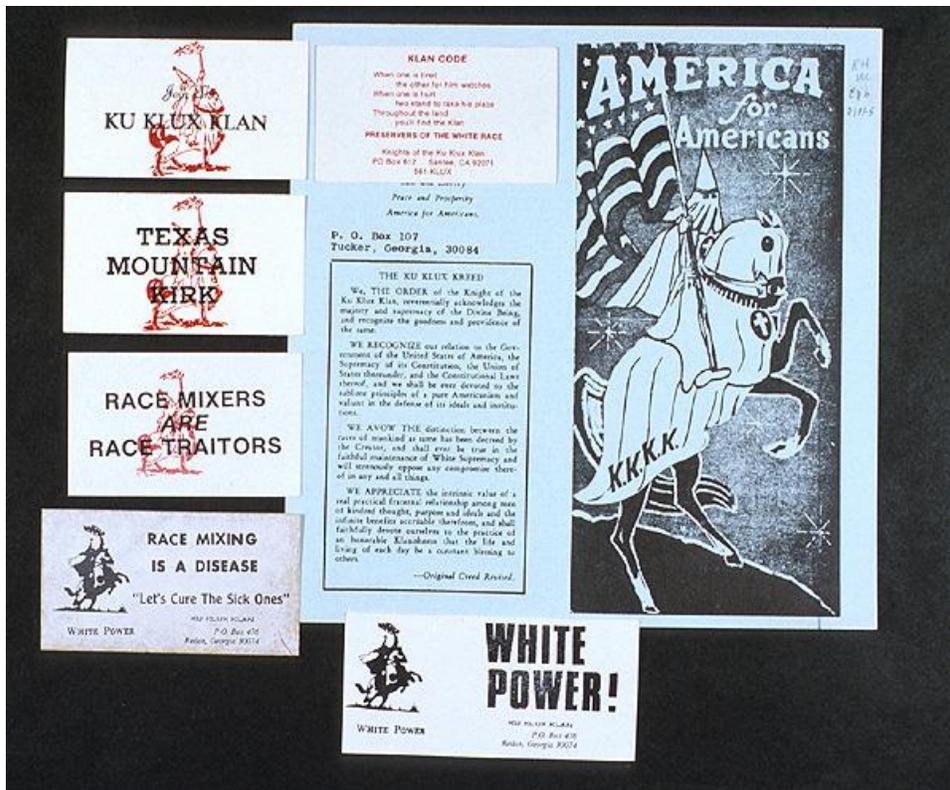
Eagle Forum

The Eagle Forum, an organization run by Phyllis Schlafly, who can be remembered as a very effective opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment, has been politically active since the early 1960s, working from her Alton, Illinois office, using networking and mass mailings in her successful “anti-women’s lib” and pro-family campaigns. The Eagle Forum, of which she was president, at one time boasted a membership of 70,000. That newsletter ceased publication in 1997 but she still regularly issues the Phyllis Schlafly Report.



Another Mother for Peace

The war in Vietnam is still a major collecting focus for the Collection as I am able to purchase this type of material from out-of-print book dealers. Both pro and anti war sentiments are well represented. This is a brochure from an organization called Another Mother for Peace. The war in Vietnam is a popular topic for students who use the collection today.



Groups with extreme ideologies are represented by the KU KLUX KLAN and David Duke.

DAVID DUKE FOR PRESIDENT COMMITTEE
P.O. Box 15039
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20035

WELLS
COLLECTION
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June, 1987



Dear Fellow American:

Why is it that not one of the announced candidates for the presidential nomination is confronting our real problems?

Not one of them is saying what needs to be said. They all sound like they were running in 1984, 1980, 1976 or even earlier.

I have made a very serious decision and I need your support. I have decided to enter the race myself as a Democrat--a populist Democrat.

It is vital that Americans start confronting the real problems that generations of politicians have manufactured for us.

My platform is simple to sum up. It is:

Let's take back our government from the organized pressure groups and return it to the people--as the Constitution intended!

May you have
a meaningful and
merry Christmas



...may they
forever be White!

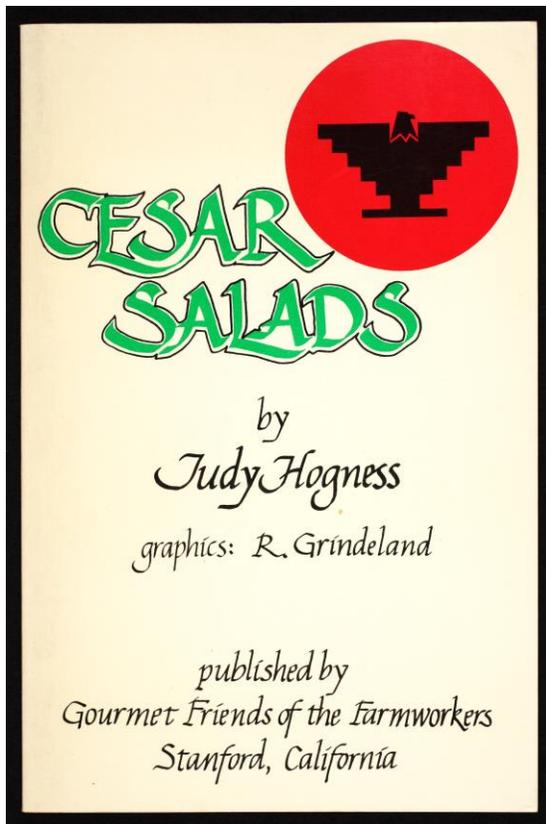
David Duke

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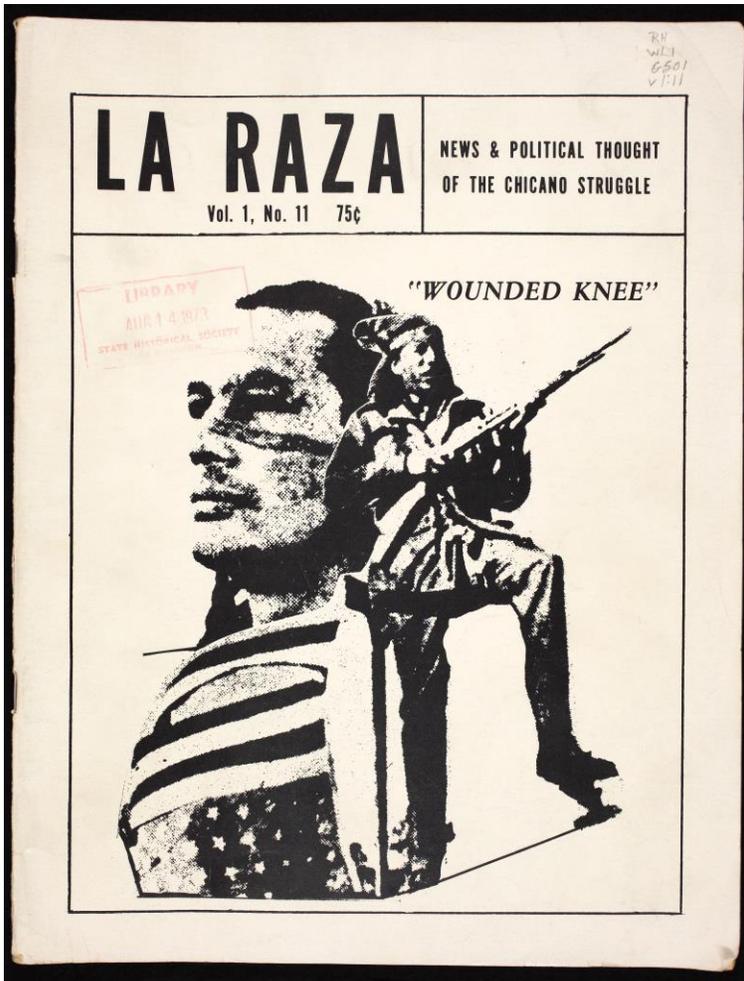
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David Duke

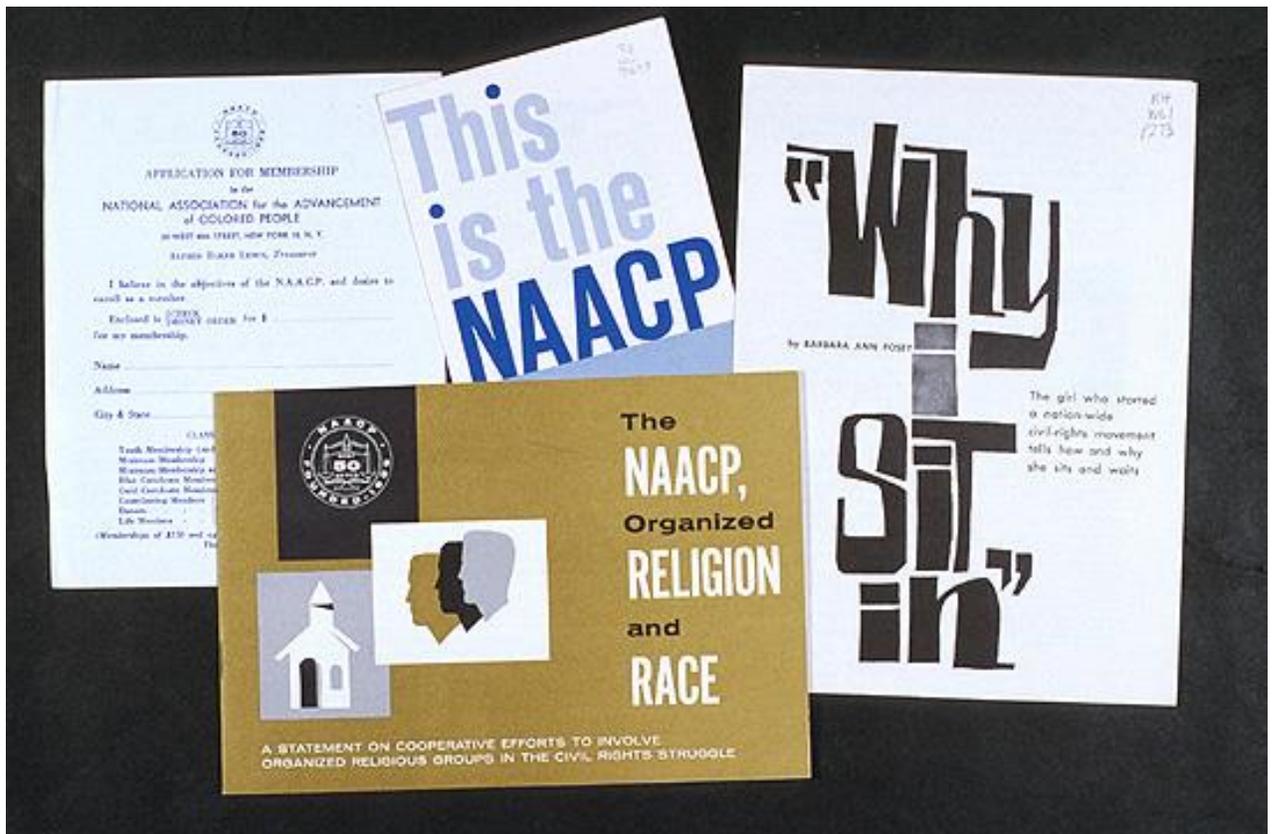
David Duke has been a well-known figure in both the racist right and state and national politics for several decades. Energetic and charismatic, Duke began his career in 1970 as a member of the National Socialist Liberation Front while a student at Louisiana State University. By the mid-70s he was deeply involved in building the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and became its national director. After a few years with the Klan he established another organization, the National Association for the Advancement of White People. By the late 80s he turned his attention to mainstream politics and announced his candidacy for the Democratic Party's nomination for President. Unsuccessful, he downsized his ambitions and was finally elected to the Louisiana state House of Representatives in 1989. His name does pop-up occasionally most recently related to the current presidential election.



Cesar Salads is a great example of an item that I have purchased just recently. It was published by Judy Hogness in 1977 in support of American farm workers during the lettuce and table grape boycotts of the 1970s. Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers Union, provided the forward for this political cookbook that provides recipes for salads without using head lettuce and grapes.



La Raza served as a voice for Mexican Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s.



NAACP

Here's a selection of handbills and brochures from the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People. Materials from many other groups and individuals such as the Black Panther Party and Angela Davis are included as well.

My Experiences and Challenges

My own experiences with the collection began (thirty years ago!!!!!!) in 1985 when I was hired to manage a Department of Education Title IIC grant that had been written by Sherry Williams. The purpose of the grant was to catalog the periodicals and ephemera that were included in the Collection. Although the grant was finished by 1990 my responsibilities for the collection continued as I moved from one position to another

within Spencer Library. I became University Archivist in 2003 and still continued as curator of the Wilcox Collection. Those combined responsibilities proved to be very challenging – just too much work. The Archives has only one other full-time position so I haven't felt like I've ever been able to devote as much of my time as the Wilcox Collection deserves.

Challenges have been many. I had no background at all with this type of material. I graduated from KU with a degree in humanities – Renaissance humanities to be exact and went on to earn my masters in Library Science from Wisconsin. My expertise when I was hired to lead the Wilcox grant project was as the manager of a successful grant at the Kansas State Historical Society not as an expert in American political literature.

The content and sometimes extreme nature of the books, magazines, ephemera and newspapers in the collection have proven to be challenging to work with of course. Almost all of the material in the collection is offensive to someone and no matter one's own personal political leanings a certain objectivity needs to be maintained when collecting and describing the materials.

At times people coming to use the collection have questioned me about my own personal political leanings and in some cases have even tried to convert me to their own beliefs. Occasionally people using the collection have been reluctant to provide their name during our registration process because they did not want it to be known that they were interested in the collection. I've had student assistants who asked to be given other tasks rather than working with the collection because they were offended by the materials they were working with and others who became so interested that they wanted to spend their time reading materials rather than sorting and describing.

Campus events have at times raised concerns. In 1988 members of the Missouri Ku Klux Klan were invited to KU by an instructor in the School of Journalism. He had been a reporter for the Kansas City Star and wanted the students in his reporting class to have experience conducting difficult interviews. Laird Wilcox was a friend of his and Laird

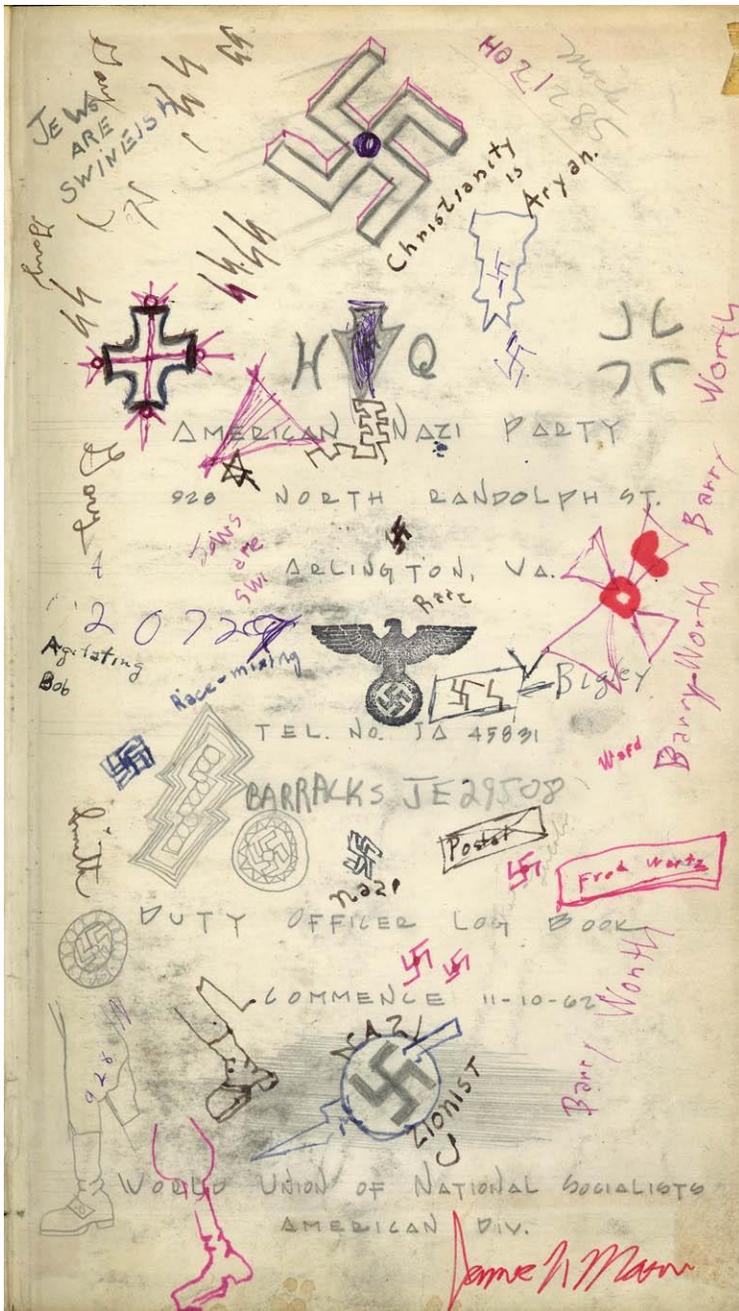
had introduced him to the Klan members. As news of the class visit was made public and reported on in the student newspaper concerns were raised by some students and members of the local community opposed to the invitation to the Klan. As a result university officials made the decision that the class could not meet with the Klan on campus and the interview was held in another location. A few weeks later as an alternative -- a free speech forum was scheduled to occur with the same Klan members. People with differing views were invited to speak as well. Issues of free speech and academic freedom were debated and editorials flew around the state. The forum was held with protests both outside the auditorium and within.

I remember that Sherry and I discussed the possibility of the Wilcox Collection being targeted since we were actively collecting the same type of "objectionable" materials but nothing happened. I discovered years later that our Kansas African American collecting program had been impacted when a potential donor learned of the controversy and told Deborah Dandridge, the Field Archivist that he did not want to donate materials to a University that hosted the Klan at a public speaking event.

One of the most memorable challenges I've faced involved the purchase of about 30 linear feet of correspondence, ephemera and printed materials from a man named James Mason. In 1966, at the age of 16, Mason ran away from his Ohio home to join the American Nazi Party at its national headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The Party broke up soon after his arrival when George Lincoln Rockwell was assassinated in 1967. Mason continued to be active in several other organizations, published newsletters and worked on his own theories of history and politics during several prison stays. Mr. Mason is now a bit over 60 and lives in Denver. He offered to sell his collection of Rockwell materials to us but since it was a considerable amount of money we wanted to view the collection to determine authenticity and its worth. I offered to go to Denver to view the collection. My boss was not really enthused about my visit to the home of an avowed Nazi who had a prison record but I convinced him that I didn't really think anything would happen to me since the guy probably just really needed the money. It was to say the least a very interesting experience. I learned quite a bit about his

relationship with Charlie Manson and his theory that Christ, Adolph Hitler and Charlie Manson are really the same person. I did get back home safely and we did purchase the collection, but with questions lingering about the provenance of these materials that Mr. Mason was selling we required him to sign and have notarized a bill of sale at the time attesting to the ownership of the materials. Here is the text from the bill of sale:

“I am the sole owner of these materials, and by selling them, convey forever not only physical ownership of said materials, but all of my rights, title, and interest in uncopyrighted materials, and any copyrights I have or may have, whether or not perfected.”



American Nazi Party logbook page

This is a page from one of the items that we purchased. It's hard to see but beneath the doodles can be read "American Nazi Party, 928 North Randolph Street, Arlington, Virginia, Duty Officer Log Book, World Union of National Socialists, American Div." and down in the lower right corner is James Mason's signature.

The possibility that someone may be opposed to materials within the Wilcox Collection has always existed but last year we received a complaint through the main library's Ask-A-Librarian service that was of a very personal nature. We were being contacted because an individual had found their name in the published finding aid of one of the manuscript collections within Wilcox. They insisted that their name be taken off immediately and that they were going to contact their lawyer on Monday.

The message made its way up the library chain through emails finally to me with the question of whether I had ever encountered a situation like this in the past. I had not.

We eventually learned that the person making the demands had been involved with the donor as a minor and that there were photographs and letters in the collection that they insisted be removed and sent to them. We contacted University Counsel for their legal advice. Early on the decision was made to immediately remove that person's name from the finding aid but we did not comply with the demand to return the materials. The photos and letters were removed and have been restricted for 100 years (encompassing the lifetime of the requester and the lifetimes of their children). A letter was sent to the person notifying them of the decision. A description of the Wilcox Collection and its purpose was included as well as a few excerpts from the SAA Core Values statement to serve as part of the basis for the decision. I'll read a few sentences that we included –

“Archivists ensure proper custody for the documents and records entrusted to them. As responsible stewards, archivists are committed to making reasonable and defensible choices for the holdings of their institutions. They strive to balance the sometimes competing interests of various stakeholders.”

The person did not respond to our letter and we did not hear from their lawyer.

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

ACADEMIA FACES THE FAR RIGHT

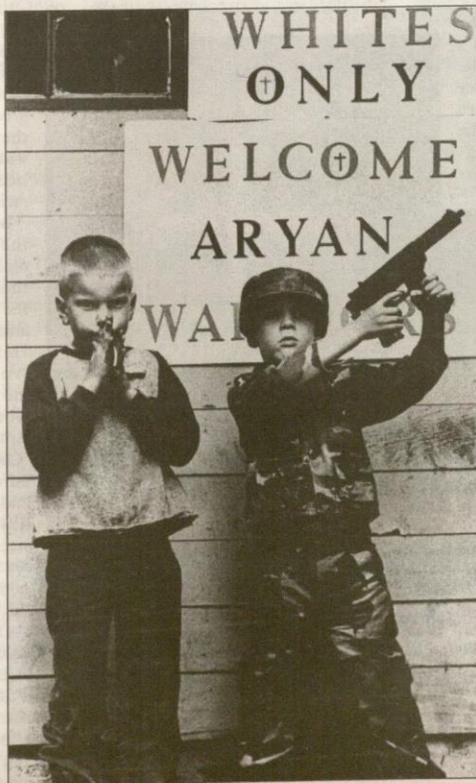
BY RICK PERLSTEIN

In flat, nervous tones, Idaho State University sociologist James Aho recalls his initiation into fieldwork on the far right. It was the summer of 1985, and all he had was a single lead for his research: the name of a white supremacist organizer in the town of Coeur d'Alene, in the upper reaches of northern Idaho. "The area is several hundred miles away from where Idaho State is located," he says, "and I'd never been up there before. I remember very vividly pacing my hotel room, thinking, I don't want to do this, I don't want to do this. But my conscience said, Look, this is what sociologists do. I looked up the guy in the phone book and I called him. We had lunch—and he was very nice."

Before long, Aho had penetrated the far-right underbrush. He soon arranged to meet the minister of the Aryan Nations Church, Richard Butler. "Butler drives up, and he has this old man with him, maybe in his sixties," he recalls. "We went into a hotel restaurant and had lunch. Once again, they were very friendly, and we spent several hours together. Very enjoyable compa-

ny. Well, the next day, the old man was arrested for putting out a murder contract. An undercover agent handed the old man a photograph doc-

tored to look like a severed head—and he paid the agent \$5,000."



Studying the rightward fringe in the United States is difficult, dirty work. Archival resources are few and far between. Your subjects often won't have anything to do with you. And—even worse—your peers may mistrust you: One day, Aho awoke to find that one of his colleagues had penned a full-page attack on him in the local newspaper. Then there are ethical quandaries, like the time a New Haven graduate student saw one of his interview subjects, a white supremacist leader, publish an "open letter to Eureka and the World" in which he bragged that his ideas now had the imprimatur of "a prominent Yale University historian."

In the wake of Oklahoma City, publishers are rushing to fill a vacuum of understanding about a fugitive world of private armies, fax-driven conspiracy networks, and white supremacist theologies that emerged into public consciousness seemingly out of nowhere. They are finding, not unsurprisingly given the obstacles, that in no academic disci-

THE SHOESMAN-REUTER

The Wilcox Collection has been the source for many books and articles. In 1995 in an article titled "Sleeping with the Enemy" by Rick Perlstein that appeared in the November/December issue of *lingua franca* several people who were writing books

about the radical right commented on their own feelings about researching these groups. Michael Kazin, author of *the Populist Persuasion*, expressed this concern:

“It’s hard to extinguish the haunting fear that by studying ideas you find grotesque, you may end up legitimizing them.”

In that same article another researcher, Michael Barkun author of *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*, said

“Spending six hours a day with this material—there was a sense of almost inhabiting a parallel universe—almost a kind of disorientation. As if all of the values and truths that I would normally accept were inverted.”

This statement caught my attention because Michael had spent several weeks at Spencer using the Wilcox Collection to do his research for this book.

Another challenge that we face is maintaining the currency of the collection. At one point about 15 years ago we took a hard look at the future of the collection. We had come to realize in the late 1990s that many of the groups and individuals that we had been collecting were now using the Internet to disseminate their messages. We know that a large part of the value and appeal of the collection lies in its timeliness. Laird took an informal poll of some of the researchers who had used the collection in recent years asking them what the impact would be if the collection was cut-off at the 20th century. He received strong opposition to the idea from researchers. One person even went so far as to say that it would become just another “fossil collection” of limited use to anyone except a few specialists. Some had commented that they had thought of returning to it for future projects but may not if the materials are too outdated. The decision was made to continue to collect as before.

Laird does not collect as heavily as in the past. He was born in 1942 so is now 74 and not in the best of health. I’m 62 so starting to think about retirement myself. For years

we've had hopes of being able to hire a full time position to manage the Collection and it looks as though that wish may finally come to fruition as the position is now on a short list of positions being considered by the Libraries. I am conflicted about turning over my responsibilities for the collection to someone else but also looking forward to a time when I can devote myself full-time to the University Archives.

Even though working with the collection has proven to be difficult at times it's always been interesting and never dull.