

Through the perspective and enthusiasm of a student archivist, we gain knowledge of a Pacific Northwest collection and its collector, Robert Hitchman.

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“Merely as a Hobby”: The Robert Hitchman Collection  
at the University of Washington

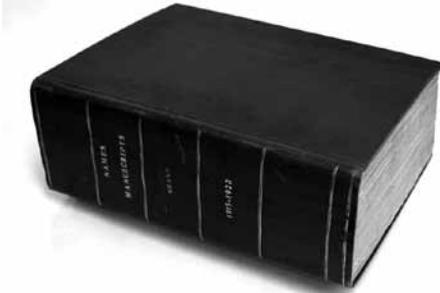
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How well is it possible to know someone you have never met? For someone who processes personal archival collections, it can feel as though the creators of these collections become close friends. As I have worked on organizing, processing, and understanding the books, papers, and ephemera of Robert Hitchman’s extensive library, it has become very clear to me how many aspects of a collector’s personality and character can be revealed by their collection – both by its contents and by its condition. In the case of Robert Hitchman, I have formed the strong impression of a humble and meticulous man, fascinated equally by books and by the rich history of the Pacific Northwest, who indulged these interests through collecting and studying a diverse variety of printed and written materials: books, pamphlets, scrapbooks, letters, ephemera, maps, postcards, and anything else that piqued his interest or seemed related to something else in his collection. However, he was not satisfied to be an uninvolved collector, or merely an appreciator of these works. His interests and character were such that he also began to assist in and encourage the creation of even more new works on Pacific Northwest history. Despite the fact that Hitchman was, by his own repeated admissions, an ‘amateur’ in the field (his day job was in the insurance business), he was able to make significant contributions and, even more importantly, assist many others in the growing and increasingly interconnected communities of historians, scholars, collectors, book dealers, and other amateurs such as himself.

When I began working on Robert Hitchman’s collection, I knew next to nothing about the man. I remember discussing the possibility of working on the collection in Nicole Bouché’s office, when the basic information conveyed was that “he was a collector of Northwest history.” The basic understanding that I started with provided me with only the barest of outlines for comprehending or appreciating what was in front of me, in the shelf after shelf of books and papers. I built my impressions and eventually my deeper understanding of Hitchman over time, through a growing pattern of stories. What follows are some of the many stories I discovered during the processing, and the impressions I have received of the man behind these materials.

Born in Colorado in 1908, Robert Hitchman was a student at the University of Washington during the late 1920s, where he studied anthropology under Profes-

sor Edmund Meany. The earliest parts of his collection reveal both his collecting impulse, and his interest in history: he collected the autographs of various public figures, such as Thomas Edison, Herbert Hoover, and General Allenby. During his time at the University of Washington, he seems to have found the interest which would occupy him for the rest of his life (letters indicate that he even kept up



*Bound book containing Meany's source material for his place names book. Forms were mailed out soliciting information about the source of the names of towns or geographical features.*

Surrounding this central focus, Hitchman's search for the origins and meanings of local place names became quite extensive. He read and collected numerous official histories, including many beautifully leather bound late 19th century volumes of Washington State county history. These volumes are unfortunately both heavy and fragile, a combination which usually led to broken or damaged bindings in other copies, but Hitchman preserved his copies in exemplary condition – evidence of his meticulous nature. As an early part of my processing duties, I measured these volumes for custom boxes, handling each one gingerly as I realized the amount of care their condition represented. They now reside safely in Special Collections' vault. Hitchman also located manuscript journals and logs from many of the early explorers of the Pacific Northwest in various archival repositories, in locations as far away as England, and acquired photocopies to study in the course of his research. Besides these research copies, Hitchman

his research while serving in the army during World War II). It was most likely Meany's influence that first steered Hitchman's interests towards what would prove to be his lifelong focus: the place-names of Washington State. Meany's own book, *Origin of Washington Place Names*, would serve as the inspiration for Hitchman's own posthumous work, *Place Names of Washington*, and, indeed, some of Meany's letters and one imposing, bound volume of his original research materials are a part of Hitchman's place names research collection. Hitchman's book has now supplanted Meany's as the standard reference on the subject, and, based on some quick searches, it still receives many citations in modern works.

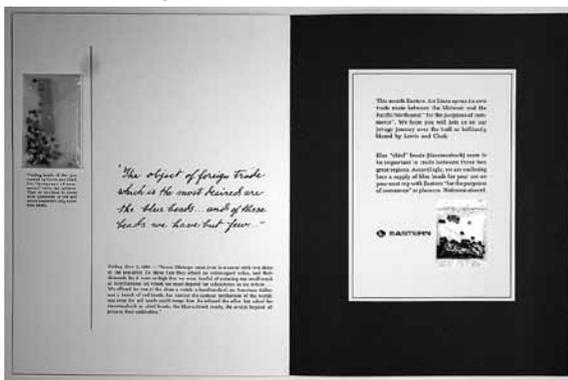
collected original manuscripts as well, such as a journal by William H. Mogg, entitled *The Voyage of the Motor Schooner Olga to Prince Albert Land for a Whaling and Trading Voyage 1907,8,9* (the handwriting is incredibly difficult to read, which only increased my curiosity), and the expedition journal of F. J. Church, who was a member of the Olympic Exploring Expedition in 1890. In handling and processing these old, handwritten documents, I felt sparks of interest; in my own research, I have always gravitated to such original and unique sources, hoping to find novel and interesting results – I imagine that Hitchman had some of the same feelings.

Many of the materials of his library contain the evidence of Hitchman's own idiosyncratic research methods: scattered through all of these books, periodicals, and other printed sources I found his detailed place-names notes, which were as likely to be written on old envelopes or fragments of business stationery as on actual notecards. During the course of his research, Hitchman also met and began corresponding with authors, academics, and any other people who shared one or more of his many interests – which were growing to encompass, it seems, anything that had anything to do with the Pacific Northwest, and plenty of other topics that were tangentially related at best.

The actual evidence of these associations, of course, consists largely of correspondence. The letters he preserved, many of them also interleaved into the books of his library, tell numerous stories about a man who seems to have encouraged everyone he encountered – from schoolchildren writing the history of their hometown, Tenino, WA, as a class assignment, to academics writing in-depth scholarly histories, and local authors such as Ivan Doig, who wrote historical fiction as well as popular non-fiction. Hitchman's correspondence with Ivan Doig, as an example, is full of a feeling of collaboration and familiarity: Hitchman wrote to Doig, "Congrats! You've done it again! Just five minutes ago I finished reading WB [*Winter Brothers*]. In the past few days I've found remarkable excuses for setting aside pressing matters in order to make time for yr book ..." (see note 1). Doig responded, "Thanks immensely for the kind words about *Winter Brothers*. I'm greatly gratified that Swan sounded right to someone of your regional knowledge." (see note 2). Both also offered help to the other in their future researches, and the loan of parts of their collections. While processing Hitchman's collection, lines such as these would frequently catch my attention and draw me in. As a result, I ended up reading a large portion of the correspondence. Robert Hitchman's simple, understated style when writing to friends, colleagues, and strangers alike impressed itself upon me, as did the sheer number and variety of the people with whom he corresponded.

Robert Hitchman's engagement with such a broad community, and the methods he employed in his own wide ranging research, place him at the heart

of the emerging local history movement of the time. Beginning, arguably, in the late 1950s, the study of history was changing in America. It had been primarily a serious, exclusively scholarly activity, engaged in largely by professors, graduate students, and other 'official' scholars, who interpreted history through research in approved, scholarly materials. It was also then transmitted, of course, to students on the receiving end of this scholarly work in the classroom. Academic historians



*An advertisement for Eastern Airlines from the 1960s which heavily referenced the Lewis & Clark Expedition (including images from the original journals) and included a small bag of trade beads stapled to the last page for your next trip west'. Hitchman loved this ad, and wrote letters to the company praising their good taste, as well as letters to his friends recommending they get copies of the ad and patronize the airline.*

were often encouraged to tightly focus their studies, to specialize, and not to trespass on other scholars' domains. Very few people seemed to do it for fun, or as a hobby. As part of the changes in society during the 1960s, a wider spectrum of people and groups began to reinterpret their own history, expanding their sources in the process to encompass a wider range than past academics had usually admitted. The groups most famously involved in this movement were women and ethnic minorities, but there was also a groundswell of interest in understanding history from a regional perspective. Hitchman, as an amateur, was a de facto part of this movement, and the broad spectrum of his research materials are evident in his collection. He chose to collect and base aspects of his research on ephemera; contemporary newspaper clippings and magazine articles; and other less scholarly sources as well as the traditional ones such as explorers' logs or journals; manuscripts; official histories; and government documents. These choices make him an excellent example of the new, emerging variety of community historian. He also clearly didn't place strict boundaries on the scope of his studies; and though his collection may have had a general focus, it was not at all a restrictive one.

Another type of source that Hitchman sought out and collected was almost a type of oral or direct history. This sort of material was another common element of the new movement in history. The general methodology would also have been familiar to Hitchman because of his studies in anthropology with Edmund Meany. I say 'almost,' however, because Hitchman, who was so enamored of written texts, didn't go out with a tape recorder to collect these local histories, as many others

did – instead he encouraged elderly members of local communities to write down and publish their reminiscences or local historical accounts based on their, or their family’s, memories of events. The resulting pamphlets and books, some very professionally typeset and printed, but others ‘published’ with the aid of a typewriter, photocopier, and stapler, would often be reviewed and promoted in Hitchman’s own bibliographic newsletter, “Sighted from the Crow’s Nest,” which covered notable new works of Pacific Northwest history. He published this newsletter irregularly between 1952 and 1979, with steadily increasing production quality. I found many letters of thanks written to Hitchman by these newly published historians, telling him how much they enjoyed and appreciated being recognized

for their contributions, or how much they appreciated the publicity for their works. Before you imagine that this was as far as the newsletter went, on the other end of the spectrum, there were also letters from academic librarians hailing from as far afield as Ivy League New England universities, who thanked Hitchman for bringing these new works to their attention and requested copies of any forthcoming newsletters to aid in their collection development. In his responses to all of these letters, Hitchman invariably downplayed the importance of his role,



*Christie and Hitchman (on the right), outside of Christie’s cabin near Vernon, B.C. during the 1930s.*

writing back that he put out the newsletter “merely as a hobby,” or “purely for the fun of it,” and adding that he “hopes that it stimulates sales of books about our part of the world.”

Besides encouraging community members to write down their history, Hitchman also tracked down local people who had participated in regional exploration, or who were otherwise involved in ‘making’ history in the traditional sense. I am particularly impressed by the body of materials Hitchman amassed on James

Halbold Christie, a Scottish-born Canadian who was the head of the Seattle Press Expedition in the Olympic mountains during 1889 and 1890, as well as participating in many other similar expeditions during his lifetime. Hitchman actually tracked down the aging explorer living in a cabin outside Vernon, B.C., in the late 1930s. His collection includes photographs of the two together at Christie's log cabin, and many letters they wrote back and forth about the discoveries made, and especially the places named, during the Seattle Press Expedition. There are also impressive scrapbooks created by Christie himself, including contemporary clippings about the expedition, original photographs, and more. Hitchman seems to have encouraged Christie to write down even more accounts of his journeys, and preserved the resulting rough manuscripts in the scrapbooks and folders of his collection. In sifting through these many items, it was obvious to me how much Hitchman admired this man, who must have discussed his role in exploring and naming Washington landmarks at length with the then-young collector. In fact, much later in his life, when Hitchman was involved with the Washington State Historical Society, he made an attempt to have a monument erected to Christie, on a mountain in the Olympic National Park. When this attempt ultimately met with failure, he even seems to have proposed (in a letter to his friends) creating an unauthorized, clandestine monument instead, and looked into how much it would cost to get a helicopter into the national park! As far as I can tell from the correspondence Hitchman saved, this plan never came to pass. However, if anyone has come across a monument to Christie while hiking in the Olympics, please let me know! The intentions of Hitchman and his preservation of extensive and fascinating material on James Christie will have to serve as the monument he so clearly wanted – for now.

Another of what I consider to be the most affecting parts of the Hitchman collection was the large group of papers from a man named Roland G. Gamwell. Gamwell was an insurance agent in Bellingham, Washington during the late 19th and early 20th century. He became a wealthy speculator in properties (at one point he was also City Park Commissioner, a marvelous conflict of interest), and also an amateur historian and naturalist. He spent part of his final work years and all of his retirement doing public speaking for many different organizations on topics of local history, self-improvement, and the local flora and fauna. The lecture topics I remember reading ranged widely, from the trials of rose cultivation in the Pacific Northwest to the geological prehistory of the Bellingham area, and the speeches are written engagingly in longhand on sheaves of yellowed, acidic paper, often secured by straight pins. Also included are clippings and ephemera related to Roland G. Gamwell's prominent place in the Bellingham community. I was struck by the many similarities between Hitchman and Gamwell, and I wondered whether the two had ever met. Did Hitchman, a young college student

at the time, attend one of the talks included in the collection of manuscripts, and become inspired by this scholarly amateur and his broad interests, later seeking out his papers when he passed on? Or did Hitchman learn of this kindred spirit later in life, perhaps through encountering a relative, who then passed on the papers? I doubt I will ever know for sure, and both versions of the story seem equally possible, and equally real.

Working on these materials, and thinking about the stories I have discovered, have made me feel that I know Robert Hitchman very well. I do find myself wondering, however, what might be absent from the collection. My view of Hitchman comes solely from working with this material, which was intentionally assembled and organized by him over the course of an entire lifetime. Robert Hitchman had ample time to effectively ‘edit’ his own collection, to reflect a picture of himself that he aspired to, or wanted to project – perhaps with Roland G. Gamwell in mind. I am convinced that this picture of Hitchman as a benevolent and devoted researcher and tireless promoter of Pacific Northwest history is an accurate one, but what parts of his life are not reflected in this collection? Have I actually



*Processed Hitchman collection in the Special Collections classroom.*

gotten a fair impression of what Hitchman was like overall, and the entirety of his personality? I know, for instance, that there was another side of his life that I have only found glimpses of in the files I have pored through: his lifelong career in insurance. Really, the only material related to the countless hours he must have put into this job was a small collection of clippings on ‘insurance oddities’ such as insurance for astronauts, etc., and a couple of books on the history of local insurance companies (*Men and Mutuality*). After processing the collection, I met Book Club of Washington member Mike Repass, who had worked for Hitchman for a time in the 1960s. The impression he had of the man was similar to mine, but was colored differently by this association: he saw him as more remote, and dignified. This aspect of his business personality did not come through as clearly in the enthusiasm he displayed in his letters about history. Differences such as this were thought-provoking, and bring me back to my initial question: how well can you know someone through their collection?

The ambiguities and missing pieces that remain, even after two years work

in these materials, add to rather than detract from the interest of this work. No collection contains everything there is to know about its creator, and there is always more to learn. While this huge collection reveals much about the character and interests of Robert Hitchman, even more than that, working with it has made me wish that I could have met the man himself. Absent that possibility, however, processing his archival collection has been the next best thing, and I must content myself with that.

Over the two years that I worked on processing this collection, I was guided by my boss and mentor: the then-curator of the Pacific Northwest Collection at the University of Washington, Nicole Bouché. She remarked to me that “it’s vitally important that this sort of collection ends up in an academic archival environment, where it can become a valuable element of students’ education in processing, and also where it is ultimately more likely to receive the extensive processing and description that will increase its use by future researchers.” I can vouch for this – working on this collection has both educated and inspired me, as well as firmly cementing my intentions of working towards a career in personal papers and manuscript archives. Having the opportunity to know this fascinating man through his collection has been an profoundly important part of my library school education, and I feel that these are not lessons that can be truly learned in a classroom. I am grateful to the Hitchman family, in that their donation made this experience possible for me, and I hope that I have adequately returned the favor in my extensive work in organizing, and producing a finding aid for, the collection. Imagining the other personal collections in existence that deserve, and will require, similar treatment in the future, gives me hope for a long and interesting career in this field.

#### NOTES

1. Personal correspondence from Robert Hitchman to Ivan Doig, 12/4/1980, box 6, folder 20, Robert Hitchman Papers, Accession #5538-001, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries.
2. Personal correspondence from Ivan Doig to Robert Hitchman, n.d. [December 1980], box 6, folder 20, Robert Hitchman Papers, Accession #5538-001, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries.

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