

# Pop goes the culture

## Bowling Green State University's Browne Popular Culture Library holds all things Americana

Story and photos by ANN FAZZINI

The typical college library is a place where you'll find students hunched over tables perusing thick volumes for a report or class project. The bookshelves usually contain rows and rows of bound academic journals or encyclopedias — materials that lend themselves to the average student research project and aren't always described as "fun."

But those working on a research project at Bowling Green State University's Browne Popular Culture Library might use that very word to describe their work. This is one library that holds research materials of a very different — and nontraditional — sort.

In the Browne library's "stacks" you'll find boxes filled with Superman memorabilia, plastic-encased adventure novels with titles like *Captain Zero: Master of Midnight*, *The Ghost Super-Detective* and *Strange Tales of Mystery and Terror*, not to mention a massive bookshelf of romance novels from Harlequin and Silhouette.

Across the room, a series of shelves supports hundreds of toys, books, scripts and figurines from the cult classic TV series *Star Trek*. Another bookcase collects Sears and JC Penney catalogs dating back to the turn of the 20th century. Drawers pull out to reveal classic movie

posters featuring John Wayne and posters from both World Wars urging readers to watch out for spies. A collection of postcards is arranged by subject: birds, Florida, dinosaurs. A set of Mickey Mouse ears sits next to

boxes of motion picture press kits. Pins and buttons featuring slogans like "I Like Ike" and "I Shot J.R." decorate the wall leading into the research room.

For the last 40 years, the Browne library has specialized

democratic scholars focusing on popular culture, the field is every bit as worthy of serious study as other disciplines because, in their view, the everyday songs, films or other forms of entertainment speak volumes about who we are as a people.

As Browne himself explained in an interview, "Popular culture is the way of life in which and by which most people in any society live. In a democracy like the United States, it is the voice of the people — their likes and dislikes — that form the lifeblood of daily existence, of a way of life.... It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainment and diversions. It is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology and religion — our total life picture."

Browne originally started studying pop culture as a student at the University of Nebraska, where he proposed a project on everyday culture compared to folklore. When he began teaching, he continued weaving popular culture studies into his classes. At first the critical examination of everyday life was met with skepticism from Browne's fellow faculty members. In fact, while teaching at Bowling Green, tensions became so high between

Browne and his English department colleagues that he fought to create his own department. As Browne said in a recent interview with *Americana: The Journal of American Pop Culture*, he argued that the new field was important to examine because "the proper



The Browne Popular Culture Library inside Bowling Green State University's main library is a treasure trove of political buttons, movie posters, comic books, and even Superman memorabilia and Mickey Mouse ears.

in all things Americana. The library was founded by professor Ray Browne, a pioneer in the study of pop culture. Browne started an academic journal on the subject, and he authored and edited more than 60 books on pop culture with his wife, Pat.

For Browne and other aca-

study of a democratic society is its democratic cultures and practices, all.”

The department grew quickly, thanks to student demand, and is now considered a preeminent program. Bowling Green is still the only college in the country that offers a graduate degree in popular culture. And Browne still keeps an office at the school and is a member of the staff as a retired/emeritus faculty.

The library holds more than 200,000 cataloged items, says head librarian Nancy Down, including more than 50,000 comic books, one of the largest collections in the world. Last year, the library hosted a successful comic book conference on the Bowling Green campus that featured lectures, an art exhibition and book-signing sessions.

Items date from the late 1800s



Most of the 200,000 items in the library are available for public viewing.

all the way up to today. Among the more delicate holdings are “story papers” from the turn of the 20th century.

Many of the library’s holdings are donated by enthusiasts whose collections have grown too large to manage. Others are brought in by family members of collectors who were left memorabilia in a will or stumbled upon a trunk of pop items while cleaning out an attic, says Down. Other items are picked up at rummage sales.

Some of the more traditional collector items include trading cards and movie memorabilia, but the library also hosts some

have sought the library’s help. One visitor was looking for pulp novel cover artwork that featured pieced-together ransom notes. Down says the library’s extensive online catalog allows users to get specific with search options like topic and format.

Down’s goals are to get more of the collection online, scanning some of the more fragile items (most materials in the library can



### Visit the library

The Browne Popular Culture Library is located on the Bowling Green State University campus on the 4th floor of the Jerome Library, Bowling Green, 419-372-2450, [www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/pcl/](http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/pcl/). Hours are Sun., 5–9 p.m.; Mon.–Tues., 9 a.m.–9 p.m.; Wed.–Fri., 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; closed Sat. Be sure to bring a photo ID with you, which is required to use the library’s materials. Call before you visit, as the library closes for student breaks and holidays. Tours can also be scheduled in advance of your visit.

unusual collections of things like beauty pageant memorabilia, matchbook covers, greeting cards and John F. Kennedy–related items.

Down says the visitors who come to the library are as diverse as the collections. Students doing research papers on Jack the Ripper or the lost city of Atlantis

be photocopied, but some of the more delicate papers can only be viewed) and streamlining the library’s collections. “We want to build on our strengths and strengthen the pop culture curriculum,” she says. □

*Ann Fazzini is a freelance writer from Columbus.*