

Westward Hoard!

An Interview with Edward W. Nolan

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Published on September 16, 2008.

Filed in *Voice: Journal of Design* in *Off the cuff*.

Few know as much about the Pacific Northwest—particularly as it has been depicted in ephemera and tourist propaganda—as Edward W. Nolan, head of special collections at the Washington State Historical Society, in Tacoma, for close to 20 years. With graduate degrees in history and library science from the University of Oregon, Nolan began his museum and special collections career in 1975, at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle. Two years later, he went to work for the Lane County Historical Museum, in Eugene, and in 1982 he went to the Montana Historical Society, where he researched and wrote a book on the Northern Pacific Railroad photography of F. Jay Haynes (1853–1921). During that stint, he studied in depth the use of photography and promotional brochures as tools of persuasion. Finally, he went on to head the special collections at Eastern Washington State Historical Society, in Spokane, where he built its manuscript, photography and ephemera collections. Here, Nolan discusses his lifelong interest in collecting and the important differences between hoarding and archiving.

Heller: Were you always a hoarder?

Nolan: Yes, I come by it naturally. Both my grandmother and mother were hoarders. My grandmother's specialty seemed to be saucers, clothing, and anything that took her fancy. When we moved her from her home I would estimate there were at least 10,000 saucers, and quantities of blouses, shoes, and bar soap. She would always say that buying these things "did [her] soul good." Without a doubt, poverty and the Depression played a large role for both my grandmother and mother. My mother, however, in addition to hoarding clothing, developed a taste for antiques. From an early age I was inclined to collect paper materials. First it was timetables and advertising available at train stations and in hotel lobbies, and I found myself attracted to real photo post cards rather than the colored lithographic cards. I was, and am, truly hopeless!

Heller: When you came to the Historical Society, did you stumble upon a trove, or did you have to assemble from scratch?

Nolan: Another treasure that was here is the large collection of World War I and World War II recruiting posters, also uncatalogued and uncared for. The third great resource is a collection of over 100 circus posters dating between c. 1930 and 1955, collected in the area by a local man with a passion for the circus. These, too, were uncared for. Beyond these three collections, our ephemera collections were truly wanting and it has fallen to me to build this resource. Since 1990, we have added thousands of pieces of ephemera, mainly acquired at thrift stores, on the streets, and occasionally purchased (we don't have much of a budget for acquisition).

Heller: Your collections are all visual ephemera, from posters to adverts to menus. What captures your fancy most, and why?

Nolan: That's a tough one! Probably handbills and broadsides because they demonstrate such a wide variety of printing techniques and designs. Their uniqueness, certainly. And, their size makes them easier to handle than large posters.

Heller: Are you tutored in design and typography? And if so, do these elements influence how and what you collect?

Nolan: I am not tutored in design and typography, but I guess that over the years I have absorbed an aesthetic that comes from long experience. For me, though, there is an aesthetic in even the crudest amateur efforts to propagandize.

It did take me some time (but not much) to overcome the shackles of library training, to see things in a larger context beyond just their informational value. I think library schools, and now "information science" schools make a valiant effort to snuff out any appreciation for the physical item and its design. It's all only information. Librarians have long regarded ephemera and pamphlets as "fugitive material," more problematic than useful. You need only witness the kind of care it has received in their hands—folding, cutting, ownership stamps and a whole host of other sins.

Heller: What ephemeral pieces are most unique—and historically important—to Washington State?

Nolan: Certainly, Fuller's collection of 1885 and 1892 anti-Chinese handbills and broadsides, and his 1898–1902 collection of broadsides advertising Klondike Gold Rush bound ships are among the finest, if not the finest, groupings in the world.

Heller: Do you view the material through a critical or aesthetic eye? In other words, what is most important in your collection the historical significance or the quality of the object?

Nolan: Since we are a historical society, we look at materials from at least two viewpoints: support of our exhibits program and support for researchers. Of course, I prefer to have the most aesthetically pleasing (to me) material. I love the "zingers," but I'm trying to document a wide range of history, so I must look at message, movements, and other aspects of the item. Of course, I might like to collect only the most finely produced and aesthetically pleasing material, but I don't have that luxury.

Heller: Are there things you will not collect? And why?

Nolan: No, there are not things I will not collect, but I also realize I cannot collect it all because I cannot get it all. I make no judgments as to cause or even aesthetic as far as rejecting.

Heller: Since many of your artifacts represent life in the state of Washington, how would you say the design of this region compares with the design of other regions?

Nolan: Historically the majority of the material representing life in Washington has come from outside of the state. Printing firms in Chicago, New York, Buffalo, St. Louis, and other eastern cities have produced a lot of what survives. Railroads, airlines, manufacturers, and others have distilled what they think Washington is all about and that has guided their design. Mt. Rainier, Seattle Space Needle, salmon, apples, outdoor recreation, the rugged West, etc.

Heller: Who were the leading poster artists of Washington State, and what did they contribute to the graphic heritage of the nation?

Nolan: I'm not certain there were any "pathbreakers." However, numerous design firms and artists have emerged over the past thirty or so years. We see fine posters coming out of Seattle and, locally, the Beautiful Angle group has been producing some very interesting work that I think is trend setting and will be sought after.

Heller: Other than collectibles—and we know from eBay that people love to pick up collectibles—what is the value and virtue of your collection?

Nolan: I must say that places like eBay have made my job more challenging. The collector mentality is different from mine in that many of them only want to possess the item and will pay any price to acquire it. I don't have that kind of budget. I look at the legacy we are creating for Washingtonians and try, whenever possible, to add those things that enrich this legacy. That legacy is the virtue and the value. Certainly, researchers and future exhibit attendees will, I hope, find all of our efforts to have been virtuous and valuable.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.