

■ RETROSPECT

Natural History at Texas Tech

By William E. Tydeman, Associate Dean of Libraries
Photo by David Marshall

The old saying goes that luck is when preparation meets opportunity. Looking back, we were prepared. For almost a year, beginning in 1997 and into 1998, the Southwest Collection's staff wrestled with charting our future collecting emphasis.

The staff tired of my questions: What are our research strengths? What makes us unique? How can we best support the research emphasis of the university while building collections of national distinction? After all, scholars considered our collection on ranching and agriculture one of the finest in the region. And like a gigantic vacuum cleaner, we had combed the counties of West Texas to gather up all manner of organizational records, newspapers and personal reminiscences. Since the 1950s, we had interviewed more than 2,000 West Texans on their lives and careers. "Build to your strength," the staff said. "Whatever we do in the future we must capitalize on our historic mission — to document the history and culture of West Texas."

Discussion with the then Vice President for Research David Schmidly helped shape our plan. Schmidly proudly pointed out that Texas Tech's field biology program ranked as one of the finest in the nation. Emphasizing on-the-ground field investigations, Tech's mammalogy program was recognized the world over. Why not collect writers and researchers who deal with the natural world—what today we refer to as the literature of place? We had millions of documents on the southern plains and West Texas. Why not expand our scope by concentrating on writers and scholars who dealt with the natural world and the meaning of place beyond West Texas?

As luck would have it, two serendipitous events occurred. The distinguished writer and National Book Award winner Barry Lopez was looking for a home for his archive. And Texas Tech benefactor James Sowell was interested in purchasing new collections for the Library. Sowell agreed to support the purchase of Lopez's papers. Sowell's interests in nature, in scouting, in the flora and fauna on his ranch fueled his interest in natural history materials. A hand-



Visiting the Davis Mountains are (from left): Barry Lopez; Debra Gwartney; John Karges, Nature Conservancy; Bill Tydeman; David Schmidly and Carl Phillips.

shake in the Market Alumni Center after a board of regents meeting in 1999 sealed the arrangement. Texas Tech would acquire the papers of the most important contemporary writer of place. Several months later, after many exchanges between Sowell and Lopez, we selected a name. The James Sowell Family Collection in Literature, Community and the Natural World was born.

One event can sometimes serve to spark a broad series of changes. Lopez now holds the title of University Distinguished Scholar, the first for Texas Tech. This appointment brings him to campus at least twice a year for lectures, readings, classroom discussions and meetings with faculty and administration. Lopez and the distinguished scientist E. O. Wilson helped design the Natural History and Humanities Degree for the Honors College. It now attracts students from all over the United States interested in an undergraduate major combining scientific training with an appreciation of the arts and humanities. The Sowell Collection has grown beyond the papers of Lopez to include eight other authors. Their concern with the ethical and moral issues of the 21st century has established Texas Tech University as the leading repository of contemporary writers of place. The papers of Rick Bass, PattiAnn Rogers, David Quammen, Max Crawford, David James Duncan, Bill

Kittredge, Annick Smith and Bill McKibben have attracted research interest from all over the world.

The Department of English has hired a new faculty member to teach literary nonfiction, the favorite genre of the writers in the Sowell Collection. The Southwest Collection Rare Books Department has acquired dazzling first editions of the classics of natural history including Thoreau's *Walden*, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selbourne*, and George Perks Marsh's *Man and Nature*. Texas Tech Press is now attracting submission from scientists and writers of the natural world. Susan Hanson's *Icons of Grace and Longing* will be published within the next 12 months, marking a remarkable debut of a writer destined to become a Texas icon. Leading scholars such as E.O. Wilson and writers from the Sowell Collection such as PattiAnn Rogers, Bill Kittredge and Annick Smith have lectured and given readings on the Texas Tech campus. All have expressed delight with our natural history initiative.

Call it luck, opportunity or preparation, but however you label it, the acquisition of Lopez's papers has led to a series of events that Texas Tech University alumni can look to with great pride. The support of donors such as Jim Sowell and writers such as Lopez are helping to make Texas Tech a leading research university. ■