COMPETITION GENERAL RESEARCH FUND
FY 2011

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PROJECT TITLE  The bumper sticker: Preserving the message

STATUS  ☑ New ☐ Renewal/Continuation (Special justification must be attached)

KEY WORDS (Provide up to 50 characters maximum that describes your project in disciplinary, subdisciplinary terms.)

Bumper sticker, pressure-sensitive, ephemera, preservation
I. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH OBJECTIVES (1 page maximum). This summary must explain what is to be done and its significance in a manner intelligible to any faculty member, regardless of discipline.

I have been granted a five-month sabbatical leave in fall 2010 for focused research and writing time to study the history and manufacture of “pressure-sensitive ephemera,” particularly bumper stickers, which are widely collected by research institutions for scholarly use. Currently there are no established preservation protocols for or substantive research on the care of such collections, despite their well-documented uses in scholarly endeavors. I plan to expand a database of material attributes by conducting research in institutions with large collections of bumper stickers, in the region and in Texas and Washington, DC; travel is the focus of this General Research Fund application. In addition, I will build on previously conducted research on the manufacturing history and preservation of the bumper sticker, using resources available in the KU Libraries and through interlibrary loan. The intended outcome of the research is at least one peer-reviewed article and at least one refereed presentation on the topic at a professional conference.
II. RESEARCH PLAN, SUPPORTING DATA, AND PROPOSED TIME SCHEDULE: Please note PAGE LIMITATION of five (5) pages.

Research Plan

In the late 1940s, screen printer Forrest P. Gill of Kansas City, Kansas, combined his design skills with adhesive-impregnated paper to create the bumper sticker. Bearing diverse messages ranging from the mundane to the profane, the stickers now appear not only on bumpers everywhere, but increasingly in academic research collections to further scholarship in a variety of disciplines. As conservator for KU Libraries, I work with my colleagues to prolong the useful life of such holdings. The impetus for this research study arose when a patron at Spencer Research Library requested a stack of stickers from the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements. While leafing through the items, I realized that the conservation field’s technical literature has remained largely silent on their manufacture history, possible chemical and physical instabilities, and preservation protocols. Although the bumper sticker might seem to be a simple object, a typical sticker is made up of four layers: printing, a substrate (normally, these days, the vinyl on which the text is printed), an adhesive layer, and a backing paper intended to keep the adhesive from sticking before it is placed on a surface. Because each layer offers possibly distinct preservation challenges, the bumper sticker is, in fact, a fairly complex physical entity.

Many bumper stickers are composed of materials known to be unstable or problematic for storage, such as vinyl and various adhesives, but there is no published conservation research on how the materials in bumper stickers interact or affect long-term permanence and durability. My own observations and conversations with archivists and conservators have identified a number of challenges concerning the long-term storage of bumper stickers: they frequently adhere to adjacent paper collections and to each other over time, develop large bubbles between the substrate and backing layers, distort and shrink, and emit gases as they age that catalyze the degradation of paper collections often stored in the same box.

Project description

In light of the dearth of information on the manufacture history of pressure-sensitive ephemera and, therefore, a lack of accepted preservation protocols for caring for such collections, I have begun a research project to study and provide this
information to my professional communities. Such information would be vital to those of us at KU interested in preserving pressure-sensitive ephemeral collections in archives, libraries, and museums on campus, but would also be widely valuable to the larger, national, cultural heritage communities, most of whom rely on conservators and our professional literature to inform decisions in caring for collections, because they cannot afford to hire institutional conservators to perform such research. Currently I am developing a database to record attributes for the cataloged bumper stickers in KU’s Wilcox Collection, and hope to follow suit for other campus resources, such as those held in the Dole Institute for Politics and the Spencer Museum of Art. In addition, although bumper sticker originator Forrest P. Gill died in 2005, his printing company (thought to be the largest producer of bumper stickers in the United States) is still flourishing in Shawnee Mission, Kansas—a fortuitous location. The chairman of the board and technical director of Gill Studios have been generous in answering questions by phone and have invited me to visit their operations. The more items I study, the more information I glean about the materials that compose each sticker and the more I learn about possible preservation concerns—all of which will inform subsequent research. For each item, I make detailed notes about the printing, substrate, adhesive, and the backing layers, as well as manufacturing marks. I will continue to add to this database, while further researching the history of the bumper sticker and categorizing, to the extent possible, changes in composition and manufacture over time.

Research Timeline

Sabbatical period (August 8, 2010 – January 8, 2011)

First three months of fall semester 2010: During this time I will build on previously conducted research on the manufacturing history and preservation of the bumper sticker and related pressure-sensitive ephemera, using resources available in the KU Libraries and through interlibrary loan. In my research I use a cross-disciplinary approach typical to conservation, studying patents, the technical literature aimed at a manufacturing audience, the scientific literature aimed at an academic audience, and the professional conservation literature on pressure-sensitive adhesives and tapes in a conservation context (where the focus is on removal, not retention). In addition, I plan to expand the database of bumper sticker material attributes by conducting research in institutions with large collections of bumper stickers and consulting with conservator colleagues and adhesive scientists. Please see next page for travel details.
Out of state travel:

Washington, DC (7 days, 6 nights):

Will meet with colleagues at the Library of Congress, Smithsonian, and National Postal Museum, as well as an adhesive scientist retired from the U.S. Postal Service. I will travel for a day to Baltimore to meet a colleague (an expert on pressure-sensitive tapes) who works at the Walters Art Gallery and Museum. I will also research at the Library of Congress and Smithsonian. A colleague has offered me use of her apartment on Capitol Hill, so main costs would be airfare, round-trip train to/from Baltimore, local travel, and per diem.

Austin, TX (7 days, 6 nights):

Since the approval of the sabbatical application, I have learned of the Paul Harvey Bumper Sticker Collection at the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. This collection is one of the most extensive I have located so far. In addition, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Museum, also located in Austin, has over a thousand cataloged bumper stickers. A colleague in Austin has offered me her guesthouse, so main costs would be airfare, local travel, and per diem.

Regional travel:

Abilene, KS (1 day) and Independence, MO (1 day)

Will use the museum holdings of the Truman and Eisenhower Presidential Museums. Costs include mileage and lunch.

Shawnee Mission, KS (Two 1-day trips)

I anticipate making two follow-up visits to meet with the staff of Gill Studios. Costs include mileage and lunch.

Last two months of fall semester 2010: I will prepare an article on the preservation of bumper stickers for a general professional readership to explain the scientific information in a clear and useful way to library, museum, and archives professionals less versed in this specific, scientific conservation terminology. In addition, I will draft and submit to a peer-reviewed journal a technical article for the conservation audience on the manufacturing history and preservation of bumper stickers. As a strong supporter of open access initiatives, I will make my scholarly output available through KU’s
ScholarWorks digital repository.

**Post-grant period**

Additional aspects to be addressed at a later date include designing and implementing a survey of conservators and other cultural heritage professionals on the challenges of and current approaches toward preserving bumper stickers and related ephemera, and presenting the survey results in a meaningful way that marries preservation needs with preservation solutions, including typical hours of work needed to stabilize items, material costs, and priorities associated with housing and treating such collections. I also intend to prepare and present at least one scholarly paper at a national professional conference on the manufacture and care of pressure-sensitive ephemera.

**Supporting data**

Please see attached for more detailed itemized budget information.
III. CURRICULUM VITAE OF APPLICANT (to be attached): Please note maximum page limitation of TWO (2) PAGES emphasizing the recent record of the applicant.

See attached

IV. FUTURE SOURCES OF FUNDING

A. Has this project or its substantial equivalent already been submitted to another agency for support? If so, please give name of agency, title of project, amount, and names of all co-investigators.

I have no current funding for research.

B. Are there other sources, prospects, or plans for future support for this project or its substantial equivalent? Be specific about your plans for application, agencies, and time schedule.

If research time allows, I will apply for the John Dowdy Endowed Grant Fund to visit the W.R. Poage Legislative Library at Baylor University. This award would cover travel to and from Waco, TX. Should this grant be awarded, I may try to combine the trip to Waco with the proposed trip to Austin (renting a car from Austin to drive to and from Waco).

I may also apply for support to the KU Library Research Fund if I find the duplication costs to be more than what is estimated in this grant request.

V. PROGRESS ON PAST GENERAL RESEARCH FUND APPLICATIONS

A. If you were awarded General Research Fund Allocations in the past, please give account numbers for the two most recent allocations:
(For past account numbers you can contact Patti Steffan - psteffan@ku.edu)

Account Number:

Account Number:

B. Total number of allocations provided by General Research Fund

Applicant:

This project:

C. LIST results of all past General Research Fund Allocations in terms of publications, proposals, grants and contracts for outside support. Please list publications in bibliographic format.
VI. CURRENT RESEARCH SUPPORT

A. Please identify all current research support, including the source, amount, title of the project and the period.

N/A

B. To what extent does this request duplicate or supplement your presently funded research or the research program of a collaborator?

Not at all
VII. UNIVERSITY REGULATIONS FOR RESEARCH PROJECT.
Enclose approvals, if applicable. Every applicant must complete one of these forms for each application set.

1. Human Subjects
   a. Does this project involve human subjects (includes interviews, questionnaires, surveys and observations)?
      Yes ☐ No ☒
   b. If Yes, have you applied for approval from the Human Subjects Committee?
      (HSCL, David Hann, 864-7429 or Mary Denning, 864-7385) Yes ☐ No ☒
   c. Have you received approval? (If Yes, attach the approval) Yes ☐ No ☒

2. Animal Research
   a. Does the project involve animals? Yes ☐ No ☒
   b. If Yes, have you applied for approval from the Animal Care Committee?
      (Jim Bresnahan, 864-5587) Yes ☐ No ☒
   c. Have you received approval? (If Yes, attach the approval) Yes ☐ No ☒

3. Radiation Safety
   a. Does the project involve radiation sources (includes x-rays, radioisotopes etc.)? Yes ☐ No ☒
   b. If Yes, have you applied for approval from the Radiation Safety Committee?
      (Contact the Environment, Health & Safety Office, 4-4089) Yes ☐ No ☒
   c. Have you received approval? (If Yes, attach the approval) Yes ☐ No ☒

4. Kansas Ecological Reserves
   a. Does the project involve Kansas Ecological Reserves? Yes ☐ No ☒
   b. If Yes, have you applied for approval from the Director of the Kansas Biological Survey?
      (Ed Martinko, 864-7770) Yes ☐ No ☒
   c. Have you received approval? (If Yes, attach the approval) Yes ☐ No ☒

5. Biohazards
   a. Does the project involve Recombinant DNA or other biohazardous materials? Yes ☐ No ☒
   b. If Yes, have you applied for approval from the Institutional Biosafety Committee?
      (contact the Environment, Health & Safety Office, 4-4089) Yes ☐ No ☒
   c. Have you received approval? (If Yes, attach the approval) Yes ☐ No ☒

6. Blood-borne Pathogens
   a. Will you or any member of your research staff be exposed to any blood-borne pathogens? Yes ☐ No ☒
   b. If Yes, please explain:

Final approval of any allocation will be contingent upon applicant’s compliance with the above University regulations.