To: Mary Lee Hummert, Vice Provost for Faculty Support, Office of the Provost  
Cc: Lorraine Haricombe, Dean of Libraries; Tyra Grant, Head, Preservation Department  
Re: Sabbatical report, Whitney S. Baker, Conservator/Associate Librarian, KU Libraries  
Date: January 21, 2011

During my fall semester sabbatical (August 8, 2010-January 8, 2011), I began in earnest a research project on the manufacturing history, material science, and preservation of ephemeral collections that incorporate a layer of pressure-sensitive adhesive (which adheres with just the touch of a hand). Because the topic is large and more complex than one might suspect, I focused my sabbatical time on bumper stickers, because they are widely collected in research institutions and are of general interest to museum curators, archivists, and librarians.

With the generous assistance of a University of Kansas General Research Fund award, I conducted two research trips. In September, I visited Austin, Texas, and surveyed two large bumper sticker collections: the entire bumper sticker holdings of the Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) Presidential Museum (approximately 1200 items), and selected items from the Paul Harvey Bumper Sticker Collection at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin (approximately 750 items). The LBJ collection was invaluable, as it consisted primarily of dated items, allowing me to record in a database various attributes about the printing, substrate, adhesive, backing liners, and storage practices. The Briscoe Center collection was not yet processed and organized, making it more challenging to use, but its relative neglect also provided many insights about how such material ages and decays with no preservation intervention.

In October I visited Washington, DC, for an intensive week with conservation colleagues and scientists. One day I met with the head conservator at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum and three scientists from the United States Postal Service to discuss the manufacture and preservation of pressure-sensitive postage stamps, which are constructed in a manner similar to bumper stickers. Their advice and information about pressure-sensitive adhesives was helpful. I also spent a day in Baltimore meeting a paper conservator who is the authority on pressure-sensitive tapes. Our discussions were incredibly valuable and she challenged me in many ways, which will ultimately lead to better final project outcomes. Another day was spent at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, Division of Politics and Reform, examining its extensive collection of bumper stickers and discussing issues with the curator. In between meetings with former colleagues at the Library of Congress, I also spent a day and a half consulting a hard-to-find run of a commercial screenprinting journal.

Other highlights of the fall semester included a research trip to the Eisenhower Presidential
Museum in Abilene, KS, and interviews with scientists at 3M and Gill Studios, a leading bumper sticker manufacturer in Shawnee Mission. I also examined the entire bumper sticker collections of the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements at Kenneth Spencer Research Library and the Robert J. Dole Institute for Politics. Much of the end of the semester was spent writing an article on the history, composition, and preservation of the bumper sticker, aimed at a professional audience of collection managers, curators, and archivists. As of the end of the semester, a first draft of the article was completed, with a targeted submission date of March 1 to a journal focusing on collections care for museums, archives, and libraries. In addition to the current article, I gathered material for additional ones and began constructing a scholarly presentation on the topic (venue yet undetermined); I am looking forward to presenting this research to archivists, curators, and conservators in the coming year.

I am extremely grateful for the chance to spend a semester in full-time research. I have taken full advantage of the opportunity and would like to thank everyone involved in supporting this effort.

Respectfully submitted,

Whitney Baker
Conservator, Associate Librarian