From an innovative national grant project to amazing acquisitions of unique treasures, and from international collaborations to more than twenty exhibitions in multiple cities, the Panama Canal Museum Collection (PCMC) has made a terrific impact in the ten years since it was established in 2012. The PCMC is a leading research collection for the study of the Canal, particularly focusing on the American era of the Canal. The collection documents all aspects of Canal history particularly focusing on the experiences of the people who lived and worked in the former Canal Zone and in Panama. We preserve and provide access to incredible historical and cultural resources including thousands of personal letters and photos, family scrapbooks, memorabilia, publications, maps, and oral history interviews.

The collection originally was developed by the Panama Canal Museum, a private museum that operated in Seminole, Florida for almost 15 years. Founded in 1998 by former Canal employees and residents of the Canal Zone known as Zonians, the Museum amassed an impressive collection and developed successful educational offerings and public events. Despite these achievements, Museum leaders recognized the
need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the collection long after they were gone, and so in 2012 the Museum closed its doors and transferred its entire collection of approximately 15,000 objects to UF.

Immediately following the acquisition in 2012, Dean Judith Russell and the Libraries received an IMLS National Leadership Grant which aided the transition immensely. The goals for this ambitious project were to integrate and manage the collection at UF, to initiate a national dialogue about library-museum mergers, and to lead a multi-institutional 2014 Centennial celebration of the Canal opening. The grant was essential because it provided funding for multiple positions to manage the collection and activities associated with the Centennial and national dialogue. The Centennial alone included over ten exhibits across campus and in Tampa, a concert, a book, and a conference held with UF’s Center for Latin American Studies, among other activities.

At the end of the grant project, management of the collection was transferred to Special & Area Studies Collections (SASC). It takes a large team to manage a collection as diverse and dynamic as the PCMC, and that team spreads far beyond SASC. While the artifacts and archival materials are managed by PCMC curators, maps are managed by the Map & Imagery Library, books are managed by the Latin American & Caribbean Collection, and there are numerous others throughout the Libraries who support the PCMC and its activities.

The PCMC remains very much a community-focused and supported collection, and we owe our success to the groups we work with so closely. Foremost is the Friends of the PCMC, the principal support group. The Friends group includes founders of the original Museum, so we benefit greatly from their knowledge and experience.
Friends members also raise funds through activities such as auctions, and these funds directly support PCMC digitization, preservation, and collecting. Similarly, the PCMC enjoys a strong relationship with the Panama Canal Society, whose members served in the construction, operation, or protection of the Canal. The Friends and the Society collaborate on multiple activities, including an annual Spring Luncheon at UF and exhibits and seminars at the Society’s annual reunion. Within the University, the PCMC enjoys a close relationship with the Center for Latin American Studies and faculty from a variety of disciplines. Externally, the PCMC is closely aligned with international groups and institutions including Pan Caribbean Sankofa and the Museo del Canal Interocéánico de Panamá. Through these collaborations, the PCMC has collected dozens of oral history interviews, collaborated on acquisitions, and conducted a very successful webinar in May 2021 with over 220 participants from the US, Panama, Antigua, Spain, and other countries.

DONORS ARE THE KEY TO OUR SUCCESS.

Over 90% of new acquisitions are donations, and since 2012 we have received 1,070 donations totaling more than 8,000 physical objects—everything from photos and letters to t-shirts and board games. We also recently received more than 15,000 digitized postcards from donor Brad Wilde, and with this incredible donation we have more than doubled the size of the collection in ten years. Donations of all shapes and sizes, whether landmark gifts such as the postcard collection or smaller gifts such as a family scrapbook, are invaluable because of their far-reaching impact on scholarship and education. Donors also generously provide financial support for all PCMC activities. In fact, the Libraries are reaching a milestone in 2022 with over $1 million raised for PCMC endowments and funds since 2012.

This strong support ensures that we will be able to engage in digitization, exhibits, and strategic initiatives. From the onset, we have prioritized providing online access to materials, and there are about 300,000 digital images which are viewed 3-5 million times annually. Some of the most-used digitized resources are newspapers such as the Panama American, school yearbooks, official reports, and photos, all of which are available in the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC). We also have created multiple online exhibits focusing on topics such
as the US invasion of Panama in 1989 and scouting in the Canal Zone. The PCMC exhibition program is ambitious with multiple exhibits annually. The Albert H. Nahmad Panama Canal Gallery in the Smathers Library Building opened in 2017 and features annual exhibitions on diverse topics such as international relations, food and cuisine, World War II, and health and medicine.

The current strategic initiative is the oral history program. We currently have over 140 interviews available in dLOC, with dozens more currently being transcribed and edited. Interviews are invaluable because they capture perspectives and details that are often not recorded in publications or other sources. Our goal is to preserve the broadest range of individual stories; memories which will be lost over time. We also are partnering with Pan Caribbean Sankofa on a multi-year project to record interviews narrated by people of West Indian descent. Pan Caribbean Sankofa members conduct the interviews, which are preserved as part of the PCMC and made available in dLOC.

In the past five years, we assisted over 300 scholars and other researchers, and we taught 25 class sessions reaching almost 400 students. The most popular subjects relate to the former Canal Zone, West Indian communities, genealogy, US-Panama relations, art history, indigenous people, labor, and race. We have worked with faculty to develop courses relating to the Canal and awarded travel grants to visiting scholars nationally. We also regularly engage with faculty and students to incorporate resources into classes and research projects. We have enjoyed a close relationship with the Museum Studies program, for example, providing practical experience for graduate students as interns and student assistants and also supporting multiple thesis projects.

We celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the PCMC in 2022 with the Spring Luncheon in March, online activities such as webinars, and a special exhibit at the Panama Canal Society reunion in July.