Here today, gone… [date unknown]: Databasing a historic accession and deaccession record

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Why review accessions and deaccessions? ➡ abbreviated here as (de-)accessions

- Confirm and preserve specimen history
- Inventory collection to understand holdings
- Discover connections between agents
- Understand how collection's past impacts its present holdings

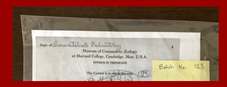
Backbone required (above). Many transactions, few documents: one 5" wide document box (below, 1).

Manageable scope

- Vertebrate Paleontology only
- Only review (de-)accessions w/ documentation
- Here, documentation = paperwork in any form

Concerns

- Material conservation: torn, fading paper
- Inventorying specimens efficiently
- Incomplete data or lack of specificity



Documents for each transaction grouped and placed in record sleeves to preserve and organize.

Outcomes

- 126 accession & 111 deaccession records evaluated
- Includes 1507 unique catalog numbers

Summary of evaluated specimens

		Accessions	Deaccessions
Unique Catalog Numbers		1026	481
All Catalog Numbers		-	559*
Catalog Numbers Per Transaction	Maximum	173	130
	Median	3	3
	Mean	1	1

*including casts with the same number as the original specimen

Abstract

Understanding the unique history of a fossil specimen can be difficult with historic collections. This is especially true if staff cannot determine when a specimen was received and/or transferred or with whom a specimen is associated. Well-groomed accession and deaccession records can aid in understanding the full holdings of a collection in its historic and current usage; however, tackling decades-to-centuries worth of paper records is a daunting task. In the Vertebrate Paleontology collection at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ, Harvard University), we have captured this data in a four-stage process, consisting of: 1) identifying transactions from historic documents; 2) inventorying related specimens; 3) databasing accession and deaccession transactions; and 4) digitizing their associated media for ready access. While the primary documents were often repurposed loan forms, other material included correspondence and informal documents from previous staff, donors, and recipients. This meant each document and transaction had to be individually evaluated, increasing the complexity of the project. Other challenges included identifying uncatalogued material and relating incomplete specimen descriptions to cataloged material. Other collection documents (e.g., field journals, yearly reports, and staff notes) and communication with other institutions' collection staff proved key to our success in clarifying specimen record data. Previously, accession records were entered into our database but required cleaning, while deaccession records had notyet been captured. As a result of this project, we verified and digitized 126 accession and 111 deaccession records, updating over 1,500 specimen records in the process. We were also able to identify information and documents relating to historic loans and other MCZ collections (e.g., Invertebrate Paleontology), as well as illuminate the connections between the MCZ, other institutions, and the researchers we support.

The process we used

1 2

3

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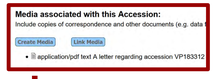


click! opens document in new window

1. ID unique (de-)accessions

- Group documents w/ *temporary* 'batch #' in spreadsheet w/ one row per item of material- add/remove records as understanding evolves

2. Inventory specimens

- Match material to MCZ #, locate specimens transaction-by-transaction, & update specimen data in MCZbase

3. Database transactions

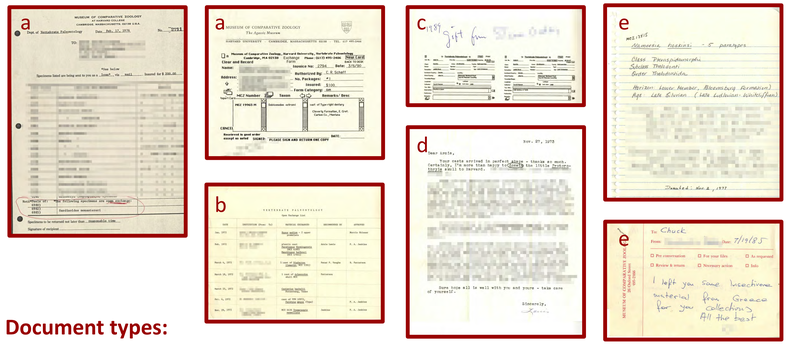
- Accession #s are MCZ-wide numeric sequence, deaccession #s are collection specific, by year (or current year if date unknown)
- Unknown info noted in remarks

4. Digitize media

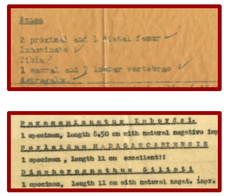
- Scan and attach for easy curatorial access from the transaction page

A century of documents: 1896 - now

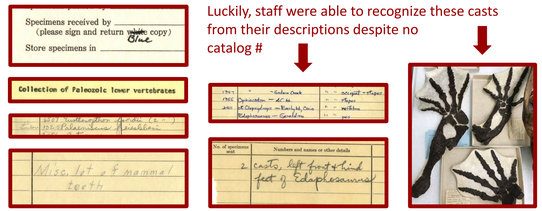
Documents redacted to protect agents and locality information



Document types:
including but not limited to a) transaction forms, b) curatorial lists, c) duplicate specimen labels, d) correspondence, and e) notes.



Conservation concerns:
Creased & torn paper, blurred & faded ink



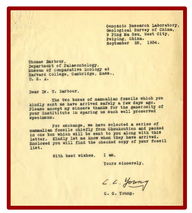
Luckily, staff were able to recognize these casts from their descriptions despite no catalog #

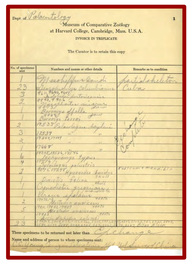
Data woes: repurposed forms, absent/vague data, field #s and un-catalogued material, multiple runs of casts

Spotlight: MCZ & CRL/IVPP exchange

- Thomas Barbour, MCZ director & herpetologist and C. C. Young*, IVPP founding member (2)
- **Exchanged:** 131 specimens incl. Big Bone Lick (KY), Niobrara River (NE), & Melbourne (FL).
- **Received:** 173 mammal fossils from China & Zhoukoudian** = 85% of VP cat. #s from China (3)

*also known as Chien-Chung Young, Yang Zhonjian, and 杨钟健. ** also spelled Choukoutien. CRL: Cenozoic Research Laboratory, IVPP: Institute for Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology.





References & image credits

1. Image Credit: University Products.
2. Institute for Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology, Chinese Academy of Sciences. (n.d.) CAS Members: Chung-Chien Young (1897-1979). Retrieved 31 May 2020 from http://english.ivpp.cas.cn/pe/cm/
3. MCZbase, Museum of Comparative Zoology. Retrieved 31 May 2020 from https://mczbase.mcz.harvard.edu with the search parameters collection = Vertebrate Paleontology and Country = China.

Lessons learned & improvement ideas

Expect complexity

- Specimens may have both incoming & outgoing documents
- Existing transactions may be combined/split

Inventories take time but are worth it

- Idea: Search for taxonomic groups at once- quicker than by transaction?

Opportunity to clean up other info

- # and type of parts, material, & cabinet location
- Ideas: Review locality data, flag for conservation or rehousing

Collaboration is key

- Other institutions may have missing data
- Idea: Accession/deaccession working group to share info, processes, and data standards

Acknowledgements

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