

On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



[Home](#) [About us](#) [Research Communications Staff](#)

Of packrats and horseshoe crabs . . .

Posted on August 27th, 2009 by earle holland

Most people don't realize that writers are really just collectors.

They collect stories, tidbits, anecdotes, experiences, opinions, triumphs and tragedies and then salt them away until an opportunity arises to regurgitate them to hungry readers.

Sciencewriters are no different, except that most of the things they collect are "sciency" stuff, mementoes of former tales of discovery, artifacts of their on-the-job education. We tend to be pack-rats as well, saving all this stuff for some far-off day in the future, with aspirations that our treasure-trove of memorabilia will amaze young colleagues or, at the least, feed the grandkids' curiosity.



The office as attic

I recalled this fact-of-life the other day while rooting through the stacks of accumulated material that clutter my office, looking for a specific document. Regardless of the urgency of my need for what I sought, the process literally stopped time.

An "organizational expert" – one of those new-age folks we hire to bring order to the chaos of our lives and teach us *feng shui* – would cringe over my office, the floor dotted with stacks of unread journals and files of past discoveries and disasters, the detritus of a career spent watching as science goes by. How would such a person react to the seemingly endless mass of questionable stuff?

When the great science fiction and fantasy writer [Ray Bradbury](#) agreed to host a syndicated television program based on his stories, the producers wisely filled the room behind him with strange and wonderful objects that fans would recognize from his tales, gargoyles and ghouls, devices of wonder, all manner of stuff. It was there that Bradbury would sit, introducing a tale, and viewers would be swept into the mindset of things to come.

In my office, videotapes of old television science programs are stacked on shelves along with press-kits from NASA's [Viking](#) planetary missions and for [Skylab](#), our first "space station." Elsewhere, there are the official reports from the [Challenger Disaster](#) and the "cold-fusion" debacle, and the ill-fated [superconducting supercollider](#) that was never built. There's a self-portrait taken from the reflection of the mirrors making up the [Whipple Observatory 10-meter telescope](#) on Mount Hopkins, Arizona. Stuffed toys in the shape of the [ebola virus](#) and a [trypanosome](#) – the vector for [African sleeping](#)

NAVIGATION

- * [Home](#)
- * [About us](#)
- * [Research Communications Staff](#)

RECENT POSTS

- * [A graphic misrepresentation . . .](#)
- * [Of ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasts . . .](#)
- * [A cascade of lemmings . . .](#)
- * [Not what Ben meant . . .](#)
- * [Of science, baseball, and cricket . . .](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

- * [OSU Research News on the Web](#)
- * [Research News on Facebook](#)
- * [Research News on YouTube](#)
- * [StumbleUpon](#)

WHAT WE READ

- * [Dot Earth — Andrew Revkin/New York Times](#)
- * [Framing Science](#)
- * [Health News Review](#)
- * [Knight Science Journalism Tracker](#)
- * [Real Climate](#)
- * [Science News](#)
- * [Speaking of Research](#)
- * [The Great Beyond](#)
- * [The Panda's Thumb](#)
- * [The Plainspoken Scientist](#)
- * [TierneyLab](#)
- * [WiredScience](#)



CATEGORIES

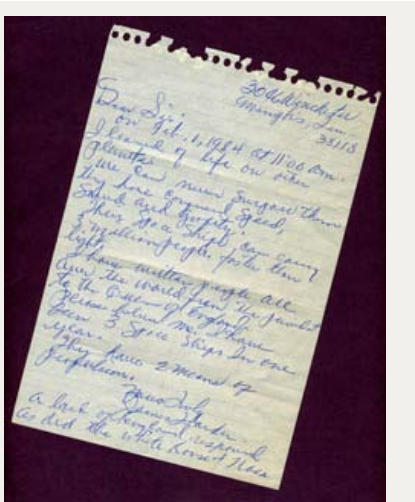
- * [Climate change](#)
- * [Environment](#)
- * [Physics](#)
- * [Researchers](#)
- * [Science Communication](#)
- * [Science policy](#)
- * [Space](#)
- * [Uncategorized](#)

ARCHIVES

- * [February 2012](#)
- * [January 2012](#)
- * [October 2011](#)
- * [September 2011](#)
- * [August 2011](#)
- * [July 2011](#)
- * [May 2011](#)
- * [April 2011](#)
- * [March 2011](#)
- * [December 2010](#)
- * [October 2010](#)
- * [September 2010](#)
- * [August 2010](#)
- * [July 2010](#)
- * [June 2010](#)
- * [May 2010](#)
- * [April 2010](#)
- * [March 2010](#)
- * [February 2010](#)
- * [January 2010](#)
- * [December 2009](#)
- * [November 2009](#)
- * [October 2009](#)
- * [September 2009](#)
- * [August 2009](#)
- * [July 2009](#)
- * [June 2009](#)
- * [May 2009](#)

sickness – share space with a small alien that asks to be taken to “your leader.” Wind-carved ventifacts picked up at Taylor Valley in Antarctica and lava bombs from cinder cones above McMurdo Station sit atop one filing cabinet. A test kit for gonorrhea made from the blood of horseshoe crabs rests inside one drawer, too unique to discard but fundamentally useless.

Tucked away are other oddities, some so strange I occasionally have to pull them out just to assure myself that I didn't make them up. One clipping from a 1950s issue of the Cleveland Plain Dealer that speaks seriously about university research aimed at perfecting head transplants. Another told of preparations at Ohio State for a heart transplant a decade before the procedure actually worked at Stanford. These and others are reminders of the sometimes strangeness of science.



James Harder's letter

Perhaps that is why I got that one particular letter.

It was 1985 and the envelope was addressed to “The University of Ohio” in Columbus but I assume the Post Office figured out the sender's intent. The gentleman from Memphis had information to offer and someone along the way decided the university's sciencewriter was the perfect recipient:

Dear Sir:

On Feb. 1, 1984 at 11:00 AM, I learned of life on other planets. We can never surpass them. They have conquered speed, sound and gravity. Their space ships can carry 3 million people faster than light. I have written people all over the world, from the President to the Queen of England. Please believe me. I have seen 3 space ships in one year. They have two means of propulsion.

Yours truly,

James Harder

p.s. A lord of England responded, as did the White House and NASA.

I have no idea what Mr. Harder saw, or what motivated him to send it to OSU, and ultimately to me. But considering what else fills my workspace, it probably belongs here as much as anywhere else. And given the basic nature of science – that we accumulate data with no real assurances of what it might yield in the future – it's probably worth saving as well. ___Earle Holland

- * April 2009
- * March 2009
- * February 2009
- * January 2009
- * December 2008
- * November 2008
- * October 2008
- * September 2008
- * August 2008
- * July 2008
- * June 2008
- * May 2008

META

- * Log in
- * Entries RSS
- * Comments RSS
- * WordPress.org

RESEARCH NEWS WEBSITE



Tags: [Researchers](#), [Science Communication](#), [Space](#) // [8 Comments](#) »

8 Responses to “Of packrats and horseshoe crabs . . .”

[Richard Fortner](#) // Sep 8, 2009 at 9:02 am

Earle,

You are a treasure. You always put a great humanist light on the science. I, too, have been in the Dry Valleys of Antarctica (with Virginia Tech) and have a small ventifact that looks remarkably like a sperm whale. Publish more of your blogs for us.

Richard Fortner
Retired, OSU Engineering Experiment Station

[earleholland](#) // Sep 8, 2009 at 10:01 am

Richard: I'm humbled by your tribute. As we all know, the world of science and research is so filled with wonder that it often seems to me like being a kid in a candy store. I'm privileged to be able to do this here.

Dale Gnidovec // Sep 8, 2009 at 11:39 am

Loved the piece. One suggestion – perhaps the ventifacts and lava bombs (as well as any other miscellaneous rocks/minerals/fossils you have lying around) might eventually find a permanent home at the Orton Geological Museum?

[earleholland](#) // Sep 8, 2009 at 11:43 am

Dale: I'll keep the museum in mind when it comes time to move along but in all truth, I seen some desirous looks in the eyes of writer colleagues and even my sons, so it's possible they'll be scarfed up by others.

[Drew](#) // Sep 9, 2009 at 4:12 pm

What a great posting, I wonder what the responses to that letter (specifically from the White House) were exactly... Keep up the great work!

[Corporate Behavior](#) // Sep 10, 2009 at 10:01 am

Earle,

i have to agree with Drew – fantastic Posting, I espacially like the picture of the room full with memories 😊

I think you really should hold on to that letter (maybe have it framed or

smth.) you don't see something like that every day!

Jenna McGuire // Sep 21, 2009 at 6:24 pm

Earle: I can vouch for you...you are truly one of the most interesting pack rats I've ever met. And its funny how many articles we start collecting once we've been enamored by a topic or author.

When we moved into our house, I found articles stuffed into boxes about human anatomy from middle schools because I enjoyed writing about it back then. It's an amazing journey when you start to go through your stuff after years of hoarding. 😊

[sciencewriters](#) // Mar 21, 2010 at 11:21 pm

[...] is the most successful and most perverse publicity stunt in the history of public relations. IOn Research... Of packrats and horseshoe crabs . . .
.Sciencewriters are no different, except that most of the things they collect are sciency stuff, [...]

Discussion Area - Leave a Comment

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

« [Mere bumps in the road . . . A matter of time . . .](#) »

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY ■ WWW.OSU.EDU

© 2006, The Ohio State University | Enarson Hall 154 W 12th Avenue | Columbus, Ohio 43210 | 614-292-OHIO

This page is maintained by: [University Relations](#). [About this site](#).

[Contact](#)

If you have trouble accessing this page and need to request an alternate format, contact webmaster@osu.edu.