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DRY EDITOR'S PICK TOPICAL

# Wyoming becomes center of Stan Lee universe with opening of new attraction

Tramel

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**S**tan Lee, who created worlds for readers of Marvel Comics to explore, still has a “world” ripe for exploration.

The world? His own.

You’ll need to go to Wyoming to do the exploring.

In the 1960s, Lee revolutionized the comic book industry by creating or co-creating flawed-but-beloved characters who christened the so-called Marvel Age of Comics. Among those characters: Spider-Man, Iron Man, Hulk, the Fantastic Four and the X-Men.



The Boomtown Dog is a new addition to the concessions at ONEOK Field, home to the Tulsa Drillers baseball team. And it is a big deal.

As those characters matured into pop culture icons, so, too, did the writer, editor and promoter who ushered them into modern mythology. Late in Lee's life, fans looked forward to his cameo appearances in films starring characters that sprang from the brains of Lee and Marvel artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko.

Lee died in 2018 at age 95. Six years later, the breadth of his life's work is on display.

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A free immersive exhibition — “Stan Lee, Beyond the Book” — opened May 1 at the American Heritage Center on the University of Wyoming’s campus in Laramie. A soft opening is a prelude to a May 16 ribbon-cutting ceremony.

“I am excited to kind of bring Stan to people in a way that they haven’t seen before,” Rhiannon McLean, who is part of team crafting the exhibit, said. “It’s hard to conceptualize how can I make people understand who this person is when he is already so famous? And I think we are shedding a new light on him in that way.”

This isn’t a case of a traveling exhibit making its way to Wyoming. Materials showcased in the exhibit are already home, even though Wyoming was never Lee’s home (he was a New York native who migrated to California) and he never attended

college in Wyoming — or anywhere for that matter because he immediately joined the workforce as a pup.

Yet Lee gave his blessing for his archival materials (the Stan Lee Papers = 196 boxes, 126.96 cubic feet) to be housed at the University of Wyoming.

It would be a shame if the items in the Stan Lee Papers were eternally stashed in boxes, hidden from all save perhaps the all-seeing Odin and the occasional researcher (like former Marvel staffer Danny Fingeroth, who did homework for two books there in 2010).

A current year-long treasure hunt through the boxes resulted in items being plucked for the new exhibit, alias a public coming-out party for the Stan Lee Papers that will continue through Nov. 1.

“Stan Lee, Beyond the Book” sheds light on Lee “the person” (real name: Stanley Martin Lieber) from his childhood forward. The exhibit includes documents, photos and artifacts that have not been preserved elsewhere. Displays showcase myriad aspects of Lee’s life and legacy.

Paul Flesher, a University of Wyoming professor who serves as director of the American Heritage Center, said the center has close to 6,000 different collections. Most of the center's collections are from individuals who are not widely known, but one high-profile collection (details later) was reportedly a factor in Lee agreeing to relinquish archival items to Wyoming.

“People know us for the American West and they're always surprised we have lots of other things,” Flesher said.

The attention-getting Lee exhibit should boost awareness of the center's assets and lure Stan fans from all over. Flesher said the exhibit is something he has wanted to do for several years. Obstacle: He couldn't devote a full-time staff member to the long-haul task of “learning” the collection and designing an exhibit with its contents.

Flesher resolved the issue because his “professor instincts” kicked in: *This is something you can teach students to do if you can recruit the right students.*

## **Avengers assemble**

Three students were enlisted to sift through the Stan Lee Papers and curate the exhibit. One of the students has a not-so-secret identity. Hazel Homer-Wambeam is a former Miss Wyoming with Lee history. She delved into Lee's life to place second in a National History Day competition when she was 13. For the project, she navigated through the Stan Lee Papers and (jackpot!) snared a 10-minute interview with him.

Because Homer-Wambeam had done extensive work in the collection, Flesher asked if she would be up for researching/crafting the new exhibit. She was interested -- and so was a fellow Honors College student.

Liam Leslie said he and Homer-Wambeam are engaged members of the university's honors community and it was only a matter of time before they encountered each other at an Honors College event. He said Homer-Wambeam casually mentioned the prospect of an Honors-sponsored position that would permit students to conduct archival research on the Stan Lee Papers with the intent of producing an exhibit. An English major who appreciates Lee's role in situating comics and graphic novels as legitimate forms of literature, Leslie was thrilled to come aboard.

McLean, the third student on Team Stan, won the right to dig through boxes after coming up short at the ballot box.

McLean ran for student body president, a paid position that functions as a summer job. After losing by an agonizingly small margin, she cheekily shared a “hey, does anybody know of any summer jobs?” message with friends via Snapchat.

One of those friends was Homer-Wambeam, who responded that applications were being sought for the Stan Lee project.

“It definitely was kind of a one-door-closed and another-door-opened situation,” McLean said.

McLean said she was “immediately in” and, whatever the job entailed, she wanted to be a part of it. For much of her life, she has been doing unofficial prep work for the gig.

“I want to say I was 7 when the Marvel Cinematic Universe started,” McLean said.

“We would go see all of them. I am from Springfield, Illinois, and there was a drive-in movie theater and we would go see the newest Marvel movies there. And so my



parents were really into superheroes. My dad still collects Star Wars stuff, so I come from a very nerdy family. From that, I started collecting comic books when I was a kid and still have a great deal of comic books. My dad got me Stan Lee's memoir that he wrote in comic form when I was 16, so this is definitely very full circle for me in that way.”

## **Why Wyoming?**

McLean wrote a **detailed blog** for the American Heritage Center that tackled why Lee chose to partner with the University of Wyoming.

“That was the first question I wanted to answer when we started our research is kind of figuring out why here?” McLean said.

Lee told the Wall Street Journal this in 2012: “You may wonder why I picked that university but, when they asked if I would archive my material there, they said that Jack Benny had his archive there. And I was a big fan of Jack Benny's and I figured, if he's there, I want to be there.”

McLean wanted to dig deeper into the reasons. She said there are a few folk legends that have circulated about how Wyoming landed Lee's materials, but the credit should go to Gene Gressley, a former director of the American Heritage Center.

“He became kind of famous for really unorthodox methods of curation and he would basically just travel -- hitchhike at certain points -- all over the U.S. meeting different kind of affluent people for either monetary or material donations,” McLean said.

“On one of these trips, we know that he met Stan Lee at some time in the early 70s or late 60s. We don't have exact dates about when they met. They developed a friendship more than a curatorial relationship. And then in 1978 he finally pulled the trigger and asked Stan if he wanted to donate here.”

Flesher said Gressley spent a lot of time in California trying to obtain entertainment collections.

“About 10 years ago, I met an archivist who was brought in to work for the Autry Museum when it was getting started and of course they were trying to bring in collections and things,” Flesher said. “One of the experiences they kept having was

this guy Gene Gressley from Wyoming was beating them to people that they wanted to collect from and the American Heritage Center was essentially scooping the California collectors and institutions.”

As a result, AHC wound up with a number of Hollywood-related collections. Most came from behind-the-scenes figures, according to Flesher, but the center also houses items that belonged to Benny and Barbara Stanwyck, including her Oscar.

“Right after COVID when we opened, we did a big exhibit on Buddy Ebsen because we have his entire collection,” Flesher said.

## **Thrill of the hunt**

Raise your hand if you are jealous of the students tasked with responsibility of forging an exhibit from the Stan Lee Papers.

“My boyfriend was working as a farmer,” McLean said, adding that he is an agriculture major. “We would both be getting ready for work in the morning and I would say ‘Oh, I am really stressed out about this thing.’ And he is sitting there, like fully a farmer, and says, ‘You get to read comic books all day.’”

Fun, yes. Easy, no.

“Honestly, it was incredibly overwhelming at times because everything that you touch is just amazing,” Homer-Wambeam said.

Asked what she saw that made her say “wow,” Homer-Wambeam said she could talk for hours about that. She gravitated to fan mail from all over the world.

“The first day we got started, and being like a Stan Lee super fan, every page I looked at, I marveled at for 10 minutes,” McLean said. “I had to kind of get over that after the first few weeks because there is so much material that you have to start dividing and conquering and trying to find through lines in the material to come up with exhibit sections. The first few weeks were definitely like the ‘pinch me’ moments.”

Leslie said almost the entirety of the team’s first three months on the job was spent sifting through thousands of documents, one by one.

“To conceptualize this, you have to imagine each box possessing anywhere from 100 to 1,000 pages of quite literally anything,” he said. “Each day we encountered something totally unpredictable, and perhaps totally unseen since passing through

Stan Lee's hands. And while that was exhilarating, it was also exhausting at times.”

Continuing, Leslie said, “Politely, we were privileged to an intimate look into some of the most banal activities of Stan Lee and Marvel. In that, we turned through memos, contracts and correspondence to open the next folder to original Spider-Man manuscripts, character constitutions for the Incredible Hulk and autographed copies of aging Fantastic Four comic books. Every second of the eye-straining, needle-in-a-haystack work was thrilling and it will be so rewarding upon our opening... I believe that our work epitomizes archival research: it is scrupulous and, subsequently, entirely revealing of the subject; and our subject just happened to be one of the most influential figures in pop culture.”

## Road trip

A field trip was part of the assignment.

Keith Bailey of Tulsa chairs the AHC's Board of Advisors. In perhaps the same way that people wonder how the Stan Lee Papers found their way to Wyoming, people may be curious about how the **Bob Dylan Archives** found a home in Tulsa. Regardless,

Tulsa is home to the Bob Dylan Center and the Woody Guthrie Center. It was Bailey's idea for the Wyoming students to visit Tulsa in preparation for the creation of the Stan Lee exhibit.

The students and two AHC staff members drove more than 1,600 miles round trip last year to tour the Bob Dylan Center and Woody Guthrie Center.

“It was a pleasure talking with the students and learning about their vision for the Stan Lee exhibit,” Steve Higgins, managing director, American Song Archives (Woody Guthrie Center and Bob Dylan Center), said. “I hope their visit to our centers was beneficial.”

Homer-Wambeam said the goal was to get a behind-the-scenes look at how an exhibit is created -- specifically an exhibit from an archival collection because that's a unique challenge. On that subject, McLean said the Woody Guthrie Center and the Bob Dylan center each singularly focus on one human being while contextualizing that person's life in the world in which they were living. The Lee exhibit accomplishes the same feat.

The Oklahoma journey yielded a bonus benefit.

“The Tulsa trip was really an important part of this process for me because I think it bonded the interns a lot,” McLean said. “We were friends and were working together in the office, but getting to spend time together socially and exchange ideas in kind of an outside environment and having 14 hours (in a vehicle) to talk about this project together was really, really crucial, so I think it was a huge turning point in this project because we figured out how to jell creatively with one another.”

## **Show time**

The expedition through the Stan Lee Papers turned up hidden gem after hidden gem. One of the hardest parts of the job, according to Homer-Wambeam, was selecting which items deserved to be in the exhibit.

Longtime comic readers know that Lee wrote “Stan’s Soapbox” messages to readers that were published in issues of Marvel books. He used the “soapbox” to promote projects and occasionally tackle social issues, including a particularly memorable one in opposition to bigotry.

“He would hand-write them first and there were times when he would scratch things out and put things back in that were just so beautifully written,” McLean said after viewing “Stan’s Soapbox” items in the boxes. “If I featured every time Stan made my heart well up with one of these things, I would have needed 10 more museums to fill up.”

In separate interviews, the students shared similar comments that they now feel like they know Lee personally.

“But I think that he had that effect on a lot of people and that’s one of the reasons he became this face of Marvel,” Homer-Wambach said. “He was extremely charismatic. He was almost like a superhero in real life that people looked up to. I just felt that close connection to him throughout this whole process and I really hope that that people can walk away feeling that same same feeling of familiarity when they see the exhibit.”

Gressley envisioned the Stan Lee Papers being a biography in documents. After poring through the contents of the boxes, McLean understands what Gressley meant. She predicted people will love the exhibit for the same reasons they love Lee.



A bonus event, a Stan Lee Super-Con, is scheduled to take place Labor Day weekend at the university. The con will be another way to spread the word about Wyoming's under-the-radar connection to the comic book legend.

Homer-Wambeam said she has talked to students at the university who don't realize the Stan Lee Papers are on campus. McLean was once among them. She was shocked to learn Lee's collection was at the university.

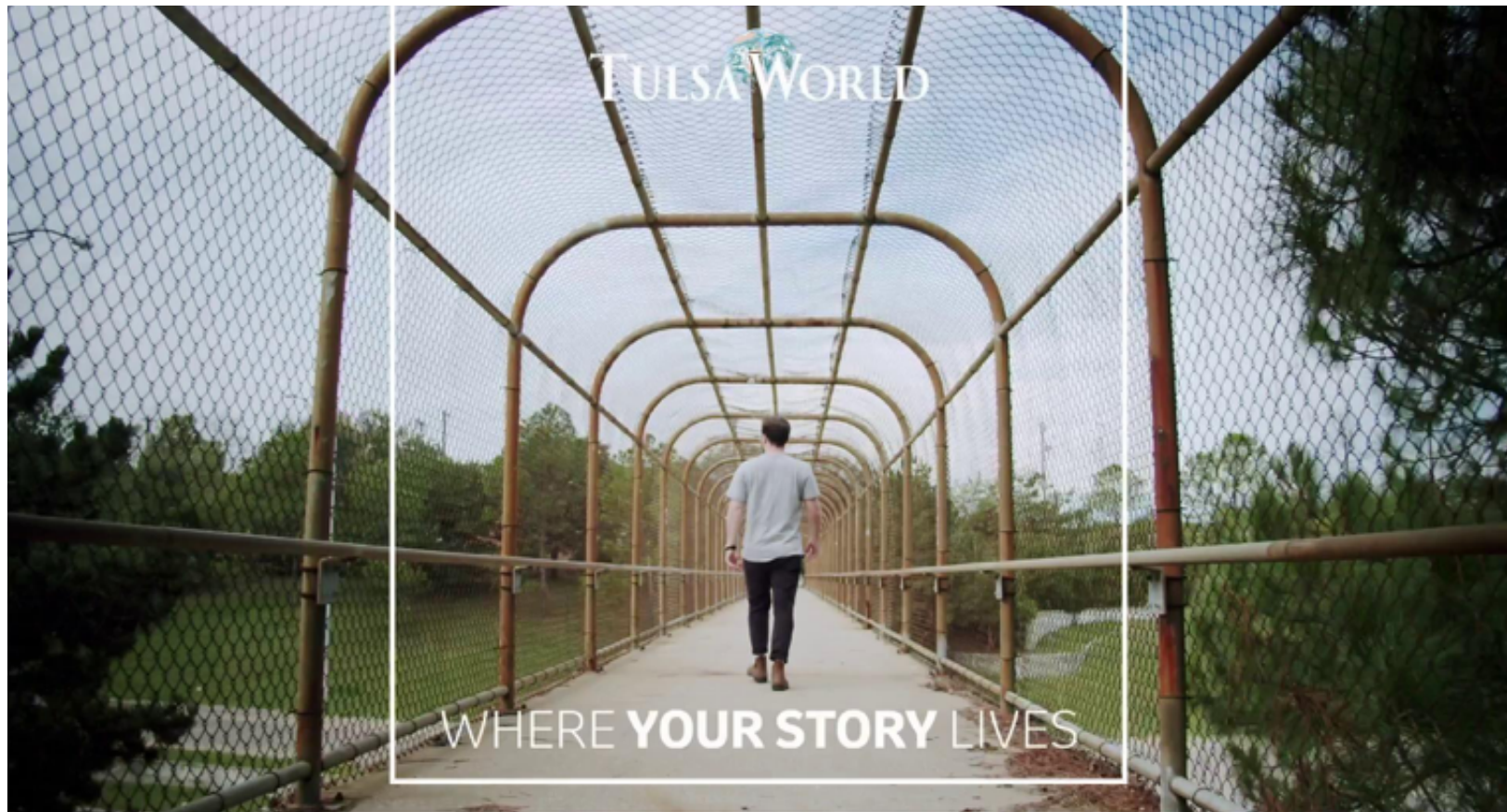
"It's just kind of hidden away," Homer-Wambeam said. "And so I think it's time for the world to realize what an incredible place we have here in Laramie."

"From the outset, our team established and maintained two objectives: to make Wyomingites proud, and to legitimize Wyoming on a national scale," Leslie said. He provided lengthy elaboration on that subject and closed with this: "I think seeing Wyoming students roll out an exhibit on one of the 21st century's most prolific writers will make Wyomingites proud and will implore others to give Wyoming the credit we believe it is due."

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