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TOP STORY

Nature photography collection gifted to WKU

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Brazil. Spain. California. Idaho. Portugal. Kentucky.

He wandered the world to document nature's beauty, and now the world can see what he saw.

The family of international travel writer and photographer W. Ray Scott recently donated his collection of 20,000 photographs to Western Kentucky University's Department of Library Special Collections.

"It's beautiful work. It didn't seem right to put them in a closet and pass them down," said Casey Scott, the nephew of W. Ray Scott.

"We thought that would be the best use for his life's work."

Half the collection pertains to Kentucky caves, landscapes and horses, and the other half spans the globe.

“It somewhat documents from the CCC days right on up through the end of the century,” Casey Scott said.

As a youth, W. Ray Scott left his Metcalfe County home to venture nationwide with the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public relief program created under Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide work for young men.

In the 1930s, he attended Western Kentucky State Teachers College, now WKU, as well as Murray State College and Ray Vogue School of Photography in Chicago, before joining the U.S. Corps of Engineers in Mississippi and Georgia as a photographer.

During World War II, he joined the Navy to work on a motion picture film.

Subsequently, he was offered two job opportunities: move to California to work on color films, or return to his childhood state to photograph Mammoth Cave and improve Kentucky tourism.

He chose the latter.

“He was very dedicated to Kentucky,” Casey Scott said. “He believed in the tourism, in the cave. What Kentucky represented was home, and he spent his entire life recording it.”

His work was featured in textbooks, travel magazines, park brochures, Mammoth Cave postcards and other various publications.

Nancy Richey, the visual resources librarian at WKU’s Department of Library Special Collections, is helping organize the collection.

“From what we have seen, the (photos) are very detailed, with good color and are in pretty good condition,” Richey said. “Scott was a world-renowned photographer.”

She favored the photographs of Southern belles wearing cotillion gowns, and the Kentucky-centric images of parks and horse race scenes at Churchill Downs and Keeneland.

“We all know places in Kentucky, but those places sometimes change or disappear,” Richey said. “His recordings of those places enable them to still live on.”



For Casey Scott, shots of Kentucky caves stand out as the most unique photography.

“He was one of the earliest cave photographers who mastered how to paint the cave in light,” he said. “You’re in absolute darkness when you go into a cave.”

To illuminate caves decades ago, multiple individuals would have to hold a flash bulb out of the view of the camera and the photographer would determine where he wanted the light to be. Once set, the photographer would fire a sequence in the direction of the light seven or eight times.

The photographer might have to use 10 bulbs for a single scene, and could easily use cases of bulbs during a single day of shooting caves, according to Casey Scott.

In addition to creating light, the photography crew also had to crawl through the caves dragging heavy equipment.

“It was really quite interesting how they do it,” Casey Scott said.

The library will catalogue samples of the collection online, and interested individuals will be able to access the photos in about a month through WKU’s KenCat Online Collections, which can be found at www.westernkentuckyuniversity.pastperfectonline.com.

Photographs will be captioned with all available information about what the photo is and where and when it was taken.

The entire collection will be stored in WKU's Kentucky Building, and will be accessible to the public.