Tucked on the seventh floor of the Albert B. Alkek Library at Texas State University in San Marcos, a quiet but monumental archive preserves the creative soul of a region. The Wittliff Collections is not simply a library or a museum—it is a living repository of the stories, images, and sounds that define Texas, the Southwest, and Mexico. Founded in 1986 by the late screenwriter and photographer Bill Wittliff and his wife, Sally, what began as a single acquisition of papers has grown into a world-renowned research center housing more than 500 distinct collections.



A Founding Rooted in Story

The origin of The Wittliff is inseparable from the legacy of J. Frank Dobie, the beloved Texas folklorist and author. After Dobie's death, his remaining estate—including diaries, journals, manuscripts, correspondence, and personal memorabilia—passed through several hands before Bill Wittliff acquired the material. In 1986, the Wittliffs donated the Dobie papers to Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State), formally establishing the Southwestern Writers Collection. That initial gift carried a philosophy that still guides the institution today: to be a place not only of preservation but of inspiration, where emerging creatives could see how great artists before them had struggled and refined their craft.

Over the following decades, the collecting scope expanded deliberately. The Southwestern and Mexican Photography Collection was established in 1996, followed by the formal union of the writers and photography collections under the singular name **The Wittliff Collections** in 2007. The Lonesome Dove permanent gallery opened that same year, and in 2017 the Texas Music Collection was launched as a major collecting area. A significant renovation completed in 2020 added dedicated galleries for Texas Music, Edward Curtis, and the Spirit of Place, further cementing the institution's role as a cultural anchor for the region.

A Treasury of Literary Giants

For scholars and devoted readers, The Wittliff's literary holdings are a pilgrimage site. The archive is home to the journals, correspondence, and unpublished manuscripts of **Cormac McCarthy**, one of the most consequential American novelists of the past half-century. Visitors to the 40th-anniversary exhibition can even sit at the desk where McCarthy wrote his novels—a physical point of contact with the writing life. Alongside McCarthy, the collections preserve the papers of **Sandra Cisneros**, whose *The House on Mango Street* reshaped American

letters, and the poet **Benjamín Alire Sáenz**. The archives of **Larry McMurtry**, **Elizabeth Crook**, **Stephen Harrigan**, and **Taylor Sheridan** further attest to the depth of the Wittliff's literary commitments.

The crown jewel for many visitors, however, is the **Lonesome Dove Collection**. This is the complete production archive of the 1989 television miniseries adapted from McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel—a cultural touchstone that Bill Wittliff himself wrote for the screen. Costumes, scripts, props, and behind-the-scenes photographs are on permanent display, drawing visitors into the world of Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call and offering a rare look at how a literary masterpiece became a landmark of American television.

A Photographic Record of Place

The Wittliff's photographic holdings are equally formidable, with strengths in documentary photography, photojournalism, and fine-art work from Texas, the Southwest, and Mexico. The collections include major bodies of work by **Russell Lee**, whose Depression-era images helped define the visual record of rural America, as well as significant holdings related to **Edward Curtis** and his monumental documentation of Native American life. Contemporary and regional photographers—from **Kate Breakey** to **O. Rufus Lovett**—are represented alongside portfolios that trace the evolving visual identity of the borderlands and the Hill Country.

Where Music and Story Meet

Since 2017, the **Texas Music Collection** has extended the Wittliff's reach into sound, gathering the papers, recordings, and memorabilia of songwriters and performers who shaped the state's musical identity. Combined with the writers and photography archives, it makes the Wittliff one of the few institutions anywhere where the literary, visual, and musical traditions of a single region can be studied side by side.

Why It Matters

What makes The Wittliff Collections remarkable is not merely the caliber of its holdings but its accessibility. Admission is free and open to the public, and the exhibition galleries are designed to welcome casual visitors as warmly as visiting scholars. Rotating exhibitions draw from the permanent archives, ensuring that each return visit reveals something new—a freshly cataloged letter, a never-before-shown photograph, a manuscript page still bearing the marks of revision.

For anyone interested in the creative history of Texas—or simply curious about how art gets made—The Wittliff Collections stands as both a monument and an invitation. It is a place where the legacy of the region's Go to the website writers, photographers, and musicians is not sealed away in boxes but kept alive, argued over, studied, and passed on to the next generation of storytellers.