The Richard Alf Papers

“Richard Alf was a fun guy.” -Mike Towry, San Diego Comic-Con International Co-founder

The papers of Richard Alf (26 January 1952 – 4 January 2012), co-founder of San Diego Comic-Con International, have found a new home in the San Diego State University Library’s archives. Alf was one of the original “Comic-Con Kids,” a group of teenagers who started the conference in 1970 and whose enthusiasm kept it growing through its early years. His papers are a welcome addition to SDSU’s growing collection of comic and Comic-Con related items.

Although he was only a teenager when he helped found what is now the world’s largest comic convention, Alf had already demonstrated entrepreneurial abilities. Inspired by his grandfather who ran astrological readings in Modern Mechanix magazine under the name “Yogi Alpha” during the 1930s, Alf started a mail order comic book business in 1969, running ads in both Marvel and DC comics. The business was very successful; Alf at one time estimated that he had 20,000 comics in his parents’ garage!

One of Alf’s ads was seen by 12-year old Barry Alfonso, whose own advertisement to buy comics also appeared in 1969 in the local Penny Saver, a weekly listing of classified ads. Alfonso was contacted by Shel Dorf, a 35-year old Detroit native who had recently moved his parents out to San Diego from the Motor City. Dorf, a comic book enthusiast who had been involved in the Detroit Triple Fan Fair in the mid-1960s, had originally planned to return to Detroit but had fallen in love with San Diego. Alfonso couldn’t afford all of the comics Dorf had for sale, so he put Dorf in touch with Alf.

While Dorf was the first to suggest a comic convention in San Diego, it likely never would have happened without Alf, who had three key things that Dorf lacked. First, he had transportation, a 1954 Volkswagen Beetle that became known as the “Con-mobile.” Second, he had a network of other local comic book enthusiasts. And, third, he had money from his mail-order comic book business. The money from that business enabled Alf to loan the nascent organization the start-up capital that financed the one day mini-con in March 1970 as well as the first few Comic-Cons. In addition to providing financing, Alf also assumed leadership roles, such as serving as convention chair in 1971.

Although Alf within a few years became less actively involved in Comic-Con, he nonetheless expanded his comic-related business interests by opening Comic Kingdom, one of San Diego’s earliest stores dedicated to comics, in 1975. However, Alf eventually sold both his store and his mail-order business and moved onto other entrepreneurial endeavors; including real estate, outdoor advertising, and day trading stock futures. Alf may have moved on from the world of comics, but he was not forgotten. San Diego Comic-Con International gave him an Inkpot Award in 1989. Twenty years later, on the 40th anniversary of Comic-Con; Alf, Dorf, and Towry were among the early founders honored during a special Comic-Con ceremony. Finally, after his death Alf was honored by a Comic-Con conference panel titled “A Tribute to Richard Alf” on July 13, 2012.

Alf’s papers were gifted to SDSU by his mother, Martha Alf, an artist. She had been a student at SDSU, and that’s where she met Alf’s father, Edward F. Alf, Jr., another undergraduate student who later spent 25 years at SDSU as a psychology professor. “The Richard Alf Papers” consist of approximately 20 linear feet of materials related to Comic-Con, his store and mail order business, original art by noteworthy comic artists such as Jack Kirby and Scott Shawl, and materials related to his other entrepreneurial enterprises. San Diego State is pleased to have been entrusted with the care and preservation of these papers, which will be of interest to researchers and comic enthusiasts for years to come.