

WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND

The Collins manuscripts at Indiana University gives us a glimpse into John “Jack” Collins’ extraordinary life and chess career.

Text and photos by JOSHUA ANDERSON

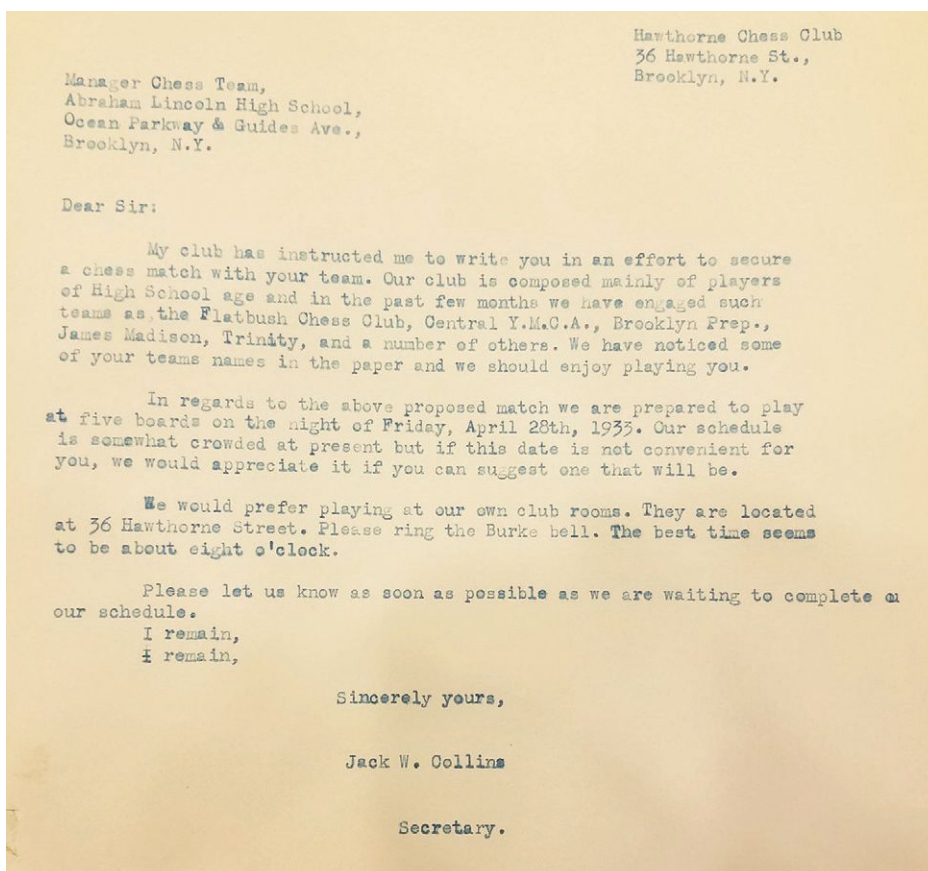
Where would you look for Bobby Fischer’s own notes about the Game of the Century, unknown games from a couple of United States’ champions, or a mate-in-two puzzle made up by Frank Marshall for his Christmas card?

No, not the famed White Collection at the Cleveland Public Library, nor the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis, and not even the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek* (The National Library of the Netherlands with a 30,000 plus collection of chess and draught books.) Add in such non-chess items as letters to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a rejection letter from Street & Smith, and few would guess that these items can be found in the collection of John “Jack” Collins curated in the Lilly Library of Bloomington, Indiana.

Two questions naturally spring to mind:

- 1) Who was John Collins?
- 2) Why Bloomington, Indiana?

The second question is the easier of the two. Lilly Library is the rare books, manuscripts, and special collections library at Indiana University. It houses numerous impressive collections, including that of noted puzzler Jerry Sloum. After the passing of John Collins on December 2, 2001, the Glenn Horowitz Booksellers (who recently sold the Bob Dylan collection to the University of Tulsa for over \$15 million) began to prepare



PICTURE ONE: A LETTER FROM JOHN COLLINS, SECRETARY FOR THE HAWTHORNE CHESS CLUB, SEEKING TO SET UP MATCHES WITH RIVAL TEAMS.



PICTURES TWO AND THREE: (TOP ROW, LEFT AND CENTER): ONE OF FRANK MARSHALL'S FAMOUS CHRISTMAS CARD PUZZLES. PICTURE FOUR: (TOP ROW, RIGHT): ADMISSION TICKET TO THE 1938 AMERICAN CHESS FEDERATION'S 39TH CONGRESS AND OPEN TOURNAMENT.

PICTURE FIVE (RIGHT): COLLINS' SCORESHEET FROM THE 39TH CONGRESS AND OPEN TOURNAMENT, WHERE HE DREW IM I.A. HOROWITZ.

Collins' papers and a few personal items for archiving. In 2004 and 2007, Indiana University purchased the two parts of the Collins manuscripts. Erika Dowell, associate director and curator of modern books and manuscripts at the Lilly Library, explained that it is not uncommon for a collection to come in parts, nor is it unusual for the processing of a collection to take some time.

Though Collins' manuscripts were indexed from 2001 to 2007, it began long before. Which brings us back to the first question: Who was John Collins?

John William "Jack" Collins was born September 23, 1912, in Newburgh, New York, to John, a musician, and Carolyn, a homemaker. An x-ray in the collection, from when Collins was two years old, shows a hip injury that left him largely confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Another relic from his childhood are the colored toy paper soldiers representing the Allies and Axis powers of World War I, as well as soldiers of the American Revolution and other wars. Little else from the collection gives clues into Collins' childhood and teen years—until he discovered chess as a teenager while living in Brooklyn, New York. Chess soon became the focus of Collins' collections.

New York in the 1930s was an exciting time for chess and playing club chess was a popular activity. Clubs came and went during this period of chess popularity. On November 20, 1931, Collins and his friends John Burke, Samuel LoPresti, and James Doyle formed the Hawthorne Chess Club, named for Collins' home at 36 Hawthorne Street. The club rotated meeting places among the members and had club dues of a quarter (\$4.70 in 2018 dollars) each week. By 1933, the Hawthorne Chess Club had eight members and regularly played matches against other clubs (picture one).

Throughout the 1930s, Collins didn't just play at the Hawthorne club; he would regularly play in other clubs as well, as is evidenced by the numerous club membership cards in his collection that span from the 1930s through the 1970s. Though Collins wasn't playing on club teams by the 1970s, in the 1930s and 1940s he was a regular participant in the famed Metropolitan Chess League, which challenged rival clubs to games. The "Met League," founded in 1895, was comprised of the city's largest and strongest clubs, including the prominent Manhattan Chess Club (which closed in 2002) and the Marshall Chess Club (still in existence today and the second oldest club in the nation).

Once, while representing the Brooklyn club, Collins played noted GM Isaac Kashdan, who counted among his accomplishments winning the

THE BOSTON CITY CLUB

Chess Score

Event: Masters. Round 7 Opening: (B) Date: 1.17.19.38

I. Horowitz (W) vs. J.W.C. (B)

WHITE vs. BLACK		WHITE vs. BLACK	
1	P-K4	37	PxP
2	N-KB3	38	R-GR2
3	B-GN5	39	K-N2
4	B-GR4	40	R-K2
5	O-O	41	P-Q5
6	Q-K2	42	B-KB4
7	B-GN3	43	R-KB
8	P-QB3	44	R-K
9	P-Q4	45	Q-N
10	R-Q	46	RxQ
11	PxP	47	K-N3
12	P-K5	48	ARALW
13	N-QB3	49	
14	PxN	50	
15	B-QB2	51	
16	P-KR3	52	
17	P-KN4	53	
18	N-KR2	54	
19	QxR	55	
20	P-KB4	56	
21	R-R	57	
22	R-KN	58	
23	Q-K2	59	
24	N-B3	60	
25	P-QR3		
26	R-GR2		
27	Q-KB1		
28	R-KR2		
29	Q-KN2		
30	N-KN5		
31	QBPxP		
32	KNPxP		
33	QxGP		
34	P-GR4		
35	PxB		
36	Q-K4		

Adjourned Position

Color to Play

Adjourned to

at

U.S. Open championship twice (in 1938 and 1947). When Collins played at the Marshall, he also helped with organizing. This led to a friendship with Frank and Caroline Marshall; in 1943, Collins received one of Marshall's famous puzzling Christmas cards (pictures two and three).

Throughout the 1930s, Collins also played in numerous tournaments, including the 1938 American Chess Federation's 39th Congress and Open tournament (picture four).

(Note: The American Chess Federation became the United States Chess Federation and the Congress and Open tournament is now the U.S. Open). Collins drew IM I.A. Horowitz, who, along with Kashdan,



The tale of the Hawthorne Chess Club, named after the Collins' first New York City apartment at 69 Hawthorne Street in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn, is a true story of a chess Camelot where the table was not round but square and the knights could be moved with a flick of the wrist. The Herald of Hawthorne was a diminutive man, wheelchair-bound due to a birth mishap. But like the legendary Arthur, John Collins drew the greatest like minds to his council.

Collins started the club as a chess-fevered teenager in search of playing partners. The club relocated twice—as Jack (as everyone knew him) and his devoted sister Ethel aged and moved—once just a few blocks away to Lenox Avenue and finally to lower Manhattan's Stuyvesant Town. But it remained forever the “Hawthorne Chess Club,” and it became the most famous chess soiree in America.

Wherever it moved, the club brought with it the most renowned cluster of furnishings in American chess history: two stuffed easy chairs (one green, one red), a coffee table supporting a wooden set and board, a side table supporting a horse-head lamp and a chess clock with a built-in bell that rang every 10 seconds (famous for training the future 11th world champ to avoid time trouble).

Most American chessplayers know that Bobby Fischer, William Lombardy, and Robert and Donald Byrne were great masters who were, to various degrees, incubated in those chairs as they played Jack and one another. Even more than that, Jack and his cozy thrones were a pilgrimage stop for American chess nobility: Irving Chernev,

Hermann Helms, Arthur Bisguier, and legions more. And his visitors went beyond the chess elite to prominent figures in other fields, like Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, who both sat in the chairs and took lessons. Nearly every American chess celebrity at some time visited the Collins' living-room-chess-club, as well as players of all strengths. Collins showed them all how to love chess.

“Jack, who found it difficult to leave his apartment, ironically met more of the world's chess aristocracy than most of us,” IM Sal Matera recalled. Matera was one of the *Wunderkind*-students Collins writes about in his book, *My Seven Chess Prodigies*. As a 10-year-old, Matera would come to the Hawthorne at noon, playing and analyzing with Collins. “They gave me Coke all day, and Ethel would make sandwiches and then dinner for us. Fischer or Lombardy might show up, and we'd carry on until 8 p.m.” The “charge” was three dollars. And when Matera's dad died tragically young, Collins became a surrogate father, as he had for Fischer.

These days there's a revisionism afoot that argues Collins couldn't have taught Fischer anything. But just for the record, Bobby Fischer first rang Jack's doorbell one afternoon in June 1956. As Collins retells it in his *My Seven Chess Prodigies*, “I opened the door and a slender, blond typical 13-year-old ... in a plaid woolen shirt, corduroy trousers, and black-and-white sneakers, said simply, ‘I'm Bobby Fischer.’” Bobby's US Chess rating, published just weeks before he rang Jack's bell on Hawthorne, was 1726. Collins' was 2375.



(Lombardy's, by the way, was 2349.) Bobby then began one of his magical years. Twelve months later, Bobby's published rating was 2231. Jack's was still 120 points higher.

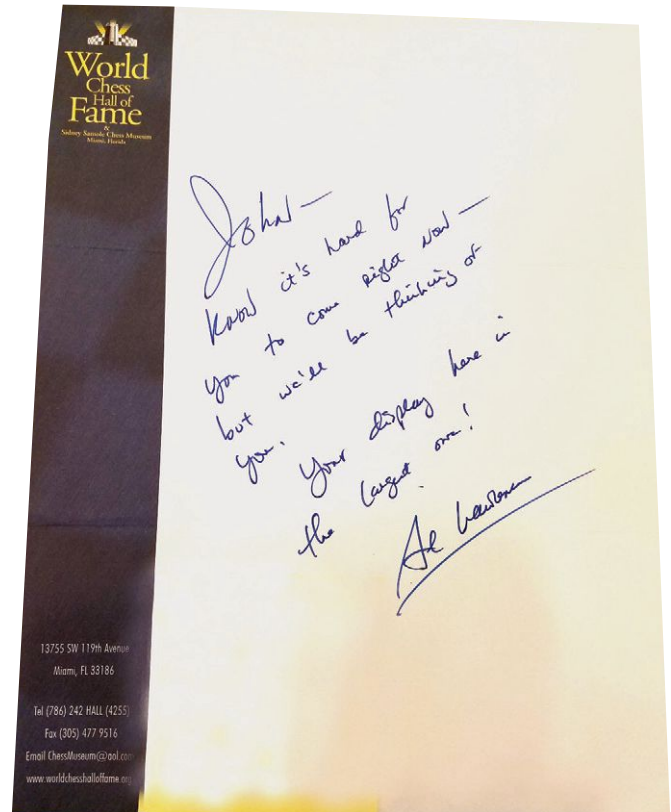
Jack's own characteristic humility might have helped fuel current doubt. Once he said, "Nobody taught Bobby. Geniuses, like Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Fischer come out of the head of Zeus ..." But could all those games with the famous master-mentor, US Chess Correspondence champion, New York State champion, Marshall Club champion, *Chess Life* columnist and co-author of *Modern Chess Openings 9*, not have taught the young Bobby something valuable?

It's true that it was Jack and Ethel's magical alchemy of acceptance and boundless love of the game and the people who played it that made the Hawthorne Chess Club a crucible of chess genius. In October of 1956, Fischer played his "Game of the Century" against fellow Hawthorner Donald Byrne and went on eventually to a world championship and worldwide notoriety. US Chess anointed Collins as its only-ever "Teacher of the Century," and he went on only to admiration. He was inducted into the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame in 1991.

A decade later, I explained to Jack that the Samole Family, with the cooperation of the US Chess Trust, was in Miami magnanimously constructing and outfitting the first-ever official World Chess Hall of Fame—complete with a 45-foot rook tower entry way—that would contain the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame as well. (The two previous locations, in New Windsor, New York, and Washington, D.C., had been only the U.S. version, but the Samoles had gained FIDE's imprimatur as well—a gigantic step.) I suppose I was hoping Jack would lend a memento or two from the Fischer days—a scoresheet of an offhand game or a signed photo.

Instead, Jack wanted me to take charge of the Hawthorne fixtures that had supported so much history and so much genius. Chess relics that were a most holy of Bobby Fischer holies.

In a rented van, my wife Daphne and I collected the treasure in Stuyvesant Town, curbside, with the help of Collins' stalwart aide Odell. I drove the relics in a sort of modern-day chess Ark of the Covenant, battling Manhattan traffic to our farmhouse 60 miles upstate. I've held a lot of chess history, including the famous Morphy Silver chess set. But as I helped move Collins' furniture into our small library room, I felt outside myself, looking down at this astonishing event. In the days of waiting for the completion of the



Miami Hall, I sat in the chairs. With light from the famous lamp, I analyzed a Fischer game or two on the set that had trained and revealed so much brilliance. Alas, no osmosis of genius occurred. But it is a time always in my memory.

Within a few months, Sid Samole's son Shane had commissioned a dedicated, major display of Collins' fixtures at the Hall. I knew Jack was very ill and couldn't travel. I wrote the note to Jack that Joshua Anderson found in the Collins manuscripts (*picture nine above*). The grand opening, a ceremony with a live chess exhibition, simultaneous exhibitions, and some of the world's greatest players in attendance, took place on December 16, 2001. Sid Samole had died a year and a half before his dream of a World Chess Museum became reality. But he knew his son would carry it through. Jack had died only two weeks before hundreds crowded in front of his display. I hope he knew they would.

For all the years the Miami World Chess Hall of Fame welcomed the public from around the world, my favorite bit of docent-showmanship was to start the Collins clock ringing in front of a busload of saucer-eyed schoolkids—and to tell the tale of a Chess Camelot and its unlikely King. ~Al Lawrence

PHOTO, LEFT PAGE: COLLINS' COZY THRONES—AS SEEN IN THE DEDICATED WORLD CHESS HALL OF FAME EXHIBIT—HOSTED STUDENTS, THE CHESS ELITE, AND OTHER PROMINENT FIGURES; ABOVE LEFT: THREE OF COLLINS' SEVEN PRODIGIES IN 1964. LEFT TO RIGHT: WILLIAM LOMBARDY, SAL MATERA, AND BOBBY FISCHER; ABOVE RIGHT (PICTURE NINE): AL LAWRENCE'S HANDWRITTEN NOTE TO COLLINS ABOUT THE GRAND OPENING OF THE WORLD CHESS HALL OF FAME IN MIAMI.

EVENT *Roseville Round 8*
 DATE *Oct 17 1956* OFFICIAL *Gruenfeld*
 WHITE *Byrne* BLACK *Fischer*

WHITE	BLACK	WHITE	BLACK
1 N-K63	N-K63	21 K-N1	N-K7+
2 P-Q64	P-KN3	22 K-B1	N-B6
3 N-Q63	B-N2	23 K-N1	PXB
4 P-Q4	O-O	24 Q-N4	R-R5
5 B-B4	P-Q4	25 QXNP	NXR
6 Q-N3	PXP	26 P-R3	RXR
7 QXP	P-B3	27 K-R2	NXBP
8 P-K4	Q-N2	28 R-K1	RXR
9 R-Q1	N-N3	29 Q-Q7	B-B1
10 Q-B5	B-N5	30 NXR	B-Q4
11 B-N5	N-R5	31 N-B3	N-T5
12 Q-R3	NXN	32 Q-N8	P-QN4
13 P-XN	NXP	33 P-KR4	P-KK4
14 B-XKP	Q-N3	34 N-K5	K-N2
15 B-B4	NXBP	35 K-N1	B-B4+
16 B-B5	R-K1	36 K-B1	N-N6
17 K-B	B-K3	37 K-K1	B-N5+
18 BXQ	BXB+	38 K-Q1	B-N4
19 K-N1	N-K7+	39 K-B1	
20	NXP+	40 K-N1	

Collins and the other members. The boys' names were Robert and Donald Byrne.

The Byrne brothers weren't the strongest players when they joined the club. Donald, age 12, was deemed too weak to play in the 1943 club championship; Robert, age 14, played in the tournament, but finished 1/5. But the boys quickly became much stronger players from playing regularly at the Hawthorne club and elsewhere in the city. While the Byrne brothers were striving to improve, Collins was not giving them formal lessons; rather, he continued his own fine chess work, winning the U.S. Postal Chess Championship that year.

In 1950, Collins tied for 11th in the First World Correspondence Chess Championship. He won the New York State championship in 1952—probably the strongest tournament in the United States that year, except for the U.S. Open. Collins also wrote a column for *Chess Review* throughout the 1950s and edited, with Walter Korn, the 9th edition of *Modern Chess Openings* (MCO) in 1957. Collins was having a very successful decade.

Meanwhile, the Byrnes were embarking on remarkable careers of their own.

The Byrne brothers were hardly the first kids to play at the Hawthorne Chess Club, but they were the first two players to gain national recognition. They also were, at least chronologically, the first two kids to be included in Collins' book, *My Seven Chess Prodigies* (1975). However, the first chapter in that book belonged to Robert James Fischer. In 1956, Fischer was a young, talented player of 13 years when he sat down at the Marshall Chess Club to play Donald Byrne on October 17, 1956. He would rise as the winner of what Hans Kmoch called, "The Game of the Century." Shortly thereafter, Fischer, in collaboration with Collins, wrote the notes pictured below (pictures six and seven).

tied for first place in the event, while Collins finished tied for eighth place (picture five).

In 1939, Collins was invited to participate in the first Ventnor City chess tournament, a series that continued throughout the war years, where he finished tenth.

Collins' manuscripts weren't strictly dedicated to chess. He had always been small for his age and, coupled with his mobility challenges, he often devoted time to writing, a pursuit where size was not an issue. His collection also contains numerous short stories that he tried to have published in various pulp magazines, including Street & Smith, publishers of such series as *Doc Savage* and *The Shadow*. Two letters to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt are in the collection as well. Letters to the president were not uncommon in that era, as Roosevelt's "Fireside chats" were intended as messages directly from the President to the public. This made many feel a connection to the Roosevelts and resulted in many people, including Collins, writing letters to the couple. Collins' letters to the President expressed his concern for the economy, the difficulties facing the nation and the world.

Though he was playing regularly at different clubs, Collins continued serving as the secretary of the Hawthorne club. In the early 1940s, Collins, along with his mother and sister, Ethel (both of whom still lived with him, as they would their entire lives), moved to 91 Lenox Road. Membership in the Hawthorne club grew to the low double digits with Collins remaining one of the best players in the club. In 1943, two boys showed up at the Collins' family home one day asking for the Hawthorne Chess Club. Collins' mother answered the door and was rather chagrined that her home was mistaken for a chess club. However, she welcomed the boys inside and soon they were playing games with

WHITE				BLACK			
41	K-B1	R-B2	56				
42		Mate	57				
43			58				
44	Bobby Fischer		59				
45			60				
46			61				
47			62				
48	This score and these notes were handwritten by Bobby at my home soon after the game was played. They are the first notes (in collaboration with me) he has ever written. -- JWC			63			
49				64			
50				65			
51			66				
52			67				
53			68				
			69				
			70				

PICTURES SIX (UPPER LEFT CORNER) AND SEVEN (ABOVE): THE HANDWRITTEN GAME OF THE CENTURY MATCH BETWEEN BOBBY FISCHER AND DONALD BYRNE, WITH COLLINS' TYPED NOTES AT THE BOTTOM.

April 30 '79

Dear Jack Please
 don't give my P.O. Box
 to anyone and please,
 please do Not under
 any circumstances
 forward me any more
 letters from anyone—
anyone—ever.

& hope that's clear!

Regards
 Bobby

PICTURE EIGHT: BOBBY FISCHER'S NOTES TO COLLINS TOOK ON A DARKER TONE AFTER COLLINS GAVE FISCHER'S P.O. BOX ADDRESS TO A REPORTER. FISCHER BELIEVED HIS PRIVACY HAD BEEN BREACHED.

Fischer would remain close with Collins for numerous years. He would write him, usually on postcards, from various tournaments. These messages tended to be light (one even joking about being hung over after trying beer) and friendly—he even inquired about Ethel's health. But the tone changed markedly in 1979 after Collins gave a reporter Fischer's P.O. Box address. Collins received an angry letter from Fischer in response to this perceived breach of privacy. Fischer's letter demanded, "Don't give my P.O. Box to anyone and please, please do not under any circumstances forward me any more letters from anyone—anyone—ever! I hope that's clear!" (picture eight)

Collins had started teaching shortly after

learning to play chess, though his first student, sister Ethel, was more of a constant help and companion than a student. Sal Matera, Collins' student in the late '50s and early '60s, remembers that for the cost of \$3 a lesson, he would spend much of a Saturday at the Collins' residence, drinking a six pack of soda while going through columns in *MCO* (the ninth edition, which Collins had co-edited), and then reviewing various games and puzzles, especially games of world champions. Collins continued teaching and actively participating in the scholastic chess community after the rise of Fischer as well.

The collection contains Collins' teaching records dating from 1971, which show he

was regularly charging \$8 (\$48.50 in 2018 dollars) a lesson. He was well regarded in the chess community as a skilled teacher, and Fischer's success bolstered his reputation even more. Even after Fischer left chess after winning the world championship, Collins continued to work with other talented students, such as Nawrose Nur, the World Under-10 Champion in 1990.

With the help of former Hawthorne Club member and *My Seven Chess Prodigies* player, GM William Lombardy, Collins began to take groups of strong players to Iceland regularly to face talented opponents. The events—called "safaris" in many of the picture albums in the collection (the photos were not removable making copies impractical)—started in the late 1970s and lasted through the beginning of the 1990s. The teams included young talent from around the United States, such as Stuart Rachels of Alabama, who would go on to tie for the U.S. Championship in 1989. In the first years of these trips, players sometimes went to Collins' home to review some material, but the teaching lessened over the years. Many United States Amateur Team East (USATE) tournament teams also were developed through the club.

As the turn of the century approached, Collins had been involved in chess—especially chess instruction for the young—for almost 70 years. Acknowledgement of his impressive career led to various awards. The most noteworthy of these was Collins' 1991 induction into the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame. A decade later, when the World Chess Hall of Fame opened in Miami featuring Collins' fixtures, then-Hall of Fame Director Al Lawrence understood that Collins could not attend the grand opening in person, but he wrote to let Collins know he was missed and that his display was the largest. (see sidebar)

The Hall of Fame inductions are exclusively awarded for a lifetime of work and this collection documents Collins' legacy. What we leave behind is not as important as who we are, but what we leave behind tells others who we were. In the case of Collins, we find a man passionate about chess and about teaching others the game, a person who helped shape many young lives during the time he experienced, and who inspired others to pass on those lessons to generations that are yet to come. ♦

Editor's note: In the interest of preservation, the Lilly Library did not allow Collins' documents to be removed from their protective sleeves prior to being photographed. Consequently, in some instances, the quality of the photography in this article may be slightly compromised.

The Lilly Library is the principal rare books, manuscripts, and special collections repository of Indiana University. It serves as a resource for scholars throughout the world and is a center for cultural enrichment. The Library is open to anyone interested in its collections. An inventory of the Collins manuscripts can be found at www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/lilly/mss/index.php