



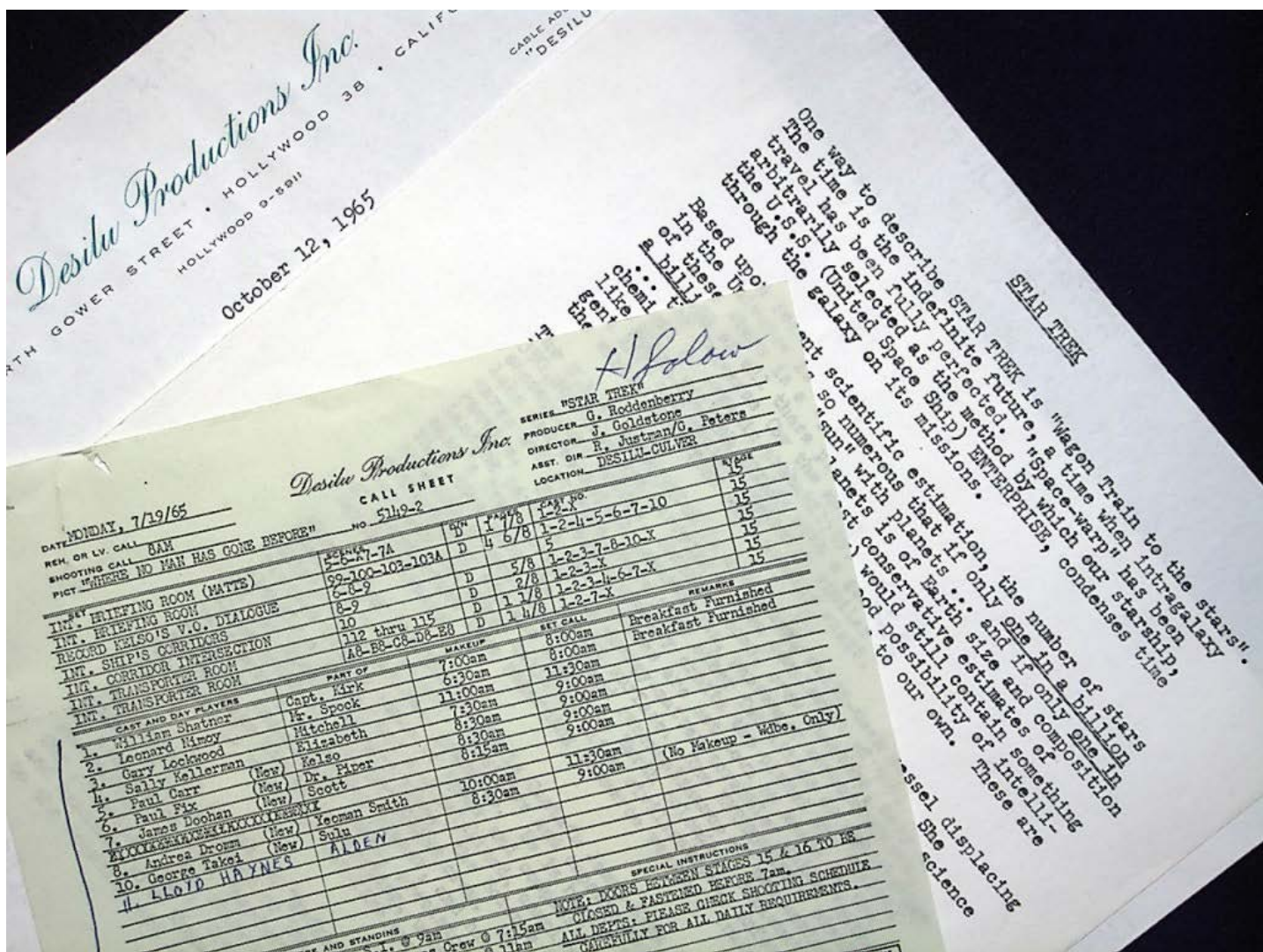
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Wagon Train to the Stars

by [Michael W. Harris](#) • September 5, 2014

Star Trek Archival Materials in the Ira Wolff Photographic History Collection



Premiering in the Fall of 1966 on NBC, Star Trek may be one of the greatest successful failures in all of television history, and a lesson to all future executives who might think about cancelling cult favorite science fiction television shows. Much ink has been spilled discussing the show's conception, the rejected first pilot, and NBC wanting to get rid of "the guy with the ears" for example. The Ira Wolff Photographic History Collection contains some of the early letters, memos, production documents, and proposals given to NBC executives between 1965, when the second pilot—"Where No Man Has Gone Before"—was ordered, and 1966 when Star Trek finally appeared on American television. There are also numerous production and promotional photographs and negatives (from both the second pilot and the regular series), all collected by Ira Wolff who was an NBC executive in the 1950s and 1960s.

Most interestingly for fans of the show's history are some of the actual documents that contain phrases that have passed into Star Trek lore. A show pitch from 1965 begins with the sentence, "One way to describe STAR TREK is 'Wagon Train to the stars'." This phrase is among the most oft repeated quotes by creator Gene Roddenberry when he sold the show to NBC. A letter from Roddenberry written on October 12, 1965, speaks to another famous piece of Star Trek lore: the use of scientific jargon—often called "technobabble"—on the series. In the letter, written to NBC executive Chuck Appel, Roddenberry states, "One of the things we found on all our STAR TREK scripts so far is we tend to get a bit complex and science-fictionish...And in the last pilot we have had to leave a lot of science fiction gobbledegook on the cutting room floor to keep it a story of people and not of theorems and gadgets." In addition to these letters, written by Roddenberry along with his secretary and later Star Trek writer Dorothy C. (D.C.) Fontana, and producer Robert Justman, the collection of archival material includes casting information and call sheets from the show's second pilot,

“Where No Man Has Gone Before,” and a publicity article that was sent out to create interest in the show.

While appealing, of course, to fans of science fiction and the history of pop culture in the twentieth century, these materials also offer a glimpse into the television industry in the 1960s. The letters and production documents show us how Rodenberry was trying to sell his version of the future to NBC executives and the general public. Left out of his pitches is any indication that he would use the show as a means to promote a utopian vision of equality among races and gender, possibly to sneak it past the executives and censors. Rather, he emphasized the extent to which the show was based on real scientific research being done at that time, to differentiate it from the more fantastical sci-fi that had come before, and how he would create a future on screen that was both believable and entertaining. And a letter from Robert Justman to an NBC executive recounts the lengths to which the production team went in order to create sets, props, and costumes that looked realistic and functional.*

These materials are but a fraction of the Wolff Collection, which holds a wealth of information on the history of photography and contains books and photos that will prove to be of interest to Special Collections patrons and researchers for years to come.

*It is no coincidence that many of today’s gadgets and gizmos resemble technology that Roddenberry first dreamed up for Star Trek in the ‘60s. The scientists and technologists who created them were raised on Trek.



Michael W. Harris

Michael W. Harris, PhD, is a lecturer at CU-Boulder and works in the Department of Archives and Special Collections. He also teaches Rock History for CU's Continuing Education. [View all posts by Michael W. Harris](#) →

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