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Mentoring Tips for the New Archivist: a True Story

By Craig Piper

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Our archival adventure begins as our hero, me, finds himself in need of a job between semesters during the summer of 1992 when I worked in Mississippi State University's Special Collections and University Archives. I went on to Vicksburg and Shiloh National Military Parks and worked on their archives from 1997-1999, and then honed my archival skills at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History from 1999-2000. I am now back at State and work in the library's Congressional and Political Research Center.

As the above vita indicates, I have the background and therefore the necessary experience that accompanies the lofty title of "Assistant Archivist" displayed just outside my office. I am by no means a "new" archivist—or so I thought. Even with my archival experience, I still had much to learn. Furthermore, I now had the added responsibilities of publishing and service to the library, university, community, and state. To make the situation even more intimidating, I still had to perform my primary task: the management of the massive congressional collections. In particular, I was assigned to manage the mammoth John C. Stennis Collection.

So there I was, facing a mass of materials and responsibility – a daunting situation. Did I panic? Did I think of "happy thoughts" to avoid the inevitable task ahead of me? No. Why? I had a mentor to guide me through the jungle of Mr. Stennis's 2,300 cubic feet of materials and all the other responsibilities. Dr. Michael B. Ballard, my boss/mentor, author, professor, archivist, would show me "the ropes."

The mentoring began immediately. After introductions to the library faculty and staff, my boss said, "I want you to go up stairs to the sixth stack tier and look over the Stennis Collection and see how we should organize it." Off I went, paper tablet and pencil in hand. I walked through the rows noting the *Public Series*, *Yellow Correspondence*, *Series 4: Department of Defense*, etc. I thought, "Okay we'll put this one here, but what about this one?" And so it went for the next two days. I looked, calculated, made computer charts, scratched my head, and shrugged my shoulders – I accomplished nothing.

On the third day, I approached my boss and said, "You know, Mike, the Stennis Collection is huge. I am having a hard time trying to figure out how to organize it — it's overwhelming." Mike, with a smile on his face, responded, "I know, that's why I had you up there looking around. I wanted you to get a feel for the job that is in front of you." Although it was a simple exercise, it served its purpose. The lesson learned here is that the new archivist must learn patience and persistence when tackling such a large collection. Plus, a collection the size of Stennis's is an ever evolving project that may or may not be not be completed in your lifetime.

With the first lesson learned, my mentor sat down with me and introduced me to another archival concept: priorities. In other words, what needs to be done immediately and what needs attention in the long term. In this case, the immediate goal was to organize the already cataloged Stennis Collection series from *Public* to *Series 58-Cards* for retrieval purposes. The long-term goals included preservation work, new folders and staple removal for the entire collection, and the reorganization of *Series 33-Legislation*.

Patience, organization, and teamwork are all valuable skills for new archivists to learn as they approach their work. But as my first year at the CPRC slowly turns into the second, I have realized that the mentorship of the new archivist goes beyond working with collections. Mentorship involves setting an example by showing up to work everyday and working the entire time. Mentorship is also teaching the aspiring archivist to work with other departments, patrons, and the outside world and how to conduct oneself at conferences and work with university leadership--the skills necessary to succeed in ones chosen profession. All of these qualities I have learned by observing my boss/mentor, Mike Ballard. I am still learning.

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