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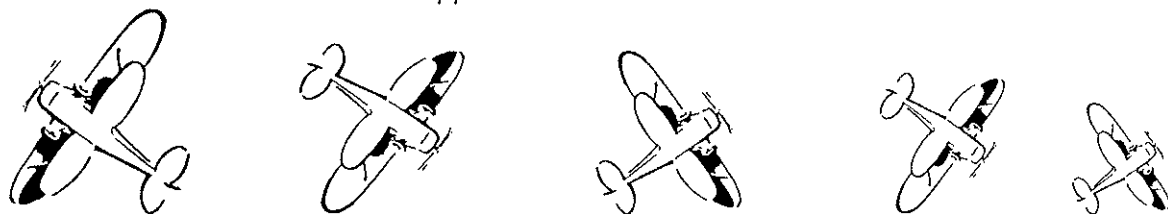
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Experiences of a New University Archivist in the Mississippi Delta

by Meredith Johnston, University Archivist
Delta State University

This article is a brief account of my first two years as University Archivist at Delta State University. While I talk much about my experiences in the Mississippi Delta, I believe each new archivist who relocates for a job, can relate to the tasks of adjusting to a new living and working environment. This is meant to be a brief, light-hearted article that hopefully provides some practical information for those just beginning their career in the archival profession.

My first encounter with the Mississippi Delta was with a bright yellow crop duster that flew maybe 10 feet above my car. He came out of nowhere and swooped down to dust the cotton field on the other side of the road. It had been 40 miles since I turned off the interstate and so far all I had seen was a crop duster, flat land, maybe a dozen houses scattered here and there, flat land, farm equipment, and flat land. As I made my way down Highway 8, to my first full time position as an Archivist, I wondered where in world was Cleveland and where was the Mississippi River?



Before relocating to Cleveland, Mississippi, I had worked, lived and attended school in Mobile, Alabama, along the Gulf Coast. I had worked as a graduate assistant at the University of South Alabama Archives located in downtown Mobile. There we had prepared for hurricanes. When not at work, or studying you might find me walking along the beach, picking up shells, or riding my bike on Dauphin Island. In all honesty, the Mississippi Delta has been somewhat of a challenge for me to adjust to. The environment has not been the only adjustment for me. When I arrived at the Archives Building on The Delta State University campus in Cleveland, Mississippi, I arrived with excitement and numerous ideas. I thought I knew how an archives should operate. I had all of two years experience working as a graduate assistant at an archives and was two chapters away from finishing my MA thesis and graduating. Little did I know how much I had to learn. I quickly realized that each archives has its own set of priorities. Some archives emphasize public programming more than others, as where I am. This is primarily because the Archives Building also houses a museum. The museum necessitates exhibits and other public programming such as opening receptions, lectures on exhibit topics and public tours. The exhibits highlight archival collections as well as prompt townspeople to donate materials. However, exhibits require much preparation and consideration. They require publicity, if you intend for people to be aware of your exhibit and come view it. Most universities have an Office of Public Information or Media and Marketing Department that can assist you in issuing press releases to media outlets.

Press releases might spotlight not only upcoming exhibits but also recent acquisitions. This will help spark readers' interest in those Civil War letters or Congressman X's papers. This is exactly the response we received when we issued a press release on the recent donation of World War II diaries by a Delta veteran. They chronicle his journeys across the Atlantic as a naval reservist transporting supplies to allied nations. We put together a press release using quotes from the diaries and a photo of the veteran. Our Marketing and Media Relations director sent it out to various local newspapers. Pretty soon the archives began receiving phone calls from Delta residents inquiring about the diaries and telling us of their WWII letters and photographs. This is one way to acquire new collections, but another is to start accumulating names for a mailing list, schedule some public programs, print up some flyers and conduct a mail-out. Here at the Delta State Archives, brown bag lunches have proved to be a success. This format,

already in place when I arrived, works really well for us. Once a month we have a speaker present a talk on a subject, usually connected with our current exhibit. The archives provides beverages and cookies. This provides an educational lunch time experience for members of the audience, publicity for the archives, and also gives us a chance to meet potential donors. Several times someone has approached me after one of these programs and commented, "You know, I have some items you might be interested in."

When I began my position, I had no special training in public programming. There are many things I learned quickly- what dates and times work best in getting people to attend, what type of mail-out receives the most response and the best caterers to call. After a few programs you figure out a format that works best for you and your audience. Give yourself time to build relationships with members of the community. You are not going to gain their trust immediately and believe me, in a small town you must gain the trust of the community before they turn over their most treasured and valued possessions.

Managing the archives staff proved to be the next challenge. I am fortunate to have a full time archives assistant and several student workers, including one graduate assistant. The students proved to be the most challenging to manage. Training student workers can be frustrating. They have their minds on many things- the paper due this week, the exam tomorrow and the party this weekend. School, rightfully so, should be their priority. It's tricky to stress to them how their job at the archives is a "real" job and how you depend on them, while at the same time letting them know you want to work with them and their schedules, understanding that sometimes they need a day or two off during finals to study. I have found that you must do your hiring carefully. Explain to the students up front your expectations of them and what the job requires. Also, try to recruit from departments you think might have students who are actually interested in archival work. History is an obvious choice but other humanities disciplines might have interested students. Sometimes, though, you get a hodge-podge of majors.

Maybe I'm the eternal optimist, but I believe that if someone actually enjoys their work they will take pride in it and the work will be high quality. How do you get a pre-med, accounting and flight management student excited about archival work? I decided to let the students tell me what they enjoyed doing. At any archives there is usually a backlog of things to do, whether it is processing a collection, transcribing oral histories, handling a reference request, or helping put together an exhibit. Of course, there are always those tasks that have to be done, but for long-term projects I like to have them working on something they halfway enjoy. I also like to give each student more than one project to work on. This helps keep them from slipping into boredom.

Another thing that has proved successful is having the students write an article for a newsletter we produce in-house called, *Inside the Archives*. They love writing about the collections they are working on. One student wrote about an oral history interview she had transcribed concerning crop dusting, another wrote about a 1940 campus handbook he found while rehousing some older university records, and another about the history of campus buildings. He had been gathering information about the DSU campus for our vertical file. If you can get the student workers actually interested in their work the battle is half won. However, you are always going to have those student workers who really are not that enthused about archival work. You do the best you can.

A good staff definitely helps in managing the work load, but from day one I realized that I would not be able to process collections and handle reference requests all day long. I would have to delegate many of these responsibilities. When I received my archival training they never told me I would have to manage a budget, justify expenditures, prepare annual reports, purchase supplies, and take care of a plethora of basic office tasks. These things were supposed to magically come together and already be prepared right?! Wrong. Thankfully I have, as my boss, a wonderful Director of Library Services who reminds me that the annual report was due two weeks ago. I also have an archives assistant who takes care of many basic office management tasks. Although, we both have to know how everything works in case one of us is out of the office.

I came to another realization one summer evening when I stopped by the Archives. I noticed hundreds of crickets surrounding the building. They attempted to enter as I opened the door. Suddenly I realized I had to deal with pest-control, or insect management as I call it. Someone suggested I turn off

the lights surrounding the building. That helped a great deal. The next year it was grasshoppers. I thought they only stayed in the grass. "Why do they want inside the archives building?!" I thought to myself. Again, we turned off the lights. By this time I was wondering what was coming next. This year I believe it will be frogs. I have already noticed a sudden rise in the population.

There is no academic program or course work offered that could completely prepare you for the real archival world. You are always learning and will have to keep up with new technological innovations. Professional workshops are a great way to learn these skills. Keep up with your readings- don't stop once you graduate. You have to keep up with what other archives are doing, who has collections similar to yours, how other archives are mounting their finding aides on the web etc.

Besides reading and attending workshops another source of help I have found is from "the folks back home," people I had worked with and who had taught me what I knew. It is very reassuring to hear a kind voice on the phone and receive encouragement. So don't feel bad about calling someone and asking for advice, after all you are just starting out in this field, and you don't know everything.



Get involved with state archival organizations. This is especially helpful if you are a lone arranger and are in a rural area or small town. They may be your only contact with other archivists (a.k.a. those who speak your lingo). It's wonderful to have others around you who get excited about the same things you do.

Well, I have been an archivist now for two years at Delta State. I did finish my MA thesis and I've also discovered a future dissertation topic among the collections at the DSCU archives. By now, I'm accustomed to the onslaught of mosquitoes and other insects during the summer, used to the mud which strangely enough resembles my mother's desert "Mississippi Mud," and yes, I have grown accustomed to the roar of a crop duster and hardly even notice when he flies a few feet above my vehicle. Now this area seems quite interesting to me and sometimes on Saturday mornings my dog, Edison, and I ride around in search of new and interesting areas of the Mississippi Delta. I did find the Mississippi River. However, I had to climb a tower at a nearby park to see it over the levee. There it was almost a mile away. Someone quickly pointed out that sometimes you could not reach the tower due to the River. I was glad it was a mile away the day I visited the park.

Meredith Johnston is currently University Archivist at Delta State University. She holds an MA in History from the University of South Alabama.