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Record Keeper or Historian? No, Cantadora!

by Russell D. James, MA

Ancient philosophers desired an education of mathematics, natural philosophy, the grammatical arts, music, rhetoric, and the aesthetic arts. Medieval men grouped these as the seven liberal arts and added theology to the mix. Modern scholars call this classical studies, adding the languages of the ancient philosophers—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Few students of today are given a chance at studying the classics. I was one of these, though my thirst for knowledge led me to study the liberal arts against the background of classical studies.

While the Mediterranean peoples were perfecting what a person should learn, the Celtic druids and later the Celtic Christians contemplated the process of education and called it a journey. My journey has taken me from political theory to law to psychotherapy and finally to history. Looking back at my archival education, I see it began early.

Twentieth century professionals argued over whether their particular field of study was a science or an art. Modernists preferred science, romanticists and post-modernists fancied art. Archivists, arguably one of the most noble old professions, have had the same debate. As a philosopher-at-heart, I have always seen myself as an artist who unfortunately must be scientific. This approach to life has helped me in my journey toward my archival career.

I am not a collector. Sure, I have a few collections lying around the house, but for the most part, letting stuff just sit and not be used is greed in my eyes. I prefer to gather possessions that will be used, not just by me but others, as well. This makes me, I think well-suited to being an archivist.

From the age of fifteen, I wanted to pursue a noble calling, enter a profession that gave back as much to the community as it took. I decided to become a lawyer. From this age until I entered law school at the age of twenty-five, everything I did was part of a grand plan to become the most chivalric and most gentlemanly attorney ever. Little did I know how much I would dislike, no hate, law school! So I took on another challenge.

I had always liked people and decided I would make a great counselor. But after a year and a half of learning that myself and my classmates—not to mention my teachers—were all crazy, I left that career path behind. But something saved me and led me to where I am today.

For five and a half years of college, a year of law school, and one and a half years as a counselor-in-training, I had worked in college and university libraries. While between schools I had done my duty as the interlibrary loan librarian in my small hometown public library in Colorado. When counseling became too much, I gave up half way through my final semester, faking my way through to the end. But I had solace in my library job, which took on an added meaning. I was sent upstairs to a dark, dreaded room called the "Archives." My task was to spend three months cleaning, sorting, filing, boxing, inventorying, and making the place look like a professional repository of past knowledge, a far cry from the storage room I found when I first opened the door and saw boxes and boxes and stacks of papers and ephemera from floor to ceiling, with only little paths through the mess to get to the rare book collection, which was used once in a blue moon.

So I spent the three months doing what an archivist does, without knowing I was doing what I was supposed to. I paid attention to original order, I recorded provenance when it was available, and I made finding aids that today surprise me for their thoroughness. But I learned then that I possessed natural gifts and had garnered certain necessary archival skills from my years in education. I was an organized person, in my daily life, my home, and my work. My love for history and rarity was unsurpassed in anyone I had ever known. I understood different types of scholarship because I had been exposed to many in my own journey through the maze of academe. Finally, I had a respect for the junk of others, considering it all to be treasure in my keeping. Then and there I made a promise to myself to one day be an archivist. I left counseling school and spent thirteen months finding the right place to get the graduate degree required for my entrance into the noble profession.

Family circumstances dictated a move to Florida, over one thousand miles from home. I entered a university to study public history, as I had seen other universities with such programs that offered courses in archival studies and management, preservation, and the like. I wanted the experience gained in on-site study with the discipline of a history degree. But the public history program was not an archivist-friendly one, so I made the move to "conventional" history, the history of Herodotus and Hegel and Turner.

But I still required an archival education. I took a directed study course in archival studies with a man to whom I owe a great deal. William Dean DeBolt taught me that being an archivist is not like being a librarian. A book is not a thing to slap a call number on and put on a shelf for people to take off the shelf and read. A book is a living thing, a creation of someone whose mind was sharp (or not) and who added to the compendium of knowledge of the human race. At the table across from this giant of archival learning I found the art coupled with science I had been looking for all my life. I trained under DeBolt for a few months and then moved on.

One tenet in the DeBolt Curriculum is community outreach. I may have taken this farther than my mentor wished by giving lectures and presentations to every group who will risk having me do so and teaching workshops to beginning genealogists, training them to think like an historian (question, question, question!) and keep records like an archivist (living records, not pieces of paper). Genealogists are an archivist's main constituency and they cannot know how to think and act unless we teach them. My graduate program did not require an internship, but I did one anyway. Through working for Dr. Michael Thomason and Elisa Baldwin of the University of South Alabama archives, I came into contact with a group of people who will always be in my thoughts and prayers, learning that the archival profession is not a group of isolated men and women who come together only annually to discuss what they have learned, found, and written, but instead a team of players in a repository, a city, a state, a nation, and a world working together to bring history alive and preserve what is really important—the stories of yesterday.

Archivists as protectors. A novel concept except when one thinks of the patron saint of archivists (for us Catholic archivists, anyway)—Saint Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr of Rome. He refused to give up the sacred books of Scripture in his safekeeping, so he was placed on a large sheet of metal and roasted alive. All of us hope our fate is not so dramatic and painful, but we, too, protect the possession that is most dear to the human race—knowledge of the past. Dean DeBolt taught me that an archivist and a librarian are two different animals. He meant in the ways each keeps and organizes records. I took this a step further, however.

While searching the world wide web one late night, I came across a word that gave meaning to my chosen profession and to myself. The word is "cantadora," Latin for "keeper of the stories." Archivists are just this—cantadora. We don't store records or just keep them safe, we make them available to scholars (and others) who will share with us the living history told in the stories each record has to tell us. We are cantadorum, the keepers of the stories.

This one word sums up all that I have been searching for and have found in my journey toward becoming an archivist. Archival studies and management is an art form that combines the science of record keeping with the aesthetics of story telling. I have found my home.

Sadly, at the writing of this article I have discovered that to become an academic archivist and be competitive in the job market, one must possess not only a graduate degree in history and a lot of training, but a second graduate degree in library science. I enter a new road on my career journey, from one of artful storytelling to one of scientific record keeping. The two roads—art and science—will merge, however, and I will carry on the time-honored profession of archivist.

Russell D. James, a native of Colorado, received his master of arts in history from the University of West Florida. He is trained as an archivist and is a genealogy educator. He has published many articles in historical and genealogical journals. As owner of the Cantadora Press, he publishes history master's theses, family histories, and historical resources of Santa Rosa County, Florida. Books can be ordered from Cantadora Press, 5406 Persimmon Hollow Rd., Milton, FL 32583-6700.