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# Archival Vaudeville: Rethinking Outreach with Collaborative Programming

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When a group of archivists in Pittsburgh started meeting for happy hours, talk inevitably turned to the great things we were working on and how we wished more people knew about the archives found in our city. Comparing notes quickly turned to making plans for a public program that would allow local archivists to introduce themselves and their repositories to an audience beyond the circled wagons of our profession. In planning for this event, several decisions were made at a theoretical level that had real impact on the structure and success of the program. The loose formula created by the program planners could be adapted by other archives who wish to expand the reach of their repository but who have neither the funding for outreach nor a large enough staff to undertake such a program on their own.

## Format and Theory behind the Program

Initial ideas within the group included bringing in guest speakers or hosting a panel discussion. With two universities in the city that provide coursework in archives (Duquesne University and the University of Pittsburgh) we quickly decided such traditional programs were already taken care of. We decided that our less structured, unaffiliated status could be an asset and we looked instead for unconventional approaches to an archival presentation that could be undertaken by an informal group of professionals. We thus decided that, whatever we did, our event would be less didactic and more celebratory. Also, it was important to us that we present a variety of topics and media, indicative of the range of items and issues we all have come across as archivists. With these goals in mind, we set about creating our program.

Considering formats that would allow for fun and variety, we found inspiration in vaudeville theater. A fast paced set of multimedia presentations, short and unique enough to leave the audience wanting more, would allow for the style and breadth we hoped to achieve. The larger theory behind the format of the program was that talking about archives would organically introduce archival issues such as preservation, accessioning, description, and access. Instead of presenting a general overview of our holdings and the services we offer, we tried to impart the sense of fascination found in the items and stories that have surfaced in our archives. This meant keeping the presentations short (generally around ten minutes) and focused on specific collections—particularly collections that we felt were underappreciated. Although we eventually decided to call the event *Unbeknownst Pittsburgh!*, everyone involved referred to it as "the Archival Cabaret"—a nickname that captured the essence of the program.

Variety was easy to come by in part because our definition of colleague was relatively broad. In organizing the initial happy hours, we cast a wide net, including educators, conservators, curators, registrars, and other professionals who work with archives and archivists. By inviting these colleagues to participate in *Unbeknownst Pittsburgh*, we were able to include repositories that challenged our audience to expand their understanding of what (and where) an archive can be. Our happy hour group boasts employees of university archives large and small, a regional history center, a major art museum, an historic cemetery, a national heritage area, several religious archives, and a house museum. The program ended up being a similar mixture of the expected and

the unexpected.

While the variety of collaborators gave us more repositories to draw from, it also made it easier to feature an assortment of items and formats throughout the evening. In the eight presentations that made up the program we managed to highlight an incredible range of formats, including photographs, documents, architectural plans, postcards, music, film, and artifacts. In one talk alone, archivists from the Andy Warhol Museum discussed an unusual time capsule cataloging project that found them working with artwork, movie posters, business records, band demo tapes, correspondence, comic books, pornography, and food. Two archives even included content in their presentations from outside their physical collections. The presentation from the Homewood Cemetery Archives on the relationship between a choir girl and her wealthy benefactor was accompanied by a 78 Victrola recording of the mezzo-soprano loaned by the husband of another program participant. The archivist at Chatham University convinced the university's small traveling choir to give a live performance of a traditional college song following her presentation on the school's annual song contest. Both of these aural additions helped bring the archival collections to life.

Creating our program as a celebration of the variety of archival materials in Pittsburgh made for an entertaining evening but not at the expense of our actual agenda items of outreach and education. Trusting that our focus on archival collections and items would be naturally educational, we were able to move humor and entertainment to the forefront. We planned our program for a Friday evening and made sure that first and foremost we put on a good show. Subjects ran the gamut from the strange (photographs of Carnegie Tech Building Bureau men in togas and knee socks) to the serious (a bitter feud between Frank Lloyd Wright and a young contemporary), but the theme running through all the presentations was a celebration of what makes Pittsburgh archives extraordinary.

## Implementation

The most common excuses we as archivists often give for not doing more in the way of public relations and outreach is the lack of both staff time and money. *Unbeknownst Pittsburgh!* successfully tackled both of these problems in creative ways.

Because the workload was distributed amongst several institutions and individuals, no one was overwhelmed by the preparations. Many of the participants work alone or on very small staffs and would never have been able to pull off such a large event without the help of the group. An e-mail distribution list, initially utilized to get the word out about those early happy hours, allowed everyone, even archivists with minimal time for face to face meetings, to contribute.

Invisible to our audience was the lack of any sort of budget for the program. Considering that the event quickly grew out of informal happy hours, there was no grant or departmental support. When it was not being referred to as "the Archival Cabaret," *Unbeknownst Pittsburgh!* was called "the Show in the Barn." It was a DIY project in which everyone pitched in what they could. Carnegie Mellon University provided a free space, free access to AV equipment, and even free parking in their garage. As an added benefit, the university is easily accessible from points throughout the city via public transit and provided a huge potential audience of young people and academics. Archivists from the Hunt Botanical Library and the Science and Engineering Institute declined to give presentations but instead provided technical support using the equipment already in the auditorium. Those archivists who did not have access to technology were assisted by those who did. While the project was a series of separate presentations, the result was a group effort.

Lack of a budget had little impact on publicity. This was due largely to the wonders of e-mail, the Internet, and a few well-placed personal connections. A Facebook page for the event circulated among members with everyone adding friends from their own accounts who might have an interest in this kind of program. A local events blog, I Heart Pittsburgh, listed the event, a suggestion that served as an endorsement to a young professional crowd that may not think of archives as Friday night fare (<http://iheartpgh.com/2009/02/05/telling-untold-ales-unbeknownst-pittsburgh/>). Several participants contacted members of the local press who had previously done research in their archives. While it would not exactly qualify as calling in a favor, positive experiences reporters had in the past with some of the participating archives went a long way towards convincing them that a write-up about *Unbeknownst Pittsburgh!* could be a nice scoop. Links to the write-ups were circulated by e-mail the day of the event. Even the more traditional methods of advertising, such as posters and invitations, were all sent via e-mail. While getting the word out was crucial to the success of the program, none of the advertising would have been effective if there was not a latent interest in Pittsburgh about history and archives. Our desire to reach a wide audience with our advertising was a bet on our part that Pittsburghers want to know more about who we are and what we do.

All told, we managed to spend less than fifty dollars on the entire evening. Thirty-five of that went towards the printing of the programs, and a negligible sum (reimbursed from fine money) was spent on homemade treats for the choir that performed.

## **Success**

Several unofficial benchmarks measured the success of the evening. First, the initial advertising we undertook generated more—the I Heart Pittsburgh listing brought about a mention on a local radio station, the Facebook page was widely distributed beyond our initial set of friends, and rumor has it that a local weatherman mentioned the program at the end of a 5:00 pm news broadcast. Second, the auditorium used for the event has a seating capacity of 147. An official count was not taken, but all seats were full and people sat on steps and in the aisles. Perhaps the biggest measure of our success was that, in looking out into the audience, none of the participants recognized everyone. The idea of the program and the manner in which we advertised it appealed to a wide range of people. Our guess that what we found to be interesting would be interesting to others was accurate.

In the months since the event took place, we have continued to receive positive feedback. Several participants were contacted by audience members interested in volunteering or interning. Many commented that they had no idea some of the smaller institutions existed and have asked when the next program will take place.

## **Conclusions**

*Unbeknownst Pittsburgh!* proved that outreach and programming need not be tedious nor expensive when archivists work together and think outside the box. We are employed by repositories with diverse missions and constituents, but we share the notion that archives and the stories within them deserve to be celebrated and enjoyed by a vast audience. By respecting the intelligence of the audience we hoped to reach, we were able to present a program that focused on fun but delivered some basic lessons in who we are and what we do. And our guess about both the intelligence and interest level of Pittsburgh paid off in that we played to a full house. Using the resources we each had at our disposal, we were able to give a whole new audience entrée into our collections. In the end, we found that collaboration, digital communications, and a certain amount of humor and audacity can make reality out of the seemingly impossible.

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Jennie Benford is the University/Heinz Archivist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She earned her MLS at the School of Library and Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. Both before and after receiving her degree, Ms. Benford worked in a variety of archives, museums and historic sites, including The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, The Frick Art and Historical Center and The Homewood Cemetery. She is a founding member of both The Archival Happy Hour Association and the original chapter of Ladies United for the Preservation of Endangered Cocktails.

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