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Managing Archival Collections

Community Documentation

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One way to focus a community's collaborative efforts is to develop a community documentation strategy. Such a strategy requires those collecting historical resources in a town to determine the full scope of the community's history. The goal is to create a complete picture of a community and its activities. Repositories work together to define and seek records related to every aspect of the community that should be documented and preserved. If no documents exist for a particular activity, they are created. This strategy can be an overarching framework for local history programs and can be a launching point for each repository to create a collection development policy.

An archivist's concept of a collection should not end at her own doors. It is important for a repository to continually collaborate with outside organizations to build collections and string together the story about local community life. Once a collaborative group of repositories has been devised to consider collection development issues, it is appropriate and beneficial to take a documentation approach to collecting. This is a very active way of ensuring that bits of history are not lost in time. The group should now involve representatives from the local community (outside of the history field) who can provide input about local life and thus, information about what records need to be collected to record both past and present history.

One primary goal of community documentation is to ensure that all views of society are represented and no one is left out of the historical collections that represent our collective memory. History has traditionally been written by those in power and archivists following a community documentation strategy make it their goal to be all-inclusive. This is not a politically correct endeavor, but a view of history that takes into account the need to hear under-represented voices to understand society as a whole.

Local Implementation of a Documentation Strategy

A community documentation strategy requires a stronger collaborative effort than "traditional" collection development and appraisal methods because it requires continual effort and involves people from many different backgrounds. Organizations and individuals working together to fully document their communities must first devise a documentation plan. At this point, each organization in town may have developed a focused mission and has found its collecting niche within the community. (See previous newsletters at

<http://www.mannon.org/archives/newsletter.htm> for more information) Within their outlined collecting goals, the organizations working together must seek to cover all aspects of community life. If town repositories have not already created collection development policies, it would be appropriate to consider your community and divvy up topics for each repository around which they may develop a collecting strategy.

First, consider important events in the history of your community. Consider the social fiber of your community and define its character. Reflect on your town's sense of space and how its geographical locale has influenced its makeup. Think of your community as a tapestry of people, events, activities, and organizations and aim to list all of the different aspects that define what it is and how it became that way. Every aspect of the community that you define here will require documentation. Consider the records created and maintained by local businesses, churches, associations, governments, and individuals. Often businesses, and associations keep their own archives, or they may be pleased to place their historical records with a local collecting repository. Make sure your local government is included in any record planning process. They are often the largest keeper of historical records in a town and can play a leading and model role in collaborative efforts. Work through the City Clerk to encourage your town to properly care for their historical records and support them in efforts to set up their own formal public records management program, if they do not already have one.

Analyze the status of the current existing level of documentation in your community. Review finding aids and sources that describe what is currently contained in local collections and what information about your town is collected by repositories outside of your area. Your documentation project is going to involve locating records created in the past and influencing records created in the present. As with a collection development policy, identify gaps in the current collections and aim to fill those gaps by locating existing records. Then, considering the elements of your community defined in the previous paragraph that require documentation, devise strategies for effectively recording information about those elements. You may want to develop oral history programs to record memories of particular events. You may want to encourage effective records management practices that capture elusive documentation. While in the past much communication took place through written correspondence that has survived the test of time, today we have more intangible means of imparting information. In this era of overabundant information, the keepers of records play a critical role to ensure that the most important information is captured for posterity. It is a task that we can not properly achieve without a community effort.

Recommended Reading on Community Documentation

Cox, Richard J. *Documenting Localities: A Practical Model for American Archivists and Manuscript Curators*. Lanham, MD: The Society of American Archivists, 1996.

A complete look at methods for documenting local history and defining the character of a community.

Samuels, Helen Willa. "Who Controls the Past", *American Archivist* (Spring 1986) volume 49 no. 2: 109-123

This is the premier source for documentation. It first defined the theory and advocates for its implementation.

White, Grant. "Message in a Bottle: Community Memory in the Local Studies Collection," *Australian Public Libraries and Information*. (September 2000) volume 13 no. 3: 96-101.

This article discusses documenting the community experience from a librarian's perspective.