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Moving

Todd Ellison

We all move; about twenty million Americans traded places last year. Most of them trucked the furniture themselves. Archivists delight in moving no more than the next person, but their professional training and experience prepares them better than does probably anyone else's. Whether they implement their knowledge is another matter; this article describes the ideal.

My reflections on this subject are fresh from personal experience. I was offered a job in Durango, Colorado, on 22 July 1991, accepted it the next day, and moved lock, stock and family from Boulder, Colorado, across four or five mountain passes to our new land of milk and honey on July 30. A move so sudden required certain resources and the application of principles learned in archival work.

A successful move is one where everything reaches the destination intact and is relocated in its new surroundings with maximal efficiency and minimal aggravation. This feat involves preparation, packing, storage, transfer, unpacking, and ultimate disposition. The archivist—and anyone who knows a few

archival principles—should have an edge in all of these functions. Could this article give you a head start on next year's exchanges?

It is never too soon to commence the first phase of a move. Preparation includes estimating the volume and special characteristics of the materials. How many cubic feet? Is a grand piano accompanying you? How about the 1,200 tropical fish? How does the new space compare with the old; is it larger, and are there stairs? What resources do we possess in terms of finances, friends, and freight trucks, and what resources will be required? Supplies are one of the earliest needs—boxes, boxes, boxes of all sizes—with lids. One never has enough boxes.

Archivists, unlike librarians, deal for the most part in unique items which contain information. Because they are one of a kind, they resist classification. There is only one box of Fonda Drug Store prescriptions, for example. If we file those prescriptions with the Jones Drug Store prescriptions, where do we file Mr. Fonda's business correspondence? Archivists conquer this difficulty by applying provenance, the archival principle that records created and received by one records unit should not be intermixed with those of any other. Thus, the moving-van-bound archivist packs all of the baking utensils together; they may have been stored in several different cabinets and drawers in the old residence, but those decisions will be made fresh in the new one. The first time that box will be needed, no doubt, will be when the family baker decides to try muffins in the new oven.

Nobody keeps a perfectly ordered house. That closet of unsorted miscellany is somewhere in there. Archivists are accustomed to the sight of such a closet, jammed full of who knows what. They attack each closet with an appraisal and (often, if energy permits) a container inventory. Their experience has provided them with a reasonably sure basis for deciding which materials to retain and which to deaccession into the

circular file or someone else's closet. Those decisions are better made before the move; there may not be time after.

The archival mind considers the values—primary, intrinsic, informational, and secondary—of groups of materials (series) before either packing them or deaccessioning them. That cracked clay pot from last year's vacation has lost its primary value (as a water-carrier), and it has no informational value because it tells us nothing about any "persons, places, subjects, and things," but for us it possesses an intrinsic and secondary value due to its workmanship and because it reminds us of the good times we had on that vacation.

The archivally minded mover packs and labels the materials of the same provenance immediately after appraising them. Aware that resources are too scarce to permit more than one handling of each item, the archivist packer decides on its disposition the first time. Recognizing that different types of materials require different types of storage conditions, this packer chooses appropriate boxes, suitably durable, small enough that the filled weight will be manageable, large enough to accommodate the largest item of that group. These boxes are neither overpacked nor underpacked, as either extreme could result in damage to the contents. Each box is labeled, in the same place on each box, with a location code (LR, KI, BR, etc.), and a brief contents description is written below the location code (such as "family photo albums"). Likewise, the archival packer considers environmental dangers, especially fluctuations and extremes of temperature. Sound recordings, photographs, and computer disks are placed in boxes sub-coded CC, so that they will be transported in climate-controlled vehicles, not in a hot or freezing van. Anything fragile is so designated, again in a standard location on each box.

When emptying cabinets, the thoughtful archival packer will maintain the original order of their contents. Files will be boxed

in the same order used by the individual who organized them; knives will be placed in a bag or wrapped to keep them separate from the forks in the new silverware drawer. Better to commit to a little additional organizational effort than, like Erma Bombeck, to face a chaos of boxes all marked "miscellaneous" later.

Preservation and access are the primary goals, not only for archivists but for people on the move. Every action in the moving process draws us either closer or further from achieving those goals. Thus, in each phase of the move the materials are organized clearly and consistently. The natural urge to heap them together should be resisted at each juncture. Moving may not be fun, but it can be successful.

Todd Ellison has been archivist of Fort Lewis College, Durango, Colorado, since the summer of 1991.