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Journeywoman: A Lone Arranger on the Final Frontier

Laura Frizzell

Introduction: The Final Frontier

“It’s a big place,” said Richard Estelle.¹ Born and raised in the state of Alaska, he is now the collections manager of the Palmer Museum of History and Art in the small town of Palmer. Sitting in the basement of the museum, where the archival collections are housed, I had asked him in a casual interview if there was anything he wanted people outside of Alaska to know that they might not already. Initially, his answer made me chuckle. “I think they *do* know that,” I said, recalling how one of the few things I knew about the state prior to traveling there was that it was, simply put, *big*. He fixed me with a knowing look, and responded, “A lot of people don’t in the sense that ... there’s not just one Alaska.”²

Comprising 586,400 square miles of diverse terrain, Alaska lives up to its reputation as the largest state in America. Across the state, communities respond to the different elements that dictate their lives such as possible isolation and low populations, limited transportation, extreme climates and environments, and proximity to and a dependency on wildlife for food and profit. As with any location, these factors yield unique cultural rewards in art, storytelling traditions, music, clothing, architecture, and more. As these forms evolve and shape the state’s multi-faceted narrative, their preservation and accessibility becomes hampered by a lack of resources and awareness. Without specially trained archivists to collect and care for these materials while also promoting them across the state and beyond, the potential for loss looms.

Recognizing this, the Alaska State Historical Records Advisory Board (ASHRAB) went to the drawing board to develop initiatives that could fill in the gaps. Zachary Jones, the acting state archivist of Alaska, writes: “From 2009-2012, we offered Archival Science trainings around Alaska, and surveyed those serviced.”³ During this campaign, repositories repeatedly expressed the desire for a professional to come provide hands-on training in archival

¹ Richard Estelle, interview with the author, June 22, 2017.

² Estelle.

³ Zachary Jones, email message to author, August 30, 2017.

practice and collections care. In response to these requests, in 2013 ASHRAB “began a Consulting Archivist Program, which allowed host organizations to apply to receive the consultative services of ASHRAB members.”⁴ This initiative was successful, but during its implementation different repositories communicated additional needs. From these requests, the Journeyman Archival Processing Program was created, and would ultimately lead me to Palmer, Alaska, as a lone arranger.

The Journeyman Archival Processing Program:

Sponsored by ASHRAB, the Alaska State Archives, and the National Historical Publications & Records Commission, the Journeyman Archival Processing Program functions as follows: every year, two archival institutions in Alaska are chosen after a competitive selection process to receive a journeyman archivist for six weeks. To ensure the competency of the journeyman archivist, each applicant must possess either a bachelor’s degree and two years of professional archival work, or a master’s degree and at least one year of work in the field. The application cites a working knowledge of theory, practice, and technology among the list of necessary qualifications. As deliverables, each applicant is required to submit a résumé, cover letter, and a list of three professional references.

As per an agreement with ASHRAB, once the journeyman archivists have been chosen, they use their stay to process at least two collections, create corresponding finding aids that can be accessed online, prepare a report for the sponsoring organizations detailing challenges and objectives met, and write a summary of their experience for the newsletter of the Northwest Archivists Association, *Easy Access*. In return, they are granted a stipend of \$7,500 plus an additional \$1,000 to compensate for any travel fees.

As an example of the program in action, in 2016 a journeyman archivist was stationed at the Carrie M. McClain Memorial Museum in the small coastal city of Nome. Located just off the Bering Sea, Nome is known for its subarctic climate and for being the destination of the famous Great Race of Mercy in 1925 that would later inspire the Disney classic *Balto*. For a new or entry-level archivist willing to travel, the Journeyman Archival Processing

⁴ Jones.

Program sets the stage for a rich opportunity, both personally and professionally.

Northern Exposure: a Lone Arranger in Alaska

In the spring of 2017, I found myself nearing the end of an 18-month contract in a corporate archives. As I attempted to piece together my steadily encroaching future, I became aware of the Journeyman Archival Processing Program, and found myself captivated by the idea of it. I had been wearing different hats in the archival field since 2012, and felt that the responsibilities described in the job posting seemed reflective of my professional experience, and, furthermore, my career goals. I immediately applied and, a month or so later, could not believe my luck when I was offered a position in Palmer, Alaska, at the Palmer Museum of History and Art.

Palmer, a small town of roughly 7,000 residents, sits against a backdrop of towering mountains in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley in Southcentral Alaska. The people who occupy this space know the land—from icy glaciers to green farmland—and recognize the many ways that it has and continues to shape their lives, both culturally and logistically. The Palmer Museum of History and Art and its archives provide locals and tourists alike the opportunity to indulge in this legacy of what it means to be Alaskan while preserving one-of-a-kind artifacts. Its gallery space represents a multifaceted range of topics, including Native American culture, the history of the Matanuska Valley Colony established as part of the New Deal, the progression of local business and technology, and even art from local college students.

Because Alaska did not become a U.S. state until 1959, the museum's executive director Selena Ortega-Chiolero pointed out the unique opportunity to mine a wealth of living history from current residents only one generation removed from early settlers.⁵ To this end, the museum's archives tell a diverse story of Palmer and the people who have inhabited it via photo albums, documents, maps, textiles, personal effects, tools, and more. These items paint images of the past that are still very much visible in the community today.

⁵ Selena Ortega-Chiolero, interview with the author, June 22, 2017.

To preserve these collections is to further establish an important link between the modern landscape and the early influences that forged it.

Having always worked in archives as part of a team, my more solitary role at the Palmer Museum of History and Art required that I assume the identity of a lone arranger for the first time. In doing so, I would push myself to be confident and resourceful in ways that had never been demanded of me previously. Suddenly considered an authority by the museum staff around me, I had to learn very quickly to trust my education, experience, and intuition while working through physical and technological difficulties to bring preservation and access to collections I would come to regard with great interest and protection.

The Elsie Blue Photo Collection

As a newly minted journeyman archivist, the first collection I was assigned was the Elsie Blue Photo Collection. Kept within a single photo album, this collection is comprised of 446 photographs depicting the life and travels of Elsie Blue in the 1930s and 1940s. A young nurse originally from Chicago, Elsie relocated to Palmer to work for the local hospital. Through her photography, she documented her life with her husband Walt, the development of Palmer, Native individuals and cultures, wildlife, and her extensive travels around the state. As a collection, Elsie's photos represent a wonderfully varied depiction of Alaska in terms of both residents and geography. Throughout the photo album's 71 pages, Elsie presents working women; Native women, students, and families; and villages, parks, and towns from the Arctic Circle to Juneau and many places in-between. As such, this collection is potentially of great value to not just Palmer and the surrounding Matanuska-Susitna Valley, but to all of Alaska.

Surprisingly, Elsie's photo album was in very good condition considering its age and the number of photos that had been stored within it. While the binding of the album was somewhat stressed from the thickness of the pages and a handful of photos showed wear on the edges from being bent in tight binding, most of the photos were in excellent condition. On each page, photos were arranged in a vertical column in an overlapping fashion which required lifting each individual photo to see the ones beneath. As she arranged her

album, Elsie wrote captions on the back of most of the photos, providing important context for each.

Before I began working with the photo album, I spoke with Selena and Richard about their intentions regarding the artifact. During this conversation we decided that, because of the album's condition, it would be acceptable to leave it intact with the photos inside. We also determined that the greatest threat to the album was over-handling, which could easily result in a torn binding and damaged photos. As such, I resolved to enhance the accessibility of the photo collection while preserving the original artifact.

My first step was to further assess the photo album's physical condition to better preserve it. Because of the overlapping arrangement of the photos on each page, I was initially concerned about photos becoming scratched or stained from the ink-written notes on their backs. My plan was to interleave tissue paper throughout the whole album, but this proved difficult because of the already strained binding and the photos' unique arrangement. As such, I reassessed and decided to prepare Mylar sleeves only for the photos that showed significant signs of wear and those that had come loose from the album entirely. I chose Mylar sleeves so that the fronts and backs of the photos could still be seen and individual photos could be lifted without being touched. Being selective in this way prevented the binding of the album from becoming further stretched. To ensure that the Mylar sleeves did not scratch the photos beneath, I used tissue paper as a layer of protection.

Because Selena, Richard, and I decided to leave the photo album intact and therefore in its original arrangement, I could spend more time determining efficient ways to assert intellectual control over the artifact. Fortunately, Richard and the museum's volunteers had already digitized the bulk of the photos inside the album. I saw this as an opportunity to create a relationship between the born-digital images and their original prints by adding physical locations—page number and the sequence of individual photos on pages—to the previously established filenames. For instance, the filename of the first photo on the sixty-second page of the album would become: 62,1_Hospital #4-Blu. Next, I wrote the filenames with an archival marker on pieces of non-acidic artist tape and applied them to the pre-existing adhesives binding each photo to the page. Adding this element to the filenames Richard had devised

added an important layer of communication between the physical photo album and the digitized files that came from it. By looking at the filenames, a person could ascertain exactly where in the photo album's 71 pages a specific photo could be found; by looking at the notation attached beneath each physical photo, a person could quickly find the digitized version on the museum's hard drive.

While preparing a finding aid for the photo album, I wanted to incorporate standardized elements while also taking into consideration the unique needs of the museum staff and potential researchers. The bulk of these needs revolved around ensuring the quick findability of individual images in an expansive collection based off the subjects and locations depicted, for research and exhibition purposes alike. Therefore, in addition to modeling my finding aid after one in use for a photo album in Special Collections at Humboldt State University, I also created a searchable inventory that details the arrangement of the photos within the album and offers key information such as: the previously mentioned filename for each photo; descriptions; dates; and additional comments that include condition reporting.⁶ In lieu of a digital asset management system, this inventory brings a similar findability component to the collection. Once the finding aid was complete and published on the museum's web site along with a sample photo from the album, I cataloged the album using Past Perfect 5, wrapped it in tissue paper, and stored it in a Hollinger box.

The *Alaska* Magazine Collection:

Next, I moved on to my second assignment: the *Alaska* Magazine Collection. In publication since 1935, *Alaska* offers news and information about many aspects of living in the forty-ninth state. Founded in Ketchikan, Alaska, by Emery Fridolf Tobin and Ray Roady, the publication was initially titled *Alaska Sportsman Magazine* and catered primarily to the discussion and photography of fishing, hunting, camping, dog sledding, and other outdoor ventures. In 1969, a new title, *Alaska*, was adopted and has remained in use to the present day.

⁶ "Neill Photo Album – Finding Aid," 2012. Finding aid at the Archives of Humboldt State University, Arcata, California, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://library.humboldt.edu/humco/holdings/NeillAid.htm>.

Since then, the magazine has come to reflect different facets of Alaska living, including spotlights on Native cultures, the environment, the arts, cooking, and individuals. In addition to a broader focus in content, the magazine also expanded its readership to audiences outside the state of Alaska. The publication strives to represent many areas of the state. Articles frequently feature Native villages, Nome, Barrow, Juneau, Fairbanks, the Aleutian Islands, etc. This expansive focus on locations that are varied in terms of culture, population, and geography creates a well-rounded depiction of the state, including Palmer and the surrounding Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

Richard had preemptively arranged most of this collection, giving me the opportunity to manage other aspects of its processing. Much like with the Elsie Blue Photo Collection finding aid, I adopted a standardized format while incorporating elements specific to the collection and the different ways it could be accessed. I created a searchable inventory that provides the following fields: issue (month and year), description, comments, location, and the corresponding object ID within Past Perfect 5 when available. This inventory reflects the 485 individual issues in the museum's possession.

In addition to creating this finding aid, the entire collection was photographed (including covers and tables of contents), and I arranged the photos by year on the museum's hard drive. A portion of the magazines had been cataloged using Past Perfect 5, so I added photos to these records, attached subjects to each record, and included article titles for pieces that featured Palmer specifically.

For the most part, the collection was in very good physical condition with the exception of some older issues that had experienced water damage or other forms of wear. These issues were placed in Mylar sleeves to prevent further damage and protect the other magazines. All told, the collection ranges in date from November 1946 to June 2012, and spans eleven oversized boxes, which I arranged chronologically, leaving room to grow if additional issues are acquired.

One more for the road: the Louis Odsather Collection

During my sixth week at the museum, I processed a portion of the larger Louis Odsather Collection. Donated in 2015, the Odsather papers pertain to many facets of life in Palmer, Anchorage,

and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Richard had been working on housing many parts of this collection, but had not yet touched a box of papers documenting Odsather's involvement in several area organizations and committees. I wanted the opportunity to arrange, house, and prepare a finding aid for a selection of documents, so I treated this sub-collection as its own entity and did just that, titling it the Louis Odsather Local Committees Collection. These papers represent the Pioneers of Alaska, the Grand Igloo Emblem Committee, and the King and Queen Regent ceremonies and conventions. Housed within eight folders inside one box, the collection is comprised of historic booklets, handwritten notes, typed manuscripts, correspondence, and a space for miscellaneous papers. It ranges in date from 1908 to 1988. Most of the collection is in excellent condition except for the historic booklets, which show signs of age and wear. As such, I housed them in Mylar sleeves to prevent further damage.

A 1988 newspaper featuring a special on the 1989 Iditarod race was originally included in one of the folders, but I relocated it so that it could be unfolded and stored in an oversized binder. It was then cross-referenced to this collection. Each document was arranged chronologically, and I prepared a finding aid. I was especially excited to work with this collection because I felt that doing so would leave a solid foundation to guide museum staff through similar, more traditional document collections, of which there will be many.

Lessons Learned: Navigating Challenges, Moving Forward

Like all archival materials, the three collections I worked with came with their own idiosyncrasies. The Elsie Blue Photo Collection, for instance, presented a series of physical challenges because of the unique arrangement of its photos. The *Alaska Magazine* Collection had been efficiently arranged, but lacked other imperative elements of intellectual control. And the lack of organization in the Louis Odsather Local Committees Collection meant that several documents originally lacked the proper context. In addition to these, the Palmer Museum of History and Art, like many archives and museums, functions without a digital asset management system and, in some cases, physical resources. For me specifically, time was also an incredibly limited resource.

In her book *The Lone Arranger: Succeeding in a Small Repository*, author Christina Zamon offers advice to solo archivists in similar scenarios: “It is easy to focus too much on how something 'should' be done while we lose sight of what really 'needs' to be done. Look at archival standards as a goal to aim for, but don't feel as though you have failed if those goals are not met ... any structure is better than no structure.”⁷ Encouraged by this perspective, my work as a journeyman archivist primarily entailed finding creative, efficient ways to render artifacts physically and digitally accessible while also enhancing their longevity through preservation-minded rehousing. One of my favorite aspects of this project was partnering with Richard to assess which of the museum's collections were candidates for rehousing, work that was informed by artifact condition, current storage methods, and available resources. Because of Richard's impressive amount of prior research about archival practice, this process was an enjoyable one in which I also learned a great deal. In his own right, Richard is very much a lone arranger as well as an excellent advocate for the collections under his care.

After spending as much time as I could with the three collections, Richard and I discussed the different ways he and the museum volunteers could further our progress. These include: finishing the digitization of the Elsie Blue Photo Collection and editing the finding aid with new filenames; cataloging the rest of the *Alaska Magazine* Collection and adding photos and subjects to the new records; and incorporating any relevant Odsather materials to the Local Committees Collection.

Community Outreach: Making Connections, Providing Service

In his Presidential Address at the 2007 Society of Archivists Conference, Victor Gray urged: “If you are a public service, then where you should truly be is serving the public.”⁸ In this vein, I prepared a collections care guide for family history in the home and led a workshop for locals to raise community awareness about the museum while fostering archival education. I divided the guide into

⁷ Christina Zamon, *The Lone Arranger: Succeeding in a Small Repository* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2012), 31.

⁸ Victor Gray, “Who's that Knocking on Our Door?: Archives, Outreach, and Community,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 29, no. 1 (2008): 1.

the following segments: Photo and Document Care Tips; Digitization Guidelines; Preserving Home Movies and Other Moving Images; and Links to Important Preservation Resources. I discussed materials and locations to avoid while working to preserve and store collections, and provided links to additional information from reputable sources such as the National Archives and the Library of Congress. The Palmer Museum hosted the workshop at a local venue for two days, and I was pleased with the response from the community, some of whom brought in their family histories and, in one case, even antique furniture.

The event was successful in providing the community with teaching moments, but also in bolstering the museum's outreach initiatives and raising awareness about the institution and its collections. Before leaving the museum, I left additional copies of the guide at the front desk, and Selena and I have since discussed having a digital version available on the museum website. Throughout the duration of my time in Palmer, I constantly brainstormed different methods of promoting the museum and engaging with new and existing audiences. Many of these methods would have ranged from impractical to impossible, or at the very least would have required a separate program and visit. If indeed "enthusiasm and passion are the ideal ingredients for outreach," Alaska and the Palmer Museum of History and Art proved themselves to be fantastic sources of inspiration for both.⁹

Reflection

Before leaving the museum, I interviewed Selena and Richard, and, while this was not one of the requirements of my position, I feel that it could be an interesting way to get feedback that could positively shape the program moving forward. I wanted to get their individual perspectives about the Journeyman Archival Processing Program and what it means to be stewards of history in Alaska. When asked about their goals for the project, they each expressed a desire for a solid framework with which to better inform their practice. Richard explained, "What I had hoped for was that you could take on a couple of projects ... preserving, recording, and

⁹ Gray, 3.

archiving them so that we would have a good example to look to as we try to do that for other projects.”¹⁰ In addition to fulfilling the requirements of the ASHRAB grant and working with Richard on general collections management, Selena also communicated a similar sentiment: “We needed a little bit more of a guided hand to put us in the right direction, and then also some verification that what we *are* doing currently *is* in the right direction.”¹¹

When thinking back on my own goal for the project, I have to laugh at how simple it was: to challenge myself professionally by working in an unfamiliar place. On the most basic level, I knew that I would be embodying a more authoritative role than I was accustomed to, but I never could have anticipated how frightening and rewarding it would be to do this. I now have a sense of confidence I doubt I would have developed under other circumstances, and the renewed belief that it is an archivist’s duty to tailor practices to their specific collections and audiences rather than apply unnecessary measures for the sake of standardization. As I now feel compelled to continue pursuing lone arranger positions in smaller repositories, I plan to draw upon this statement from Susan Pevar in her article “Success as a Lone Arranger: Setting Priorities and Getting the Job Done”: “My overall strategy ... is to put my energies into those areas where I can succeed, rather than spin my wheels trying to make changes that are beyond my control.”¹²

A couple of months removed from my experience in Alaska, I still firmly believe the Journeyman Archival Processing Program is an asset to the state as well as the larger archival profession. And as my mind wanders daily to the time I spent at the Palmer Museum of History and Art, I am consistently amazed at how such a seemingly short-term solution can be so transformative. Regardless of where my career takes me in the future, I will always acknowledge that much of my practice and philosophy have been informed by my six weeks as a journeywoman archivist on the final frontier.

¹⁰ Estelle, interview.

¹¹ Ortega-Chiolero, interview.

¹² Susan Pevar, “Success as a Lone Arranger: Setting Priorities and Getting the Job Done,” *Journal of Archival Organization*, 3 (2005): 51-60.

Laura Frizzell received her master's degree in Information Science from the University of Tennessee in 2015, after which she relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, to be a project archivist in the archives of the Coca-Cola Company. Upon completing this contract, she served as a journeyman archivist at the Palmer Museum of History and Art in Palmer, Alaska. Currently, she is a museum archivist at the David J. Sencer CDC Museum, where she works to preserve and promote the history and progression of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.