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Preserving and Publicizing Archival Collections

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Introduction

Archival collections vary in content and scope, and how universities or archives handle those collections varies even more. When Troy University was gifted thousands of interesting and unique postcards, the librarians were unsure of how to handle these since no archivist was on staff and no one was trained in the preservation or organization of archival material. This forced librarians to educate themselves and discern the best way to move forward. The purpose of this study is to investigate ways to preserve archival collections while increasing the visibility and usage of the content. The first section will include a literature review of ways archival materials are handled in libraries and museums as well as best practices for preserving, organizing, and sharing special collections. The authors will then detail the way this information was used to establish digitization processes and storage options for managing an archival collection of postcards in their academic library. The last part of the paper will detail the way this academic library increased the visibility and usage of the postcard collection by collaborating with other academic departments to create both physical and online exhibits. This section will give practical details concerning the production of three multi-panel traveling exhibits, the methods used for generating interest and securing bookings for these exhibits, and the logistics of managing the exhibits.

Literature Review

While many libraries and archives store materials from the surrounding community or state, collections vary drastically. Some veer towards the unique, while others seem odd – from collections of postcards (Collections, gateways, and tools, n.d.) to the bloody clothing worn by a former Alabama governor during a failed assassination attempt (Edgemon, 2014). How do these institutions preserve these collections? Are they accessible online, or must someone visit the library or archives to browse the contents? How do they market their collections to the public?

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) gives specific guidelines for special collections. These guidelines provide “best practices” for processing items, information on using appropriate descriptors, knowledge to improve the findability of items in the collection, and stated competencies for preservation and

conservation (Guidelines, 2017). The Library of Congress (LC) website, <https://www.loc.gov>, is another resource for those with preservation questions. In addition to preservation, the LC website covers collections care, conservation, digital preservation, and emergency management (Library of Congress, n.d.). The Digital Preservation Coalition (2019), a non-profit company based in the United Kingdom, also seeks to “secure our digital legacy” by providing a handbook to assist in the preservation process. According to Oya Rieger (2018), “The development and adoption of shared standards...have been instrumental in facilitating the access, discovery, management, and preservation of digital resources.” Although these have been created to help librarians and archivists use a streamlined process, each institution handles its collections according to staffing, budget, and the perceived needs of the patrons (Kersting, O’English, Pässehl-Stoddart, Stoddart, & Velte, 2017).

“Reboxing is preservation in its most basic form,” according to Haley Aaron, Registrar at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (personal communication, February 28, 2019). In order to preserve something, archivists must think of several factors: ways to preserve the integrity of the items, the lighting, the climate, and fragility or potential damage from use. While some items may be perfectly fine once they have been “reboxed,” others may need additional attention, especially fragile items (H. Aaron, personal communication, February 28, 2019). Over the past two decades, more content is being preserved and accessed digitally than ever before (Rieger, 2018). In order to “save” those items that are fragile while still providing access to the public, institutions may try to digitize them. If people only want to read what is on a document, typically “a digital surrogate is enough” (H. Aaron, personal communication, February 28, 2019). While this may be costly and/or time-consuming to organizations, it does have many benefits, such as making items available to a wider community of users and providing additional preservation and backup of materials in case of natural disaster or damage to the original.

Once the preservation of the items has been taken into consideration, the next step to consider is the visibility of the collection. According to Purcell (2012), “The standard archival principle to preserve and protect materials sometimes adversely intersects the push for greater use of and access to original items” (p. 144). Whether or not an institution should exhibit its collection has been in the archival literature for decades. Many questions arise, such

as security of the exhibit, along with the proper temperatures, lighting, and humidity levels required for the preservation of the items (Powers, 1978). One way to work around many of these concerns is through digitization. Some of Altermatt and Hilton's (2012) research has focused on the digitization of ephemera and the importance of providing access to that type of archival item. Since *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (Rickards, 2000) classifies postcards as ephemera, Altermatt and Hilton's (2012) research was of particular interest to this institution since the objective of the archival project was to showcase a unique set of postcards.

As mentioned above, digitizing content allows institutions to provide electronic access to collections on their websites. Another way to showcase collections is by creating traveling exhibits. These can be sent to other libraries or institutions with the appropriate amount of space in which to display the exhibit, whether it be in panels, on digital devices such as iPads, or even the original items. The Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections at the University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill is one example of a Special Collections library that incorporates this idea. They have a unique photograph collection that can be shared with institutions across the country. This traveling exhibit allows the work of a well-known North Carolinian photographer to be shared with others who may not be as familiar with his work or with his lesser-known photographs (Traveling Exhibits, n.d.). The National Library of Medicine (NLM) has a variety of traveling exhibitions that are sent throughout the United States and Europe, one of which is "Pictures of Nursing: The Zwerdling Postcard Collection." This collection is digitized, and banners of the postcards were created for institutions to borrow and display (Exhibition Program, 2016).

Another option is to create online exhibits (WKU, 2018; Cornell University Library, 2019; New York Public Library, 2019; Smithsonian Libraries, n.d.). According to Cornell's (2019) website, "Library exhibitions, both online and in person, help nourish and inspire intellectual curiosity and creativity." These online exhibits allow the collections to be shared across the world, not just locally or at the specific sites that receive the traveling exhibit. The Mississippi Gulf Coast Museum of Historical Photography (MoHP) is a prime example of an institution who has created digital content online to share with others. The MoHP has a collection of images and postcards from the Mississippi Gulf Coast Region that has been digitized and is available for viewing on their website. In addition to the images, they have added information on the collection and the historical restoration of items (Mississippi Gulf Coast, n.d.). The Albuquerque and Bernalillo County Public Library is another excellent example. This website hosts a collection titled "Albuquerque Historical Postcards," which displays "more than 2,000 postcards published throughout the 20th Century." The original intent was to celebrate Albuquerque's tricentennial celebration, so a traveling display was sent throughout the county, but now these postcards are displayed on their website for people

worldwide to visit and enjoy (Albuquerque Historical Postcards, n.d.).

Overall, it seems to be a balancing act for those working in archives and special collections. Which items need additional attention for preservation? How will displaying or providing access to this item affect its condition and "life-span"? What is the best way to reach an interested audience? Is it better to have a traveling display or a stationary one? If an institution chooses to create a traveling display, should the original items or digital surrogates be used? In the end, each institution must decide these things for its collection and for its patrons.

Managing Archival Collections

In this study, the authors chose to investigate the best methods for managing the Wade Hall Postcard Collection. This collection is made up of over 25,000 vintage postcards which Dr. Wade Hall, an alumnus of Troy University, donated to the Troy University Library Archives. These postcards are from every state in the union and many foreign countries, and they range from the early 1900s to the 1960s. There are also topical postcards, such as holidays, patriotism, and humor.

he ability to group materials into logical categories is the first step in establishing intellectual control over collections (Hunter, 2003). The mission is to organize the materials in some systematic manner and then communicate that order to users (O'Toole, 1990). Therefore, the librarians started by putting the postcards in categories mainly by location. With the Alabama postcards separated out, it was easier to add them to AlabamaMosaic, a digital repository of materials dealing with Alabama's history, culture, places, and people whose purpose is to make Alabama materials electronically accessible to Alabamians and people throughout the world. Since this was the librarians' desire as well, it was a great fit. The other advantage of adding this collection to AlabamaMosaic was the best practices guidelines and support this organization provided. This support included librarians from NAAL (Network of Alabama Academic Libraries) member libraries who help new contributors learn to use the CONTENTdm (a digital collection management system) software.

The librarians at Auburn University were extremely helpful concerning digitization techniques and scanning equipment for postcards. They also taught the project leader how to upload postcards (compound objects) into CONTENTdm, which Dublin Core (a small set of vocabulary terms used to describe resources) metadata fields to use, and appropriate subject headings. The end result was a Metadata Application Profile (MAP) or data dictionary which consisted of 23 fields. Some of these fields pertain to the specific postcard and others to the entire collection. The fields include: Title, Description, Text, Creator, Contributors, Original Date, Digital Date, Publisher, Rights, four controlled vocabulary subject fields (Library of Congress Subject Headings, topical categories from the Encyclopedia of Alabama, topical categories from the

Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, and headings from the Thesaurus of Graphic Materials), Alabama Moments, Relation: Is Part of, Language, Transcription, Contributing Institution, Source, Identifier, File Type, and File Format.

Because of the excellent resources provided by AlabamaMosaic, there was very little research needed concerning the management of the Alabama postcards. However, since each AlabamaMosaic contributor has limited storage space and there are approximately 20,000 postcards not “related to Alabama,” the authors are looking into other digital management systems and storage options for those postcards. They are in the process of scanning the non-Alabama cards using the same specifications as the Alabama cards in order to maintain consistency and interoperability across the entire collection.

Wade Hall Postcard Collection Traveling Exhibits

In addition to preserving the postcard collection, the librarians wanted to promote its existence. The Kansas City Public Library’s award-winning exhibit “Greetings from Kansas City” was the inspiration for what would become the “Wade Hall Postcards” traveling exhibits (Malden, 2014). As the librarians assigned to this project began considering their assignment, they became convinced of two things: that the exhibit should be made available to venues statewide and that it should be tied into the Alabama bicentennial celebration. They also discovered three important facts that had to be dealt with in order to turn this idea into a reality, namely that creating a quality exhibit is expensive (the original estimate was over \$25,000), they needed to include someone with more insight into the state’s history than they possessed, and they needed to have a professional design the exhibit.

As for the first concern, Ericson (2003) pointed out that state humanities commissions were a good source of funding for public programming. This proved to be the case for this project when the library received two grants from the Alabama Humanities Foundation (AHF). AHF is the state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, with a long history of awarding grants to support public humanities programming. The Grants Director went out of his way to answer the librarians’ questions, make sure the proposal was strong, and ensure everything required was included with the online application. In August 2016, the library received the first grant for \$2,500. The monies were used to support the exhibit’s creation and publicity. Because the demand for these exhibits was so great, in 2019, the library applied for and received a second grant from AHF for \$3,750 to create a third exhibit. One of the conditions of receiving the funding was that the exhibits would be made available to the public. This condition coincided with the team’s decision for the project to be a traveling exhibit rather than a permanent one. As this project developed, the librarians became convinced that the exhibit should be shared statewide.

Ericson (2003) offered another piece of advice that the librarians applied to this project: “You will be judged by

the quality of what you produce. Don’t be reluctant to ask for help from someone with knowledge you lack” (p. 74). Therefore, the librarians requested a Troy University archivist/history professor, who is a native Alabamian with a doctorate in American History, to check all the exhibit’s content for accuracy. They also contacted a professor from Troy’s Department of Art and Design for design advice. Originally, an outside company was considered for the design and production of the exhibit panels. However, once the librarians began working with the “in-house” expert, it became obvious that they should work with him to design the physical panels as well as the complementary online exhibit. By doing this, they had greater opportunities for collaboration, and it gave the library more control over the final product.

Another reality concerning exhibits is that they have to attract people’s attention. It is easy for developers to get excited about a personal project, but would others throughout the state be interested? To gauge that interest, libraries throughout the state were contacted in person or via email. The end result was a list of seventeen venues who agreed to host the exhibit based on just the concept alone. They loved the idea of an exhibit centered around postcards because postcards help people fondly remember the past and the images associated with it. “The power of reminiscence brings to mind times in almost everyone’s life that were particularly meaningful, influential, or happier” (Ericson, 2003, p. 67). After the exhibits were created, displaying them at the 2017 Alabama Library Association convention garnered even more interest.

Now that the librarians had funding, experts ready to assist, and committed hosting sites, it was time to create the exhibits. The guiding principle came from Jessica Lacher-Feldman’s 2013 book *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries*, which was quoted in Davy and Schinder’s 2015 article. She said, “Any good exhibit teaches, it requires research that might spark further research endeavors, and it creates goodwill and interest, which can be construed as service to the campus and to the broader community” (p. 31). As the Society of American Archivists’ (n.d.) Guidelines for College and University Archives points out, “the archives takes its mission from the mission of the institution, to educate.” For this reason, the librarians designated two of the panels in each exhibit for educational purposes. One panel introduced the collection and its donor and explained the postcard colorization process. The other panel displayed how postcards depict social history without words, compared postcards to today’s social media, and gave instructions for accessing the rest of the Wade Hall collection. Creating these panels was easy compared to the six “subject” panels.

Deciding which of the over 5,000 Alabama postcards to highlight on the exhibit panels was a daunting task. Therefore, the librarians developed criteria to use in the selection process. The first step was to determine the general themes. The librarians chose main streets for the first exhibit since they knew the collection had hundreds of “main streets” by many other names in cities and towns, big and small, throughout Alabama. Since creating exhibits

which would appeal to as many people as possible was one of the goals, they made some strategic decisions. First, the state was divided into five regions by counties making sure Birmingham, Mobile, and Huntsville were in separate regions and determined each region would have a panel. Second, they decided Montgomery would have a panel of its own because it is the capital. Third, with the help of the designer, they decided to only showcase eight postcards on each panel. The final step was choosing the eight postcards for each panel. This process included the location represented, how interesting the image was, and how the postcard would look enlarged. Practically, this meant taking all the scanned images and putting them into the six geographical regions, choosing at least one - but no more than three - from the major metropolitan areas, and then looking at where a town was located in the region and its city's size to make sure that it was a diverse grouping. The librarians also specifically chose postcards from Union Springs (Wade Hall's home town), Tuscaloosa (Wade Hall is an alumnus of the University of Alabama), and Troy because they wanted to promote their town and university.

This method of culling the cards worked great for the "main streets" exhibit. However, for the second exhibit, the librarians chose buildings as the theme and the number of building postcards in the collection was overwhelming. Therefore, they added the following limitations to the criteria. First, it was decided the buildings had to fall under the category of governmental, educational, medical, or religious. By excluding commercial buildings, all hotels, restaurants, factories, and so forth could be eliminated. Second, choices were made between courthouses, post offices, schools, hospitals, churches, and libraries so no one type of building would dominate. For the colleges, historical buildings that are still in use were specifically chosen. Troy University was the only exception because the librarians wanted their students to know about the original building. A lighthouse was also specifically chosen as a reminder that a part of Alabama is on the coast.

For the third exhibit, the librarians chose tourism for the theme. It quickly became apparent that the regional divisions used for the first two exhibits would not work for this one since Alabama tourist spots are not evenly divided throughout the state. Therefore, they chose postcards for this exhibit that would showcase the various aspects of tourism in Alabama, such as how people got here (roads, trains, pleasure ships, etc.), where they stayed (hotels, motels, lodges, etc.), and what they saw (natural and man-made destinations). The educational panels included the same information as the first two exhibits, but the postcards used to illustrate were different. As for the "subject" panels, the sub-themes were: Transportation and Restaurants; Lodgings; Historic Homes; Greetings, Museums, and Monuments; Natural Attractions; and Attractions, City Parks, and Events. Once again, the librarians wanted the exhibit to have wide appeal so they chose postcards from well-known and obscure places, large cities and small towns, and from locations throughout the state. Because of the nature of tourism, some locations have

greater representation, but the librarians did try for diversity.

Once the panels were completed, they needed to be printed. The librarians investigated "in-house" and commercial options to find high quality and economical choices for the printing. Ultimately, the exhibit panels were printed by an outside company on very durable fabric that has held up to the conditions of various venues as well as the installation and removal from each venue (a number that exceeded two dozen for each set of panels by the end of 2019). By using the "in-house" professional for designing and an outside company for printing, the library received three exceptional exhibits at a cost close to half the amount of the estimate from the original outside company.

Tying these exhibits to Alabama's three-year bicentennial celebration and offering them to venues free of charge increased their popularity and provided a service to Alabamians. "A centennial is a superb opportunity for an archives to reach its various constituencies: researchers, resource allocators, and the general public" (Kohl, 2003, pp. 125-126). In addition, "a series of events, perhaps extending throughout a centennial year, will draw a more diverse audience and ... keep you in the spotlight for a longer period of time" (Ericson, 2003, p. 74). This was definitely the case with these exhibits. The librarians knew that venues across Alabama wanted to be a part of the bicentennial celebration but budgets were tight and space was limited. Therefore, the exhibits were created so that they were easy to transport, took up little space, and could be displayed in a myriad of different ways. Hosting sites loved them and organizations contacted the librarians to request to host them. The costs were kept down by having the staff from the host sites work together to transfer the panels. The value of working together was obvious and everyone was very willing to cooperate. Having these responsible people move the panels also contributed to their endurance as they traveled around the state over the course of three years.

Connecting the exhibits to the bicentennial also helped with publicity. Each time an exhibit was displayed, the event was advertised on the Alabama 200 website's Community Events calendar (<https://alabama200.org/events/community-calendar/>).

Sniffin-Marino (2003) talks about the importance of publicity to archives, and Ericson (2003) reminds readers that when they can attach their activity to an existing event, much of the work will be done by others. The librarians are convinced that having the Wade Hall Postcards Exhibit events written up in newspapers, magazines, and on social media sites, as well as featured on radio programs and the weekly television show *Absolutely Alabama* (a program that highlights places, people, and things that make Alabama distinctive) helped to make this a very successful endeavor.

At its most basic level, this was an outreach project to promote the Wade Hall Postcard Collection and the Troy

University Library Archives. "Outreach can be called public programming, marketing, and selling. It is also teaching, training, building relationships, and thinking of customer needs" (Chute, 2008, p. 138). This book gives numerous outreach ideas. These are the ones used for this project: presentations, brochures, exhibits, anniversary events, promotional materials for the institution, and a webpage which included the digitized images of the postcards. All of these, except the brochures and presentations, have already been addressed. The library offered all venues a speaker free of charge if any of the venues wanted to host a presentation concerning the exhibits. One of the librarians has visited 32 of the exhibit venues to present talks to various audiences—high school students, historical groups, and the general public (including postcard enthusiasts). Each talk included information about the University, the postcard collection, and historical stories about towns located in the venue area. The librarians created informative brochures about the exhibits and assisted sites with creating promotional materials.

The traveling exhibits project has definitely been a success. The exhibits were booked solid for the entire three-year bicentennial celebration period and requests are still being received. It also fulfilled the goal of increasing the exposure of the postcard collection, and the number of requests to use particular images has risen significantly. These requests have come from authors, museums, magazines, documentary researchers, and commercial entities.

Since the third traveling exhibit was created in 2019, it provided the opportunity to put into practice some of the lessons learned from the original exhibits. Issues like who to include on the project team, how much time to allow for the development of the exhibit, and which vendor to use were known going into the third project. Other lessons that relate to the design of the panels eliminated much of the re-choosing of postcards. With this knowledge, the librarians were able to pick postcards that had enough variety to make the panels interesting (portrait and landscape orientation; black & white, colorized, and colored; colors that complemented the background of the panels; different architectural styles and time periods).

Conclusion

"Digital and collaborative projects in academic libraries are redefining the roles of the campus library in the lives of students, scholars, and faculty" (Purcell, 2012, p. 47). This has certainly been the case for this academic library. The Troy University Libraries' mission is to provide resources, instruction, and programs that support Troy University. Those resources include the archival materials. To support this mission, the librarians created the traveling exhibits which provided resources while promoting the archives, educated through the exhibits and presentations, and created a webpage that allowed access. However, in today's technologically advanced world those steps are only the beginning. Users expect immediate and comprehensive access to materials. Consequently, anyone dealing with archival materials realizes the need to not only physically preserve these items, but also to preserve them in digital format.

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