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INTRODUCTION

As an archivist it is a fabulous time to be working in Special Collections in a public library. Archives are the core of a library . . . they make that library different from every other facility. They also help people recognize what is special about their own lives and neighborhoods.

—Elizabeth Sargent, Assistant Director for Special Collections and Director, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

All across the United States public library archivists and special collections librarians are experimenting with programs that raise public awareness of and promote engagement with special collections. Through interpretive programs, community archives, crowdsourcing, digital access projects, educational outreach, commemorative events, exhibitions, collection development initiatives, and broadcast programs archivists and librarians are developing new approaches to connecting patrons with rare, fragile, and historically or culturally significant collections. The programs take multiple formats, engage diverse audiences, sometimes involve partners, and, more and more often, use digital technologies and social media to extend their visibility and enable remote participation. Programs range from Denver Public Library's Creating Your Community Project, an online social media archive, and Houston Public Library's Student History Internship Project, to Hartford Public Library's Arts and Archives Classes, Newark Public Library's Puerto Rican Community Archive, and San Francisco Public Library's OldSF project that involved experts and enthusiasts in geocoding the library's historical photographs.

The new programs are significant for their potential to reframe public and professional consciousness about public library special collections. They are significant as vehicles for access and as catalysts for collections management and digitization. And, they are especially significant in the context of current professional discussions

regarding the meaning of “access,” the value of archives and special collections, and the evolving roles of special collections professionals. Despite their significance, there has been relatively little attention to public library archival and special collections programming at professional meetings or in library literature. It was not until 2010 that the Society of American Archivists approved formation of a roundtable on public library archives, now known as the Public Library Archives/Special Collections Roundtable (PLASC).

Archives Alive aims to shine a light on archival and special collections programming in American public libraries at a time when libraries and archives everywhere are undergoing profound change. By examining current programming trends, and profiling 117 programs, projects, and archival departments, *Archives Alive* documents the scope and variety of collection-based programming—programming that has the potential to help change perception and use of special collections. It is a resource for library leaders and archivists, special collections librarians, reference librarians, library and archives educators, state archivists and state librarians, students in library studies and archival and rare books programs, and other members of the library and archival professions concerned with the relationship between special collections and public audiences. Focused on public libraries, the book offers examples and lessons that can be applied in academic, museum, or special libraries as well.

Beyond the library and archives communities there are stakeholders for whom the following examples of innovative archival and special collections programming are relevant: historians, especially public historians; curators and educators in museums and historical societies; community and oral history specialists; students of book arts and material culture; and leaders of humanities councils and digital humanities projects associated with cultural heritage organizations. In fact, the relationship between these stakeholders and public library special collections is itself shifting, and is an aspect of the changes taking place in programming.

BACKGROUND

Three trends in the recent evolution of American libraries influence current developments in public library archives and special collections:

- the changing identity of the public library, from a static repository of print materials to an open, networked, user-centered destination for inquiry, interaction, and creativity;
- the evolution of digital technologies that are transforming approaches to collection management, services, and communications; and

- changing definitions of “access” and purpose in the realm of special collections, with prominent archivists calling for streamlined approaches to cataloging and digitization, a greater emphasis on visibility and access, and more focus on the use of collections for education and community-building.

These trends converge in the phenomenon of increased public programming, both analog and digital, based on public library archives and special collections. Responding to the new library environment, new user expectations, and calls for new approaches to documentation and community engagement, archivists and librarians are moving beyond traditional exhibitions and scholarly lectures to offer an array of new programs from social archives and history symposia to community scan-ins. These activities are reshaping internal and external perceptions of archives and special collections. Ivy Marvel, manager of the Brooklyn Public Library’s Brooklyn Collection, explains this phenomenon in relation to the library’s first experiment with an Artist-in-Residence:

An archive is typically deemed a repository of the past, compiled for the sake of posterity, the future; this public conversation, which is grounded in the collaborative relationship between photographer and archivist that has developed during Felicella’s time as Artist-in-Residence at the Brooklyn Public Library, presents an opportunity to consider the archive in the present tense and as an open, active endeavor.

While some programs profiled in this book build on prior efforts to create finding aids for scholars or display special items for public viewing, most current programs reflect new goals: increased exposure to archives and special collections and direct engagement with aspects of these collections by members of the general public. Some projects even invite members of the public to contribute information about collections, thereby enhancing the overall institutional record. According to David Riordan, Product Manager for NYPL Labs:

We often think about the public library as a public platform . . . While archivists are essential for building collections, members of the public can add information that enriches the collections. By creating a context for public involvement we enable them to participate in the future of humanities research.

Many of the new programs enhance digitization projects or result in digital initiatives. Beyond basic digitization, however, they use new technologies for communications with audiences, for community-based collection development, and, even, to enable individuals to create their own programs or personal collections. The combination of digital access with online communications and face-to-face programming is

powerful, enabling public library archivists to make their collections more visible, more accessible, *and* more meaningful for multiple audiences.

Despite the clear evidence of a movement toward public access through programming, there are barriers to change: a lack of consensus about the value of increased public engagement with special collections within the community of archivists and special collections professionals—what the president of the Society of American Archivists has called the profession’s “resistance to change” (*Strengthening Our Identities, Fighting Our Foibles*. Inaugural Address, Society of American Archivists, September 1, 2007); the lack of a forum to connect and support those carrying out new programming; minimal training in interpretive activities or public programming, other than exhibitions, in most archival and rare book studies programs; and the lack of visibility within the professional library and archival communities for the experimental activities that are beginning to transform the identity and use of special collections.

Beyond these barriers there are two other major and interrelated challenges, one a matter of perception and one a matter of resources. With respect to the former, there is a lingering perception of archives and special collections as insular, static, and associated with the library’s past rather than its future. This perception is evident even within the library profession. One of the most recent studies of library futures, for instance, by the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries titled “The Challenge: Re-envisioning the Public Library” (November 2014) includes relatively few specific references to archives or special collections. This, despite the report’s lucid discussions of public libraries as “trusted community hubs and repositories of knowledge and information,” “interactive entities that can facilitate people operating individually or in groups,” and “platforms for the learning needs and goals of the community.” Ironically, these descriptors could have been used in connection with many of the institutions and programs profiled in the following chapters.

Somehow, in the rush toward the library of the future, the collections that are the foundation of most libraries, the programming that is occurring around these collections, and their value in the digital age have been overlooked. It would behoove library leaders to confront this oversight, and to reframe the value and position of archives and special collections as they plan for library futures.

The relative lack of attention to archives and special collections in library planning is especially ironic in light of the high levels of professional interest in the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). This extraordinary initiative is laying the groundwork for a new digital network of cultural heritage collections made up, in part, of public library archives and special collections. As local collections are digitized and integrated with other collections, the individual and collective value

of these special collections—their social, historical, pedagogical, aesthetic, and civic value—will become more and more apparent, along with the value of their source institutions. The DPLA network will provide public library special collections with new visibility, a new platform for service and a new rationale for sustained support as a part of a larger national whole.

Beyond the issue of perception there is an additional challenge, one that was voiced over and over by the professionals interviewed for this publication—namely, the need to improve the balance between routine archival functions and the new forms of public programming and digital communications. Many professionals, such as Janine Pollock, manager of the Rare Books Department at the Free Library of Philadelphia, welcome and, indeed, believe in the need for increased public engagement with collections.

As part of a public library we have a two-sided mission, on the one hand to safeguard our collections and make them available to scholars, and on the other hand to inspire people's curiosity and help get them interested in arts and culture.

However, these same professionals, including the “lone arrangers” in smaller departments, find themselves caught between the possibilities for doing more education and interpretation, both online and on-site, while also carrying out traditional archival practices. Despite their dedication to outreach and their capacity for program development many archivists and librarians simply do not have the requisite support to operate on all fronts simultaneously. Jordan Goffin of the Providence Public Library explains: “With only two professionals for the entire department, it is difficult to realize the potential for creative, collections-based programming.”

For this author, the very real dilemma confronting those who are motivated to experiment, to reach out, to engage with their publics, raises questions that merit exploration in archival and library forums. How can special collections librarians continue to carry out their traditional duties while also creating new opportunities for public participation, discovery, and learning? What routine functions can be discarded? How can new tools streamline archival processes? What additional skills and supports in special collections departments would free up creative archivists and librarians who are keen to develop the interpretive and educational potential of their collections?

GOALS

Archives Alive is intended to help address these questions and barriers. By highlighting examples of proven programs and cutting-edge experiments, *Archives Alive* aims to stimulate librarians, archivists, and key stakeholders at all levels to reenvision and

revitalize special collections programming—and, indeed, the position of archives and special collections—in the public library setting.

Designed as a report to the field, or a scan of the landscape, *Archives Alive* brings together a range of programs that represent changing practices at a certain point in time: 2014, just over a decade into the twenty-first century. It shines a light on the many programs, projects, and departments that are, individually and collectively, helping reshape the image, functions, and content of public library special collections. In so doing *Archives Alive* aims to raise their visibility across the library and archival professions and create a base of information for future analyses and reports.

Archives Alive also seeks to raise the visibility of the professionals who are managing special collections departments and/or carrying out the projects that are profiled. Relatively invisible within the public library hierarchy or outside the library sphere, these professionals are dedicated to ensuring the preservation of their collections *and* finding ways to share them meaningfully with the general public. Their voices provide texture and values to the reports on specific programs and authenticity to the overall landscape scan.

A final and related goal is to foster professional exchange around public library archival and special collections programming. Again and again over the course of the research for *Archives Alive* individuals at one institution would express surprise and curiosity about the work of peers in other locations. Public library archivists and special collections librarians are relatively isolated, few have the time to report on what they are doing or exchange information with colleagues about public programming, and even fewer have the personal or institutional means to attend national conferences of archivists or librarians. By creating a resource for the profession, *Archives Alive* seeks to stimulate increased recognition for and contacts between the professionals carrying out the new programming.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Archives Alive consists of 117 profiles—104 programs and 13 institutions or departments—organized into ten topical categories. The profiles reflect the extraordinary variety of subject matter and collection formats found in public library special collections, from illuminated manuscripts, iconic photographs, landmark poems, and presidential letters to restaurant menus, diaries, plans for ships, railroads, planes and parks, yearbooks, and records of local unions, clubs, businesses, schools and public agencies. Creative archivists in public libraries across the country are reexamining

these collections and finding new ways to make them meaningful for diverse audiences. Some are focusing on whole collections, such as Kansas City Public Library's exhibition *Greetings from Kansas City: Postcard Views of a Midwestern Metropolis, 1900–1950*, that presented 200 postcards as forms of instant messaging and indicators of popular cultural developments over time. Others are using a single item to engage residents in rediscovering a key period in local history, such as the Cincinnati Panorama project of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. And some, such as the Cleveland Public Library and the Providence Public Library, are encouraging new artwork inspired by their collections.

Whatever the scope or topic of a particular program, it takes a particular form. *Archives Alive* identifies nine programming categories that demonstrate the range of ways that librarians are using collections to inform, inspire, educate, and entertain. These categories provide the organizational framework for the book. From broadcast programs and community archives to interactive projects and commemorations, the projects and programs profiled suggest the scope of the national landscape. Traditional program formats, such as tours and exhibitions, are important parts of the landscape—and are often the subjects of experimentation and transformation—along with nontraditional formats such as virtual scrapbooks and geocaching events. Trends within these categories are summarized in the introduction to each chapter.

In addition to the nine programming categories, one chapter examines the full array of programs being offered by thirteen special collections departments. These “Emerging Institutional Models” reflect organizational as well as programmatic trends. Some of the institutional models also offer excellent examples of specific program types, in which case the latter are profiled with like programs in the appropriate chapter. Together, the ten categories demonstrate the vitality and variety of programming in archives today.

With respect to content, it is important to point out that *Archives Alive* does not document programs based on genealogical collections. Although many of the public libraries referenced here include or even feature genealogical collections and provide extensive services and programs on genealogical research and family history, they are so extensive as to require a book in and of themselves.

It is also important to point out that *Archives Alive* is not comprehensive. Such a report would be impossible to compile given the number and variety of public libraries and library systems and the scope of programming taking place in and through their archival departments. For each program example included here there are many others that could have been included. *Archives Alive* uses the examples to suggest the larger universe of activities, to present potential models, and to trace current trends.

METHODOLOGY

Archives Alive is not based on a rigorous survey nor does it reference established criteria for selection of program examples. In fact, no such criteria exist. The programs, projects and institutions described in this volume do not have a collective identity, nor do they, yet, have the professional recognition necessary for formal codification. In reporting on the scope, variety and significance of current public library archival programs, *Archives Alive* aims to prompt professional recognition and, eventually, more rigorous assessment and evaluation.

The projects and institutions profiled in *Archives Alive* were originally selected for inclusion based on the author's deep knowledge of libraries and of interpretive programming in libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions. A list of nearly 175 projects was drawn up for further exploration, along with the following informal set of criteria for further program selection:

1. What is the program or project format and how effective is it in illuminating an aspect of the collections?
2. To what extent does the program reflect new programming approaches or a reshaping of prior program approaches?
3. How does the program contrast or align with others of its type?
4. To what extent does the program reflect the archives/special collections department's commitment to public programming?
5. Is there something distinctive about the program that makes it stand out from others of its type?
6. Is the project replicable in other libraries?

Using these criteria and the initial list of projects, the author then interviewed 77 library directors, archivists, special collections librarians, and communications specialists regarding their overall approaches to public programming and the specific program or project under consideration. Based on these interviews the number of examples was reduced to 117. These represent 62 institutions, with some institutions represented in multiple programming categories.

As a national scan, *Archives Alive* does not emphasize rigorous analysis. The programs and projects speak for themselves. Brief comments about each project indicate its value as an exemplar of a particular programming approach. In addition, the author provides a brief analysis of the trends in each program category as part of the chapter introductions. At this stage in the development of public library archival programming, criticism is less important than professional and public recognition

and information exchange; at a later stage in the development of these programs deeper analysis and development of evaluative criteria will be beneficial.

In the context of current professional discussions about archives and special collections, particularly in relation to digital projects, *Archives Alive* provides a timely and complementary resource that focuses on the programs, and the people behind the programs, that are transforming special collections. *Archives Alive* reports on the work of many professionals across the country and in so doing gives them visibility and voice. Their work reflects a shift in how archivists and special collections librarians regard the general public and a shift in how they are organizing and reorganizing resources to meet public users' needs. Based on this evidence their work is having a strong impact on their institutions and their constituents. If the vitality and variety shown in these examples are sustained, *Archives Alive* will be the first of many "reports to the field."

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