

From Beanies to Gravestones
Collecting Artifacts in the Archives
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At the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, where I worked years ago, there is both a history library for the book and manuscript collections and a museum. At the time and it may still be the practice, when manuscript collections were processed, non-print materials were removed from the collection and treated separately. Audio recordings were cataloged separately, books were sent to technical services, photographs were sent to the photograph processor (me) and any artifacts were sent to the museum. All this was tied together intellectually through the catalog and the separation forms that staff members filled out as each format was removed and sent to its own area for processing. The beauty of this was that there was a place for each type of material, particularly the artifacts. Having a museum nearby as part of the institution meant that we could simply send those objects we received to the experts in their handling and know that they would be treated right.

In the perfect archives world, we would all have museums handy to take care of the objects so we could concentrate on the archival material. Then, when we needed a particular artifact for display, we would simply contact our curator and the object would appear complete with description and ready for exhibit. But this is not usually the case.

A former and long-retired dean who was around for the founding of our archives once said to me that the library director at DePauw University at the time of the archives' founding resisted having the archives located in the newly constructed library, because she "did not want a lot of old wagon wheels laying around." Maybe that was that librarian's misconception of what an archives is like or it was her recollection of a county history collection, but her sentiments were likely shared by the archivist – no wagon wheels, please.

However much we may want to concentrate on archival information resources, those artifacts keep creeping into the new accessions that arrive at our doors and we need to deal with them. However, I believe that for a couple of very good reasons, we should not just endure having museum objects cluttering up our space, but instead we should, if not actively solicit such historical items, at least welcome them as important parts of the documentary story. Then we should treat artifacts appropriately giving them the same professional attention within the limits of our resources that our archival collections receive. This approach will pay big dividends later.

Handling artifacts

Artifacts seldom arrive in the archives individually, but are usually part of a larger collection of records. Donors often just dump them in to the same box with the files and records books almost as an afterthought. At other times the donor has a feeling that the objects may have value, maybe even more than the documents, and mentions their donation to us at the same time as the records. Regardless of how they arrive, we are faced with a preservation and handling problem. Artifacts are included in DePauw's finding aid descriptions, but because of the vast differences in shape, size and composition, they need to be housed separately. The wide variety of materials that artifacts are composed of would seem to require differing environmental storage conditions, too. For example, metal parts should ideally be stored in lower relative humidity than paper or wood. Compromises need to be made, however, since most of us do not have the luxury of separate storage conditions for different materials.

Before we box the items, we assign a number and attach that number to the object. Following AASLH museum guidelines, we paint a background for the number on a dark colored object and used clear coating for a light colored object on an inconspicuous part of the artifact. The number is written in black ink, then a clear top coating applied. Whenever possible, we now use string tags to attach the number to the object. For fabric we use small labels sewn onto the piece.

In order to save space, we have typically housed like-sized objects together in flat boxes and we make dividers for some flat boxes to house small objects such as jewelry. Larger artifacts are housed in record storage boxes. If the item is too big for the records storage box we usually leave it uncovered on a shelf. Items in boxes are often wrapped in acid-free tissue paper. Boxes are labeled with the accession numbers of the items they contain.

Cataloging system

Many years ago, our archives moved out of the library for a year during the building's renovation. We took that opportunity to start a system for cataloging our artifacts. Prior to that time, artifacts just ended up on the shelves wherever there was a space. We began by creating a card file system assigning numbers to each artifact. The numbers included the year and the number of the artifact accession for that year assigned sequentially.

Photographs were taken with a 35mm camera, but instead of prints being made, a contact sheet of all the negatives was printed. We then cut out one of the small photos and glued it to the catalog card. It was fine for the time, because we still had a card catalog for both our book collection and the archives and manuscripts. Although it was fairly simple, it was labor intensive to produce. The staff member working on it would need to allow time for processing the film one day and printing the contact sheet on another day. A third day was required to type cards and glue pictures. The time in between was to allow the film and photographic print to dry after processing in the darkroom. The unused contact sheet images were discarded, but the negatives were saved, assigned numbers and records added to our card catalog. Later, they would be added to the image database.

A big technological improvement came in the 1990s when I got the idea to combine the picture of the artifact with the description by using a Polaroid camera. There is considerable space under the photograph of a Polaroid picture where information about the object can either be written or a typed label attached. This greatly speeded up the production of the "catalog card" and the picture of the item was much larger. It could also be done in one day instead of three. Picture quality suffered somewhat as the Polaroid lens didn't focus as sharply as the 35mm lens and sometimes the photographer got too

close for the camera's focal length causing the object to appear out-of-focus. But we were generally happy with this until 2000.

Beginning in 2000, all of our photographic production switched to digital formats. Our darkroom is now a break room – a refrigerator and coffee machine where there once was a photo paper storage box and print washer. Not long after we purchased our first scanner, we purchased a digital camera. We used the camera to produce digital images of the artifacts and re-photographed all the items in the collection. There had been quite a bit of inconsistency in the image quality with both the black and white contact sheet images and the Polaroid pictures, so we thought scanning those photos would not be the best decision. The camera was mounted on a tripod and a neutral, black or white cloth background was used behind the object. The camera was set on the “macro” mode in order for us to move it closer to the artifact and keep it in focus. It is important to try to fill the frame when photographing an object so that details will be visible in the finished image. We shoot the photos at the highest setting on the camera to make the largest digital file possible. The finished image will become part of our digital image collection and be available for researchers, for use in publications or the web.

As the digital images of the items in the collection were made we started a database using FileMaker Pro software. We have used FileMaker for several years as the successor to dBase III and Paradox and have been very happy with the results. FileMaker allows us to add the digital image to each record along with a considerable amount of data – much more than would fit on the border of a Polaroid picture. This summer we began to load our several image databases, including the museum objects, to the LUNA Insight image database. DePauw subscribes to LUNA mostly for the art and architecture images it contains in which the art department has an interest. LUNA also allows us to add our own holdings as sub-collections within the DePauw collection. It will be accessible from outside the campus via the university website. The collection will be displayed to the public in a very attractive form with quite a bit of functionality. For example, images can be enlarged for viewing details, image data can be displayed and images can be printed or downloaded from the database.

Uses for the collection

An archives should include outreach as one of its regular activities and one of the most natural outreach activities is exhibits. Exhibiting archival materials can be a problem, however. Archival records and manuscripts tend not to be interesting as objects themselves. We collect them for the informational content, not usually as artifacts. Of course there are exceptions such as the a letter from your founder. The informational and “artifactual” value is obvious in those cases. But when we prepare an exhibit on a particular topic, we usually think of documents that illustrate an important decision, pivotal event or turning point in our story. That document may or may not have interest as an artifact. Museum objects on the other hand attract attention. An exhibit we prepared about Marmaduke Mendenhall, a Methodist minister and donor of an endowed lectureship, was improved by including the top hat he wore. In another case, we used a chemistry professor’s lab coat in an exhibit about his life and career at DePauw.

We currently have an exhibit in the library that describes the story of an alumnus and missionary who established a school in Japan and the first Japanese students to come from that school to attend DePauw University. A letter in that exhibit describes John Ing’s arrival at the Japanese port from which he and his wife rode in sedan chairs to the town where they would begin their school. It illustrates an important point in their story. The letter itself does not have much value as an artifact and it requires support of accompanying documents such as a photograph and a map. One early Japanese alumnus gave the university a writing desk. It makes an interesting addition to this exhibit along with a photograph of him and his wife and seven children.

Artifacts improve archival exhibits by giving additional information to the viewer in the form of extra-textual information, visual information or other ways to engage more senses. Disney has become a master at this with multimedia experiences and it is being increasingly adopted by the history community, for example at the Lincoln Museum in Springfield, Ill. But it can be done in very low tech ways as well. Hands-on natural history exhibits have for years employed pieces that visitors can pick up and examine. A

rattlesnake rattle, turtle shell or animal pelt give additional information to supplement the text that describes the local flora and fauna. If we had a way to leave Marmaduke Mendenhall's top hat out, visitors could try it on with a mirror handy to see how it looks on them.

We try to use our objects as much as possible in the Archives displaying them on the shelves in the reading room and always keeping the collection in mind as we prepare new exhibits. When researchers know about artifacts, they are often interested in those that relate to their topic to be used as illustrations in their publications. Recently, an alumnus has written about a benefactor who had established a scholarship program at DePauw in the nineteen teens. Two objects in our collection are being considered for use in the book on the man, a brass plate from his desk and a pin worn by an early scholarship recipient. Once the database of artifacts is made available through the web, we hope that the collection will become useful to the outside researcher. We have also used items for display elsewhere on campus. There are a couple of exhibit cases in the alumni building where a variety of artifacts are on semi-permanent loan. They cover a range of subjects and time periods, from the College Bowl trophy of 1962 , a blanket for the "D" Association and the Walker Cup award. A traveling trunk belonging to Robert Roberts, the Methodist bishop who served on the committee that formed DePauw University as Indiana Asbury University in 1837, is on loan to the Indiana Sate Museum in Indianapolis. Anything that is displayed is noted in the catalog record so that we can keep track of the items.

Some other examples from our collection include ...

- The Iikubo Bible: It belonged to Teiji Iikubo, the grandfather of alumnus and current trustee, Hirotsugu "Chuck" Iikubo. Rev. Iikubo was a Methodist minister who preached at the church in Japan where John Ing had established a school. Ing also helped establish the Japanese Methodist Church. This exhibit came about when Chuck Iikubo wanted to donate his grandfather's Bible, but wanted it displayed. The university museum did not have a good place to display it and did not believe the museum was the best place for the Bible. DePauw was beginning

to emphasize international education and I offered to create an exhibit about DePauw's first Japanese students and the Bible became a featured item in the exhibit. A relationship between the Archives and Mr. Iikubo was established as an added benefit to an informative and timely exhibit.

- Saddlebags: We have several sets of these from various donors over the years. They make good display items for the pioneer period of the state and the Methodist church to supplement the journals of circuit riding preachers in our collection.
- Communion set: We have one set and could probably have many, but this is a case where one is probably enough to illustrate the style used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- Preacher's coat: We have a couple of these that show the style of dress for a late nineteenth century Methodist preacher.
- Cornerstone box: This corner stone box is from the first building on campus that was demolished in 1934. It measures less than 4x6x4 inches, but is made of lead. When children visit, I enjoy handing it to one of them and watching their reaction as they feel its full weight.
- And what about the title of my paper? The beanie refers to the green wool cap worn by freshmen at DePauw from about 1900 to the 1960s. I heard about them and had seen photographs of male students wearing them, but we did not have any in our collection. So as I talked with alumni, I would mention that we did not have a freshman beanie. The reason they were scarce, I was told, was that at the end of their freshman year, students would burn their beanies in a bonfire – well, most of the students did. After a few years of canvassing alumni, we eventually received six beanies. The gravestone was in our collection when I arrived at DePauw. It was given to DePauw when the cemetery where it was located was plowed over in southern Indiana. The marker is for Moses Ashworth, who was among the first Methodist preachers to cross the Ohio River from Kentucky to set up Methodist congregations in the Indiana territory, ca. 1807.

Conclusion

As potential exhibit pieces, artifacts belong in the archives. As a professional responsibility, caring for artifacts should be a part of our archival work. Carefully selected they can enhance the other resources we have in our collections. Our donors will appreciate the interest we pay to their whole collections and our users will appreciate the added facet artifacts can provide to their research and learning experience.

Resources

I have used the AASLH publication:

Daniel Reibel. *Registration Methods for the Small Museum*. 3rd edition. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1997.

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