Archives in Public Libraries

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Abstract

Some public libraries have started to collect special historic material from private collections to create small history rooms that act as archival reading rooms for in-house use. The primary topic of these collections much of the time is local history. Differences in the fundamentals of arrangement and description processes between archival and library materials can provide challenges to those librarians and users used to one or the other types of materials, as well as handling special storage and handling considerations. Management and funding of archival work also involve special considerations and challenges. Proper processing strategies are important to make collections available for public use.

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Archives in Public Libraries

Archives are distinguishable from libraries in many ways, one of which is the type of materials each one handles. While the typical public library deals with more current, mass produced materials, an archive’s holdings are most often unique or one-of-a-kind. There are also differences in the way the materials are arranged, described, housed, and handled. This paper will provide a general discussion of local history collections found in libraries, the differences between libraries and archival institutions, and some of the initiatives happening around the world to bring special collections in all types of repositories to light. With the proper support by reference and management staff, institutions can work together to make more unprocessed archival collections available for public access, so matter what kind of repository they are housed in. In addition, as public libraries tend to see more of a variety of patrons from different backgrounds, including students, teachers, and others, having these special collections available there provides an opportunity to educate the public about special collections, and where else they can be found. By being willing to learn about different institutions processes, and even partnering to produce the desired result, libraries can help increase patron access to archival collections valuable to researchers and genealogists around the world.

One of the major differences in how archives and libraries operate is the way they organize and arrange their materials. “Intellectual organization of content is the philosophy that motivates the librarian, while physical organization drives the archivist,” (Linderman, 2009, p.46). In other words, while librarians organize their holdings based on the content, or subject which they cover, archivists prefer to organize their material by provenance, the principle which says that “archives of a given creator must not be intermingled with those of other records creators,” (Hunter, 2003, p.113). Archives and libraries also differ by the kinds of physical materials they hold.

There are two different types of materials which archivists generally work with. One is the record, for instance, those that chronicle the dealings of a local business. The other is personal papers, which often include such items as original letters, correspondence, and manuscripts written by the creator. The local history collections most commonly found in public libraries include photographs, ephemera, local newspaper clippings, histories of area towns and businesses, yearbooks, and genealogical material, both published and unpublished. For those libraries and considering starting a collection of this type, there are several decisions to consider that will affect the archival holdings, discussed below.

Operating Decisions

Some decisions which must be considered by the library when starting an archival program include those of space and storage limitations, staffing concerns, and acquisitions. Special collection material is most often made up of physical objects which require their own space in a secure environment where they will be well preserved. Given the unique nature of archival materials, items are generally not available for checkout, as is traditional library material, and special care must be taken to make sure the material they are stored in will allow the items to be preserved in a useful state for as long as possible. This generally limits the amount of space available to store archival material, and therefore the size and number of the archival collections the library is able to house. Additionally, space is needed for the processing of new collections. Staff concerns are also an issue. All library and support staff who work with the archival collections will be required to have specialized knowledge of the contents, plus know how to perform searches using the finding aide, and return material to its proper place. This can be tricky for someone not familiar with archival arrangement. Similarly, if items are not described at the item level, which is often difficult to accomplish, the risk of theft goes up (Linerman 2009).

Archival Materials

Another way in which archival material differs from library material is the way they are handled, and the special precautions that are taken regarding the operating rules. Just like traditional archive research rooms, a library’s area for the storage and use of materials, often referred to as a “history room” or “reading room”, have different rules and regulations from those of the rest of the library. As it was mentioned before, the unique nature of these collections is what prompts librarians to put special limitations on their use and environment. An example taken from one such library collection will demonstrate these ideas. According to the History Room Rules and Regulations document taken from [www.racinelib.lib.wi.us/](http://www.racinelib.lib.wi.us/) (Racine Public Library, 2010) The Racine Public Library, located in the state of Wisconsin, uses its history room to store materials which contain:

…current and historical information about the city of Racine, Racine County, and Wisconsin. Included in this collection are items published in Racine, about Racine, or written by Racine authors, an archival collection of books published by Western Publishing, minutes of local governing bodies, postcards, newspapers and vertical files which contain information, articles and clippings on local and state happenings.

This page also notes that materials are stored in the reading room because they are unique, costly to replace, or irreplaceable. As it was mentioned above, it is because of this that special precautions must be made regarding their use. According to this same document, the Racine Public Library has instituted several rules regarding the use of the history room. Some of these include requiring patrons to sign in and leaving a government issued photo identification at the reference desk, placing bags and backpacks at the reference disk, only using pencils or a computer for notes, keeping material inside the history room, and leaving material on the desk for staff to reshelf (Racine Public Library, 2010). Writing tools used by researchers are generally regulated to pencils only, and pens bring the possibility of permanently marking and damaging the material. These rules are all similar, if not identical, to more traditional archival repositories such as historical societies. Another important issue to address is management’s involvement in the archive project.

Possible issues when starting programs

Having management support of the archival program is very important. This can sometimes be an issue because although the librarian heading up the project may have a background in archival theory, and be able to train support staff to assist in the arrangement, description, and preservation of the special collection material, management approval is needed for the archive to open and operate with the appropriate staff. While promoting and running an archive requires multiple people to be involved, it can be difficult to move forward with a project if public librarians do not understand the importance of various aspects of running an archive (Linderman 2009). The archive librarian will require the support of management in order to bring on the appropriate staff or volunteers to assist with processing collections, working with the public, assist with future preservation needs, as well as all of the other activities that go into opening an archive for public use.

Another roadblock many programs run into is the issue of funding. Especially in today’s economy, many public service institutions, libraries, archives, and museums, are all struggling to find enough operating income to keep the doors open. Libraries and archives often will provide volunteer programs which allow people to gain valuable skills and knowledge while at the same time helping institutions to complete projects which staff members do not have time to complete on their own. Another possibility for helping increase public access to special collections is thorough collaboration between information organizations. One example of how this has happened can be found in Norway. In the early 2000’s, a new organization for libraries, museums, and libraries was created, called the Norwegian Library, Archive, and Museum Authority. The emergence of this new organization “follows an international trend to regard these three sectors as sharing common challenges. This includes developing standards for documentation, digitization and preservation, as well as new methods to increase access and public participation” (Hindal and Wyller, 2004, p.207). The article continues on to explain how integration can be used to provide the same quality services users have come to expect from all three types of institutions. Although not all libraries who look to open a small archive department will look for partnership opportunities, this could be the way to go if the institution would like assistance in knowledgeable staffing, help with coming up with procedures to processing and reading room operations, and many other aspects of their projects. The goal of such collaboration, the meaning behind those who started the Norwegian initiative, was to “reflect the cultural diversity in our society to contribute to a better society through these institutions’ functions and services, individually and in cooperation,” (Hindal and Wyller, 2004, p.208). According to this article, the cooperation would allow for opportunities of knowledge enhancement and learning, new experiences, critical reflection, creative insight, human understanding, dialogue, social and democratic involvement, and access to documentation of various kinds (Hindal and Wyller, 2004). By taking a look at projects such as this one, local libraries have the opportunity to study a system that has had some success, and although their collaboration may not go to the extremes that this one did, it could serve as a model for either how to start an institution’s own archival collection program on their own, or how to look for local partnerships to help them along the way.

Partnerships like the one discussed above also have the ability to broaden the archival user base. Many archives over the years have seen a decrease in funding, which leads eventually to staff layoffs and not enough manpower to continue the important work that archivists and historians provide to the public which includes bringing people and history together. According to John J. Grabowski, curator of manuscripts at the Western Reserve Historical Society and adjunct assistant professor at Cleveland State and Case Western Reserve Universities, “archivists need to build awareness of ‘archival value’ among the general public if they are to command the support the profession deserves,” (Grabowski, 1992, p. 464). In doing so, archivists would create more users of public archives. By making people more aware of what it is that archivists provide to the community, and how they can benefit from it, archivists and others in the history profession will develop a user base that “understands, respects, and, therefore, will advocate for our cause,” (Grabowski, 1992, p. 464). But how would this be applicable for archivists working with local historical collections in a public library? By creating an archive in a public library setting, whose librarians have access to a great number of the general public including students of all ages, the opportunity would be there to educate the public about archival collections including what they contain, and how the contents could be applicable to their own lives. In giving them access to several unique collections in a public library setting, archivists can demonstrate the usefulness and value of archival collections within an environment familiar to the patrons themselves. In turn, these educated patrons could then be better informed about what archives have to offer, and can advocate for their continued operation. After all, “using archival material, and becoming aware of its vast potential are the key elements in what has made genealogists advocates for archives,” (Grabowski, 1992, p. 464).

Hidden Collections

Many libraries, in addition to archives, will at times receive donated collections of special material which is meant to be open for public access. However, unless the institution has the ability to properly process and catalog the materials to the point that allows patrons to find out what the collections contain, it is difficult, if not impossible, for that information to be retrieved. These are referred to as ‘hidden collections’, “materials that either have not been entered into an online catalog or if retrieved are only located by searching under a collective title,” (Yakel 2005, p.95). There are several problems with hidden collections. First of all is security. Without a proper inventory of what the collection contains, it is difficult, if not impossible for staff to tell if material has been lost or stolen. In addition, if only a select number of staff know what is contained in these collections, that knowledge is lost if that staff member were to leave the institution. This is relevant to archival donations to public libraries because there is often more limited staff time set aside for processing such collections, and the collections are often harder to access than in a traditional archival repository (Yakel 2005).

This can be a difficult issue for any archive, but it can be especially difficult for a special collections department in public library to deal with. An alternative, at least a temporary one, should be decided on which will allow these hidden collections to be uncovered and made available for researchers and scholars. This could include using a specified assessment model to evaluate the demand for such information, and to find a way to at least minimally process what is available in the collection so that patrons have access to it. By uncovering and getting information out about the collections available in archives and libraries, the professionals in these institutions can provide better service to their patrons.

Conclusion

In today’s environment, unique collections that used to be considered in only archival institutions are now finding their way into public library holdings. These collections can include personal papers of prominent local citizens, local history collections once owned by historians, and other material individuals or businesses no long want to keep themselves, but neither do they think they should be discarded. When accepting these special collections, public libraries must ensure they have staff with the knowledge and ability to properly process and preserve these valuable community resources, provide the proper facilities to house them, and supply staff with the knowledge of how to connect researchers with this information while protecting the material from damage. By providing the opportunity for public library staff to process these materials, and to get help from neighboring institutions if required, these collections are able to be used in research by an expanded number of genealogists, local history enthusiasts, and students who otherwise would never have been able to access the material.

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