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A Political Junkie in the Archives

By Hope E. Grebner, Drake University



Hope E. Grebner

I owe my career as an archivist to a United States senator who died 20 years before I was even born. If not for him, I may have never become interested in congressional history and archives. Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen and I were both born in Pekin, Illinois—he in the late 1890s and I in the late 1980s. Growing up, I would pass a statue of the senator on every trip to the park, but I will admit that I never really gave him much thought. As an undergraduate history major at Monmouth College in western Illinois, I wanted to do a research project on another of my state's native politicians—Adlai Stevenson. However, when my professor discovered that I hailed from the same town as Dirksen, she insisted that I change my topic so I could travel home to do my primary source research at the Dirksen Congressional Center in Pekin. What started as a small research paper would end up taking me to conduct research at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, and to a semester in Washington, DC, where I could visit the Library of Congress. And thus, my love affair with archives (and politics) was born. After this project, I was fortunate to take three archives courses as an undergraduate, where I gained hands-on experience by working in the Monmouth College Archives. When my senior year rolled around, I found myself torn between pursuing an MLS or a PhD in history—I loved doing research, but I also liked assisting other people with their own research. Based on this, I decided to pursue a dual-degree program in library science and American history at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

As a graduate student, I worked in the University Archives processing the papers of former senator Birch Bayh of Indiana who is known for authoring two amendments to the US Constitution as well as authoring Title IX legislation. Here, I discovered that processing congressional papers

allowed me to combine my love of politics with my passion for history and assisting others with their research. I also found an incredible mentor who brought me into the fold of congressional and political papers archivists (I didn't even know that was a profession!) and who helped me to secure an internship in the US Senate Historical Office, working under the archivist of the Senate. In addition to serving as the institutional memory of the chamber, the Senate Historical Office advises senators and committees on the disposition of their records, assists researchers, and maintains databases of the locations of former members' papers. During my summer there, I worked on the description of backlogged electronic records from various Senate committees. The collection and preservation of electronic records is one of the greatest challenges faced by political papers archivists. In addition to the archival experience I gained, I also learned by osmosis about the Senate and how it functions as an institution.

This internship gave me the confidence I needed to apply for and accept my first archivist position at Indiana University's Modern Political Papers Collections. It was a two-year project archivist appointment, which are becoming increasingly common in the field. This type of appointment brought about its own challenges in addition to the time constraints of processing three congressional collections: Congressman Dan Burton (123 linear feet), Congressman Mike Pence (30 linear feet), and then my main project—Senator Richard Lugar (approximately 1,600 linear feet and electronic records). During that time, I developed strong project management skills and supervisory experience as I managed a team of four to five graduate students who assisted in the processing. I was living in the town where I went to graduate school, my friends were still there, I had a great job doing something I love—what more could I want, right?

Due to my temporary appointment, I always had one eye on the job market. When I saw the announcement for the political papers archivist position at Drake University, I knew I had to give it a shot. At the very least, it would be good interview experience. While it meant moving away from what was comfortable to a city I had never even visited, I knew it would allow me to grow as a professional

and an individual. In addition to managing the traditional processing duties for the newly acquired papers of Senator Tom Harkin, the job description included teaching responsibilities, acting as a liaison to the Harkin Institute for Public Policy and Citizen Engagement, and publicizing the collections. While I considered a potential move to Drake University, the main question friends and colleagues asked was, “Who would want to move to Iowa?” My response was always, “Me. Political nerds like me want to move to Iowa!” Just the thought of moving to the political center of the state that votes first was exciting to me. And it hasn’t disappointed.

My advice for students and those entering the profession:

- **Never close a door.** For me, this meant leaving open the option to pursue a history PhD by completing a dual-degree program. If you are having trouble deciding between two options, see if there is a way for you to do both. Find a way to blend your passions.
- **Find a good mentor (and stay in touch!).** Some of the most insightful advice I have ever received came from mentors. I look up to these individuals as role models in both my professional and personal life. Finding a mentor is more than having a superior who can simply show you the ropes. These individuals should truly see and help support your desire to grow.
- **Don’t be afraid to take risks.** Take the short-term project position if you feel you can gain critical experience. Don’t be afraid to move to a new place.

And so, in November 2014, I made the move from Indiana to Iowa. Drake University is a midsized, private university in Des Moines, and its University Archives and Special Collections is a relatively new endeavor, having been granted official administrative designation in 2012. Because of this, I have had the opportunity to be a part of building something from the ground up. In addition to managing its growing number of political papers collections, I have been able to contribute to the creation of policies and procedures for the archives as a whole. The largest collection in the archives is that of former senator Tom Harkin of Iowa. We also house the papers of Iowa governor Robert Ray and Congressman Neal Smith. The Political Papers Collections also include the Iowa Caucus Collection, a new initiative to preserve files, photos, audiovisual materials, and memorabilia from the Iowa caucuses. This collection documents the unique political culture that has developed in Iowa, the

extraordinary interactions average Iowa citizens have with presidential candidates, and the ways in which Iowa’s caucuses informed and influenced the US presidency over the past 40 years. Perfect for a political junkie like me.

When I started at Drake, the Harkin papers had yet to arrive and I was able to visit his DC office to assist in the packing and do some on-site appraisal. This was an invaluable experience for me. Not only did I give a presentation to the senator’s state and DC staff in a Senate hearing room (a dream come true for a political nerd like me) on the importance of congressional collections, what they should be saving, and how I will go about processing the documents, but I was also able to get to know the senator’s staff on a personal level. The staff is like a family, and they can be a tremendous resource for archivists. Luckily for me, some of these former staffers have returned to Iowa and have become some of my closest friends in my new home. We also have hosted reunion gatherings for the staff in the archives, and we make sure that they are invited to all of our events.

The Harkin papers arrived on a snowy day in early January 2015. A semitrailer rolled up to the library, and the boxes were unloaded and placed in the archives. Prior to their arrival, I worked with our university communications team to secure various local news interviews. Throughout the day, local television, radio, and newspaper reporters visited the archives to report on the arrival of the papers. Despite being nervous about being filmed, recorded, and quoted, I knew that my goal was to make the papers come to life. I didn’t want them to sit on the shelf, and these interviews were just the press we needed. In addition to this, I have also worked to promote our collections to potential users, including elementary, middle, and high school students. In fact, our first researcher in the Harkin Papers was an eighth grader working on a project on the Americans with Disabilities Act. No student is too young for archival research, and congressional collections provide a great first exposure to primary source documents on a myriad of subjects.

For those of you who have worked with congressional or political papers, you already know that they are a completely different beast. Not only are they extremely large collections, but they contain a wide variety of record formats, they are created by a large and diverse staff, and they reflect a very specialized field.

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Here is my from-the-trenches advice for those working with political collections:

- **Visit the office and get to know the staff.** Visiting the office helps you to learn the context of the records' creation and aids in making decisions about arrangement and description. The staff are your built-in reference librarians. Are you trying to figure out which staffer worked on a specific issue? Or how they organized their shared drive? Developing good relationships with the staff can help you get easy answers to these questions.
- **Don't be afraid to publicize your collections.** Most archivists and librarians probably do not like to be interviewed for television and radio, but it is a great opportunity to promote your collections. Develop relationships with the marketing and communications staff at your institution as well as with local news media.
- **Keep a daily progress log.** With collections of this volume, it is easy to feel as if you have not accomplished anything at the end of the day—or even the week! Keeping a daily progress log helps me to track my progress and reassure myself that I am indeed making a dent in processing the collection. It's also helpful for any activity reports you may be required to write!

And don't worry—I haven't forgotten about old Senator Dirksen. One of his campaign posters (right) hangs in my office to remind me of my roots and my journey into the archival profession.

