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The Accidental Archivist

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Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists—Johna Picco, Assistant Editor, The Filson Historical Society

Please submit Up-and-Comers items to Johna Picco at johna.picco@gmail.com.

The *MAC Newsletter* is happy to welcome Johna Picco to its staff. With this issue, Picco takes over our Up-and-Comers column. She is an assistant curator of special collections at the Filson Historical Society. She earned her MLIS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where she focused her studies on archives as well as library architecture. As an “up-and-comer” herself, she is excited and grateful to be a part of the *MAC Newsletter* team! Picco lives in Louisville with her fiancé and chihuahua. Contact her at johna.picco@gmail.com or connect on LinkedIn at www.linkedin.com/in/johnapicco.

The Accidental Archivist

By Ellen Brooks, Oral Historian, Wisconsin Veterans Museum

A year and a half ago, I found myself in the precarious situation many graduate students find themselves in just prior to graduation: frantically trying to complete my thesis, working hard at that essential internship that would round out my resume, and job-hunting like mad. I had bookmarks and job alerts coming out of my ears. My search was very specific; I wanted a job that would combine my newly earned MA degree in oral history from Columbia University with the passion for public history that I cultivated through internships at the Chicago History Museum, the Chicago Cultural Alliance, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. When I saw a posting on the American Alliance of Museums job board for an oral historian at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum (WVM), I was beyond thrilled. Cover letter, resume, references, phone interview, in-person interview, and several anxious weeks later, I had the job and I was on my way to Madison, Wisconsin.

My position description divides my job into two distinct components: managing the oral history program at WVM by actively gathering oral histories from veterans across the state, and, on the archival side, overseeing the preservation and maintenance of the oral history collection. When I came on board, the interviews in the collection numbered 1,885, which, as anyone who has worked with oral histories would agree, is no small number. Today that number is quickly approaching 2,000 interviews.

The Hurdles

I faced a multitude of challenges during my first year and a half on the job. The biggest challenge? I am not a trained archivist. While my graduate program offered a glimpse into the archives world as it relates to oral histories, the program focused on the methodology and theory of oral history, practicing the art of the interview, and applying the information oral histories contain. My internship at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum introduced me to the

collections management software program PastPerfect as well as my first hands-on interaction with an archival system for oral histories, but again my responsibilities were focused on conducting oral histories and using them in public programming. Walking into my position at WVM, I was entirely confident in my ability to conduct interviews and train others to do so. I had a myriad of ideas for potential uses of the interviews in exhibits, educational materials, and social media, but it quickly became clear that while adding to the collection and making plans for its use was (and is) important, it was imperative that simultaneously I get the collection organized.

Gaining a grasp on the organization of the collection was hindered by a lack of transitional staff. The staff responsible for the oral history program and collection prior to my hiring were no longer available to help train me for the position. In addition to the staff who had previously handled the collection were a number of oral history volunteers, which meant a lot of cooks in the kitchen. Weeding through the files and management systems turned out to be quite a daunting task. I needed to figure out how things had worked in the past and then decide which components of the old structure to maintain and which to retool. This challenge is ongoing, and I learn new things about the collection practically every day.

The other big obstacle I've faced over the past year and a half is learning to communicate with non-oral historians about oral history. After being immersed in the oral history MA program for more than a year, I had become very accustomed to talking about oral history with my cohort



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and colleagues. At WVM, I learned quickly that it would take some effort to effectively communicate about what oral history is and what it can (and cannot) do with my supervisors and coworkers, as well as with patrons and potential narrators and their families. As an established discipline, oral history has existed only since the 1940s and therefore is still a relatively young field. Despite its fairly short existence, the field has seen an extraordinary amount of transition in the past seven decades. Although most people have heard of oral history and many in the archives, museum, history, and other memory-related fields have encountered it, it can still be quite enigmatic. Everyone I have spoken with about oral history, including museum and archives professionals as well as the general public, has been excited about its potential. As an oral historian, I see it as my responsibility to support that interest and enthusiasm, while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of the field by thinking about the best practices and standards and finding a way to manage outside expectations about WVM's oral history program and collection.

The Leaps

In terms of handling the challenges I have faced, and continue to face, I learned something very important about myself soon after starting this position: I am an archivist at heart. It is such a wonderful thing to capture the stories of Wisconsin's veterans, and it is stimulating to think creatively about how to provide access to their stories. But the less glamorous aspects of oral history—storing, preserving, maintaining, and organizing—are just as significant. If we are not conscientious about how oral histories are archived,

we risk losing these incredibly valuable resources. Recognizing this fact made me eager to become an archivist—and quickly. I started first with my small knowledge base and from there my understanding of the profession grew rapidly. I joined MAC and other professional organizations and read everything I came across that I felt was relevant. I leaned heavily on the guidance of archivists in WVM's Research Center, along with my colleagues at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Wisconsin Historical Society. One of the biggest hurdles has been to recognize the gaps in my knowledge and expertise without losing confidence in my ability to do the job. I am competent and I care deeply about the work I am doing—everything else can be learned.

All of the encountered challenges have required an enormous amount of patience, mostly with myself, which has never been my strong suit. I have a tendency to think I need to be able to understand everything right away, especially in a professional setting. Considering there was no one to officially train me on the specifics of my position, I have had to learn to cut myself some slack. I'm getting better at that, but it still doesn't happen easily.

I have also developed more faith in my professional decisions. Today when I'm speaking with a narrator, a patron, or a colleague, I feel confident that I can expertly communicate the ins and outs of oral history and WVM's program and collection. I achieved this level of communication when I realized that, not only do I know what I'm talking about, but the person I'm speaking with wants to know what I'm talking about, and therefore is actually invested in what I am saying. Although it may seem obvious, this realization has



Ellen Brooks and translator Seethong Yang interview Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) veteran Nao Tou Lor for WVM's Hmong SGU Veteran's project. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Veterans Museum

helped me to slow down these conversations and take them as an opportunity to engage with people about oral history and our program. Most people are quicker to understand and to appreciate my work than I initially anticipated and that has been a very welcome lesson.

The position continues to challenge me, but I look at these challenges as opportunities to expand my expertise and to bridge gaps in my knowledge. Because my responsibilities are varied and my work is so interdisciplinary, I have yet to have a boring day. I feel very fortunate to have landed myself in the archival world, and I hope to be joined by many up-and-coming professionals with new ideas and energy.

Some Pointers

I have been fortunate to receive guidance from colleagues in the information and historical fields, and I feel it's valuable to share experience. This is my own advice for students and new professionals, in any field:

- **Be flexible.** I began the job search with a very narrow focus, but I was well aware that I might have to broaden my scope eventually. And I was flexible about location. Relocation is tough but also exciting!
- **Don't quit your support job.** I worked at a grocery store

in the gaps between undergraduate and graduate school and all during graduate school. A job outside of the field is perfectly acceptable if it helps support you until you land that professional position!

- **Enlist the support of your friends and loved ones.** My roommate and I were on the job hunt together, and although we are in different fields, we buddied up for resume and cover letter review, as well as for questions about job hunting etiquette and interview attire. It always helped to have another pair of eyes and a second opinion. We are both now employed.
- **Find a mentor (or mentors!).** Reach out to people in your professional organizations and establish relationships so that you have experienced professionals to turn to for advice and support. Utilize listservs to ask questions and promote your projects and ideas.
- **Be patient with yourself.** Whether you've been in your profession for 5 months or 25 years, there is always something new to learn. Do not expect to be an expert at everything right away, and do not be afraid to ask questions.
- **Be creative.** Not only does it make your job more interesting, thinking outside the box will make you that much more attractive to potential employers.

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