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Keep Calm and Expect the Unexpected

By Justin Seidler

The world of archives and special collections can be overwhelming and tumultuous for students and new archivists. Archival graduate programs aim to prepare students for professional endeavors by providing theoretical background and as much hands-on experience as possible. However, knowledge of theory is quite different from the wisdom of experience. In the pursuit of professional goals related to standards and best practices, as well as ethical decision-making, it becomes all too apparent that the reality of archives does not always follow the scripted theory learned in academic course work. On the contrary, one may encounter obstacles of such import and frequency that we are left thinking, “this is not at all what I expected.”

Anything from unusual materials to effective management of time, resources, and people can pose unforeseen challenges. The purpose of this article is to call attention to the fact that these obstacles, or “hiccups,” are not only unavoidable, but constitute the very fabric and character of the profession—they are as common to a budding archivist as books are to a library, and can often lead to amusing anecdotes and cautionary tales of the “dos and don’ts” of archival practice. Therefore, it is important to remember that the archivist’s path requires flexibility, adaptability, and a positive attitude in order to earn the wisdom gained from time and practical experience. In other words, keep calm and expect the unexpected.

Despite the attempts of repositories to control the massive amounts of materials in their collections through finely tuned collecting policies, responsible selection and appraisal methods, and considerations of ethics and finance, the up-and-coming archivist is sure to encounter items that do not seem to belong anywhere in particular—or anywhere at all. It is not uncommon during the negotiations of donor agreements to accept items that do not fall under an organization’s collecting policy in order to obtain an exceedingly valuable collection. For example, imagine processing the collection of a prominent and recently deceased university professor. The majority of the collection is comprised of paper-based documents, such as research, publications, awards, personal manuscripts—and an unexpected 100-year-old fraternity paddle that adorned the subject’s office wall, most likely belonging to a friend

or family member from an unknown institution. The paddle bears no direct connection to the professor, to the research value of the collection, or to the collecting policy of the archives. What does one do with the paddle? Deciding how best to proceed in situations like this can be perplexing, or even exasperating, especially when trying to meet a deadline. However, this is exactly the type of experience that generates a deeper understanding of the profession, and it should be taken in stride.

The discovery of bizarre and unusual items is relatively common when processing collections and may include encounters with unusual objects such as risqué literature, petrified ham sandwiches, and illicit or even dangerous materials. For example, an archivist accidentally pricks his or her finger with a rusty metal pin used to secure a stack of nineteenth-century documents, or discovers illegal recreational items in the collection of a popular recording artist. “What on Earth...?” is usually the initial response, but rather than succumb to frustration and confusion, it is wise to keep an open mind, ask appropriate questions of colleagues, and add the answers to one’s “bag of tricks.” Whether the solutions involve the consultation of a doctor or the local authorities for hazardous waste removal, experiences such as these help mold the career of a knowledgeable archivist.

Unusual occurrences are inevitable setbacks; setbacks lead to lost time, and lost time can lead to anxiety. “I have to spend the next three hours doing what?” is a phrase uttered by every professional at some point. One way to preemptively address this problem is to learn effective time management skills. During the creation of a processing plan, one must be certain to account for these unusual occurrences and to anticipate potential setbacks. Preventing the careless errors made during those rushed moments, such as mislabeling folders or omitting information, can save valuable time. This can be challenging for an archivist who lacks wisdom earned from years of experience. Learning to keep calm and expect the unexpected is a positive step toward overcoming any obstacle. Keep in mind, however, that even if the process is free of unforeseen obstacles and unintentional mishaps, the world of archives and special collections has quirks that are best navigated with extreme patience and a sense of humor.

Consider the following scenario: a potential donor is interested in donating a quite valuable collection of manuscripts and memorabilia, but later, upon viewing the collection in storage, adds the stipulation that every object in the collection be preserved in Mylar. The collection of over two thousand items has already been acquired, arranged, and described at the item level by the original archivist. The preservation of the collection, now *your* responsibility, requires a period of approximately one week of working hours, which can be extremely taxing on both material and human resources but is nonetheless necessary. Following this weeklong extravaganza, you, the up-and-coming archivist, begin dreaming at night of being lost in an endless and inescapable forest of Mylar! Although archival work of this sort can seem daunting, it is important to remember these are the “dues one must pay” to gain insight and perspective on matters not only of labor, but also the importance of public and professional relations.

Many up-and-comers choose archival studies in the hopes that they will be able to avoid social interaction, and instead process collections in solitude and haunt the stacks like ghosts. To be certain, this is a very romantic

and fundamentally misguided notion. Information science itself is created by and for the people, meaning that archivists must not only tailor their work to meet the needs of users, but must also cooperate with coworkers and the information science community at-large to determine and accomplish appropriate goals. Every master’s degree candidate in this field takes a management course, but no textbook can provide the practical experience of interpersonal communication. “People skills” are a must, and, as with the unexpected hiccups that occupy so much of the archival profession, they cannot necessarily be taught in a classroom, nor will personal interactions always unfold as planned.

Ultimately, it is how we choose to deal with these inherent uncertainties that characterizes the nature of our profession. Flexibility, adaptability, and a positive attitude are essential to keeping calm and expecting the unexpected when faced with the unusual challenges of archives and special collections.

Up-and-Comers News Bytes

Students in the Field at the University of Michigan

By Erin Platte, University of Michigan SAA Student Chapter

This year, the Student Chapter of the Society of American Archivists at the University of Michigan is focusing on building a stronger bridge among chapter members, the archival field, alumni, and the Ann Arbor community in general. Students are working to provide members with a variety of opportunities to become actively involved with their communities, and at the same time showcase their work. During the summer, the group created a blog series entitled *Students in the Field*, featuring the work of Chapter members. This series encourages readers to explore new aspects of the archival field previously considered to be beyond their reach. In addition, the Chapter implemented service projects that assisted both the campus radio station (WCBN) and the Matthaei Botanical Gardens in the digitization and preservation of their collections.

The Student Chapter is currently inviting speakers to present information on a variety of subjects, including

unexpected job opportunities in the archival field, born-digital materials, and certification. Shadrack Katuu of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently spoke about unique opportunities for archivists, while Mark Matienzo, a digital archivist at Yale University, introduced students to digital forensics using open source tools. In the coming year, the Chapter anticipates discussions between university alumni and current students through an event series entitled *Words of Wisdom*, and will be actively promoting collaboration with other student chapters. As the SAA Student Chapter at the University of Michigan moves into a new year, it looks forward to inviting additional archivists to speak to members, either in person or via video chat, on a range of issues including certification and advocacy.