

7-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Childs-Helton, Sally (2010) "Saving Your Stuff Archivaly at Home: Preservation Outreach and Education," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 38 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol38/iss1/8>

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Saving Your Stuff Archivaly at Home: Preservation Outreach and Education

By Sally Childs-Helton, *Special Collections, Rare Books, and University Archives Librarian, Butler University*

People love their stuff, and often turn to archivists and curators for advice about caring for it. In my small shop, I receive frequent requests from faculty, staff, alumni, students, and local residents, all wondering how to best preserve their precious stuff. Over the years, I have developed a preservation outreach program that guides people through ways to save their stuff archivaly at home, and have presented it to a variety of groups: senior citizens, collectors, book groups, genealogists, hobbyists, churches, clubs, and community organizations. Individuals and representatives of groups and organizations have also come in for guidance.

We've all seen the results of misguided and uneducated attempts to preserve precious things—the Civil War letters that have been heat-laminated at a copy shop, the 100-year-old family photos lovingly arranged in a “magnetic” photo album with the waxy dots to hold the images, the painted antique wrapped in plastic wrap, the christening gown stuffed with newspaper. Unfortunately, many ways people assume will preserve their stuff has the opposite effect, often creating damage beyond reasonable repair or recovery.

Preservation presentations have proven to be an excellent opportunity to educate people about a broad variety of topics, including various levels of preservation, the historic value of materials, and why donating materials to archives and museums is ultimately the best way to preserve precious stuff. They also provide opportunities for outreach, community service, and raising awareness about preservation, your archives, and archives in general. Increased awareness can lead to increased donations of both materials and money, attract volunteers, and generally help the likelihood that materials last long enough to make it into archives or museums. This is especially important at a point in time when hard copy is becoming ever more precious as more and more materials, regardless of format, are born digital, and as more traditional formats, including letters and diaries, are being replaced by texting, social networking sites, and blogs.

Often I tailor the presentation to the group, but in general I attempt to give the audience the basics of preservation and how people can apply these principles, at least to some extent, at home. I first ask them to consider what they want to save and for how long. Simply put, what do they want to accomplish by saving the item? The next question is why

do they want to save it? Is it historically, emotionally, or financially important? Many people have never considered these questions, and the answers will directly affect the range of preservation solutions. Do they want to preserve a certificate to hang on the wall, to share photos at family reunions, to be able to pass on a diary to the grandchildren, or to sell a comic book, stamp, or coin collection to take the vacation of a lifetime?

In the wonderful book *Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions*,¹ Don Williams, the senior conservator at the Smithsonian, outlines three levels of preservation: “quick’n’dirty,” the middle road, and pharaoh’s tomb. The colorful categories describe minimal, moderate, and maximum levels of preservation, respectively, and how long each approach is likely to help a particular format last. With each of these levels come increased investments in time and money. By evaluating how long they want to keep the materials and why, combined with the cost factor, most people can create a realistic solution to help them save their stuff.

The next section of the presentation is preservation 101. Here, I discuss the things that damage collections and what people can do to decrease that damage, based on a sliding scale of minimum to maximum options and approximate costs. I include information about damage from water, light, dust and dirt, mold, critters (including insects, vermin, and pets), temperature and humidity fluctuations, rough handling, improper shelving and storage boxes, and theft, and ways to safely store and display materials at home. Taking items that have been damaged, as well as examples of properly stored materials, or a slideshow of these things, is extremely useful to your audience. If you’ve invited people to bring materials for examination, you can use these to illustrate your presentation.

Two main areas I also include are digitization and scrapbooks, since both, improperly done, can damage or destroy materials. Many people believe that digitization is archival, and once scanned, they can toss those family photos that have been taking up space in the hall closet. I explain that digitization is a great way to share materials with far-flung family, but that maintaining digital files archivaly at home is almost impossible. It also helps to point out that hard-

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ware, software, and storage mediums (like CDs, DVDs, and flash drives) have short life spans, and in just a few years people may not be able to access digital files. To illustrate technological obsolescence, I like to ask people how many times they've bought the same music—first on LP, then on cassette, then on CD, then as a download, because they couldn't play the previous format anymore. I also urge people who must create scrapbooks to buy supplies from archival suppliers and not from craft stores.

Other areas I cover include cleaning collections and shelving, emergencies and disasters, insurance for collections with high monetary value, including instructions in wills for what happens to collections, loaning collections or items for display, and reasons for donating collections to archives or museums. I also address the difference between preservation and conservation, and types of appraisals.

Because I cover so much information, I have a handout that includes the basics of preservation, preservation and conservation Web sites and books, archival suppliers, and American appraisal organizations.² Since some audience members do not use computers, I include printed resources and phone numbers. You may want to include information about local resources (conservators, appraisers, and so forth), but it's important to emphasize that you cannot appraise items for monetary value due to conflict of interest issues.

Always leave time for questions, because there will be many. If you've invited people to bring items for preservation evaluation, you may want to have separate time for them since it tends to bring out an *Antiques Roadshow* mentality. Remember to bring

business cards, and you may want to create a follow-up form to record questions and contact information for more in-depth questions or referrals.

There are many other ways to do preservation outreach. You can start an "Ask the Archivist" program where people bring in an item for preservation assessment by appointment or one day a month. Getting on a speakers' list for your university, organization, or company is another strategy, as is targeting likely groups and organizations and offering to do a presentation or workshop. If you don't know much about artifacts, you may want to copresent with a museum curator. And you can limit your presentations to specific formats.

Over the years, I've had excellent experiences doing preservation outreach. It has created awareness about preservation and how donating to a cultural institution may ultimately be the best solution; it brings positive publicity to my archives and university; it creates an immense amount of goodwill; and it has resulted in donations, volunteers, offers of materials for exhibits, and oral history opportunities. It costs almost nothing other than the archivist's time, and is a highly effective public outreach tool. Now is an excellent time to begin a preservation outreach and education program since baby boomers are starting to retire. This is the last generation who was raised with and still truly values hard copy, and presents an important collection opportunity. Overall, it's a wonderful way for me to share my passion for old stuff with others who also love their stuff!

Notes

1. Don Williams and Louisa Jaggar, *Saving Stuff: How to Care for and*

Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions (New York: Fireside Book, 2005).

2. Sally Childs-Helton, "How to Save Your Stuff Archivally at Home: Basic Collection Preservation Strategies," <http://www.butler.edu/media/684154/hobbyists.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2010).

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