

Running head: ARCHIVIST MARCELLA WIGET INTERVIEW

Interview with Project Archivist Marcella Wiget, Kansas Historical Society

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Abstract

This paper is a recount of an interview done with Marcella Wiget, a project archivist with the Kansas State Historical Society on a twenty month grant. Marcella discussed archiving and what it means to her, how she does her job duties, and why she does what she can to preserve history. Marcella responded to questions about technology and the role libraries play in preserving our rich history in Kansas.

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Introduction

Marcella Wiget is a project archivist with the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS). Her job is provided by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) as part of a grant awarded to KSHS for twenty months to help clear up some of the backlog KSHS had accumulated by arranging and describing archival items for entry into the Machine Readable Catalog (MARC). This is similar to cataloging titles in the library world. The interview with Marcella began as an email interview but upon speaking with her on the phone, it became evident she began in archiving because it is something she enjoys. In a world where technology is quickly becoming a motivating force for institutions to become digitized and move into the future, archiving instead focuses on the past, and determines what artifacts are important to keep for society. However, while archiving does focus on history, the need to become more digitized has become relevant in order to stay current. Marcella touched on this subject in the interview and said the archivist area has changed even within the last five years, perhaps a sign that while archiving focuses on the past they are looking forward to help preserve artifacts.

Interview

Marcella began her career as an archivist by accident, when she started working in a museum as a curator for her first full-time job out of college, which also had some reference duties that involved archives. She has a Masters in Public History, with a double concentration in Museum Studies and Archival Administration. Interestingly, this Masters does not involve Library Science, especially since archiving and libraries are so closely intertwined, but Marcella did emphasize it is not so much what education you have, but how much experience you have. In some ways, the history/museum aspect of this Masters makes sense for archiving because of

the historical nature of the artifacts. Some items are even housed in museums, but it would seem there needs to be some knowledge of library science for archiving. This is especially true since part of Marcella's job is entering the digital copies of government records into the MARC system, which is used by libraries as a catalog to show the records of titles. The realization that libraries and museums are so closely connected was remarkable.

Marcella stressed that experience of both practical application and educational training was instrumental in preparing for the job she has now at KSHS. Both the class work and the internships Marcella had as she went through school were important for giving her the background she needed in her field. From a collection of photographs in her first archiving class, which had an emphasis in arrangement and description, to internships, her experiences gave her a concrete base for her performance in the workforce. However, Marcella stresses the importance of her education, as she states "I definitely needed the classroom theory and readings before I could even go into the "real world" situations" (personal communication, March 25, 2010).

Marcella says there are always ways to learn more about the archiving field and encourages people to take archiving classes, whether it is through a Masters of Library Science program, or through an Archiving program. This is true as the profession changes to include more technology related ideas for archiving. Marcella also says volunteering time to institutions that focus on archiving is a great way to gain valuable experience, and looks great on a resume. Experience through practical application or educational training is important to any profession, but especially so in these changing times.

Marcella has worked with archives by both interning and being paid. Her various work experience includes state archives centers, and working with both government collections and manuscript collections (business and private papers). She interned at a religious archive and at a

corporate archive. She has also worked at two local historical societies, again working mostly with business and private papers and publications. KSHS is one of the local historical societies Marcella has been employed with.

Marcella shared some information concerning employment during the interview that was interesting. She said one reason she has so much experience is because most jobs are grant funded, meaning they are mostly temporary, and rarely do they turn into permanent employment. Marcella says, “It’s hard work, don’t expect to get rich from it, and no matter what ANYBODY else tells you, don’t expect to find a job in the field easily. And even if you do find a job pretty quickly, don’t expect it to be permanent for life. It’s not a profession for everyone” (personal communication, March 25, 2010). The job at KSHS, as stated above, is a temporary position based on receiving funding to fix their backlog problem, which is only available for 20 months. It seems unlikely she will be able to stay in Topeka, and brings the question of whether having a library degree would help create more possibilities for permanent employment, perhaps as an archive librarian.

The mission of KSHS is very similar to the missions of libraries across the state. Their main interest is collecting, preserving, processing and disseminating materials for patrons across Kansas who are interested in their heritage. KSHS is the main repository for artifacts for the state of Kansas, meaning the Historical Society takes care of documents from small towns in western Kansas to the larger cities in the east. Also, because Topeka is the capitol, government artifacts are stored at KSHS by mandate to protect the records of both county and state decisions, making the jobs of the archivists demanding. It is not as if they are focusing on one town’s history and governmental decisions to protect and disseminate.

Marcella discussed challenges she has encountered while performing her job, and talked about the ones mentioned above concerning grant work and pay. Also, because of the nature of grant work, Marcella says the challenge of coming into a new working environment and taking over the duties of an already existing program are paramount over everything else. If there is a lack of arrangement within the backlogged materials, it can be overwhelming to a person just starting out in the archiving industry. Since Marcella's job duties at KSHS focus mainly on description, it can be time consuming to have to identify the artifacts yet again before she can start entering them into the system.

Organization is also a key issue in the attainment and arranging of artifacts. Many times Marcella has begun to sort through boxes, only to become stymied by poor record keeping. To properly describe an artifact, there is some important information that should be attributed to the piece. As Schellenberg (n.d.), states, "In arranging a group or collection an archivist should obtain a general knowledge of its meaning or essential nature and structure before proceeding to deal with its parts" (p. 11). How it came to the institution and when it was delivered are facts that are significant to the piece and should be part of some record.

Marcella also encounters difficulties indirectly by dealing with materials that government employees have boxed up and sent to her. She does receive materials that should not have come to her department and must work with the record officers to find out who sent it, and where it must go from there. Again, this is a time consuming aspect of Marcella's job, and is something that is due to the lack of knowledge in the governmental agencies.

Marcella finds the most rewarding part of her job as a project archivist at KSHS is that of being a historian. She likens her job to being somewhat of a detective, whether she is retrieving information for herself, a researcher, or acting as an archivist. This is very similar to a library

reference desk, in which the librarian will conduct a search with a patron using all of their avenues of information. Marcella finds that researching a problem and finding an answer while applying her training is a very rewarding part of her job. Marcella also enjoys the people she meets, both as coworkers and members of the researching public, and says “you get to help people touch and connect with history, which I personally find pretty awesome” (personal communication, March 25, 2010).

One question that created some thought for Marcella centered on technology and how it has started to change the archiving profession. As mentioned previously, Marcella stated she believes archiving has changed even within the last five years, based on her experiences working in the profession. One example of how technology has changed archiving, by looking at KSHS, is evident in Marcella’s job duties. She is now entering the description of the artifacts into the online database. The description is based on open-source coding and is input in such a way that it is exported to MARC automatically, making it available for the public to research independently of information professionals, and creating an invisible link to government resources and the general public. This is important because while Marcella is still working with paper documents and other tangible artifacts, they can now be accessible by digital means, making it possible for the general public to be involved in the history of Kansas and governmental agencies. Electronic archival records are a different issue, but as Hedstrom (2000) says, describing these items “will play a critical role in helping the original creators of records, researchers, and others to identify, understand, and use electronic records” (p. 383). Even as archiving moves further into the electronic movement, it is possible to see how central Marcella’s job is to the future of the profession.

Marcella also considers the impact that the Web 2.0 and social networking technologies have created on society have also impacted archiving. One example of this is the NHPRC's website. If a researcher was to go there, <http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/>, it has a link guiding them to the NHPRC's Facebook page for the user to become a fan, which helps to create a new kind of awareness for archiving. Researching tools have also changed as online services in genealogy and other topics have become more and more advanced, in effect creating a niche for archives in the common population. Marcella believes archiving must change to keep up with the searching styles of new or younger researchers, whether professional researchers or members of the general public. As technology becomes even more advanced, archiving and record keeping must adapt to create a style of communication with patrons regardless of their researching experience level. Nesmith (2002) theorizes that by looking at present day archivists actually means "seeing archivists anew-as visible, active, agents in the construction of this history and the societal knowledge it shapes" (p. 41).

Marcella does employ special precautions while working on her projects. They are somewhat obvious considering her occupation, but generally focus on food issues. No food is allowed in her cubicle. She can have water, but only in closed containers and as far away from her work space as possible. KSHS has temperature control within the stacks and have monitors scattered around that measure the relative humidity. They also have protective measures for the audio/visual materials, which are kept at 50 degrees. The lights are kept turned off except during business hours, and artifacts are kept in acid-free protectors.

It is interesting to see how similar these practices are to how the Washburn Law Library protects their items. Any item that is bound is done so in acid-free cloth or hard covers, and if a title is printed from a digital source, it is done on acid-free paper. There is also a no food policy

and drinks can only be carried in if they are in closed containers. The Washburn Law Library also keeps its microfilm in a controlled temperature room to protect them. Because of these similarities, it is important to note that libraries also help to preserve the past to create a place for individuals to research.

Marcella does want to reiterate that she believes the library world and the archiving world interact closely. However, there are many areas in which they do differ, and as Hunter (2003) describes, it is imperative to remember this interaction “does not mean...that libraries and archives are the same or that the theories and practices of one are transferable to the other” (p. 7). Still, several examples of a close interaction between the two professions have been given, and it is exciting to realize how much they are parallel to each other. While Marcella’s Masters is not in Library Science, she does work with librarians and feels that they also think there is no easy way to separate, or make a distinction, between the two professions. Another interesting theory of this that Marcella discussed is that with most artifacts, either in a library or museum, the focus is typically on the individual item, rather than on the collection as a whole. Titles in libraries are generally entered into library catalogs separately, with each item able to be searched independently. Marcella’s job is also about creating records for items to be searched by librarians and researchers.

Marcella also creates an example between the two professions by entertaining thoughts about how unpublished materials are used to create published materials, and how the published materials then act as reference tools for the individuals creating more unpublished materials. Both archiving and libraries provide context for each other, and are involved in a never ending circle of creating, disseminating, and diffusing information.

Conclusion

This interview with Marcella brought about new ideas on what archiving means to our history, and how we can continue to keep archiving current in regards to technology.

Technology is constantly changing, creating a need for researching tools to be kept up to date, so individuals can utilize the archives in better and different ways. By talking with Marcella, it is obvious more archivists are needed to keep up with this need, which would help with time constraints. However, budget issues and cutbacks are what most institutions are facing right now, but hopefully history can still be preserved and new ideas for how this can be done will emerge for archiving to stay current while still focusing on the past.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

How did you become an archivist?

What educational experiences helped to prepare you for your job?

Have you worked in a variety of archives? If so, which ones?

What is the mission of the archives where you currently work?

What are the three greatest challenges you face in fulfilling your job responsibilities?

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

Do you see archiving changing to reflect the technologies of today?

What special precautions do you take with the archives you work with?

How do you find archiving items fits within the realm of the library world?

What other details would you like me to know about archiving?