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Kansas State Historical Society Archives

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Abstract

Archivist librarians are sustaining the culture of our ancestors by providing artifacts and other information for today's general public to use as research. Their jobs require that they know the collection thoroughly, and they want to preserve these items so the public can access them. Strict policies are put into place to help librarians continue to provide the level of service that is required and to protect the researcher, as well as the items being researched. An afternoon spent with Lin Fredericksen at the Kansas State Historical Society Library solidified the notion of cooperation between archivist and researcher, and the roles of instructor and seeker.

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The interview for this assignment was conducted with Lin Fredericksen, head of reference at Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) on Thursday, February 25, 2010. The interview revealed surprising information about archives in general, and processes for retrieving information that was not anticipated. After speaking with Lin for a short while about the policies of the KSHS library, Lin started to demonstrate the processes for finding the answer to the history of Topeka's public libraries. As the interview progressed, it became apparent that while the researcher's role was different than the archivist's role, the archivist functions to improve interaction between both in two ways: knowledge and protection for access. The archivist, Lin, uses her knowledge of search patterns to assist patrons, compared to patrons accessing material themselves, such as browsing at a public library. Lin also follows strict policies to protect the archives, at the same time making the archives accessible to the public, not just to academics, but to ordinary people.

Lin did offer some history of the KSHS, which has been preserving items from Kansas' heritage since 1875. The library was a 1995 addition to the KSHS museum and according to the KSHS website (2010), items their collection includes are photographs, letters, diaries, and other personal papers. It also includes Kansas newspapers video, film, sound recordings books, periodicals maps, architectural drawings, state government records such as governor's papers, and state censuses family history resources (n.p.).

Because of the sensitive nature of the materials within the library, there are strict policies the librarians must employ to protect the items. These include registering, which is done by providing personal information to obtain a registration number. This number is used by the patron upon coming into the library on the registration sheet. The number also corresponds to

patron's ZIP codes, enabling the library staff to collect statistical information. Personal belongings are to be put into lockers outside the library, but they do allow laptops to be brought in. All items are inspected upon leaving the library. KSHS does allow photos to be taken without a flash but only with a prior arrangement and by signing a sheet detailing copyright laws. Photocopying is done by the librarians, and it is provided for items at a cost of \$.30 a page.

Finding information about the history of Topeka's public libraries began by thinking about what kind of information was needed. Obviously, Topeka has been the capitol for many years, and while the KSHS library has information from throughout the state, Topeka history is prevalent in the library because of it being the state capitol. Lin stated the question might be harder to solve if it was about a small town out in western Kansas, but she was confident we could find the answer even so. Since the question was about Topeka, Lin suggested the place to start was the card catalog section. KSHS has a specific room that houses the card catalogs, which also has tables set up in the middle for browsing.

Lin pulled the drawer that was labeled Topeka (Hou-L), stating she believed we would find something under the subject heading "Topeka Libraries". When asked how the ordinary patron would think to look under this subject heading, Lin replied that most patrons are helped by the librarians the minute they walk in the door. As Hunter (2003) states, the entrance interview serves to "clarify the researcher's topic and available time" (p. 221). There is no index or subject heading list for the card catalog, so experience is what helps in this area. While reference help is valuable to the novice researcher, it seems there should be some finding aids for the experienced researcher. As Jimerson (2000) asserts, "All users need equal access; they do not all need equal time or the same method of access" (p. 428). This is where the archivist's role differs from the researcher's role. Most libraries have reference librarians there to help, however

normally after the researcher has tried to find the information themselves first. The archivist's knowledge of the collection and the preference to help find the information is what changes their role.

The card catalog yielded more than 100 possible titles, with subtitles being Directories, Mulvane, Periodicals, Phillips Aeronautical, and Topeka Public Libraries. There was also one directional card, "see also Friends of the Topeka Public Library". Lin chose the title "History of the Topeka Free Public Library", which was an article in the *Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin*. Lin gave instructions to fill out the request form, which was then given to one of the pages for retrieval from the stacks. These stacks are not accessible to the public, but any title can be retrieved with the proper forms and signatures. This brings to light the archivist's role of providing protection of the materials while simultaneously providing access to the public. These rules and regulations regarding the access to materials enable the archivist to help the researcher by keeping the items available and intact.

While waiting for the book to be retrieved, Lin went to the second phase of the search process. Lin stated individuals working with the KSHS had compiled scrapbooks of clippings from the area newspapers. Behind the reference desk is a binder labeled "Clippings Volumes Subject Headings". In this binder was again the subject heading "Topeka Libraries". Once again, a slip was filled out with the call number on the card and the title description, to give to the page to pull. The book returned was literally a scrapbook in which an archivist had cut out articles from the newspapers pertaining to the Topeka Free Library. The name of paper and date of publication was handwritten at the top of each article. These scrapbooked newspaper articles began in 1873 and went through 1951. Again, this shows the knowledge the archivists have to have about their collection because the average researcher would not know to look in the

Clippings volumes behind the reference desk. Pugh (2005) theorizes, “Locating information in archives is often inferential, based on what is known about the records, their creators, and the circumstances of their creation” (p. 118). Their role is instruction based, rather than seeking based.

Upon receiving the first book from the page, the article answered the question immediately and accurately, with an eleven page article giving the date of initiation, the names of the group of seventy original members, cost of the original building, total population served, and the librarian’s names and years served from 1874 to 1847. This information, combined with the scrapbook, was enough to answer the question; however Lin decided to look further by incorporating the library catalog into the search. Most of the information in the electronic catalog was added after 1995, when the library moved to the KSHS grounds. Searching for the history of Topeka’s public libraries did return the Clippings volumes, but did not return the SCHS Bulletin, because the book had not been added to the electronic catalog. This returns to the fact that archivists have to protect these items because there is truly only one copy, not accessible through any digital medium.

When asked about the use of technology in searches, Lin stated that most of the archives in the KSHS library were tactile, not electronic, but they have started digitizing some pictures, letters, and diaries. They have also included some videos and podcasts on this website. The website for these images is www.kansasmemory.org. Upon searching, there was one digital image of the Topeka Public Library from 1911-1915. This is an important photo archive because the library pictured was the original building on the State Capitol grounds that was demolished after the second building was built. This push to add more digital items to the collection will

protect newspapers, books, maps, and other items that are withstanding the test of time in the collection, while still providing access for the researcher.

Utilizing an archive library was a unique experience on many different levels. This special library was unlike the public and academic libraries in that it was strictly user-centered, mostly because of necessity. The methods of retrieval, security and protection were unlike most libraries, but the archivist is there specifically to lead the researcher through the process, from start (signing in) to finish (performing a security check on the way out). The roles between the researcher and the archivist do differ, in that they are seeker and instructor, but a favorable end result is wanted by both parties. Lin's role as the archivist instructing the researcher helps to create a relationship between the two, opening possibilities for future interaction.

References

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