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Information professional or caretaker of "Old Stuff"

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CIMA Talk 5/12/06

"Information Professional or Caretaker of 'Old Stuff'"

Intro: I was a bit surprised by the offer to be a panelist for this session as I am certainly a notch or two below the people on this panel. So I tried to think what unique angle or perspective I could add to this panel discussion. What I came up with was to offer my insight into how I have attempted to tread (and how I hope to pursue in the future) a path as both an informational professional with technical expertise and as a historian with historical expertise.

Of course this debate has raged in one form or another in the archivist profession from the 1930s until today. I am framing the discussion in what I feel to be the current manifestation of this debate as between archivists who hang their hat on contributing technical expertise in the form of digitization, database management, web page creation, etc., who quite frequently have an MLS or Archival Studies Degree, and archivists who hang their hat as historians who publish, give talks, appear on TV, who frequently have history degrees.

All my observations are impressionistic (qualitative vs. quantitative) but I'm curious if some of my observations about Utah State University are indicative of broader trends in Special Collections or Archival departments.

Recently a disturbing thing happened to me. A young man who was a student of mine from Utah State University started his first archives job making more money than I currently make. He broke a cardinal rule of the archives class that Steve Sturgeon and I teach which is that no-one in the class can start an archives job making more money than the instructors. I urged him to tell his employer not to pay him more than $33,458. He said he would try, but he couldn't promise anything. Later he told me they insisted on paying him more than $33,458. Even more depressing is that as I look around our library I see younger, techno-savy librarians being hired at an alarming pace. These people run over there lunch breaks, bike or hike to work, and their talk is full of "blackberries, text-messaging, ripping and burning, blogging, tivo, wyfi, etc." They are the people who came into their jobs with ideas and skills for adapting new technology to traditional library functions and as USU has increasingly gone to a merit based system of raises it is obvious that these are the new up-and-comers of our library.

Almost overnight I became aware of my own obsolescence although, of course, this didn' t happen overnight. During my six years at USU there has been a profound shift in the " power dynamics" of the library. Special Collections went from the elite department to, as one of our techies put it, "housing the backups to the digital originals." Special Collections was once the "apple of the Library Director's eye," but now that status is reserved for electronic journals, online databases and the digital library. The new up-and-

comers (at least according to salaries) in the library are not in Special Collections. To put it simply, publishing an article or giving a paper does not carry the same weight as say, creating a new database or adapting a new technology for use in bibliographic instruction. It has also increasingly become apparent that in this new climate the place reserved for Special Collections by library administration is to house sources for digitization.

The irony is that when I was brought on board at Utah State University it was, in part, to be the "techie" for the department. Which is pretty scary if I'm the one who knows the most about technology in our department. It was hoped that I would take over the digital library and the SCA website. I did not take over the digital library (which is a long story) but I did eventually take over the SCA website. I describe myself as an archivist who knows enough about technology to get the job done. I have switched photo reproductions from the conventional darkroom to an all digital operation. For instance, I converted old documents from word, word perfect, and excel into HTML and posted them to the internet, I created digital exhibits, and I've assisted in the creation of the new digital library (in 2003) and with digitization of photographic material for inclusion into ContentDM and into the Mountain West Digital Library. I've also helped out in the department with some basic tasks relating to e-mail, excel databases, and digital audio. I also serve as the SCA representative on our Library Systems committee (where I only understand about 10% of what is discussed).

If I'm an archivist who knows enough about technology to get the job done then I'm also a historian who does just enough history to be called a historian. Since arriving at Utah State University my focus has been to re-invent myself as a photo curator and a specialist in Western photography rather than a reference archivist with a broad knowledge of Wyoming history as I was at the American Heritage Center. When I got to USU SCA in 2000 we already had people with specialized knowledge in local, water, and Mormon history. One of the things I've noticed is that if I say something about photographs as the "photo curator" it seems to carry extra weight. People assume I must be an expert in this area.

Consequently I began by reading and researching about Western Photography. I was able to give a few class-room lectures and public lectures, and I took a couple of history of photography courses from the USU art department. I then submitted three entries for the Encyclopedia of 19th Century Photography and gave papers at the Owen Wister Symposium at the University of Wyoming and the Utah Historical Society annual meeting. The paper I presented at the Owen Wister Symposium was entitled: "Creating a Visual West: The Stereographs of C.R. Savage and A.J. Russell." This paper became the basis for a lecture I submitted for the Utah Council for the Humanities entitled: "Creating a New West: Photographers along the Union Pacific Railroad," which I presented six times over the last couple of years. The thesis of that presentation is that railroad photographers played a crucial part is the remaking of the 1840s and 1850s image of the interior American West from a desolate area fit only for "Savages and Wild Beasts" to the

1860s and 1870s image of a land filled with opportunities for settlers and capitalists.

Most recently I published a paper about the risque images of Salt Lake City photographer Charles Ellis Johnson. This paper examines why a man who outwardly appears as a serious Mormon businessman and who was sort of the unofficial "Church Photographer" also published lewd and risque images. Unfortunately I couldn't really answer why he did it, but I did speculate that he was Mormon in appearance only and led something of a double-life. Luckily Kent Powell and the Utah Historical Quarterly still published the paper despite this crucial flaw.

Beyond the furtherance of my career I do feel that history is important for archives. If nothing else we can sympathize with our researchers, but we also can suggest different resources for them to use and we understand the research process. In acquisitions we understand what are "hot" historical topics. We can also separate the common and mundane from the informative and unusual. We can also promote scholarly research in the collections under our care by using them in our own research (which is what I've tried to do with photographs). In the internet age we reach out to constituencies that are not as savvy historical speaking and who seek our interpretation of the documents in our care. Finally, my advice to young, potential archivists is that if you're really more interested in technology than in history then you should go into a profession where you can actually make a better living.

That's a summary of my career to this point. My dual approach to my job worked well enough to get me tenure and promotion to associate status. At 35 years old though I feel that I have a lot of career left in me and at the risk of appearing greedy, and kinda whiney, I think I wouldn't turn down a better salary. At least I hope to avoid any embarrassing episodes with former students as I described earlier. I wish I could say that I had higher and more noble aspirations, but not at this point in my career. Archivists are reluctant to discuss and often to advocate for higher salaries. For example a few years back one of my old friends took a job as an archivist for the Catholic Church. I called to congratulate him and I asked him if the benefits were good. He said yeah he thought they had health care. I then asked him about retirement. He said he wasn't sure. Baffled, I asked him about the salary. He said he thought it was in the "middle 30s," but it wasn't finalized. I wish I had this laissaiz-fare attitude about my salary and benefits but I do not. I know you never get rich in the archives field, but you can be comfortable.

At a conference on digitization I recently attended one speaker answered a question as to the difference between a "metadata specialist" or "digital archivist" and a regular old archivist. Her definition was that the metadata/digital archivist makes at least $10,000 more a year than you do. By coincidence my father always told me that a "good salary" is $10,000 more than you're making right now. In my case and at USU the road to a $10,000 raise (although right now I would settle for being considered in the "Up-and-coming" category) is by continuing to embrace ever-more-sophisticated technology while

at least passing oneself off as an expert in something. The three library faculty at USU who achieved full librarian status (as opposed to associate librarian) did it by emphasizing an area of specialization beyond their library duties. It may not seem fair that I have to do both, but "them's the rules." Consequently I will be pursuing an Master's of Library Science Degree from the University of North Texas in the fall of 2007. With this degree I plan to specialize in digital librarianship. One of the advantages of an MLS is the technology emphasis. A constant rule of technology is that the bar is raised higher and higher each year and the technology you understand now will soon become obsolete. What I have done in the last 6 years doesn't have a whole lot of bearing on what I'll need to do in the next 6 years and I hope this degree will keep me current. I tried to do a more sophisticated analysis of how many of the recent jobs posted in the SAA employment section require an MLS, but got bogged down in technicalities. It seems that generally the MLS as a requirement for a archival job has reared it's ugly head more and more. As I looked through the ads, though, very few jobs outside of Special Collections require it or even have it preferred. Suffice it to say that about ½ of the jobs posted there that are at a faculty or department head level require either an MLS or an Archival Studies Degree (not sure what that means as there arguable isn't such a critter). That percentage, however, goes up to 70-80% if you look at Special Collections faculty/administrative jobs or jobs where the MLS is preferred. I didn't see any jobs (outside of jobs which required a Ph.D.) which excluded you as a candidate for only having an MLS.

At the same time I won't be forgetting about history. I also plan to continue my research into the Union Pacific Photographers (probably after I get the MLS degree) which will, hopefully, lead to a book. As I mentioned earlier, gaining full librarian status hinges on expertise in something beyond library work, and strongly suggests that you have at least one published book.

In Summing Up I would say that my guess is that Utah State University is not an isolated case and archives/Special Collections will use ever-more-sophisticated technology. I also guess that the "new" up-and-coming archivist must have at least a basic skill level with technology (e-mail attachments, excel, electronic searching, word processing, web page design, etc.) but I suspect that many archivists struggle with even basic computer knowledge. There might even be a few people out there who like an old friend, declared the computer to be, "The New Capitalistic Tool of Oppression," and who refused to work on a computer. I should note, however, that this old friend exempted e-mail and certain internet sites from that categorization. This new archivist must be able to communicate effectively with technical people using the current technical mumbo jumbo. I think he or she will also have to become more comfortable working in a collaborative environment where we don't have to understand the nuts and bolts of a project or even how the technology works (the "techies" will do that for us). We do have to be supportive and do our assigned part of the project. Universities are brimming with tech savvy students and staff and we can have others do the heavy lifting while we sit back and "supervise."

Let me also make it clear that I feel it would be silly to abandon our history roots and we don't need to become computer geeks. There are a lot of opportunities out there for the archivist/historian. For instance history professors have for the last 25-30 years been largely abandoning the field of local and state history. This opens up opportunities for others (such as Bob Parson or John Sillitoe) to be the "expert" on, say, the history of Ogden, Utah. There is often a void at the local history level between enthusiastic, but often misguided amateurs, and accurate, but a bit staid, academic historians. Also all of us have had experiences (what I jokingly call "the drama of archives") with patrons and the look of awe in their eyes when we bring out our heavy duty archives treasures. Nearly all the patrons I've dealt with expect me to be an expert on historical photographs and photography.

In the end my advice to the young archivists out there is to do whatever you need to do in order to increase the prestige of your position. While I wish I could say that the path of the historian/archivist is the correct one, my guess is that for most of us we will not have the luxury of choosing to be only a historian/archivist or only a technician/archivist. We need to be a technohistorical archivist (I looked up technohistorical in the dictionary and couldn't find it, but I like it). This is hard, however, because we as professionals want to " hang our hat" on something. We want to know what it is we're really good at. A student once asked me what makes a good archivist. A number of things came to mind, but I couldn't come up with one single thing. My mind kept coming back to the thought that an archivist is someone who is good at balance; between their myriad duties; between public and institutional users, between access and preservation, between bulk of material vs. level of description, and especially between having historical knowledge and having technical know-how. If we do this we just might be able to put Special Collections back into it's rightful spot as the elite division of the academic library.

Thank You.

1. Do an analysis of jobs that have come up in SAA's employment stuff.
2. Check out that SAA newsletter article about "cross a librarian with a historian."
3. Talk about the debate between MLS/Archival Studies vs. History.