

# A Menu for Menus: Organizing a Menu Collection

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**Abstract:** An unprocessed collection of menus exists in SUNY Schenectady's archives, a treasure trove of information for the history buffs, the culinary enthusiasts, and more. In a desire to make these accessible, both in hard copy and online, an organization and digitization process have begun concurrently - organizing the menus and also digitizing them and creating finding aids. Lessons learned from starting to process the collection both digitally and physically, and the processing of a menu collection as a whole will be shared.

## Introduction

Ephemera offers an insight into the past, telling stories that traditional artifacts such as documents and photographs cannot tell. These items that are saved for personal remembering become “fetishised so that we might tell tales of who we are as individuals” yet are often “discarded as we move on” from the moment, unless specifically saved and later encountered.<sup>1</sup> Learning the whys and hows of the items, how were they collected, how were they used, when they used, when they stopped being used, and more can all add to the knowledge of a past culture, event, or person.

While this collection of international menus donated by Dr. M. Estelle Smith to SUNY Schenectady County Community College is only a snapshot of a person's life, of individual seemingly disconnected events that occurred. These artifacts are intended for a personal archive of “touchstones that lead to the recollection of past events,”<sup>2</sup> and were not organized with the intention of future generations being interested, much information can be missing and might never be found. This situation presented a challenge. How does one handle such a collection, how is it organized, how is it described, how can one find out more to place the collection and its individual components into a larger context? These, as James Mussell (2012) calls them “key instruments of cultural memory,” are often meant to be disposable and thus are often fragile and not intended for long-lasting.<sup>3</sup> Due to the fragility of some of the items, and their intention to be disposable, it was determined by the archivist in conversation with the Director of Library Services to ensure their lasting through digitization as well as physical processing.

An unorganized, unprocessed collection of over 500 print restaurant menus and other associated printed ephemera was placed into six computer boxes when the archives were relocated a few years ago. With a lack of context, organization, descriptions, or any other records of what had been done with these items in the past, it was determined to digitally and physically process the collection concurrently. As several other collections had been processed using ContentDM through the New York Heritage Digital Collections (NYHDC), although without any documentation left for future archive workers to follow, it was determined to use ContentDM as the method for archiving this collection.

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<sup>1</sup> James Mussell, “The Passing of Print,” *Media History* 18, no. 1 (2012): 81.

<sup>2</sup> David Zeitlyn, “Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 41 (2012): 468.

<sup>3</sup> Mussell, 77



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## **Problem Statement**

Should the collection of print ephemera be retained and treated as an archive of the events in the donor's life that each item represented<sup>4</sup>, or should it be focused on the culinary arts as it was donated with the culinary arts program in mind. This collection consists mainly of restaurant menus from around the world, and items related to travel such as places of accommodation, affiliated stores, postcards, and brochures. Should it be organized chronologically to represent the travels of the individual? Are these menus from every place the donor visited, or are they only those that were significant for some reason lost to the future researchers? Should they be organized geographically to represent the places the person had travelled? Or should it be organized by cuisine, to aid the culinary students in their research? It was determined the purpose was to preserve personal memories, rather than a collective, historical, or archival collection, and it was processed as such.<sup>5</sup>

The ones presenting the history, the ones organizing the artifacts, influence the story being told. In determining who should present the history, is it better to have someone familiar with the content and context of the artifacts or is it better to have an outsider, and what biases might be encountered in either situation? Unfortunately, this collection had been donated several years before the current archivist began processing the collection in 2008 by Dr. Smith. Limited notes were available of the now deceased collector. It fell to the archivist to make the decisions, acknowledging their bias towards the culinary program at the college rather than the individual who collected the menus.<sup>6</sup>

After examining the menus, it was determined that most were a mix of cuisines, and that many did not have dates of acquisition so these arrangements would not be feasible. It was determined to organize this as a culinary collection, geographically, limited to menus.

## **Methodology**

Before beginning, a sense of what the collection entailed needed to be obtained. The collection was determined, after contacting a former worker in the archive, to be donated by a single person to the college due to the college's large culinary program. These menus and other printed ephemera were collected by Dr. Smith without any guide for inclusion or exclusion, and no standard recordkeeping was made of the menus as to their location, date of acquisition, or any other context for the menu. It was assumed that the menus themselves would serve as an artifact for the collector to evoke much larger memories of the situation where the menu was obtained (the trip, the meal, the people, etc.), and that maybe others who might have visited that restaurant might also have memories of the restaurants.<sup>7</sup>

There were also various other pieces of ephemera in the collection, including postcards, pamphlets and brochures related to the restaurant or the affiliated lodging such as a hotel or inn, nearby tourist attractions, and in one case a musical score. "We preserve what we value and these values vary at the individual, institutional and social levels."<sup>8</sup> It was determined to only catalog those items that were menus. The other ephemera was integrated for researchers who came to the archive and were interested in more information. This was done as the donation was intended to be a menu collection specifically for the

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<sup>4</sup> Mussell, 81

<sup>5</sup> Zeitlyn, 467.

<sup>6</sup> Krylova

<sup>7</sup> Krylova; Mussell.

<sup>8</sup> Mussell, 80.

culinary arts program at the college. It appeared to be an archive dedicated to the individual, rather than the culinary aspect. A chronological organization might be more appropriate as it would be a timeline of the person's travels. Several menus did not even have the name of the restaurant on them, and the collector had not placed the name anywhere on the item to help identify the menu's origin.

As there were both national and international menus in the collection, it was determined to begin by sorting by country, and then go from there. The archive masks the actual rhythm and rhyme of the menu collection in its original form because the organization is made by the archivist who has no sense of the order in which these were collected. They are presented them in a logical order to the archivist.

Once the archivist had sorted the menus by country, in consultation with the New York Heritage Digital Collection (NYHDC) coordinator for the library, it was determined that all menu locations needed to be in the form of Country – State/Province - County – City – Further Sublocation. The menus were sorted in each Country by State / Province, where it could be found. In researching menu locations for those that were not labelled either by the business itself or by the collector with a location were researched online. Each state, province, or country was placed into either a box or folder depending on the size of the collection for ease of scanning and moving the items around. When information matched, the location was noted for the item; when no information could be found, the item was given a location of Unknown. For any menu without a city listed, research was done to try to pinpoint the location of the institution as close as possible to the city. Going country by country, each menu's geographic location was pinpointed as carefully as possible, finding the province or state, the county or equivalent, and the city when possible. This information was noted on slips of paper added temporarily to the menus while they were being physically processed.

Menus are potentially fragile, being as they are “unlikely to be robust, unless such robustness is the result of another desired property,”<sup>9</sup> such as withstanding a high-volume restaurant necessitating the enclosing of the menu in plastic (which causes other problems such as sticking and glare), and the length of time they had been stored in non-ideal ways. In some cases the menus were food or drink stained, and in rare instances scraps of food were found stuck to the menus. It was determined to begin scanning the menus first, and then to physically process them. All menus that fit on a standard multipurpose copier were scanned as JPEG files, to ensure as much information was gained from each page as possible. The multipurpose machine sent all scans to a personal email. The scans were then altered to face the correct direction, had their file types changed to JPG as required by ContentDM, renamed according to a naming convention (institution code, state or country (if outside of the United States or Canada) code, shortened restaurant name, and additional descriptors as needed to differentiate among menus from the same institution, and then page number of the menu), and organized into folders for later uploading to ContentDM. The base code for the restaurant and information were recorded on a spreadsheet that also included (where available) the street address, city, county, state, country, and telephone number of the restaurant for the metadata

Once this was done, the menus were sorted into archival quality folders labelled as Country – State – County – City. These files were placed into archival boxes arranged alphabetically by country and then alphabetically by state, then county, then city. Several menus were too large to fit on the standard scanner, and no larger scanner was able to be located at the college, either a flatbed or a camera scanner. A makeshift method was made to obtain images of these menus by laying a large sheet of white paper on the floor and taking photographs of the menus page by page using a cell phone. These files were treated as the scanned files had been.

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<sup>9</sup> Mussell p. 80

When access to the NYHDC was obtained, the digital files began being uploaded as compound objects, one compound object for each menu. The metadata for each object was created, including finding the standard pieces in the existing collections as necessary to ensure standardization across the college's entire digital collection such as the form of the college's name and contact information. This process occurred simultaneously with the physical processing of the final resting places of the menus, the research, and the scanning. Once the physical collection was organized into boxes, a print finding aid was created, to be available both in print and on the college archive's webpage to ease locating items of interest.

## **Results**

This process has led to an organized menu collection, both physically and digitally, available for anyone who wishes to view it. Anyone from around the world who has the link has digital access to the collection, which also enables printing and downloading of the images without needing to access the print items. The digital collection is also of use in sharing items with those who find items in the physical collection who wish to take copies home as files can be printed, downloaded, and shared on site as well, limiting the amount of exposure to scanning and copying that would otherwise be required. All items were eventually able to be digitized, and as much information as possible was gathered for each metadata record. A geographically organized collection, physically arranged alphabetically, was also found to be the most effective way of organization.

## **Findings**

In this process, several findings came about regarding processing of future collections in the archive. First is that the physical collection needs to be organized ahead of time to make scanning and future processing easier. Scanned items are labelled by the scanner in chronological order and thus scanning in order makes it easier for later processing. The scanner labels the files by the user's name first followed by the chronological designation. It was determined to always log in as the same user to make it easier to find the files in order. Finally, for larger items that do not fit on the scanner, or for more fragile items, the archivist found that using a camera and a white sheet of paper laid on the floor as a background is the most effective way to obtain images due to glare and height issues. Also, that this is best done as a two-person project, with one person near the floor for turning pages, and one person standing to take the pictures. Potentially a makeshift tripod might make this easier and will be tried with future collections.

## **Conclusion**

A digitized collection, even if used for the purpose of locating items in the actual archives, is of great use. Being able to physically organize the collection in one system, but then having multiple systematic access points in the online collection, just as with the online public access catalog versus the card catalog in the library is a huge benefit to the researcher seeking information in the collection. When obtaining a collection, it is of utmost importance to record as much information as to the context, ownership, and intent of the collection. It is also suggested to obtain missing information about artifacts as soon as possible, before the information becomes obsolete as with several of the restaurants. The method of scanning, and how files are saved need to be considered when making scanning plans.

## Resources

Krylova, Anna. "Dancing on the Graves of the Dead: Building a World War II Memorial in Post-Soviet Russia." In *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*, edited by Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, 83-102. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

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