

Creative Collaboration for Collection Building: University of Tennessee’s Special Collections and Center for the Study of War and Society

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Abstract

This article is a case study of a collaborative partnership between the University of Tennessee’s Special Collections and Center for the Study of War and Society to build collections that document a specific community of people: veterans of 20th century American conflicts. This relationship allows both organizations to maximize efforts beyond their individual existing resources and can serve as a model for others looking to build collections in a strategic and efficient way.

Introduction

An essential role for many archivists is that of collection building. In order to intentionally build collections that appropriately document a community of people with a shared experience, it is crucial to engage with, and integrate one’s self into, that community. In 1982, archivist Andrea Hinding claimed that in order to document something fully, one “must understand it fully – define it in all its complexity – and select for preservation material that records both its significant and representative features.”¹ This is an idealized goal which many collecting archivists strive for, but the reality is much more complex. Most archives and other cultural heritage institutions regularly deal with stagnant, or perhaps even dwindling, resources. Additionally, for the archivists responsible for collection growth, it is often only one of a variety of tasks they perform. The extent of staff responsibilities and limited resources are just a few of the myriad constraints that can make it impractical for an archivist or an institution to wholly commit to the thorough understanding and documentation of a single community. At the same time, archivists know that passive collecting can result in unrepresentative collections and therefore in inaccurate or incomplete historical documentation.² So the question is: how can archivists successfully and proactively develop collections that document distinctive communities within the constraints of their job’s priorities and available resources?

Problem Statement

One common strategy undertaken by many collecting institutions and archivists to build representative collections is through partnerships. Often, archivists work closely with local organizations to inform those groups on recordkeeping best practices. Through this relationship, the organization’s members learn new skills to help preserve their work and history while the archivists gain a deeper understanding of the represented community. This alliance and knowledge transfer often builds trust between the two entities and can result in the organization eventually deciding to deposit their records with the archivists’ collecting institution. While this speaks to the aspect of integration into the community, this type of situation still relies on a one-to-one model whereby the archivist must invest time and energy into a single

¹ Andrea Hinding, “Toward Documentation: New Collecting Strategies in the 1980s,” in *Options for the 80s: Proceedings of the Second National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries* (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1982), 535.

² Terry Abraham and Scott Cline, “Literature Survey: Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice,” *The American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991).

community or organization; to do that for every possible community or organization within an institution's collection area on top of other job responsibilities is impossible.

A different approach to this concept is to reframe the boundaries of partnership; instead of focusing on single record-keeping entities, archivists could collaborate with an intermediary group that has a wide community network. This creative and practical approach can make the most of archivists' time and reach. One such cooperative partnership has taken place at the University of Tennessee between the Libraries' Special Collections department and the Department of History's Center for the Study of War and Society.

Methodology

The Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Tennessee (Special Collections) works to acquire, arrange, preserve, and promote rare and unique materials supporting the needs of their university community, largely students and professors, as well as scholars.³ This department is comprised of archivists and librarians who collect materials in all formats and facilitate the use of those materials through research, undergraduate and graduate instruction, exhibitions, events, and more. As both an institutional archive and a collecting repository, their collections document the history and culture of their university, Tennessee, and the greater Southeastern United States.

Located in the University of Tennessee's Department of History, the Center for the Study of War and Society (CSWS) is "dedicated to the study of the relationship between war and society."⁴ Through their research, CSWS aims to understand the human experience of war and peace. In addition to fostering research among scholars, faculty, and students, CSWS also hosts public programming and community outreach events such as lectures and conferences. The staff of CSWS includes a professor and scholar of modern history as the center's director along with a project manager who is a veteran of the U. S. Air Force.

Upon the center's inception in the late 1980s, the staff of CSWS began an ambitious oral history project that continues to this day. The oral history program captures the voices and experiences of veterans of modern American conflicts, largely those from East Tennessee. The oral histories take a "whole life" approach in which interviewees talk about their military and conflict experiences in addition to speaking on their families, upbringing, and life post-war. Through their dedication to this project and other outreach initiatives, CSWS staff have proven themselves to this community as a trusted and valued collaborator, resulting in the development of a large network of veterans and their families.

As soon as they began the oral history project, CSWS staff quickly realized that many veterans, in addition to telling their stories, had physical material documenting their military service. As CSWS did not have the physical space nor the archival knowledge to preserve such items, they contacted Special Collections about a possible collaboration. Seeing the enormous value in this material, Special Collections was eager to solidify the partnership. By collecting material in addition to the oral histories, the two groups can work together to create a more inclusive historical record of this community and their experiences.

CSWS networks with veterans and their families to continue the oral history program and to solicit collection material. Their historical knowledge and military experience provide them the understanding,

³ "Special Collections – About the Collections," University of Tennessee Libraries, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://www.lib.utk.edu/special>.

⁴ "Center for the Study of War and Society," University of Tennessee College of Arts and Sciences, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://csws.utk.edu>.

tact, and delicacy needed to work closely with this specific community of people. Special Collections then processes, houses, and makes those collections available for research. Their knowledge of archival best practices positions them to best take care of the material and facilitate its use. Additionally, their physical space, which includes both archival collection storage as well as a staffed reading room for researchers, poises them to more easily tend to the material. Through this reciprocal relationship by applying each groups' expertise, both groups can address their needs beyond the existing resources of the individual organizations.

Results

Over time, this partnership has seen tangible results. The foremost outcome of this unique relationship is the development of collections that provide a multifaceted and more complete historical record of veterans' experiences. This collaboration increases the scope and diversity of material in Special Collections; the staff of Special Collections are able to consciously document a community of people with a shared experience who otherwise were not present in their collections. The material is then available not only to CSWS staff and scholars for their study, but to the wider University of Tennessee research community including students, faculty, and the public. This material has an extensive range of appeal. Firstly, students are able to see the personal side of war, supplementing their course readings and lectures. Courses that have utilized these collections so far include World War II and Memory; Europe in the Age of Total War; and composition classes from the Department of English. Secondly, faculty and other scholars can explore a more intimate view of these American conflicts as part of their research. Thirdly, descendants of the veterans themselves can learn more about their family members' participation and experiences. The availability of these collections and the information contained within them broadens one's understanding of these tumultuous and complex times in history.

The partnership has thus far resulted in the addition of 265 linear feet of material and over 300 oral history interviews, all of which document more than 900 veterans of American conflicts in the 20th century. These collections include original correspondence, photographs, scrapbooks, military documents, and much more. Many veterans have also donated their personal memoirs, whether published or written solely for the benefit of family and friends. Building this corpus of physical material also provides an avenue for veterans to participate in the memory process who do not feel comfortable being interviewed for an oral history. While the project's original focus was to document veterans of World War II, due to the collaboration's success, it has since grown to document more recent conflicts such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War. It has also expanded to document the experiences of some World War I veterans, thanks to the generosity of their descendants. The collections represent a diverse range of veterans including men and women, people of color, and individuals from each branch of the U. S. Armed Forces.

Another result of this alliance is the growing opportunities for collaborative outreach. The partnership enhances the profile of both Special Collections and CSWS, both on campus and in the community, as they combine their resources for exciting outreach projects. Through joint initiatives, they increase their visibility to their established networks as well as to new, potential users and donors.

One successful outreach initiative was a six-month exhibit on World War I and World War II that drew mainly from the collections brought in through the partnership. One of the archivists from Special Collections curated the exhibit in consultation with CSWS staff. The archivist and CSWS director gave gallery talks to undergraduate students from the Department of History, and the popularity of the exhibit resulted in new donations of material. To mark the opening of the exhibit, staff of Special Collections and CSWS worked in tandem to plan and execute a reception and lecture that drew over 125 attendees, one of the highest event turnouts seen by either group.

Another fruitful outreach endeavor was a grant-funded digital collection to make many of the oral history interviews available online. Working together with a generous grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, Special Collections and CSWS staff digitized 375 audiocassette tapes holding interviews for over 160 veterans.⁵ This endeavor was also marked by an exciting event, jointly hosted by both groups, to commemorate the release of the digital collection.

Findings

Working together has been beneficial to both organizations, but it has not been without its challenges. For example, the original partnership was simply a verbal agreement between the two groups. Over time, it became obvious that in order to move the project forward appropriately, it was necessary to formalize the relationship on paper. Creating a memo of understanding allowed for the documentation of the terms of the collaboration as well as each organization's responsibilities. This written agreement clarifies the objectives of the partnership and serves as a cornerstone for informing any future decisions that either group may need to make.

As the collaborative relationship has evolved, so have the priorities and workflows. With each group bringing their own expertise to the partnership, they have used the opportunity to learn from one another. Archivists from Special Collections educated CSWS staff on the types of records best for collecting from donors. For example, CSWS staff often found that donors kept large quantities of widely published newspapers from their time in service; due to preservation and storage concerns, Special Collections staff advised that those items only be selected for inclusion in rare circumstances. CSWS staff aided archivists in further understanding the socio-cultural nuances of the historical material. Their intimate knowledge of the conflicts and time period aid in the identification and description of materials. Each group's specific knowledge contributes to the success of the relationship and to the growth of the collections.

As the partnership continues into the future, there are questions to consider. Both groups hope to maintain their reach among current and new users, making it important to consider new ways to amplify their collaboration and the work being done. Since both groups will continue to evolve independently, it is essential to consistently assess the status of the partnership and ensure that each group's work remains relevant to their own organizational missions. Collecting strategies and workflows may need to be updated or improved over time in order to meet changing demands and priorities.

Based on the success of this collaboration, as exemplified through the continual growth of collections and fruitful outreach initiatives, Special Collections can use this as a model for partnership with other organizations entrenched within specific communities, beginning with other University of Tennessee departments or centers and eventually broadening to regional organizations. Through this, Special Collections can work to intentionally but effectively document more communities in their area.

Conclusions

As archivists continue to balance strategic collection building with other increasing demands on their time, it becomes imperative for them to identify and attempt creative approaches and solutions. Based on the success of this collaboration, the experience between Special Collections and CSWS at the University of Tennessee can serve as an example for collecting archivists looking to intentionally grow their collections while remaining cognizant of their limitations. By broadening the concept of partnership and exploring unanticipated relationships beyond some of the traditional modes for collection building, working with trusted organizations deeply rooted in distinct communities allows archivists to maximize

⁵ "WWII Oral Histories," University of Tennessee Libraries, accessed November 16, 2018, <http://digital.lib.utk.edu/collections/wwiioralhistories>.

their efforts while also creating a more complete historical record. It also generates possibilities for new and better outreach initiatives, raising the profile of each group involved and opening doors to previously unforeseen opportunities.

Resources

Abraham, Terry, and Scott Cline. "Literature Survey: Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice." *The American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991).

Hinding, Andrea. "Toward Documentation: New Collecting Strategies in the 1980s." In *Options for the 80s: Proceedings of the Second National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries*. Greenwich: JAI Press, 1982.

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