

Preservation and the Future in the Northwest: A Conversation with Archivists and Librarians

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Introduction

The theme for this current issue of *PNLA Quarterly* is Preservation and the Future. This article addresses that topic in the form of a conversation with professionals in archives and libraries in Idaho and Washington that have a stake in the preservation, access, and future of library collections and historical materials in the Northwest. These perspectives offer points-of-view from an academic library, county historical society, and university special collections.

Participants included Dulce L. Kersting, Executive Director of the Latah County Historical Society¹; Lorena O’English, Social Sciences Librarian at Washington State University²; Erin Passehl Stoddart, Head of Special Collections and Archives at University of Idaho³; and Ashlyn Velte, Archivist at University of Idaho⁴.

The conversation was facilitated online by Rick Stoddart, a librarian at the University of Idaho, via email over a four-week period in June 2017. Questions were posed to each participant around definitions of preservation, future of preservation, privacy, and preservation challenges. The conversation below has been edited together for readability and flow. The words and content remain true to the intention and spirit of each author. The conversation begins with each person defining what preservation means to them.

Rick - Thank you all for agreeing to talk about preservation! To get us started I thought I’d ask what preservation is to you?

Dulce - Executive Director, Latah County Historical Society: When thinking about the preservation work that our small, community-based historical society takes on, I am primarily interested in gathering and saving records of experiences. In our office, preservation is about collecting pieces – documents, photos, oral histories, objects – that can inform a holistic understanding of a moment in time. Just like every archive, we struggle to be as inclusive as possible while also acknowledging our very real limitations to truly preserve a full record of the past. Our organization has been at this work for nearly fifty years, or longer if you consider we are descended from a pioneer association and a his-

torical club. While our work is changing at an accelerated pace, I think that the process of collecting and curating is now more important than ever.

Lorena - Social Sciences Librarian, Washington State University: When I think of preservation, I largely think of it in the context of stewardship over a library collection to provide for current and future use and the sustaining of the scholarly record. Most of the print collection I work with is part of a circulating collection, so books are checked out and sometimes returned not just with normal wear and tear but also the occasional marginalia or highlighting, water damage, etc. Preservation includes the physical collection: books, journals, media, and more specialized items (including our archives and special collections), but it also includes our online collection of reference works, ebooks, articles, and databases. It also includes judicious weeding, because of the limitations of space.

Ashlyn - Archivist, University of Idaho: I think preservation does two things: it keeps documents with valuable information from being destroyed or changed, and it makes them easier to find and use. What gets preserved can be very subjective and an entire area of study. Archives develop policies that inform decisions about what to preserve which helps us assign value to collections or items.

Erin - Head of Special Collections, University of Idaho: As an archivist, I would technically define preservation as taking in materials (both physical and digital) that fall under a collection development policy to prevent damage and extend the life of archival materials. Preservation can include environmental control, security, and delicate storage and handling of materials. These are all reasons why institutions such as archives, libraries, and museums do a better job of preserving historical and cultural materials than most individuals. We work hard to protect institutional and community history for future researchers and citizens to understand our place within a larger context of the state, the region, the country, etc.

Ashlyn: Yes, and when deciding what to keep I like to think about what is going to be most valuable to people in the future. It's usually the material that contains the most information and context about a time period or a subject area that will probably be the most useful to them. It might take the form of people's personal papers (correspondence, notes, memos, photographs, etc.), in books, in publications, or even in ephemeral materials like posters, flyers, and stickers. Today we also look at digital formats like word documents, digital photographs, web sites, social media, and email.

Lorena: I should note that my library is lucky enough to have a trained conservator, but many libraries do not. In the case of items available through electronic access, if we have to cancel a journal or database that does not come with guaranteed perpetual access, we lose all access – there is no preservation possible.

Ashlyn: Lorena mentions journals that do not guarantee perpetual access even after paying millions of dollars in subscription fees. A change in this problem will only come if significant changes are made either in our professional practices or the publishing industry or both.

Dulce: Information that seems always available online is actually deteriorating and disappearing

just like paper records of old. We cannot rely on our future donors to be collecting and self-curating records in the way that their grandparents did before delivering their treasures to our institution.

Lorena: When I think of why we preserve our collection in the current online era, I would argue first, that not everything is online – copyright and other intellectual property issues can get in the way, for example. There is also the issue of editions – you may need the 1979 edition, when the only thing available online is a 2013 update. Online access to journals is expensive, and some journals are not available online at all, or in a way that works for libraries, or don't have a complete backfile available. Many are too expensive for libraries to subscribe to in these days of inflation and declining budgets. Streaming media is limited by availability and is far too expensive for most libraries to not retain a physical collection of DVDs, VHS, and even older formats. In the absence of open access for everything, publishers' walled gardens will always mean that there are high financial barriers for libraries as well as individual users.

Ashlyn: They are profession-wide problems, many of which will require the dedication of significant resources to resolve and communicate. Solutions to such wide reaching problems though can only happen if they are prioritized by the profession and the culture at large. Many innovative solutions to difficult problems have happened only after receiving federal money to dedicate to the problem. This financial support reflects a cultural valuation of our work. Without continued support, progress in preservation practices for cultural heritage resources will suffer.

Lorena: I think preservation and sustainability in academic libraries in the future will look somewhat like now, but ramped up. I think for libraries, we will see even more consortial sharing and interlibrary loan to make up for declining budgets and space constraints while still ensuring that library patrons have access to what they need – even though for physical books it may take a week to get an item delivered. I see increased use of light and dark archives such as Stanford's LOCKSS project⁵ and Portico⁶. We may see a move to greater use of electronic books – although they have cost and preservation issues of their own, often "owned" through licenses rather than true permanent ownership as I noted previously. What I would like to see is the rapid expansion of true open access to books and journals, but I recognize the many barriers to that happening.

Erin: We must balance passive and active collecting with our limited resources, funding, staff, etc. These are all reasons why we must work together in our fields to be inclusive and preserve the most voices we can. We are stronger when we collaborate and work together.

Rick: Are there any preservation issues specific to the Pacific Northwest?

Ashlyn: I'm still relatively new to the Pacific NW and I'm always learning something new about its history and the history of the profession in the area. So there are probably some preservation specific concerns to the PNW that I don't know about, such as a history of funding or the valuation of preservation over time.

Erin: After working as a professional archivist for ten years, I would say that my repository is

facing challenges to preservation like most other institutions around the country. Physical storage space is becoming more and more of a premium in the library and on campus. Making effective arguments as to why we need storage space can be difficult. Digital storage space faces its own challenges of people thinking there is no cost to server space, or just throw everything into the cloud for cheap. In both cases, security and access can be costly but necessary; staff are needed to help arrange and describe materials as well as look for potential issues with sensitive or protected information.

Lorena: I'm not sure there are any unique preservation issues in the northwest – that is, unless Rainier or another Pacific coast volcano has an eruption! Seriously, however, northwest-relevant collections seem to me to have the same funding, infrastructure, and significance challenges as the relevant regional collections of the southwest or northeast – ephemera is ephemera, perhaps?

Dulce: That's an interesting question. I don't know how unique our challenges are, but I do think some of them are informed by geography. One preservation issue that comes to my mind is how to reflect the existence of American Indians in my archives, when the organization has traditionally not collected any materials related to the local tribes. Beyond the fact that tribes like the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene have their own archives, I think my staff lack the expertise necessary to meaningfully curate an American Indian collection. As a result, however, our archival record of Latah County does not do a good job of acknowledging the first people who lived here.

Ashlyn: I have heard stories from local libraries about volcanic ash contaminating their collections during the Mt. St. Helens eruption in 1980. Ash can be highly acidic and cause degradation of analog materials. For digital files, we try to save multiple copies across different geographic areas that have different likely disasters. For example, one copy might be saved here where we may get an earthquake or volcanic activity, and another might be saved in the South where they may get hit by a hurricane.

Erin: While not unique to the Pacific Northwest, one challenge to preservation for print materials is weather and environmental conditions. This stands out to me, as I am not a native of this area. In particular, the wildfires during the summer of 2015 were particularly bad in this region, and our library had to react to smoke entering the building through the air intake vents. Another factor can be humidity, which in the Midwest we used dehumidifiers because there was too much moisture in the air, whereas other areas such as Boise are concerned with not enough humidity. Collections may also have been exposed to certain elements, whether they are coming from a barn or attic or abandoned house. Mining collections are an interesting example, in that some materials are quite difficult to preserve (maps that are over 20 feet in length and 5 feet wide) as well as they were created and used underground, potentially near hazardous areas. So I definitely think that we need to pay attention to climate and environmental conditions for print materials.

Rick: In your experience, what changes are happening in preservation today? Is preservation becoming easier or harder?

Ashlyn: Digital storage is also a relatively new problem and so justifying it as a new expense can

be difficult to communicate. The volume of born-digital material also requires resources dedicated to staffing and training so that we can take time to make decisions about what to keep and to add valuable context and description to digital objects that make them usable. The variety of ways that digital and digitized resources can be described and shared can be a good thing for users who will have many different access points. But it also takes a lot of time to maintain these access points, especially as more and more digital items are added. Therefore, I think preservation is not getting easier OR harder; I think it is both--easier AND harder.

Dulce: There are certainly advantages to practicing preservation today. More people have access to platforms through which to document their experiences, which means the historic record of our time will be more inclusive than any time in the past. Born digital information can be captured immediately and reproduced cheaply, which is an appealing alternative to receiving a twenty-pound ledger that's been stored in a barn for decades and will now take up valuable linear feet.

Lorena: I would agree. We can do so much more, thanks to technological innovation and consortial and other group efforts – that makes it easier.

Erin: Not to be pessimistic, but I think overall preservation is getting harder, especially if thinking about all of the old media formats we need to worry about preserving and migrating over to, as well as the new ones being introduced every year.

Lorena: Challenges from my local or organizational perspective include managing normal use wear and tear of books that may be able to be fixed with mending or rebinding, but sometimes can't be – and out of print books may not be able to be replaced. Books walk out of the library sometimes, too!

Ashlyn: The main way I see that preservation is getting harder though comes back to this high volume of digital material being created. With paper materials it's relatively easy to skim materials, categorize them, and put them into preservation quality containers. A lot of this can happen up front with new collections. However, with digital materials it requires continual management for each digital object, and it often requires item level attention that we don't have to provide for with a physical object. When each item requires attention for preservation and access more staff and resources are needed.

Dulce: Dissemination of our holdings is also becoming more democratic. The challenge of this great democratization of preservation is that the volume of materials to be considered for archiving is growing exponentially. Our patrons are also increasingly expecting the totality of our collections to be available online, but we lack the infrastructure and (wo)manpower to make that happen. I don't think any of these thoughts are revolutionary, every archive is grappling with the same issues.

Erin: For born-digital materials, preservation is directly linked to the ability to access the original version, not an altered or vanished document on the Internet for example. To me, preservation is directly linked to collection development policies and appraisal: we cannot collect everything, nor should we, but having policies in place to help us make transparent decisions is really important.

Ashlyn: I think any archivist's dream for the future is one where records creators are better at practicing good personal archiving tasks. I am no different. I want everyone to adopt good file naming practices, and choose preservation file formats for their digital records. But I think this is unlikely to happen unless there is a significant shift in the awareness of archives and preservation practices by the general population.

Dulce: I know there is a lot of talk today, especially in relation to digital preservation, about the right to be forgotten. A proliferation of communication mediums and an increased ability to capture those communications means that many more people's experiences are available for archiving...

Ashlyn: In many cases, we will not preserve materials with personally identifying information or personal information protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other privacy laws because we cannot provide access to that information. We don't want to spend resources preserving it. Additionally, if archives accidentally provide access to private information there can be serious legal consequences; by removing this information from the archive when it doesn't have permanent value, we are ensuring that people's privacy won't be violated in the future.

Dulce: In our office, we have not really begun to tackle archiving contemporary media. When it comes to the records we are actively archiving, we do our best to ensure that no sensitive personal information is shared with the public (i.e. medical records, Social Security details, etc.) We also have consulted with the state regarding the acquisition of old school records which could contain personal information deemed confidential in the past.

Ashlyn: A new and interesting area of privacy is social media and web archiving. Do people who post publicly on social media intend for their content to be preserved long-term? Do archives risk unintentionally participating in surveillance or other monitoring activities by harvesting content from websites and social media, which could cause harm to certain groups we collect from? It seems that the profession is leaning toward seeking consent from groups or individuals when it comes to social media even though they have posted publicly... privacy is an important part of preservation anywhere.

Erin: When thinking about the future of preservation, there are certainly many challenges. Most archives are taking in mixed collections – that is, they contain some physical formats and some digital. So in a way, we are at probably one of the most difficult times, as we are straddling two different forms of preservation in our profession. We will continue to do so for some time, probably throughout the rest of my career if we think about when archives typically receive donated collections.

Ashlyn: I think all of the problems we've brought up are not particular to our institutions. For example, Erin, Dulce, and I discussed finding space (digital and physical) and providing access points for our collections. Finding cheap and sustainable ways to accomplish these tasks is not something that a small or medium sized repository can accomplish as we struggle to keep on top of day-to-day tasks. Not to say that a profession-changing solution will not come out of these institutions, just that it is hard to dedicate time to solving difficult problems. As always working together across the

profession is probably the best way to develop creative solutions.

Lorena: Libraries and archives are putting out amazing collections such as the Western Waters Digital Library and the Digital Public Library of America, while vendors have amazing products. But the constraints of budget and intellectual property limitations make it harder – digitizing takes time and money, and requires building in sustainability, while vendor products can’t always be afforded (or even worse, are leased for a short time, then taken away via cancellation projects).

Erin: I think that falling back onto basic archival principles will help us address these challenges. Appraisal (what do we need to actually preserve rather than everything/what’s presented to us), documentation strategy (how do we collaborate with others to collect materials), file naming conventions (as Ashlyn mentioned) – these guide our work no matter what format we are trying to preserve. I also think money, in all its forms (staffing, resources, space, etc.) will control what we are able to preserve over time. This divide already exists in all cultural heritage organizations, libraries, and archives – but I think this point stresses why working together across the profession is so important, sharing knowledge and expertise, and not duplicating our efforts. This may be collecting policies, or digitization policies, or more consortial work.

Dulce: I see a strength in our geography. I’ve also found a lot of support for local and state archives in western states. I am also on the board for the Idaho Association of Museums and can attest to the fact that nearly every county has a historical society or museum, and here in Latah County nearly every community outside of Moscow has its own historic group. Of course the “too many cooks in the kitchen” phenomenon is a problem at times, but in general the widespread pursuit of preservation is only to our collective benefit.

Erin: The current climate is forcing us all to be effective advocates and stewards of cultural and historical materials and strategically communicating what we need to be successful to protect our historical, cultural, environmental, political, and other collective memories.

Summation

The past informs the future largely through preservation -- libraries, historical societies, and archives play an essential role in shaping what our collective future will look like in the Northwest. This conversation presents a snapshot of preservation practice from various vantage points. As Ashlyn noted, “preservation is not getting easier OR harder; I think it is both--easier AND harder.” While concerns around weather/climate, old formats, and funding remain constant, issues regarding integrating technology, born-digital materials, and digital formats offer up new opportunities, as well as challenges for archivists and librarians. In order to better leverage resources and expertise, one solution everyone agreed on was for greater collaboration between preservation organizations in the Northwest. As Erin pointed out, “We are stronger when we collaborate and work together.” Organizations like the Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNLA), Northwest Archivists (NWA)⁷, and others are critical to facilitating these collaborations and partnerships. The authors encourage you to be active in organizations such as these and to also support your local heritage collections, archives, and special collection libraries -- for our futures are better illuminated with the insights from the past.

1. <https://www.latahcountyhistoricalsociety.org>
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4. Ibid.
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