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Preserving Cultural Heritage in Rural Areas: The Case of the Park County Local History Archives

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Abstract:

Local history archives are a vital component of community efforts to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of a region. Digital technology offers an opportunity to expand access to local archival materials beyond geographic boundaries and preserve fragile items. In rural areas, digital archives are seen as a catalyst for building more resilient communities. Community archives represent grassroots activities and are usually organized by volunteers. However, volunteer initiatives often face challenges of sustainability, especially if they are not affiliated with government agencies or heritage institutions. This paper presents a collaborative project between three partners: The Park County Local History Archives (PCLHA) in Colorado, a local government agency, and the library and information science (LIS) program at the University of Denver. The goals of the project are to preserve the PCLHA archival collections and to explore the way digital technology can be integrated to promote the unique heritage of the region and to contribute to sustainability efforts.

Keywords: Local history, community archives, sustainability, digitization, collaboration, library and information science (LIS) programs.

Introduction

Community archives play an important role in preserving the documentary heritage of a region or groups of individuals who define themselves based on shared identities or cultural backgrounds (Bastian, 2003; Collins Shortall, 2016; Flinn, 2007; Flinn & Stevens, 2009). Local community archives are often organized by volunteers and represent grassroots activities aimed at documenting history that is not part of the official record maintained in institutional archives. Community participation, local control, and ownership are their essential traits. The collections include a variety of resources that document the history of a place and tell life stories of community members. In rural areas, archives contribute to shaping community identity and resilience as they preserve the collective memories and maintain the connection to the past (Beel et al., 2017). However, it is often challenging to continue these local initiatives and to sustain the archival projects beyond the lifespans of original volunteers (Caswell et al., 2017; Newman, 2011).

This paper presents the case of the Park County Local History Archives (PCLHA) and describes the efforts to sustain this community archive through a collaborative project with a local government agency, the Park County Department of Heritage, Tourism, & Community Development, and the library and information science (LIS) program at the University of Denver. PCLHA is a community archive located in Fairplay in Park County, Colorado, in the United States. Park County is part of a remote and mostly rural region in the Rocky Mountains. The settlers arrived in Park County during the Gold Rush in the second part of the 19th century. Opportunities in mining, ranching, and the establishment of the railroad attracted pioneers and prospectors, thus creating a rich history and a plethora of archival materials. The Local History Archive was established by a group of volunteers in 2001 with a goal of collecting documents related to the history of the region. The purpose of the collaborative project is to assist the community of Park County in preserving the Local History Archive and to explore the way digital technology can be integrated to promote the unique heritage of the region and to contribute to sustainability efforts. This paper provides an overview of the activities from the first phase of the project focused on preserving the physical collections.

Background: Community Archives

Community archives are not a new phenomenon. Interest in local history and collecting of local historical documents and artifacts have a long tradition. In recent years, however, researchers observed a substantial growth of archiving initiatives that are rooted in local communities and established outside of official archives and libraries (Caswell et al., 2017; Flinn, 2007). Community history is often not part of the official record maintained in the large state or national archives and voices of marginalized groups are silenced and their records absent from institutional archives (Caswell et al., 2017; Flinn, 2007). In his seminal paper, Flinn (2007) examines the factors that have contributed to the recent development of community archives, including political and social movements, growing interest in family history, and the desire of communities that are going through dramatic changes to document their heritage that might be at the risk of disappearing. Recent research points to the role of community archives in social justice activism, especially in contemporary movements for racial justice and against gentrification (Cifor et al., 2018).

The concept of community archives encompasses a wide range of independent initiatives, connected to a geographic location or centered around ethnic, racial, gender, or sexual identity (Caswell et al., 2017). Volunteers may use different terms to describe their local archiving activities, including community history project or local memory project. Flinn (2007) notes

that the term “community archives” helps to bring those disparate projects together. He proposed a definition that is now widely accepted in the field:

Community histories or community archives are the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential. This activity might or might not happen in association with formal heritage organisations but the impetus and direction should come from within the community itself (Flinn, 2007, p. 153).

Community archives serve as memory spaces by collecting primary sources that document the history of a place, tell life stories of community members, and preserve the fabric of ordinary life. They collect a variety of resources in both analog and digital formats, including photographs, correspondence, historical documents, oral histories, and ephemera. The type of collected materials don’t differ from those collected by institutional archives, but the evidence they contain and custodial practices tend to be unique, reflecting community agency and the desire for authentic representation. In the current digital environment, the acquisition and curation approaches are mixed and complex, representing post-custodial strategies, and often challenging the traditional modes of archival practice (Zavala et al., 2017). For example, the process of building a photographic archive may involve reaching out to community members, collecting original photographs, creating digital representations, and returning the originals to community members.

Sustainability is recognized as one of the major challenges of community archives (Caswell et al., 2017; Newman, 2011). Community archives are often created and organized by a small group of committed and passionate volunteers. It is difficult to sustain volunteer efforts long-term and maintain the archival collections at adequate organization and preservation levels without the support of government agencies or cultural heritage institutions. Newmann (2011) identified adequate funding as a factor indicating likely sustainability of community archives on the organization level. The level of government funding for community archives varies from country to country. Local community projects receive some support in the UK, Ireland or New Zealand (Collins Shortall, 2016; Flinn, 2007; Newmann, 2011), while government funding in the US is limited. Other organizational factors include governance, skilled staff, collaboration, and dynamism (commitment to growth and change). Collaboration with other repositories or stakeholders with expertise in archiving and preservation contributes to sustainability but Newman (2011) did not find it to be a common practice. In addition to the factors on the organization and collection levels, community engagement is a key aspect of sustainability.

Digital technology offers an opportunity to expand access to local archival materials beyond geographic boundaries. In the archival community, digitization is widely accepted as a means of making unique materials accessible, and even in some cases as an approach to managing archival processing backlogs (Miller, 2013). Digitization can also protect fragile items or serve as a preservation solution for materials recorded on deteriorating media (Matusiak et al. 2017; Matusiak & Johnston, 2014). Recent research begins to examine the benefits of digitization that go beyond access and preservation. Researchers explore the use of digital technologies to facilitate new forms of engagement with local history and as a means of promoting unique heritage (Tait et al., 2015; Vasile, 2019). Digital collections can be used to enhance the tourism experience of the area encouraging visitors to engage more fully with the history and culture of the place. In rural areas, digital archives are as seen as a catalyst for building more resilient communities, offering not only the potential economic benefits of cultural heritage tourism but also supporting community activities and strengthening social cohesion (Beel et al., 2017). This

project builds on the research in digitization but also explores new questions of community engagement and promotion of local heritage in the context of a local archive in Colorado.

The Case of the Park County Local History Archives

History of the Archives

The Park County Local History Archives (PCLHA) represents one of the most valuable rural community archives in Colorado. It is currently located in Fairplay in Park County, although in the past was housed at other county locations. Most recently, the Archives occupied the basement of the historic courthouse in Fairplay (see Figure 1). PCLHA primarily serves the community of Park County, which includes the towns of Fairplay and Alma, in addition to the unincorporated communities of Bailey, Como, Grant, Lake George, and several others. Park County is one of Colorado's original 17 territorial counties and is known not only for its stunning beauty but also for its rich history of mining, railroads, and ranching. The Archives is dedicated to the acquisition and preservation of materials documenting the cultural and natural history of Park County. Established by a group of dedicated volunteers in 2001, the PCLHA collects photographs, manuscripts, maps, books, local newspapers, businesses records, ledgers, *oral histories*, and a wide range of public records. The archival materials document the region's history and community resilience, illustrating how residents of Park County dealt with the challenges of pioneer and rural life, high elevation climate, and ups and downs of economic booms and downturns.



Figure 1. Old Courthouse in Fairplay, Colorado.

The photographic and oral history collections are a result of the substantial community efforts. The group of volunteers launched a major initiative to collect historical photographs from

community members and acquired over 4,000 images. The Archive received donations of original photographs or created digitized copies. The photographs are organized in folders by geographic location or topic. As demonstrated in Figure 2, individual photographic prints are placed in archival sleeves. In some cases, volunteers scanned photographs using a portable scanner at the community members' homes and returned the original photographs to families. Digitized versions have been created for all photographs, although the standards used for image capture varied over the years. The assessment conducted for this project determined that the majority of digitization work occurred between 2003 and 2017 and revealed varied digital curation practices. The Archive has a mix of original photographs and digital surrogates captured in different formats and varied in technical specifications, including low-resolution images in the JPEG format. Each photograph has a unique number and a brief description on item level. In addition to collecting photographs, the volunteers were involved in recording oral histories with key community members. Oral histories were recorded on audiotapes and transcribed. The recordings and transcriptions for over 60 oral histories are accompanied by consent forms and detailed documentation.



Figure 2. Photo files and photographs in archival sleeves.

The Archives also includes an extensive collection of local newspapers and more than a dozen of unprocessed manuscript collections. Archival collections have been arranged primarily according to material type, rather than the more common practice of keeping different materials from one accession stored together. For instance, many of the photographs have been separated from other material types they were received with, such as family papers. In addition to archival materials, the Archives houses a considerable reference collection. The Archives also maintained a website, monitored a Facebook page, and published a newsletter until 2017. A website that was maintained until 2017 includes transcribed marriage records, cemetery surveys, a list of special collections, a resource file, and a searchable name index database. The group published two books using photographic materials from the Archives (PCLHA, 2015; 2016).

In 2017, the volunteer group lost key founding members, who were central to the Archive's management, growth, and direction. The long-term preservation and sustainability of the Archive became a serious concern. The physical location of the collections in the basement of the Old Courthouse, although attractive, posed some preservation risks because of moisture and water damage. The Park County Department of Heritage and Tourism stepped in and offered to house the Archives in the new county building.

Collaborative Project

The collaboration between the Park County Department of Heritage and Tourism and the University of Denver began in the fall of 2018. The Department of Heritage and Tourism department strives to protect historic resources of Park County and share them through their Historic Preservation and Tourism Programs. Their mission statement is to “preserve, protect, and promote the natural and cultural heritage of Park County, Colorado in a sustainable manner that improves the quality of life for its citizens” (Park County Government, 2019). The department works alongside the Office of Recreation Development to accomplish mutual goals that are guided by the Park County Historic Preservation Advisory Commission (PCHPAC) and the South Park National Heritage Area Board (Park County Government, 2019). However, it does not have an archivist or a digitization specialist on staff.

The Director of the Department of Heritage and Tourism reached out to the Library and Information Science (LIS) program and asked for assistance in moving the Archive to the new location and organizing the collections. The LIS faculty and students at the University of Denver are well-positioned to offer professional assistance in the project as the program offers coursework in archival science and in digital libraries and digitization. However, the distance of 170 kilometers between the city of Denver and Fairplay and the town’s remote location in the mountainous region pose some challenges for regular visits. The University of Denver Center for Community Engagement to advance Scholarship and Learning (CCESL) awarded the LIS faculty Public Good grant to support this project.

The purpose of the project is to assist the community of Park County in preserving the Local History Archive and extending access through a digital archive. The goals of the project are both practice- and research-oriented. The practical goal focuses on assisting the Park County the Department of Heritage and Tourism with transferring and organizing the Archives and digitizing selected materials. In addition to assisting with the preservation of physical archival materials, the project team plans to build a digital archive in Omeka software and explore the role of digital collections and exhibits in the promotion of local heritage in rural regions and in engaging the community with its history and strengthening community ties.

Project Activities and Outcomes

The project methods and guidelines were developed based on the best practices in the field and with input from the Park County community members. As part of planning activities, the two graduate LIS students conducted a needs assessment study. The students undertook this work as an independent study, supervised by the LIS faculty. They prepared a detailed report assessing the state of the Archive and outlined a set of recommendations for transferring and organizing the archival collections at the new locations. The report appendices include a list of recommendations for purchasing archival supplies and digitization guidelines. The report was shared with the staff at the Department of Heritage and Tourism, who purchased the needed supplies and two new photo scanners. It provided a foundation for the initial project activities and for future training of volunteers.

Understanding the community perspective, building trust, and engaging community members in the project activities is essential to the success of this project. At the beginning of the project, the LIS faculty and the director of the Department of Heritage and Tourism worked together on forming a community advisory board. The board consists of five community members, who share their knowledge about the collections and are asked to provide input on community needs, recommendations on the selection of materials for digitization, and advice on the ways of engaging the community with digital collections. During the first meetings, the members of

the advisory board provided input on selecting materials for digital collections and identifying themes for digital exhibits.

The transfer of the archival collections to the new location took place in June 2019. The LIS faculty and students spent a week in Fairplay and helped with the physical move and the organization of the materials. The Archive was transferred to a brand-new building that is shared with other branches of the county government. The Archives received three rooms, dedicated not only to the storage of materials, but also to the accession of new materials, processing, preservation work, and a space designated as the reading room for researchers. The storage rooms are made of concrete floors and walls, they have no windows, and are furnished with fluorescent lighting. The entire building is equipped with specialized smoke detectors that will only activate the sprinklers in the location where the fire has been detected. The relocation of the Archive to the new county building addresses the preservation of most of the analog collections. The physical materials are housed in the building with better environmental control.

During the week of the move, the LIS team began digitization of the photographic collection using the facilities at the new location and the photo scanners purchased for the project (see Figure 3). Based on the assessment study, it was determined that the photographic collection would need to be rescanned. Digital surrogates created over the span of many years vary in formats and resolution and do not meet the criteria for preservation-quality digital objects. The digitization project undertaken by the LIS team uses the notion of use-neutral approach and creates high-quality master files as well as derivatives. The guidelines for the project are based on digital library standards and best practices to ensure a consistent level of image quality and to create high-quality digital objects in support of current and future use (ALCTS, 2013; FADGI, 2016).



Figure 3. Scanning of photographs at the new Archives location.

All digital master files created as a result of digitization are reviewed for quality and saved as uncompressed TIFF files. They serve as preservation copies and as sources for derivative (access) images (see Figure 4 for an example of a scanned image). Access files will be used for building digital collections and exhibits in Omeka.



Figure 4. Photographic postcard with an image of Old Courthouse in Fairplay, scanned as part of the project.

The construction of the digital archive in Omeka software will take place during the second phase of the project in the fall of 2019. In addition to photographs, the archive will include a selection of digitized oral histories. The process of converting audio recordings on tape to digital format began in the summer of 2019. In addition to building digital collections, the archive will feature digital exhibits highlighting selected objects and telling stories about the events important to the history of Park County and the life of its community. The exhibit topics were identified based on the discussions with the members of the advisory board.

Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of the collaborative efforts aimed at preserving the community archive in a rural area of Colorado. The case of the Park County Local History Archives illustrates the common challenges in the sustainability of community archives. The challenges are compounded for archives in rural areas because of their isolation and the lack of easy access to archivists or digitization specialists. The success of sustainability initiatives depends on many factors, collaboration being only one them. Community engagement is another important factor as it indicates the relevance of archives to the current community life. As this project continues, the project team plans to explore the role of digital archives in raising community awareness and interest in the Park County Local History Archives. Digital collections and exhibits can increase the visibility of the Archives and their materials, which could in turn influence community participation in its leadership, collaboration, and volunteer activities.

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