

Center for Sacramento History – Archival Repository Visit

The archival repository I toured is the Center for Sacramento History located at 551 Sequoia Pacific Boulevard in Sacramento, California. After contacting Senior Archivist Patricia Johnson via the CSH website, Ms. Johnson agreed to show me around the facility. On August 26, 2009, while we walked through the repository, Ms. Johnson and I had a candid conversation about what she does at CSH and why CSH exists. Below is a summary of what I learned.

I did some initial research on the CSH website before my visit to the facility. There is an abundance of information provided on the website, and except for being able to see and feel the collections and experience the vault at CSH first hand, one could learn all one needs to know about the repository from its website. CSH is a historical research center that serves the Sacramento region; it is the official repository for the archival records of the City and County of Sacramento. CSH collects and preserves privately donated manuscripts and personal papers from individuals, businesses, and organizations in the community. The photograph collection consists of more than 5 million photos with only 45,000 currently available through the online catalog. The Center holds museum artifacts, or “three-dimensional artifacts” as Ms. Johnson refers to them, which also document the lives and activities of the residents of the Sacramento region (CSH, 2009).

CSH is a public agency; a division of city government. More specifically, the Center is part of the Convention, Culture, and Leisure Department. CSH is funded by the city and county of Sacramento, but it is administered by the city making the staff at CSH city employees. CSH regularly collaborates with area museums, other city and

county agencies, the arts commission, the convention and visitors' bureau, area community centers, and area libraries (Johnson, 2009). The Center's mission, "*to illuminate and promote the exploration and analysis of the social, political, geographical, and cultural history of the City and County of Sacramento from their founding to the present, by collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and making accessible the documentary and material culture of the diverse region*" (CSH, 2009), is viewed as a guide which helps the Center's employees assist city and county governments as well as the general public with their research needs. As the official repository for city and county archives, CSH collects the non-current records of city and county agencies which are the target audiences for the repository. Researchers who frequent CSH "come from all disciplines including genealogists, authors, homeowners, students from high school through graduate schools, city/county agencies, attorneys, curators, and documentary film makers" (Johnson, 2009).

Ms. Johnson has been an archivist for CSH since 1995, and has held the most senior position of Senior Archivist since 2004. She made sure to re-iterate the importance of collaboration and that it is a major component within the everyday workings of the Center. CSH has an assistant archivist, history manager, audio-visual archivist, manuscript archivist, film technician, curator of history, associate curator, and interns and volunteers (the Center has from 25-30 volunteers). While each person on staff has very specific specializations, everyone works together in order to serve the surrounding communities.

My first thoughts of CSH were that it seemed like an intimate and well kept "hole-in-the-wall" repository. The outside of the building is plain and unimpressive with a small

sign above the front door noting that it is indeed CSH. Upon entering, I was a little intimidated by the security procedure. The archivist had to enter a code to let me in the building. After the tour I realized just how necessary tight security protocols are for any type of archival repository. Items and sensitive information must be kept safe or archivists run the risk of losing very valuable and often priceless information.

Ms. Johnson began the tour in the administration area where an intern was working at her desk and a volunteer stopped us to ask a question; Ms. Johnson politely introduced me to everyone we encountered. Our next stop was the reading room. This room is equipped with surveillance cameras and procedures for entering and signing in and out. A little note: guests who visit CSH for research purposes must go through a brief “entrance interview” before their visit so the staff at CSH can evaluate the needs of the researcher/visitor to properly prepare for the visit. If it is determined that CSH does not have the necessary items to help the visitor, then a referral to another repository or library is made. It is policy that someone on CSH staff must monitor the reading room when a visitor is in. The reading room is open for 12 hours a week, reduced from 24 due to budget cuts.

Other rooms I visited were the computer room where servers and official CSH computers are held and the staff reference room where donor files are kept in a locked cabinet. Ms. Johnson shared with me the fact that these donor files have not yet been digitized, so keeping the staff reference room locked and heavily monitored is very important. The staff reference room has its own security alarm separate from the building alarm. CSH also has a small “Technical Library,” as Ms. Johnson calls it, to be used by staff for training. The Technical Library is like an archivist how-to collection, and

is something I thought to be of great value, especially for interns and volunteers to learn on the fly. CSH does not have a clean room. Instead, there is an area called the “general receiving area” that holds items that have been newly acquired. Next to the receiving area is a workshop where a crew assembles museum exhibit display boxes for the Center. These boxes are custom made to fit the needs of any collection the Center will put on display.

Ms. Johnson and I spent most of our time together in the vault. This room is 20,000 sq. ft. and was restructured in 1989. The room is something I’ve never experienced before, and I was mesmerized by the vastness of the collections. Archivists must use a ladder and fork lift to reach parts of the collection that are stored high. The room is kept at 68°F and 48% RH, with photo negatives kept separate from the main collection in a freezer stored in the vault. The vault is lined with automatic, oversized shelving that hold the collections.

Photo of one row of city/county records



The Center's largest collection is the Eleanor McClatchy Collection. The McClatchy estate donated this collection to CSH in 1892 after Eleanor died in 1980. The collection consists of Gold Rush history, Sacramento theater history, historical photographs, and California/Sacramento history. Below is a photo taken of a photo of Eleanor McClatchy:

Eleanor McClatchy



CSH acquires the majority of its collections from donors. The Center also received transfers from city and county agencies as “[the county] has a weak records management system” (Johnson, 2009). I asked Mr. Jonson to elaborate on this statement for me and she clarified by explaining that the Center receives records inconsistently from other agencies within the county. There is no official county records retention schedule so more often than not the Center has to actively solicit material.

The time I spent with Ms. Johnson at CSH was priceless. This was my first visit to an official archival repository and the things I saw and learned have helped me better understand why archives are so important and how they survive. Archives document and provide access to local and national history, and dedicated archivists make this happen every day, all over the world. Monitoring the vault temperature and relative humidity, ensuring staff is properly trained, and investing in a top of the line surveillance and security system are all vital steps archivists must take in order to maintain and protect their repositories. In fact, Ms. Johnson suggested archives security as a research paper topic, and I am considering following her advice. Exploring how different repositories protect their collections is interesting, and the research would be productive and useful.

References

Center for Sacramento History. Website.

<http://www.cityofsacramento.org/ccl/history/default.asp>. Retrieved September 17, 2009.

P. Johnson (personal communication, August 26, 2009)