Dec-2012

An Interview with University Archivist Orson Kingsley

Ellen Scheible
Bridgewater State University, ellen.scheible@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

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An Interview with University Archivist Orson Kingsley

It has been about one year since Bridgewater State hired Orson Kingsley to become the head of the university’s archives, a large and growing treasure trove of information about our institutional history and the people who have passed through our doors. In September 2012, Bridgewater Review Associate Editor Ellen Scheible visited Mr. Kingsley in his Maxwell Library office and asked him to reflect on the role of the university archivist and his experiences at Bridgewater State.

ES: What is the difference between special collections and the library archive?

My full title is University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian. There are really two components to my job. The University archive basically contains the output of the University: its history, publications and other sometimes obscure things, such as blueprints from the new Science building or new dorms that were built, or lists of new faculty who were hired. For institutional purposes, old accreditation reports and student newspapers are part of the archive. We have catalogues going back to 1840 and yearbooks from 1899. We are in the process of having all of our yearbooks digitized. Soon, people will be able to do keyword searches throughout the history of BSU yearbooks. The archive is different from the special collections because special collections include things that were not produced by the University. These include donations, such as when alumni come in and donate personal papers and photographs, some of which may be from their times here as students. I put these sorts of things in special collections when I add them to our permanent collection.

ES: What does it mean to be a library archivist?

It’s kind of a mixing, for me, of a love of history and a love of things old, particularly old paper. That’s why I got into the profession. The older the institution, usually the older the material they have. Bridgewater opened in 1840, so we have a very old collection. It’s important for archivists today to have both library and history backgrounds. One part of the job is to make sense of the collections we have and make them available; but another part is to really understand the history aspect of it and to promote that effectively to faculty, classes and researchers. Using the internet or electronic resources, you can really push the archive out to the public more than you could twenty years ago, which is why knowing technology and how it affects what you do is becoming more prevalent in the field. But my main goal in the job is to get researchers in here to use the materials. I am really invested in democratizing the learning aspect of what we do at the archives because if people can’t use it, what’s the point of spending money to preserve it?

ES: What are some of the most eccentric things that we have in the archive?

One thing that I uncovered a couple of months ago was a large run of a French encyclopedia that predates the French Revolution. These are extremely rare. They were ordered by subscription, so, most people didn’t get a lot of them. It was a replacement for the famous French encyclopedia that was written in the mid 1700s by Diderot. The issues went right up to the 1830s, but the bulk was from 1782-1791. Thomas Jefferson wrote some of the History and Geography entries. The younger generation of the last wave of the French Enlightenment also wrote some of the articles. Most were created before the French Revolution, which is absolutely incredible. One article was written by Lamarck, a pre-Darwinian theorist. This encyclopedia is one of the rare and unique things in our collection that can compete with collections in all of the famous universities in Boston. It builds the prestige of our collection, and hopefully will persuade people to make donations in the future.

ES: How do you make order out of the chaos that is the archive?

It really is like playing a big game of Tetris. I can’t move one collection until I get another one moved because space is limited. Piles of material were...
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everywhere when I started the job. It’s really an ongoing project where every couple of weeks I reevaluate what I’m doing and tinker with my original intention. Right now I am beginning to look at a large collection of uncatalogued books. For the archives, I created a completely new scheme. It’s based on a numerical order by subject. All records will be based on the administrative layout of the University. For instance, Academic Affairs will be one category. The intention is to keep like material together so that if somebody comes in, say, looking for the history of the Math department, all of the Math material will be in one section. For special collections, I’ve also had to come up with a completely new scheme because we have more materials to deal with than we’ve had in the past. I broke the manuscript collection down into different categories. For instance, we have a unique and rare books collection that I am still processing and adding to our online system. What I am really interested in, though, is the manuscript collection. I am hoping to put more of it onto our website in the future so that a researcher can use a finding aid to look at the collection beforehand and then come in and say “I want to look at Box 46, Folder 5.” In the past, a researcher might come in and ask “What do you have on the Civil War” and, because we have such a large collection on the Civil War, I didn’t know where to begin. The idea is to start the research process before he or she comes in. Then, I can supplement the researcher’s requests with other parts of the collection the researcher might not know about.

ES: There has been a huge push in the last ten years or so for PhDs in the Humanities and Social Sciences to return to archival study for their research. Do you feel that the archive occupies a prominent enough role in scholarship?

Of course, I’m going to encourage people to use primary-source material because I am in the field and I think it should be more of a requirement. In my own education, I wasn’t introduced to an archive until my last semester as an undergraduate. I was a lost History major and did an internship at an archive, and, instantly, I knew what my future was going to be because I loved it. But, none of my undergraduate History professors made us go to an archive or a repository or anything like that. If you get to grad school and have to write a dissertation using primary-source material, it can be very intimidating if you have never been exposed to it. I think it’s great to have undergraduate students make archive visits to expose them to the primary source material. In a general archive, good use could be made of ephemera, historical material like posters and flyers that were designed to last a week and then ripped down and thrown away. A lot of this material can be very revealing about the culture or society of the time.

ES: How can the community, specifically the faculty, best use your services?

Right now, I am a liaison to the History department and I would like to encourage people to come up here more, but I am still getting my own department ready. I would love to start giving tours to classes to expose them to the behind-the-scenes of the archive. In past jobs, I have loved doing that—if there are history buffs in the class, you can see their eyes light up because they’ve never seen the back corridors of an archive. If faculty members want to make appointments, I am here Monday through Friday, 8-4. However, I am willing to occasionally stay late to accommodate classes who want to use the archive in the evening.

ES: Could you give one or two examples of how faculty members or community members have used the archive in the past?

Most people associate an archive with straight history, but since I’ve been here, I’ve had more interest from English professors than from History professors. Last week I had a graduate class from off campus come in. The class was composed of teachers who

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were getting their MAs or certification and the faculty member wanted to show them the progression of education throughout the past couple hundred years. That is one of the strengths of our collection. We have a lot of old textbooks on a range of different subjects. A lot of these students were elementary teachers and we have a very large children’s books collection going back to the 1800s. This material shows students how the profession they are going into has evolved over time. When students can see how different the textbooks from the 1700s were from today, it can be quite enlightening. We have to really balance paper resources with electronic resources. What we are really seeing now is more older paper material being digitized, which will not only help with future material preservation because it could result in less physical handling of those items, but push it out to a larger audience, including those who have not traditionally been drawn to the archive. We have gaps in University presidential history from the 30s and 40s. Faculty might send programs of events and any published materials that we could put on our Virtual Commons page. We want to be able to show off outstanding faculty who are publishing and keep that information for our own archival records.

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some material from Conrad Aiken, an American poet and from May Sarton, a famous Wellesley College author.

ES: In the age of digitization, what do you think is the future of the print archive?

It’s kind of like the theory from a couple of decades ago about the paperless office of the future. If anything, it’s proved to be wrong because more paper is produced than ever before. In my position, you get into the field because of your love for old paper. Suddenly you have to deal with born digital material, which is extremely important because if you don’t capture it now, in a month it could be gone forever. So you have to really balance paper resources with electronic resources. What we are really seeing now is more older paper material being digitized, which will not only help with future material preservation but push it out to a larger audience, including those who have not traditionally been drawn to the archive. What areas of the archive or special collections are you looking to expand?

It’s really important to have a deed of gift and get it signed by the donor and get their information and the list of what they donated, not only for our own records so we can track where everything came from, but to avoid conflict in the future. Right now we have been going through the collections of the student newspaper, the Campus Comment, tracking what we’re missing. We have been in contact with the alumni association because for a lot of this material, our only hope is to track down older alumni and get them to donate it to make it accessible. Random issues of the Comment are missing from the 30s, 50s, and 60s. We have gaps in University presidential history from the 30s and 40s. Faculty might send programs of events and any published materials that we could put on our Virtual Commons page. We want to be able to show off outstanding faculty who are publishing and keep that information for our own archival records.