PRESERVATION ESSENTIALS

Practical Preservation for the Penurious: Plans, Policies, and Procedures

By Sally Childs-Helton, Butler University

If you have a state-of-the-art facility and a large preservation/conservation budget, stop reading this and go back to work. The rest of you are invited to continue reading once you've stopped laughing (or crying).

In reality, a reasonable preservation program is possible on a limited budget, and there are numerous inexpensive things we can do to greatly improve the longevity of our collections. Over my next three columns I will discuss efforts that deliver a lot of preservation bang for the buck. We may not even think of some of these things as preservation activities, yet all are vital if we are to effectively carry out our roles as stewards of our collections. Everything we do as archivists is related to preservation in some way.

I work in a preservation nightmare. Please picture an early 1960s university library (famous architect), mostly glass, flat (and leaky) roof, retrofitted archives on the top floor, southwest corner. Picture library (not archival) shelving; wooden flat files and oversize storage; one large area divided into stacks, work area, and reading area using cubicle partitions; no specific environmental controls. This wonderful, sunny building has the best view on campus ("Is that a tornado?"), but is also the antithesis of a proper archival structure. We have every archival format imaginable, as well as artifacts ranging from band uniforms to furniture. And we have a very small budget.

Many of you labor in similar conditions. Given this challenging scenario, there is still a lot we can do to preserve collections until we are able to get into a building with a stable environment that offers more protection from disasters.

Planning for a Disaster and Recovery

Do you have a disaster and emergency plan? If so, when was the last time you updated it? If you don't have one, why not? It is not a matter of *if* your institution will have a disaster, but *when*. Here in the Midwest we don't have hurricanes and tidal waves, but many MAC institutions are in the New Madrid fault damage zone, and we have our share of blizzards, floods, and tornados. No institution is immune to fires or broken water pipes. Be it caused by an act of God, garden-variety human stupidity, or poor maintenance, your institution *will* have a disaster of some sort, and chances are it already has.

Disaster and emergency preparedness is a major part of any archives' preservation plan. Not only do you need to be able to recover as much of your collection as possible after a disaster, you need to plan to keep disasters, such as roof leaks, from happening in the first place. Make friends with your physical plant and cleaning staff. They know where the potential disasters are waiting in your building, and often will see the first signs of water leaks, electrical problems, etc. Ask your head of maintenance for an annual tour of the building to spot potential dangers. Educate maintenance and cleaning staff about why it is so important to establish and keep preventative maintenance schedules and inspections. These people can become powerful allies, and we need their expertise to maintain our buildings and collections.

Your disaster plan should include all the most likely scenarios, and it should be scaled from a small, contained disaster in one part of your building (for example, a water pipe leak) to a full-building disaster (a fire), to a local disaster (a tornado), to a regional disaster (an earthquake). If you are part of a larger institution, work with the institutional disaster team to ensure plans are coordinated. If your institution stands alone, make sure the local emergency response officials (especially fire fighters) are aware of your special needs. Invite them to visit and discuss various scenarios. Once you have a plan, update it annually, train everyone who works in the building, and have annual drills for various disasters. Have everyone on your disaster response team keep a copy of the plan at home.

There is no excuse for not having a disaster plan. There are excellent books, Web sites, and workshops that will walk you through the steps. Ask your peer institutions to share their disaster plans. You don't have to start from scratch, but do be careful to adapt plans to your institutional situation.

Policies and Procedures

All of your policies and procedures should be written to support preservation. Much of the damage to materials

comes from poor handling, so it is vital to train staff (including students and volunteers) and patrons in proper handling techniques. Staff must handle materials correctly to process collections, and reading room staff must train patrons in proper handling techniques. A little education goes a long way in getting patrons to cheerfully (or at least unwhiningly) comply with user policies. By telling patrons that the way they handle materials can contribute significantly to the life of the materials and preserve them for future generations, I have found patrons are much more likely to follow the rules and not ask for photocopies as often.

Giving patrons a handout with your user policies on it, including basic handling instructions, is good, but you must also demonstrate the proper way to turn a photograph or a page in a fragile ledger. When patrons forget, or get in a hurry, we must politely remind them to only use pencil, or not to lean on the materials. Patrons who are pushy or difficult can do a great deal of damage to materials, so we must be diplomatic but firm to save our collections. Fortunately, these folks are in the minority, and most patrons like the idea that they, too, are stewards of the materials they use.

Reproducing archival materials can be extremely damaging, and your reproduction policy must not only protect intellectual property rights, but the physical condition of the materials. As technology changes, so must our policies. Again, educating patrons about the damaging effects of photocopying, scanning, etc., can go a long way, as can reminding patrons to allow themselves sufficient research time to take notes. If an item is being "loved to death," it is time to make a use copy and retire the original. You get extra service points if you provide a microfilm or circulating copy for the patron.

Your security policy (it's next to your disaster policy, right?) is also an important part of your preservation plan. If an item has been stolen, you cannot preserve it. Security policies and plans can be simple or complex, depending on your collection, physical environment, and institution. Your user policy should outline the basic security issues, again educating your patrons. What may patrons bring into the reading room? Do you reserve the right to search materials patrons bring in as they leave? Do you check photo ID and have patrons register? Decide how much material a patron may have at once (one folder or one box?). Use a sheet the patron signs and have staff sign materials in and out to the patron. Train staff to be aware of what is going on in the reading room; never leave the room unattended. Be aware that theft is often committed by staff who have easy access. Security cameras and alarms are good, but the few suggestions above cost nothing to implement other than training.

For further information, I recommend the SAA books on these topics. There are many excellent workshops and Web sites (the SOLINET site has a thorough but concise preservation page at http://www.solinet.net/preservation/preservation_home.cfm). Educating your staff, patrons, and administrators goes a long way toward having a good, if not state-of-the-art, preservation program, as does including preservation in all of your plans, policies, and procedures.

Next time I will discuss low-cost ways to improve control of your environment.

Welcome to new "Preservation Essentials" columnist Sally Childs-Helton. Sally is the special collections, rare books, and university archives librarian at Butler University in Indianapolis, where she also teaches world music and ethnomusicology courses. She is a past president of the Society of Indiana Archivists. **And a fond farewell** and thanks to Elli Bambakidis for three years of preservation columns.

MAC 2007 Annual Meeting, Columbus, Ohio

They've been coming in droves for years! First National Convention United Mine Workers of America, Columbus, Ohio, 1890. Courtesy Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries.