

Mobile Archivists: Outreach on the Go!

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Article abstract

Despite the rich histories of rural communities in northern Wisconsin, accessibility to professional archivists is limited at best. The North Woods Tour project in Wisconsin focused on empowering local residents to preserve historical materials themselves, by teaching them basic archival methods relating to a variety of formats through personal archiving workshops. Led by Amy Sloper, head archivist at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, three Wisconsin archivists created and implemented the project, visiting three rural northern Wisconsin communities and working with 30 local community members. This report examines their planning process and attendee response. Additionally, it argues that, in some cases, materials might be best preserved within the context of their creation.

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PROJECT REPORT

Mobile Archivists: Outreach on the Go!

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Despite the rich histories of rural communities in northern Wisconsin, accessibility to professional archivists is limited at best. The North Woods Tour project in Wisconsin focused on empowering local residents to preserve historical materials themselves, by teaching them basic archival methods relating to a variety of formats through personal archiving workshops. Led by Amy Sloper, head archivist at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, three Wisconsin archivists created and implemented the project, visiting three rural northern Wisconsin communities and working with 30 local community members. This report examines their planning process and attendee response. Additionally, it argues that, in some cases, materials might be best preserved within the context of their creation.

Keywords: outreach; archives; community archiving; rural communities; local history

The North Woods Tour Project

In fall 2015, Amy Sloper, head archivist at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (WCFTR), and two University of Wisconsin-Madison iSchool graduate students, Catherine Hannula and Jennifer Barth, began to organize a series of personal archiving workshops across northern Wisconsin. This series continued previous community outreach efforts by the WCFTR, such as several Home Movie Days and a Personal Archiving Day held at the Madison Public Library. However, this particular project was dubbed the North Woods Tour, in reference to the five-hour journey the trio would have to make from Madison to their respective hometown areas—Bayfield, Barnes, and Eau Claire—where these workshops would take place.

The first step in planning these workshops was reaching out to potential community partners. The authors contacted the Bayfield Public Library, the Barnes Area Historical Association (BAHA), the L. E. Phillips Public Library, the Chippewa Valley Museum, and local Eau Claire magazine *Volume One* to gauge public interest in



workshops. Community partners then communicated what kinds of historical items local patrons wanted to learn how to preserve. These included videotapes, audiotapes, photographs, and family letters.

Sloper gathered the necessary equipment through the resources of the WCFTR and the UW-Madison Communication Arts Department Instructional Media Center, aided by grant funding from the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment.¹ Much of this was equipment for digitizing materials, such as videotape decks (VHS, DV, miniDV, and Digital8) with converter boxes, one USB audiocassette deck, one flatbed scanner, and enough laptops for four digitization stations. The authors also developed overview presentations about the importance of preservation. The community partners took care of local publicity and provided venues. Dates and times were settled, and partnership negotiations and responsibilities were finalized.

Implementation and Results

The tour took place over the course of five days: two days for travel and three for the workshops. Patrons in Bayfield were more interested in gaining hands-on experience digitizing videotapes, photographs, and family letters, whereas patrons in Barnes and Eau Claire were interested in learning about proper archival storage. Since BAHA was establishing its own museum, the association's representatives wanted to learn how to organize their collections and craft exhibits from their historical items, such as tourism brochures and photographs of area families. Altogether, 30 patrons attended these events. At all venues, patrons requested that similar workshops be held in the future. As of this writing, the WCFTR has held other workshops in southern Wisconsin.

In the planning stages of each event, community partners brought up the issue of whether the archivists would retain copies of digitized materials, such as personal letters or files of home movies, or take the originals. The WCFTR decided early on that the focus of these events would be to share skills and build relationships and trust with communities throughout the state rather than use the events as a collection-development activity. This spirit of community service had already been present in other types of outreach activities organized by the WCFTR, and is also a core value of the University highlighted by the Wisconsin Idea.² At each stop on the North Woods Tour, participants were assured that all materials would stay with their owners, and the archivists would take nothing with them. While this approach did not guarantee that the materials would be preserved according to best practices, it did ensure that the community was left with the skills and resources necessary to make these decisions and that they had a resource within the state to help them.

This project supports the idea that historical materials may be better preserved in the context of their creation. This approach helps ensure that underrepresented voices have more control over their own place in the historical record. The North Woods Tour demonstrates that these aims are not only feasible, but also wanted by the public that archivists serve.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Reference

University of Wisconsin-Madison. 2018. "The Wisconsin Idea." Accessed May 14, 2018. <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea>.

¹ The Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment awarded Sloper a mini-grant to implement the workshops.

² The Wisconsin Idea is defined as the university's influence throughout the state: broadly, 'that education should influence people's lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom' (University of Wisconsin-Madison, "The Wisconsin Idea," <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/>).

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