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Lost in the Archives, It's a Good Thing

It is easy to understand how someone can get lost, in a good way, working in an archival setting. My archival work in the East Texas Research Center was a mix of tedium punctuated by excitement whenever I found a particular interesting document or correspondence. The tedium could be a real grind and at times it seemed all the documents in my series would run together when talking about something boring like requests for lumber totals at one mill or another. The first exciting documents I pulled related to a dispute between Kirby Lumber Company and the Houston Oil Company over timber counts. As I dug deeper into this dispute even the seemingly boring documents began to shed light on day to day operations and became a valuable resource for understanding how the Kirby Lumber Company operated at the turn of the century. The sheer volume of information contained in each box provided a sense of excitement as to what I might find and also the dread of knowing it could be a box full of insurance documents.

When I first started I spoke at length with Kyle Ainsworth about what exactly he wanted me to achieve as an archival volunteer for the ETRC. He provided me examples of the archival work being done on the Kirby Lumber Company Records and also a sample finding aid to get me started. In our conversation, he explained that his role was to help recheck and catalogue what we were organizing in way that would make it more accessible and searchable to a researcher. In addition to that role, he also helped check in any new documents received by the ETRC, preserve existing documents and conducted oral history interviews. Kyle explained that

the initial processing done on the archives was an example of very minimal processing and what we were working on was basic processing. The processing level that we were expected to achieve, was to provide an order to each box of archival documents we worked on. There was a great emphasis placed on making sure that we did not move documents from one box to another even if it made sense. The reason being, previous researchers had already made citations from the archival collection.

Kyle then provided some background information on the Kirby Lumber Company and who the major figures in the company were. This was important because so much correspondence occurs between a few high ranking individuals, that labeling a folder correspondence with one of these people's names didn't really make the archival resources more searchable. The ability to make these documents more research friendly was our primary goal as archivist interns. It was clear early on, that so much valuable information existed in the archive collection but few people were willing to sift through the mountain of documents to find what pertained to the project they were working on due to its sheer volume. This is clearly a major flaw in minimal processing; it takes a really dedicated researcher to go through a minimally processed collection, especially if the collection doesn't contain something that readily pertains to a researchers work. The only advantage I can see to a minimally processed collection is that if you have a small team of archivists, limited resources, and a very large collection it allows you to get the archive processed so researchers can at least have to access it. Providing open access to the archives is an essential role for archivists and if minimal processing does this for a collection then it is clearly better than letting it stay lost in the archives.

Kyle then provided me with the final revelation of this type of archival work; there is no "right way" to do it. I may organize my boxes in a completely different manner than any other

person; the key is to make sure it provides a readily searchable collection versus the current situation of minimally processed boxes. This idea that I could organize the box as I saw fit was both a relief and a cause for concern. I was very worried as I began to organize my first box that what made sense to me might not make sense to anyone else. I possessed only a cursory knowledge of forestry and lumber practices from meetings with forestry managers on my family's property. I knew nothing about the history of forestry especially at the turn of the century. Even more of a concern was that I had never done any archival work before. Kyle reassured me however that my organization would be better than what the collection currently had.

I began with my first box, meticulously going through each document, trying to come up with an organization that made sense to me and would also make sense to a researcher. I struggled at first because I expected to find something interesting but it seemed like the first box I grabbed was going to be just a collection of timber scaling practices. As I continued to sift through my first box I came across it, The Kirby Lumber Company and Houston Oil Company dispute. This was the first time the archives had excited me, it seemed I had found evidence of a genuine dispute between these two companies regarding the way timber was being counted by the companies. Then I realized that the earlier timber scaling documents were directly related to the dispute between Kirby Lumber Company and the Houston Oil Company. It was at this point that the contents of the box in front of me really came together and I was able to begin to organize the documents in a way that made sense. As I started to see an order to the box in front of me, I was able to understand how to craft a finding aid.

The creation of a finding aid is probably one of the most critical aspects of archival work. The reason for this is that the finding aid is what the researcher will use to locate a group of

items that pertain to their work. The keys to a good finding aid are to make it broad enough that it covers a reasonable portion of the materials in the box, organizes those materials in an accessible manner, and provides clear labeling that explains what is contained in each folder. This is where it is important to not get in the weeds and see the collection from a larger perspective because we were not doing complete processing. The number of ways you could organize and label the folders with ever greater specificity could allow you to easily create 50 or more folders in a box. However by creating that many folders you might as well completely process the collection and you lose the efficiency advantage that is gained with basic processing. That first box took me well over four hours to complete because I made the mistake of getting lost in the dispute between Kirby Lumber Company and the Houston Oil Company.

After I took my first box to Kyle for review I was relieved to find that he felt that I had done a good job on the organization and that I had a good grasp on the basic processing concept. I then selected my next box which unfortunately had skipped a few box numbers forward and I was concerned that I had lost my chance at learning more about the dispute between Kirby Lumber and Houston Oil that had excited me so much in the first box. Low and behold the dispute was present even in the next box that I processed but with less specifics. This box is where I was able to learn how to avoid getting caught up in every single detail of every document. Organizing the documents contained in my first box I had a great level of concern over missing an important detail that would result in a researcher missing valuable information. It was in the second box where I had the epiphany that I wasn't the researcher; I was organizing the collection in a way that a researcher could more quickly reference what they might deem pertinent.

I continued to process each new box with increased speed and efficiency with the idea in mind that each document was connected and the connections would lead to how I would organize them. The details I would leave for the researcher who was using the archive. The way researchers use an archive is so varied that trying to think of all the research possibilities can be an exercise in futility but it also demonstrates the power archival collections possess. After all, who knows how someone may use a document collection. Documents that seem to be only railroad shipments to myself could be seen by a researcher as evidence of the dangerous working conditions present on railcars due to overloading at the turn of the century. I would continue to take my time on anything relevant to the Houston Oil/Kirby Lumber dispute because it was the something that interested me but even those documents I began to process more quickly.

As I processed I began to really see the advantage to the basic processing system. The advantages were of course that researchers would be able to more readily access a large collection but also that once you get the hang of the process it can be quick and efficient without the drawbacks of the minimal processing system. The only real drawback that I observed with the basic processing was that documents that were bound or stapled together during the minimal processing were to remain that way. There were instances where I felt that these documents were not always bound or stapled in a way that made sense and could have been better organized if separated. In addition, there are preservation questions that arise from bound and stapled documents. Depending on which “standards” you are going by these fasteners could be ruinous to the documents due to rust or tearing. In this case, I believe it is just a minor concern because many of the documents are properly kept in a climate/humidity controlled environment, minimizing concerns about damage. The basic processing of archives ultimately even with its

limitations seems to be the ideal way of allowing the public to best utilize a large resource like the Kirby Lumber Company Records.

The ways in which the public utilizes these resources is central to the ideas of archives as a whole. The archives are first and foremost a public resource. While working at the ETRC I was able to see a few of ways that the public interacted with the center and archives as a whole. I gathered that most requests which came in were usually looking for information from past newspaper articles but I did also see a new collection being brought in. This was very interesting because the gentlemen who brought in the documents seemed to be very excited by some of what they brought in but Kyle and Linda were more reserved as to their significance. I did note however that both Kyle and Linda wanted to make sure that they would be able to contact some of these gentlemen about questions they may have over certain documents. They emphasized that being able to ask questions and clarify issues surrounding certain documents was best done by contacting those most closely associated with the donated collection. In addition, they readily expressed their thanks and admiration for the donated collection. I feel this is significant because it bridges the gap between the amateur historians who donated the collection and the professionals who would properly catalogue the documents. After all, the public perception of an archive and its processing/preservation record is what brings people in to donate their collections to the archive.

The public's interaction of the ETRC as a resource for both amateur historians and researchers emphasized the important role archives play in public history. The public nature of archives as well as the connections they can provide between amateur and professional historians is immensely important. The ETRC archival internship provided me with a great experience to learn about the archival process and the method of basic processing. In addition, I became

fascinated with the Kirby Lumber/Houston Oil Company dispute. I learned ultimately that this dispute became a full-fledged federal court case as I continued my processing work and was able to follow its development. Of course, sometimes your box is nothing more than shipping records and insurance forms. At times I found myself lost in the archives and the archival process. I realized in the end that it is hard to match the excitement of opening an unorganized box of documents and wondering what it may contain.