

## **Connections & Conversations**

### **Australian Society of Archivists Conference 2006**

#### **Documenting Communities**

##### ***The Role of the University of Melbourne Archives in preventing the fall***

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*The paper aims to explain the role of a university based collecting archive within the national archives system, placing this in generic higher education and specific University of Melbourne settings. Against that background, it describes two recent instances in which the University Archives, or UMA as I will refer to it, has supported communities in documenting their histories and identities. The first covers UMA hosting the 'collecting archive' program of the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive, and the second involves a partnership with the Benalla & District Family History Group to repatriate (virtually) the collection of a local studio photographer held by the Archive. In conclusion I will attempt to offer some reflections prompted by these case studies about the challenges of documenting communities in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.*

Before I begin I'll give a brief background introduction. The UMA is part of a larger Cultural Collections Group (CCG) within Information Management which encompasses not only the Archives, but Special Collections & Rare Books in the Baillieu Library and the Grainger Museum. CCG is also involved with the registration of more than 30 other collections across the University which have been deemed to be cultural collections.

One of our drivers '*growing esteem*' - from the University's new strategic plan - is the recognition that the University occupies a public space, with community expectations of its making a broad contribution to intellectual, social and economic life. It proposes Knowledge Transfer as equal to Research and Teaching at the core of the University's activities. In other words, the University is in a two-way exchange of knowledge and skills with the community, to the mutual benefit of both, and I see the projects to be discussed today as fitting firmly within that niche.

### **Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive Collection**

The Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive (VWL&LFA) collection, or 'women's collection', for the sake of brevity, is a major collection of women's liberation and lesbian feminist literature and memorabilia spanning the second half of the twentieth century. The collection, containing the papers of 127 individuals and organisations associated with women's liberation, political activism and the lesbian movement was transferred to UMA at the end of 2000. The collection dates from 1950 to 1986, and was formerly housed in the private residence of the Archivist of the VWL&LFA in East Brunswick. The Archivist had begun collecting in 1982, but by 2000 had come to realise the collection should be adequately preserved and find a suitable, permanent home. It was agreed that the UMA would house and manage the collection because its status as a public institution would ensure that the collection would be made publicly accessible.

At the time of transfer, the collection complemented existing UMA women's collections, such as the records of the Working Women's Centre, the Women's Electoral Lobby, the Victorian Women Graduates' Association and the Young Women's Christian Association. Especially significant is the extensive collection of periodicals documenting the women's movement, gender, sexuality and social issues both in Australia and internationally. While the collection is predominantly paper-based, there are also photographs, t-shirts, badges and banners. Rather than grouping the entire collection as a whole, the material has been listed by individual donor, as donated to the collective, and therefore makes the collection a unique record of each donor's individual political interests and activism.

In 2000, the VWL&LA was awarded \$3,500 by the Community Heritage Grant Programme – an initiative sponsored by the National Library of Australia in cooperation with the Commonwealth Department of Communications, Information

Technology and the Arts – to conduct a preservation survey on the entire collection. The grant underscored the belief that it was vital that the records of the contribution made by lesbian feminists to the development of political theory and campaigns in Victoria be preserved and publicly available.

The survey began soon after transfer to the UMA, and in May 2001 staff from the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre undertook the survey to better understand the condition of the collection and provide recommendations for its long-term preservation and management. In terms of meeting our community obligations, the survey was used as a tool to enable access and therefore research; best practice in collection management; and supporting what we now call knowledge transfer in the support of research and professional linkage. In short, the results of the survey indicated that the collection was generally stable and in reasonable condition. Only a few items were deemed fragile and that placement of the collection within the UMA repository's stable environmental conditions was the optimal outcome for the collection.

The collective continues to work on the archive at UMA and we are still ironing out policy regarding the collection which covers donations, donor details & biographies, access (whenever possible, access is open, however where privacy is an issue, the collections are closed), ownership (we prefer outright gift, and where possible, transfer of copyright) and de-accessioning.

### **The Howship Collection**

The second case-study, the Howship collection of historical images which document Benalla and its surrounding district has been made available for the first time to the local community through a project by the UMA in partnership with the Benalla & District Family History Group (B&DFHG). The images are on dry plate glass negatives created by Benalla-based professional photographer William John Howship between 1904 and 1931. Making the Howship Collection available to the Benalla and district community has provided local students with a valuable study resource, enriched local heritage appreciation, and may contribute to water management and flood mitigation.

The collection was acquired by the founding University Archivist, Frank Strahan, in 1964. Due to limited resources and other priorities the collection received very little

attention over the years with only a rudimentary list and the production of limited contact prints for reference purposes.

The first stage of the project consisted of rehousing, listing and digitising the 1250 plate glass negatives. With the considerable help of the J J Merrigan Trust, the Tomorrow/Today Foundation and the Swanpool Directory Project Group, the B&DFHG has been able to provide the funds required for stage one of the project. The second stage is being managed by the B&DFHG and involves a community-based project to identify and add stories to the images.

The final stage will see the entire collection catalogued onto the Archives on-line photographic database, UMAIC, which will make the collection available both locally and internationally. Once on UMAIC the images will be harvested by the national photographic on-line gateway, PictureAustralia, further enhancing the collection's profile.

The images include views of early buildings that have since been replaced, scenes of local events such as the great floods of the area, coronation celebrations and military ceremonies as well as a large body of portraiture. The portrait work in particular is highly significant to the Benalla community as it includes images of many well known Benalla and district identities, along with lesser known subjects whose descendents still live in the area.

William Howship himself was a well known and active member of the Benalla and district community. Born in Collingwood in 1874, the youngest son of Charles Emanuel and Luisa Jane Howship, he left school at the age of 15 to work in his brother's mount-cutting and photograph framing business in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. His early interest in photography led him to branch out and open a photography and picture-framing business in Nunn Street, Benalla in April 1904 which included services such as the sale of small-format Kodak cameras and a 24-hour film processing service. Sporting goods and 'fancy' items were also sold by the business.

In 1914 Howship became one of the first volunteers in the Benalla district to enlist for the Great War. He served as transport driver carrying ammunition to the lines and as a dispatch rider. Wounded in 1915, Howship was repatriated to Australia and discharged from military service in early 1916. During his time away Howship's wife

and brother-in-law ran the business. The business continued for another 15 years before his hospitalisation in late 1931 due to a recurrent war wound which eventually took his life in 1932. After Howship's death the business was sold and continued to operate until it finally ceased trading in 1964.

The glass plate images remained in a trunk on the business premises until its closure, at which point they were acquired by the UMA as an example of the output of an early 20th century photography business. Having been lost to the area for many decades the return of these images will greatly enhance the visual history resources available to the community. Restoration and digitisation of the images has already indicated some of the value of the collection to the local area as it documents the regular flooding of the Benalla Township occurring in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the local community are now utilising the images to identify potential flooding risks created by proposed water management changes currently taking place.

One of the highlights associated with the project was an exhibition to showcase the collection at the Benalla Art Gallery that was sponsored by the B&DFHG and the University of Melbourne's Goulburn Valley campus. On display from 1 July to 13 August, the exhibition consisted of approximately 70 images representing the diverse and rich nature of Howship's work. Additionally, the exhibition has raised further local interest in the community-based project to identify and add stories to the images co-ordinated by the B&DFHG.

The exhibition also provided an opportunity for local VCE students from Benalla College to become involved in the project as a part of their Community Service subject. The students' involvement has included conducting research into the historical background of the images as well as enabling their assistance in the curator-ship and mounting of the exhibition.

## **Conclusions**

Neither of these projects took place overnight. The women's collection acquisition was subject to lengthy negotiations and ongoing evaluations. With the Howship project, at a meeting in November 2004 then University Archivist, Michael Piggott, made contact with representatives of the B&FDHG at a seminar organised by the Goulburn & Murray Association of Local & Family History Groups. At this time the

possibility was discussed of forming a partnership to make this collection available to the local community. After several meetings between representatives from the UMA and the B&FDHG it was agreed in mid 2005 that these two organisations would collaborate.

The acquisition of the women's collection has also highlighted the need to deal diplomatically with depositors – restrictions have had to be placed on the acceptance of further documentation and collections, especially where duplication occurs. However, the UMA has been able to prevent the fall of these collections; the women's collection was assured longevity, preservation and allowed access to those who want to use it and add to it. When originally deposited, it was with the proviso that men not be allowed access at all. Over the intervening years we have been able to relax that somewhat. What was once a private collection housed in a private residence is now in a public institution.

With the Howship collection, I believe we have been able to go one step further. The “picking up and dusting off” of a collection of photographs has helped establish real ties with the community, and has put expert advice and reproduction techniques into the hands of a local community. By merging local enthusiasm and fund-raising with archival expertise, a potentially forgotten moment in history has been revived and is contributing to the community in a real way with several projects arising from the initial scenario.

Other than the interest shown by the local community the project has raised interest from: a PhD student studying the history of photography in Australia (La Trobe); Photographic historian L Frost (author of *Dating Family Photographs 1850 - 1920*); the Science & Citizenship Project (University of Melbourne, Goulburn Valley Office) which is a three year funded initiative to study the ecological history of white settlement in the Goulburn Valley based on photographs and farming records. Department of Victorian Communities (DVC) is using this project as a positive example in a soon to be released paper on Cultural Development & Community Strengthening (revitalising local history groups etc). It has also resulted in two further offers of material (Avery photograph collection and Howship original prints, and more plate glass negatives).

For the archives itself, in addition to the obvious benefits previously mentioned, the processes have been a means to re-evaluate our collection. Earlier this year a

student project was completed. This scoping project sought to identify further collections within UMA holdings which would lend themselves to similar partnerships for the mutual benefit of regional Victorian communities and the University. The project was undertaken over 80 hours by a Monash University student as part of the Masters in Public History course work to identify collections with potential regional and genealogical interest to whole communities rather than to individual families. A significance assessment of several collections identified historical societies, museums and other groups (including University of Melbourne regional campuses) in corresponding regional areas who could be potential partners in developing the resource. It also undertook to assess the best way of making collections available to these partners in potential projects for example, digitisation of photographs or digitisation of paper documents on CD-ROM/web. Finally the student was required to assess and plan the stages in the most promising project, including funding required. We are yet to see the final report, but initial indications are encouraging.