
Taming the Chimera: Preservation in a Public Library

by Pat Ryckman

The fire-breathing Chimera, a beast with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of serpent, terrorized the Lycian countryside. It took a goddess, a hero, and another fantastic beast, Pegasus, to subdue it. Today, many public libraries face another Chimera when dealing with preservation issues—a tripartite monster made up of lack of time, money and expertise. At the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) we have no budget for preservation, no trained archivist and, with the Main Library open to serve the public seventy-four hours a week, very little time to devote to preservation activities. Yet with an arsenal of affordable programs and activities, we have begun to tame the Chimera and address our preservation concerns.

Why are public libraries concerned about preservation? Even the tiniest public library holds unique materials, usually relating to its community's local history. The 1992-93 edition of the *American Library Directory* includes entries for 183 public libraries in North Carolina. Of these, 107 claim special collections ranging from local history and genealogy to oral history, pottery, and even spiders. All of these materials (even the spiders, we suppose) need to be protected from the environment, our patrons, and ourselves to assure their survival for the long term.

At PLCMC, special collections including genealogy, local history, photographs, maps, sound recordings, and manuscripts are housed in the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room. By segregating these materials, we can offer them a little more protection and control. It is clear, though, that preservation is not just the concern of the special collections staff. Most Carolina Room materials first must pass through the Library's technical services department for processing and cataloging. And it is desirable that library materials in the general collections be handled in such a way as to maximize their useful life.

Our first step in addressing the concerns about preservation at PLCMC was to develop a plan for preservation; to do that we needed to understand our collection, its environment and use. A preservation committee, formed in 1988, was charged to (1) survey the collections, evaluate the needs in each area, set system priorities, and develop a proposed budget to meet the needs; (2) examine and train/retrain staff on current handling, processing and in-house mending practices, and make recommenda-

tions to bring these practices into conformity with accepted conservation principles; (3) develop staff training/workshop opportunities that provide staff with professional conservation and bindery expertise; (4) examine the library's physical environments and make recommendations for their enhancement, if necessary; and (5) prepare a disaster plan for the library system. The work by this committee, made up of a cross section of public service and technical service staff, did much to raise collective awareness of preservation issues at PLCMC. Today, preservation is not an isolated activity performed by one department, but a philosophy that permeates our policies, procedures, and services.

Education can provide the highest returns for the lowest cost of any preservation activity a library might initiate. Like Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and it is us." The PLCMC collection abounds in examples of mistreatment by both staff and the public. Over the years, we librarians have stamped, taped, labeled, bound, and rebound materials with good intentions but sad results. Our patrons have dog-eared, torn, inked, and mistreated the collection in even more creative ways, but they are often unaware of the harm they have done.

Education is the answer. Each new Carolina Room staffer receives orientation and training that emphasize our preservation goals. Each new staff member views a videotape, *Use or Abuse: The Role of Staff and Patrons in Maintaining General Library Collections*, a 24-minute introduction to good housekeeping practices, including shelf maintenance, loading book trucks, and safe handling of materials. Each newcomer also receives a checklist, "Reminders for Shelves," that encourages safe handling as part of the initial training packet.

In Fall 1992, all three hundred employees of the library system attended one of six mandatory sessions of "Don't Drop That Book!" a half-day training program that emphasized the idea that everyone, no matter what his or her job title, handles

library materials and is responsible for their safety. The presenters, Sharon Bennett, Director of the Charles ton Museum Library, and Harlan Greene, Executive Director of the North Carolina Preservation Consortium, provided practical tips and hands-on demonstrations of proper care and handling of a wide range of library materials.

SOLINET's preservation field service provides excellent workshops on a variety of preservation

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topics, but they can be expensive for some smaller libraries. There is sometimes a way around that cost. As host for their May 1993 Book Repair Workshop, the library was allowed to send one staff member free of charge, and the registration fee was waived in consideration of our sweat equity in preparing for the workshop and providing refreshments. This staff member is now prepared to do a variety of simple repairs — recasing, tipping pages, tightening hinges, mending tears — at a work area that has been established on an available countertop. By handling these most frequently needed treatments in-house, we not only save money, but also are able to return items to the collection more quickly.

Educating the public to the preservation cause is a more delicate matter. We obviously can't require them to attend a workshop or view a video. Instead, we try to develop their appreciation of the issues in more subtle ways. Every tour is an opportunity to mention preservation concerns; for example, when pointing out the photocopier to a tour group, we mention its "Book Edge" feature which can help prevent spine damage if used correctly. A quick peek into our vault and a few words about humidity, temperature, and acid will impress on the group our own concern for preservation and encourage them to begin to treat materials more carefully. Staff members approach pen-wielding patrons and offer pencils in a non-judgmental but informative way. A library-produced brochure, "Caring for Your Photo Memories" gives tips on safeguarding family photographs. We hope this information also will influence patrons' use of library photographs. Patrons value the materials and want them to be safe just as we do, but may not realize the destructiveness of some of their own actions.

It is easy to see that preventative preservation measures can save both money and time by helping to avoid costly corrective procedures in the future. Pamphlets coming into the collection routinely are placed in archival enclosures when judged to have lasting value. A book with a paper, spiral, or other less than satisfactory binding is sent to a commercial bindery for recasing before being added to the collection. Archival donations arriving in shoe boxes and milk crates are transferred to Hollinger boxes to await processing.

The Carolina Room is responsible for a large image collection — approximately seven thousand historic photographs and close to ten million negatives. Our subject index to the photograph collection includes oversized contact prints for researchers to peruse to help reduce wear and tear on the originals. As we develop computer databases for access to portions of this collection, we have been experimenting with storing images on Photo CD.

The bulk of the negative collection (comprising the *Charlotte Observer* negative files 1956-1989) currently is accessible only by date. A project to provide a subject index simultaneously is addressing preservation needs of the collection. As negatives are identified, they are placed in individual mylar sleeves, and acid-free envelopes and boxes. To date, fifteen thousand negatives have been identified and transferred to safe storage. The negatives project is undertaken entirely by volunteers. With Carolina Room staff almost always tied to the reference desk, it would be impossible to accomplish this labor-intensive task without our volunteers. Each month they contribute an average of seventy hours to the Carolina Room, and many of these hours involve preservation activities.

Donations of large collections of papers can mean many weeks of work for library staff to prepare the materials for addition to the collection. Universities and museums sometimes request an additional monetary gift to support this work. At PLCMC we have been successful in involving the donors as volunteers. In 1989, the Theatre Charlotte/Martha Akers collection arrived in the Carolina Room ready for use. Theatre volun-

teers, trained by library staff, had already completed organization of the collection, including transferring the entire collection to archival folders, files, and boxes provided by the library. Volunteers from the League of Women Voters, Charlotte Chapter, currently are working on their organizational papers, which have recently been donated.

Another strategy that can be successful is to take advantage of the library school practicum programs. This year, a UNC-Greensboro library science student completed processing the Mary Howell Papers, including attending to their physical needs.

Funding preservation activities may seem daunting to public libraries with so many other pressing needs. But if preservation is considered an integral part of the library program rather than a separate concern, the funding can be more readily available. At PLCMC archival boxes, folders, and photograph sleeves all are purchased through the regular supply budget. Training materials and preservation workshop fees are covered under staff development/continuing education funds. These monies are less susceptible to the budget axe than a separate preservation line item might be. The gift fund has proved a good source for special conservation work on prized items in the collection. Donors often are as happy to have their monetary gift used to preserve a valuable item of local importance as they would be with a purchase of new materials.

PLCMC has begun to address preservation needs through education, creative use of limited funds and human resources, and by learning to "think preservation" every day. Once preservation thinking became imbedded in the library's overall operation, the monster was tamed.

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