

National Treasures:

How to Use Prized Items in Your



Whoever your key audience is, keep in mind that people love stories. Tailor your story to that audience, demonstrate passion and enthusiasm for your archives and your work, and you'll leave a positive – and lasting – impression.

Your “elevator speech” (see page 6) is vital for those occasions on which you have a short time to present a compelling explanation of archives and archivists. When you have a bit more time to communicate, share a story. . . .

What are the most interesting stories in your archives? Do you have a document, photo, or artifact in your repository that always “gets ‘em”? You know, the photo of immigrant settlers in your region, or the book that absorbed a bullet and saved someone's life, or the letter from a soldier to his young wife that reveals what it was really like on D-Day? Do you have a story about a visit to your collection that changed forever someone's understanding of his or her family history?

Peter Gottlieb, state archivist of Wisconsin and chair of SAA's American Archives Month Task Force, set about to collect stories from the Wisconsin Historical Society staff that could be used to advocate for the state archives. Here – to stimulate your own ideas – are several of those stories.

Changing Lives

“The Wisconsin Child Center was a state orphanage. Perhaps the most striking example of the impact created when people use these records is the case of two brothers placed at the Center in the 1930s and then ‘indentured’ to families in different parts of the state. One brother came to see the records and through them not only learned of the family situation that led to the placement, but also was able to locate and be reunited with his brother. . . .”

Protecting Rights

“The Archives responds routinely to requests from individuals who need information from school records, court case files, and naturalization volumes in order to secure social security, get a passport, or prove citizenship. We received an inquiry from a recently widowed elderly woman now living in Oregon. She was naturalized under her maiden name in Dane County in the 1940s, and needed to document her citizenship to receive certain Medicare benefits. We were able to provide a certified copy of her naturalization in the Circuit Court for Dane County.”



Collection to Tell Your Story

Connecting People With Their Past

“A researcher came to the Archives Research Room seeking information on his father, who was the first journalist killed in New Guinea during World War II. The researcher was one year old when his father was killed. He wanted to use the Lewis Sebring Collection because Sebring had been a journalist in New Guinea during the war. In the collection was a series of photographs documenting the father’s funeral.”

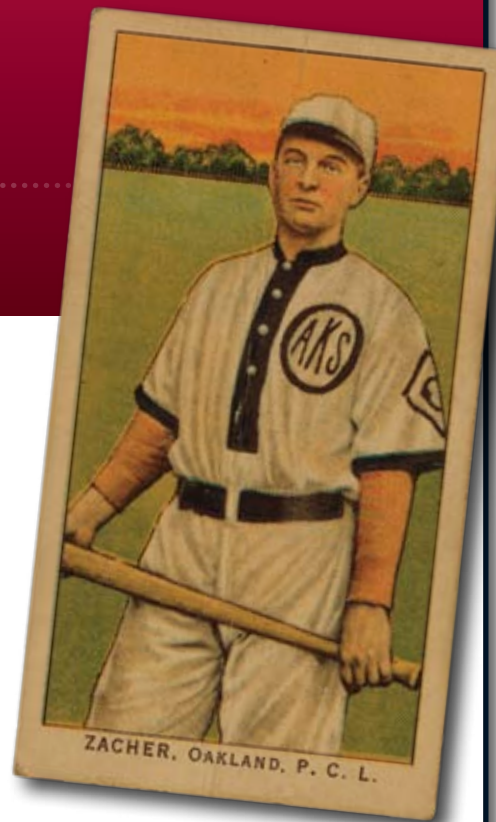
“Through a Google search, a man from Colorado learned that we have an oral history interview with his grandfather, whom he had never met. The caller identified himself as a pilot, and the interview concerns the grandfather’s barnstorming career in the LaCrosse area. He ordered a copy of the interview on CD to share at his family’s Christmas gathering.”



Making History Possible

“The thing we call history is created by individuals conducting research and writing about their findings. The ongoing preservation and conservation work of the Library/Archives makes it possible to write the history of many people, places, and events. The Historical Society not only preserves the materials necessary for individuals to connect with their personal pasts, but preserves the raw material that is essential to writing the histories that society needs to understand its past, present, and future.”

“The Historical Society has the diary of the only member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to die during the journey. It’s a true national treasure. Because of its value and fragility, the original was seldom accessible to researchers. Following careful conservation, we scanned the diary, produced an impressive facsimile, and placed it on the Web. The original diary was available for display in several major exhibits during the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial; the facsimile is readily available to researchers at the Historical Society, giving them the same experience as handling the original; and now anyone in the world can access the diary on the Web.”



An Ongoing Need

“A Native American researcher was working in the Government Publications stacks investigating potential topics for her dissertation. She caught a volume that serendipitously fell from the shelf. It was a copy of the Robert La Follette hearings on the condition of Native Americans in Wisconsin. As she caught the volume, it fell open to her grandfather’s testimony before La Follette’s Senate committee. This experience led to her dissertation based in part on these published hearings. She not only found her topic, but she recognized that the volume was deteriorating rapidly and brought the problem to staff attention. It has now been repaired and digitized for future generations.”

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On the cover: Check purchasing the Alaska territory for \$7.2 million in 1866, signed by Secretary of State William H Seward (National Archives and Records Administration); electrician Fred Brusati atop the Golden Gate Bridge during construction (Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University); “Replevin Order Jenny, a Negro vs Williams, 1800” (Ohio Historical Society); Pennsylvania delegation at the 1912 Republican National Convention, Chicago Coliseum, Chicago, Illinois, June 18-22 (Library of Congress).

Page 3: Archives Month/Week posters courtesy of the state archives. To view state archives posters, go to the Council of State Archivists website at www.statearchivists.org.

Page 4: Eighth-grade students from Bexley Middle School assist Ohio Historical Society staff in sorting 1864 Soldiers’ Ballots. (Ohio Historical Society)

Page 5: This message was sent from behind enemy lines during World War I. It was carried by a pigeon. (National Archives and Records Administration)

Page 8: “Going to town on Saturday afternoon, Greene County, Georgia, 1941,” Jack Delano, 1914 - (Library of Congress); “Cowboy apparently reading a letter to his horse,” Charles J Belden, 1887-1966 (American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming); “Rural school children, San Augustine County, Texas, April 1943,” John Vachon, 1914-1975 (Library of Congress).

Page 9: “Original Journal of Sergeant Charles A Floyd, 1804,” Lewis and Clark Expedition (Wisconsin Historical Society); “Zacher, Oakland, Pacific Coast League, 1911,” Baseball card from the Benjamin K Edwards Collection. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).

Special Section: From the Johnson/Rohrer, Perkin, and Spears family collections.

Acknowledgments

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