

Site Visit

-Interview with Head Archivist, Paul Rogers –

Yosemite Archives

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Abstract

The following report summarizes the modern-day archival practices and challenges of Yosemite Archives through the lens of Head Archivist and Branch Chief, Paul Rogers. Rogers shares an overview of the archives as he discusses the hierarchy of practices and protocols that set forth upon records' arrival. Rogers relates how a record is appraised and cataloged, arranged, and described, and how it is made secure and accessible to the public. Rogers also contributes his solution to improving missing historic information gaps in a collection through the implementation of oral history. Yosemite Archives is located at 5083 Foresta Road in El Portal, California.

Introduction

Yosemite Archives is one of three institutions devoted to archiving and preserving Yosemite's National Park's history- Yosemite Archives, Yosemite Museum, and Yosemite Research Library. According to Head Archivist and interviewee, Paul Rogers who oversees all three institutions as branch chief, the archives were born out of necessity due to a field school that existed in Yosemite Valley during the 1920s. In 1924, the size of the field school's collection created a need to build a museum. The attic of this museum became the first incarnation of Yosemite Archives. By 1996, and after its second life as the "Records Center" overseen by a librarian, the collection became too large for its informal space and was moved to a climate-controlled building just outside the western entrance of the park in El Portal, California.

Rogers arrived at Yosemite Archives in 2005, after a cross-country archival career in the National Park Service, and he entered as its first professional archivist. After receiving two master's degrees in history and record management, Rogers' thesis about records clean-up landed him on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund team. Upon completion, Rogers moved into the National Parks Service (NPS) taking post at the NPS archives of Mesa Verde. He was then promoted to NPS Regional Archivist of the Southeast in Atlanta, Georgia and later received the opportunity to transfer to his birthplace as regional archivist of the Pacific Northwest in Seattle. His final move, in 2005, was to El Portal, where he became the Head Archivist of Yosemite Archives and the branch chief of all three cultural institutions. His personal archivist philosophy is, "anti-elitist," defined by Rogers as ensuring access to all. And his passion for archives lies in preserving what would otherwise be lost.

Yosemite Archives: An Overview

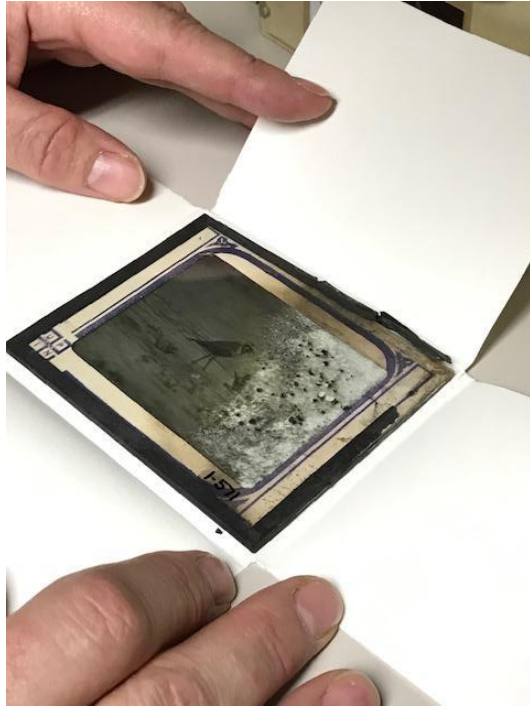
According to Rogers, Yosemite Archives is the fourth largest collection in the National Park Service (NPS) system with Yellowstone National Park just behind it. Its archives would carry title as NPS' largest national park archives if other archives did not contain military and maritime records such as The Presidio of San Francisco. Its collection contains over 4.4 million items and is made up of over 3,000 linear feet of documentation that spans the 1700s to the present.

Items in the collection include resource management records, historic park administrative records and any park related records that demonstrate baseline data that exhibit decision making choices. According to Rogers, these items are some of the most important records (and the most stressful) in the collection due to the amount of litigation that pertains to them. These records are accessed by both park employees and the public involved in legal inquiry and lawsuits. If the archives cannot produce records needed to justify Yosemite's side (i.e., decisions related environmental protection, endangered species and/or land use) the park will lose its case.

The collection also contains a vast audio and/or visual history of Yosemite. The archives house collections of slides, photos, audio recordings, drawings, printing blocks, ephemera, maps, negatives (see Figure 1) and films of all formats, that are mostly original to the park. The archives are also home to unique artifacts, items such as Ansel Adams' wooden skis (see Figure 1), a prop from a plane carrying five tons of marijuana that crashed in Yosemite, and two skulls of male deer locked together by their antlers which caused their demise. The collection's records are made up of natural and manufactured materials as well as analog and digital formats.

Figure 1

Photographs from Inside Yosemite Archives with Paul Rogers





Note. Top Left Photo: Rogers shares an example of a glass negative from the archives.
Top Right Photo: Rogers discusses one of Yosemite's first trail maps housed in the collection.
Bottom Photo: Ansel Adams' wooden skis are stored on the 2nd floor of the archives.

And when there are no records to account for history in Yosemite National Park, Rogers creates them. Rogers does this through an oral history project he spearheaded titled "I Remember Yosemite." He locates and pursues former park staff and the public that pertain to missing periods of records and has them participate in interviews to create digital audio and visual records for the archives. These interviews are then transcribed and archived for public access in both written and digital form.

Yosemite Archives is staffed by a modest team of Rogers and Archivist Technician, Sam Goza, who together assist over 300 researchers annually as they manage the archives and record history. During acquisitions and appraisals staff members from other Yosemite cultural and historical institutions are utilized, such as the head librarian and museum curator. Other archival

related projects are brought to completion with the aid of summer interns and volunteers though these numbers are gravely limited due to geography and the amount of beds Yosemite National Park can devote to short term residents of the archives- a total of four beds. Despite these limitations Rogers successfully manages one of the largest archives in the NPS system and ensures its access to everyone.

Appraisal, Acquisitions, and Accessioning

Early informal NPS acquisition practices were to, “tell the parks story” (National Parks Service, n.d.). Today, appraisal, acquisitions, and accessioning follow a formal protocol to better protect the archives and records. When a donor comes forth with a record, manuscript, or audio and/or visual record for donation, Rogers first deploys Yosemite Archives Scope of Collection Statement (SOCS) to determine the value of the record. All National Park archives have their own unique draft. Elements of the SOCS allow Rogers to appraise and analyze how the records pertain to Yosemite, the existing collection, and the history of the park. If it contains baseline information that demonstrates legal value, operating value, and archival value related to Yosemite and/or produced by people and personnel in the collection, it is kept. Federal records that do not contain baseline value to Yosemite Archives are passed onto the National Archives to become public domain. If the value of a record from a private donor is called into question a SOCS committee is formed to evaluate the items' relevance. The committee is made up of an archivist, a curator, a librarian, and a person outside of the cultural property field. Together they evaluate the item and vote if it should be kept. Often, Rogers is tasked with delineating if the donated item is a better fit for the museum and even if the donated item does have archival value, Rogers may have to reject the donation under the motto, “if we can’t care for it, we can’t take it.”

After appraisal, if records or manuscripts have been identified as an addition to the archive's holdings, Rogers sets forth in the acquisitions and accessioning processes. He begins by ensuring a Deed of Gift Agreement is in place. Federal records absorbed by the archives transfer ownership within the agency and become public domain. Regarding items donated by private citizens or corporate institutions, Rogers will research if the donor is the living rightful owner and if this is not the case, Rogers hunts down the next of kin or establishes who the owner is and tracks the person or entity down for permission. Once a Deed of Gift Agreement is in place the record can begin the next step towards becoming public domain and accessible to all.

Arrangement, Description, and Finding Aids

Because a significant percentage of research that takes place in Yosemite Archives pertains to litigation, Rogers not only ensures everyone has equal access to the records, but he also ensures the validity of the records through rigorous provenance. Roger believes provenance is crucial to proving the unbroken chain of custody of a record which gives the record significant legal value and strength. If provenance is weak, Rogers will gather additional information for its stability. For instance, the archives received a donation of a wooden marker with “1VB” burnt into it. It was known that it was an artifact produced by NPS that might have served as a boundary marker, but its provenance was not exactly known. Rogers found proof from the original Yosemite land grant that it was in fact a boundary marker that marked one of the first four corners of the park.

Rogers also believes arrangement is equally important to the validity of the records. When Rogers began discussing his beliefs on original order, he cited an archival example that took place with the late author Carl Sandburg's personal papers. According to Rogers these papers arrived at the archives in labelled folders, labelled by Sandburg himself. The labels were

“F”, “B”, and “ATT.” The archivist, not taking note of these labels, thought they had received a collection of papers with no specific order and set to work to order them chronologically. Later the meaning of the labels was discovered, and it was quite significant to the context and content of the papers. Pages label “F” were related to friends. Pages labeled “B” were from business and pages labelled “AAT” meant answer anytime. It was now too late to know if the Christmas card from Elvis denoted friendship, business, or something of no real interest. This anecdote is a window into Rogers strong belief that original order should be preserved most often to protect the content and context of the records as well as to properly dictate the subgroups of a series. Rogers believes this so strongly he will even attempt to reconstitute the original order on a case-by-case basis. Regarding chronological order, Rogers only uses it when deemed appropriate.

Once the records are ordered, description is cut and dry for Rogers, as it is a standard practice across the National Park Service. The entirety of this system utilizes DACS content standards to catalog all records. Rogers notes that NPS began its archives at the turn of the 20th century and invented its own alpha-numerical system that it used up to the 1940’s when the system shifted. Once the 21st century arrived NPS was generating computer records making DACS the clear operating system of choice. All records possessed by NPS have been updated using DACS standards. All completed collection descriptions are managed in a database powered by ICMS software and their finding aids are made public through the Online Archives of California (Online Archives of California, n.d.).

Preservation and Disaster Planning

The preservation program led by Rogers addresses the repository level, the storage environment, holdings maintenance and utilizes preservation systems of rerecording files into

digital formats. At the repository level, despite being subject to an increase in climate change fueled forest fire and flood, the archives are protected by being strategically built next to all first responding entities that serve Yosemite National Park. The external threats of insects, mold, and fungus are combatted by immediately isolating donations in airtight bags to destroy anything that may be surviving inside of them. The item remains bagged for two days and is then taken out and placed in a freezer for two more days. Finally, the item is bagged airtight again for two days before being admitted into the collection. Rogers' greatest fear for the repository is the threat of wildfire smoke triggering the internal sprinkler system. The archives are built on top of a waterproof membrane to protect them from the land below which was formally a trash dump. Because of this, there is no drainage inside the archives, and the sprinklers can flood the repository and destroy the records. According to Rogers, it would take four semi-trucks to evacuate the records from the archives making it a gravely difficult possibility.

The storage environment implemented by Rogers is organized by the material of the records and its preservation needs. All paper documents and artifacts made of natural materials (including metal) are stored in a two-story room with grated second floors to ensure air flow throughout. The space is kept at a temperature of sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit with humidity ranging between forty and forty-five percent. This ensures the records and manuscripts do not expand, contract, and remain stable for preservation. Nitrate films are stored in a freezer that is connected to a backup generator in the event of a power outage to ensure the films remain fixed and will not combust. Photographic materials (i.e., slides, tintypes, photos, and film) and magnetic tape have a 10'x10' room sized cold locker devoted to them, so their chemical components do not degrade.

Rogers oversees the preservation of all records through digitization, and it is ongoing. Seventy eight percent of all analog files contained in the archives' collection have been digitized. Sensitive materials in the collection such as records about archeological site locations or endangered species will never be digitally recorded to protect the information. And thanks to Rogers' on-going and never-ending grant writing efforts, in 2018, Yosemite Archives received an award funding the digitization of 6500 historic negatives from the collection to make them accessible for anyone online (NP Gallery, n.d.). Rogers believes the future of Yosemite Archives, as well as the archival profession is deeply embedded in the digital world and as an anti-elitist records manager he rejoices in digital preservation as it allows easier access for everyone, across the globe.

Access and Security

Access to the repository is open to the public in person and online, world-wide, though no one is admitted into the actual archives (tours are the only exception). All records are accessible but certain records are shrouded in extra layers of policy and security due to the sensitive nature of these records (i.e., archeological sites and endangered species documents). The four main employees of Yosemite's history institutions are the only personnel with access to the actual archives. There is one security code shared amongst these four employees that grants them access to the archives and it is continually changed. The personnel include Rogers, the assistant archivist, the museum curator, and the head librarian. This is to ensure the safety of the records. Appointments and record requests made by researchers must be made at least two weeks ahead of time. Records are found and identified by researchers through finding aids on the Online Archive of California. Upon arrival, an employee meets researchers in a room that neighbors the archives. In this room the prepared records are shared. Visitors must sign in and

sign a contract entitled *Guidelines for Handling Archival Materials*. Guidelines range from handling records with the gloves provided to the cost of copies of the records. They also include explicit instructions to not trace records or use ink next to them.

Conclusion

Rogers manages the daily operations and security of Yosemite Archives, writes grants, appraises donations, creates finding aids, assists 300 researchers annually, leads an ambitious oral history project, ensures the archives can legally protect one of the most litigated against National Parks, digitizes new and existing records from numerous formats, confirm interns and volunteers for new projects, and oversees two other cultural property institutions, all with the aid of one assistant archivist. At the end of the day, it seems modern challenges in 21st century archives do not stop at digital preservation, the legal validity of records, and threats from climate change. Today's challenges also include age-old problems such as funding, storage space, and staffing shortages. In Roger's eyes the future of his profession is the digital archivist, and this may be because he sees it as a solution to the timeless tests of the archival community.

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Interview conducted with Paul Rogers on April 3, 2023, at Yosemite Archives.

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