

Undergrads at the Archives: The Benefits of Archival Sources for Research and Teaching Juandrea Bates

My research explores the history of young people and their families. It uncovers stories like that of fifteen-year-old Paula Santorini and her twelve-year-old brother, Mateo who pooled their wages and fled home to escape the brutal beatings from their father. It reveals the odyssey of young migrants like David Gutierrez, who sailed alone from Spain to Buenos Aires, established a successful business, and set out to buy a homestead all before leaving his teens. It unearths the of the Guiloff siblings, Juan, Maria, Felipe, and Angel who, at ages ranging from nine to fourteen, hustled from one side of Buenos Aires to the other, enlisting an impressive array of relatives, charity workers, and legal officials in their campaign to keep their family together.

Alone some of the stories in my research are inspiring. Just as many are heartbreaking. Together they shed new light on the dynamics of childhood, family, and law during a transformative period in Argentine history. Paula, Mateo, David, and the Guiloff siblings lived at a time when Argentina was undergoing one of the most dramatic demographic and economic expansions of modern history. In the mid-nineteenth century, Argentina was an oligarchic republic characterized by low population density, underdevelopment, and profound social and economic inequality. From 1880 to 1930, 6.5 million European immigrants entered the port of Buenos Aires. The rise of agro-exports and the beginnings of industrialization brought the country's GNP on par with Western Europe and political upheaval impelled democratic openings and social welfare services.

Generous funding from the CLIR Mellon Fellowship for Research in Original Sources allowed me to investigate new sources that new provided insights into how young people and their families navigated this rapidly changing world. I spent a year in the basement of Buenos

Aires' Civil Tribunal, reading hundreds of previously inaccessible lower civil court cases on topics ranging from child custody to child support, complaints of abuse, and the removal of parental rights. While other documents had been transferred to the National Archives and neatly preserved, these lower court records were deemed insignificant, irrelevant, and unworthy of careful preservation. They remained uncatalogued and unused by historians.

Reading these cases made it clear that family and children were not niche subjects insulated from the “real history” of Argentine modernization. They were a central part of the story. Paula and Mateo's struggle encouraged me to consider how legal concepts of the terms “family” and “child” determined who received state services and who did not. Putting their story together with others like it made it clear that legal definitions of family and youth were critical in perpetuating the inequity that plagued nineteenth-century Argentina. The 1869 Civil Code limited legal recognition of family to propertied men and their legitimate wives and offspring. As a result, judges regularly denied poor and female-headed households’ legal access to inheritance, marriage, or child custody; they also dismissed many impoverished children, girls like Paula’s pleas for legal recourse against abusive guardians. As time went on, processes like immigration, industrialization, and the rise of social welfare agencies dramatically altered household dynamics. The way young people like David and the Guilloff siblings responded to these changes would come to shape judicial culture. Thousands of immigrant minors who had arrived in Argentina without court-approved guardians joined millions of native-born women and children, whose entrance into the workforce had weakened men's control over household finances, in challenging the court's limited definition of family. Young people maneuvered between legal and social welfare agencies to force judges to take their complaints seriously. By 1919, judicial overload led the National Senate to draft new legislation that extended legal protection to all

minors regardless of class or natal status and brought working-class kinship under state protection. Following the stories of young people collected in a forgotten archive, my manuscript “*Raising Argentina: Family Policy, Childhood and Justice in Buenos Aires 1871-1930*” demonstrates how poor kids and their families used civil courts to give meaning to abstract notions of authority, protection, rights, and citizenship.

As an instructor, I want my students to have the same thrill of archival discovery that I had in Buenos Aires. Archival research is the center of historical craft. And, undergraduate research in the humanities has been linked to a host of benefits, including increased critical thinking skills, along with improved student satisfaction, retention, long-term career achievement, and the decision to pursue graduate school.¹ The benefits of archival research have not been lost on historians. I’ve read several articles in which urban universities showcase assignments that take students on day trips to local depositories like New York Public Library or the Schomburg Center. Other written by scholars at research universities bring undergraduates into the vast archival collections on their own campuses. Other well-endowed schools support undergraduate research through travel research grants or integrate it into faculty-led study abroad programs.

Teaching at a state school in rural Minnesota requires a different approach. Much of our students’ isolation from major archives is due to structural factors beyond their control. We are

¹ Chris Craney et al, "Cross-Discipline Perceptions of the Undergraduate Research Experience." *The Journal of Higher Education* 82, no. 1 (2011): 92-113; Linda S. Behar-Horenstein, Kellie W. Roberts, and Alice C. Dix. "Mentoring Undergraduate Researchers: An Exploratory Study of Students' and Professors' Perceptions." *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 18, no. 3 (2010): 269-291; David Lopatto, "Undergraduate Research as a High-Impact Student Experience." *Peer Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 27-31; Sandra R. Gregerman et al. "Undergraduate Student-Faculty Research Partnerships Affect Student Retention." *The Review of Higher Education* 22, no. 1 (1998): 55-72; Russel S. Hathaway, Biren A. Nagda, and Sandra R. Gregerman, "The Relationship of Undergraduate Research Participation to Graduate and Professional Education Pursuit: An Empirical Study." *Journal of College Student Development* 43, no. 5 (2002): 614-631; John Ishiyama, "Does Early Participation in Undergraduate Research Benefit Social Science and Humanities Students?." *College Student Journal* 36, no. 3 (2002): 381-387.

located in Southeastern Minnesota, - three hours from Minneapolis, and six from Chicago. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college and, even more work long hours to pay for their education. Growing budgetary restraints restrict our department's ability to provide research travel grants for most students. Considering the impacts that undergraduate research has on learning, retention, and the pursuit of graduate studies, I often consider how these factors gatekeep the next generation of historians.

I want to share two of the strategies I have used to help my students get the benefits of archival research. First, digital depositories featuring oral histories have proved amazingly useful. Last year, I created an assignment in which each student analyzed five oral histories from the Arizona Memory Projects and pull out common themes presented in the interviews. We then used a google doc to index the themes in eighty-five oral histories and worked together to develop research questions based on the index. Generating research questions from the themes present in oral histories pushed students past the typical big name, big event approach to developing historical research topics and led to more interesting questions and interpretations of the past.

Second, while I can't bring my students to the archives, I can sometimes bring the archives to them. Last year, I brought in translated transcripts of the court cases I used in my research along with photographs of similar documents procured from Chicago's Progressive Era juvenile courts. I photographed boxes of these documents without reading the contents and organized them in google drive folders the same way that they were organized in the archive. This allowed me to step back from the role of expert professor and engage alongside students in approaching these documents as novices. One of my favorite teaching moments came as I listened to students excitedly call out their findings to one another as they went through the

photographs. We made our own more in-depth index of the material, read some of it together, and let this index guide us in developing group research topics. Again, sophomore and junior students proved capable of organizing and analyzing original sources to reveal hidden histories and make new insights about the past.

In short, both my research and my teaching suggest that there is ample evidence that young people are capable of making history if we just look closely enough to see it.