



A guide to archiving personal and family records

You leave a legacy for your family and for history if you choose to archive your personal and family records. I just received from my sister Nancy a second sizable box of dad's photos and slides, some of which I've not seen before. I'm excited to supplement visually what I read in Towle diaries and correspondence. For example, when I see an early photo of mom, dad, Alice and myself in preschool days, I'll remember dad's 1941 diary noting the difficulties he and mom had balancing demanding language study with family responsibilities. He ruefully commented that the conventional expectation of a wife devoting her time to keeping the children happy and in line didn't work when both parents have to study to pass language exams, yet the ayah couldn't keep pace with two lively girls. This and other passages give me insights into my father that enrich my understanding of him. They also reveal the kinds of tensions with which missionary families had to cope. I'm convinced that preserving such personal and family records gives us and those who can access them a unique and compelling picture of the experiences of missionary families and of the people, places and time that shaped our lives. History comes alive from such original records. I urge classmates and Kodaites in particular to honor their heritage by preserving it.

Collection and survey

Try to collect all the pertinent records, whether diaries, correspondence, photographs, slides, videos, scrapbooks, church programs or reports, sermons, pamphlets, books or memorabilia. Store them in a cool dry place where the temperature remains moderate and constant, the humidity low and the collection is protected from direct light. Florescent light as well as sunlight fade records and hasten deterioration. Avoid basements and attics.

Do a casual survey to see what you have. Are the records of one person? A family? Do they range between interrelated families? What kind of records? At this stage, resist the temptation to organize them. Make a very rough inventory as is. If the records are in an order you know to have been used by their creator, it is important to maintain that order and grouping. Context is all in archiving. Respecting provenance and keeping related records together is crucial. That alone differentiates manuscripts archives from libraries. But common sense should prevail, so if your records are as haphazard – as those of the Towle materials, you can note the logical topics or categories and eventually group them accordingly. (Wait for the arrangement section) I'll be noting some of the standard categories used in archives under arrangement.

Immediate preservation

While you survey, make notes about the kinds of material and any exceptionally striking or significant pieces or passages. Also take preservation measures to arrest deterioration. Most missionary family records of our era will be paper and photographic. Let's take paper first. Twentieth century paper making generally included chemicals, making the paper decidedly acidic. Newsprint has the poorest quality paper. Over time the paper becomes discolored and brittle. So as you work, try to handle them only once to photocopy them or otherwise reproduce them. An excellent website www.yeinfo.com/howto/PreservingRecords.html urges us to use a PC scanner to copy family records, labeling files for easy identification before transferring them to a CD. I prefer paper as a more permanent and reliable alternative record. If you choose paper, remember to use archival copy paper to copy

records.

Note the condition of the items. As you go through the collection, remove any paper clips, staples, straight pins, rubber bands or stickies all of which damage the items they enclose or mark. There are archivally sound paper clips to keep leaves of letters or connected documents together (see resources). When you find a letter enclosed in an envelope, take it out, unfold and carefully flatten it and attach the envelopes for possible useful information. All pages should be flat. When you undertake the arrangement stage, you will be putting each document or related documents into a folder as part of a group. If you can supply documentation that is lacking – a name, date, place or time for instance use only a no. 2 pencil to lightly annotate as inconspicuously as possible. In brackets add your name and the date to indicate that the addition is yours. (Ink damages)

Photographs, slides, movies and scrapbooks of photos offer their own challenges. To preserve photos in particular, it's wiser to wear lint free white gloves and use both hands instead of picking up the item by one edge. Take care not to bend or crease. If you are handling video magnetic tape, only hold it by the housing supports. Touching the tape surface will damage it. When storing photographic materials, try to keep the humidity under 70 degrees and the temperature in the same range. Color prints or negatives that have questionable stability need to be stored in a refrigerator. Be sensitive to the smell of slides or negatives. If you detect a vinegary smell, you should separate them from the rest and get advice. Cellulose nitrate film can spontaneously combust, it requires a special explosion free freezer.

Identification of pictures can be a huge problem. Try to get people who know the people, place or situation to help you identify the photographic subject. To avoid damaging the photo or film, use an archival 'pigment pen' to label on the back the key features of the photo. The pressure of a pencil can indent into the photo surface. If you choose to keep your photos in a scrapbook or binder, be sure it is an acid free or buffered item from a reputable archival supplier. And if you come across old scrapbooks with photos, be aware that the acidic or magnetic pages will hurt them. Make a photocopy or take a picture of a page in order to record the contact and then try to remove the photos without damaging them. Place them in an archivally safe scrapbook or binder, reproducing the setting and any identification on the page. If the photos and newspaper cut outs can't be safely detached from their original setting, get some acid free or alkaline buffered sheets of paper and interleave the pages of the scrapbook or photo album. In resources you'll find the materials needed to follow these suggestions. Note light impressions in particular for photographic archival supplies.

The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point www.archives@uwsp.edu has a very helpful section, 'preservation tips for family records and photographs.' It mentions 'reversibility' the principle that you should only undertake steps to preserve materials that do not change or damage the originals. It also lists the most reliable archival supplies, their addresses and phone numbers.

Arrangement

Now that you have a rough inventory, you can think about how to organize the records. It helps to understand the underlying principles governing archival arrangement. Gregory S Hunter has written an excellent basic book, *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives*, in which he states, "[The] archives of a given records creator must not be intermingled with those of other record creators. Archivists always try to keep separate the records of different creating individuals or agencies (p 97)" this dictum does not mean that the correspondence between members of the Scudder and Graham families can not be kept together. Essentially, Scudder family records would be kept as a record group in a manuscript collection, with sub groups or series, one of which might be the correspondence between the two families, with copies of Graham letters. Likewise the Graham records would be maintained as a unit, with subdivisions including copies of Scudder letters to Graham recipients. In the case of interconnected families, the decisions become more complex. Still they are manageable.

The second basic principle of archival arrangement is original order. The idea is to honor the organization of the originator so that the family member or researcher sees from the arrangement how those records were used by the creator. Most of us have moved from pillar to post and records often have been packed higgledy – piggedly with no records to the original order, so I suspect that as a rule we who want to preserve those records will be creating the order.

Archivists work with 5 levels of arrangement. The first, the repository, we will take up later. It is the place you choose to deposit the records. The second is the record group or collection. Third is the series level, perhaps the most important. It involves both the order among series and the order within a series. Hunter defines a series as “a group of files of documents maintained together as a unit because of some relationship arising out of their creation, receipt or use. (p 100)” the series you choose (or the archivist working with you recommends) forms the character of the collection. Subdivisions of the series clarify its focus. Researchers look first for what series the collection contains to determine where to concentrate. The fourth level consists of file units. These might be alphabetical, chronological, geographical, subject or numerical. The item level (a single letter or document) is the fifth. Suppose you are dealing with the records of Dr Ida Scudder in a repository collecting missionary records. The record group would be the Scudder family collection(s). Dr Ida’s records would comprise a series. Within the Ida Scudder series you would have her correspondence which in turn would have its subdivisions or file units. Items within the file units would concern family correspondence, professional correspondence, mission correspondence etc

For manuscripts, Hunter suggests chronology, topics, types of material, or functions of the creator. As I survey the Towle records, I anticipate that I would choose to go with function as the major organizing principle, because dad in his professional capacity worked mainly as an agricultural and mechanical engineer and the unofficial mission photographer, but also served as an administrator, pastor, publicist and teacher. In the personal sphere he functions as husband, father, son and relative. I could expand the list as I go through things. Then, within the series I would use chronology to give historical context and organize the types of material, such as correspondence, diaries, board matters etc. I would resort to topics too, because his responsibilities and interests were legion. I hope these examples will give you an idea of things to consider in arranging your records.

Hunter deserves to have the last word. Among his tips are the following:

1. Use the question “who created these records” to help you distinguish between record groups or series
2. If there is any discernable order, rearrange as little as you can so as to make the collection usable
3. The value of the information in the records should determine the order of arrangement
4. If you organize a series by types of material, correspondence and diaries usually come first, going from the most personal to the least
5. Label folders concisely, but completely. The list of folders within the file unit will provide a helpful finding aid.

Of course, if you delegate the task of arranging to an archivist, you won’t have to keep these pointers in mind. If, however, you choose to arrange your documents, you will need to invest in reputable archival materials (many claim the name without the standards.) You will need folders for each individual item or group of items, paper for copying and interleaving, photographic supplies such as binders or photo guard photo pages and boxes for safe storage. They do cost, but the expense is much greater if you cut corners and fail to use genuine archival products or tools: you lose family history to deterioration.

Long term preservation

You now may be thinking, what have I gotten myself into? Most of us do not have the room or the proper conditions to maintain family records permanently. We may not have the time or energy to organize the records. So what alternative do we have? Simply put, an archives. The question becomes what is the best possible repository for my family records? You need a reputable place that has the facilities and expertise to permanently care for your records, one that will arrange a deed of gift with you that fulfills your requirements and makes the records accessible to family and researchers. That deed of gift means you turn over the responsibility of maintaining your records (an in most cases, organizing them) to the archives in return for its assumption of the intellectual rights to them.

You have a number of options. Consider your purpose and what you think would best please the creators of those records. If you mainly want to honor the religious convictions and contributions of family

members, you may want to look into which seminaries, mission boards or universities with strong departments of religion have the conditions and personnel to properly care for your records. Wheaton College (the one with the Billy Graham connection at www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/ema/guidelines02.html) has an excellent archival set up and specializes in things missionary. If the medical connections are crucial, as with Dr Ida, you should consider whether the appropriate medical school has special collections or archives that could and would undertake to preserve your records. Colleges or universities are another logical choice. Not all small colleges have the wherewithal to undertake missionary collections. Oberlin does. Some of the big universities can be picky – even they have to worry about space and staff. Harvard used to take the manuscripts of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, but no longer accepts them. The research value of your records makes a difference in how attractive they are to an archives or special collection. Don't forget to investigate historical societies or state repositories. You may have to shop around.

Once you locate a possible repository, visit it and talk with the curator or head of manuscript collections. Look at how it has organized its collections, what finding aids are available and who is using what collections. Only deposit if you find a suitable repository that you like and trust. It should be a place that respects your wishes about what records may be accessed and by whom. I choose the University of Massachusetts for several reasons. First, it is dad's alma mater, though it was Mass Aggie in his day. I have visited there and talked with the archivist. It turns out that he has previously worked with missionary papers and photographic collections. U. Mass archives have the capacity, expertise and desire to undertake the Towle collection. When I have vetted my family collection, Nancy Towle Guiles and I will work out a deed of gift and make the deposit. We will include the restrictions we deem necessary. I am happy with the arrangement.

Access

Who do you see using your records? Family members only? That will considerably limit the number of repositories likely to be interested in them. Do the records have research value? For whom? If they can instruct future ministers and missionaries, they may belong in a religiously connected archives. If they would help train doctors going to tropical areas or very poor, underserved regions, they might go to a teaching hospital or university with that kind of outreach. If they could be useful to budding, diplomats and international programs or organizations working in third world countries, you would look at the John Hopkins University or its equivalent. The U Mass archives make sense for the Towle records because dad's primary work was in agriculture and rural development as well as in the religious realm.

Once you find the right fit, you need to consider how the records will be used. Diaries and correspondence in particular can have very personal and private comments, some of which might be misinterpreted in another era or culture. We third culture kids especially should be sensitive to cross culture interpretations. On the other hand, researchers who genuinely want to reflect the truth of the experience they find in such records will take the times and the writer / subject into account in trying to produce a balanced picture. You can put restrictions on really sensitive materials for a period of time, but archivists will argue against them. They believe in the sunlight principle: full exposure will force the users to defend their interpretations. The deed of gift spells out what and when you are willing to share and who can access what.

Resources

The internet is invaluable, of course. If you 'Google' family records, missionary collections, church websites, manuscripts archives / repositories or like key words, you'll find help with genealogy and long lists that take ages to weed through. My list will be relatively short, but I hope useful.

Internet aids to archival information

www.archivists.org

The Society of American Archivists is the gold standard for things archival in this country. Look here for activities and publications of the SAA and for many different aspects of archival policy and practice.

www.elca.org

This represents the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and provides a list of Non ECLA repositories with Global Missions Materials. These entries name repositories and include the contents of their collections.

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/caringrecords.html

This British source gives good tips for preserving family records.

www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/ema/guidelines02.html

This is U Wisconsin – Stevens Point information is concise and to the point

www.yeinfo.com/howto/ManuscriptArchives.html

This site seems to be the work of an individual. Through genealogical in focus, it gives good advice about what is involved in manuscript repositories.

www.yeinfo.com/howto/photographs.html

This overview concerns photographic make up, handling, storage and key sources. Very informative

www.yeinfo.com/howto/PreservingRecords.html

Useful tips for preserving family records.

Books and pamphlets

Hunter, Gregory S: *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives: A How to Do It Manual*
New York: Neal Schuman Publishers, Inc. 1997

McClure Rhonda: *Digitizing you family history: Easy methods for preserving your heirloom documents, photos, home movies and more in a digital format.*
Cincinnati, Ohio: Family Tree Books, 2004

Pamphlet: www.archivists.org/publicationslist

Donating personal or family papers to a repository

Product code 243. non member price \$16.00 for 50 pamphlets

Pamphlet: www.state.sc.us/scdah/shrab/shrab1.htm

Placing you family papers in an archival repository

Archival suppliers

Conservation resources: archive library and museum preservation. 800 634 6932

www.conservationresources.com

Email: Conservarts@aol.com

Full range of supplies and list of books

Hollinger Corporation. 1 800 634 0491

Email: hollingercorp@erols.com

Hollinger is so well known for its storage boxes that many archivists simply call archival boxes Hollinger boxes.

Light Impressions. 800 828 6216

www.lightimpressionsdirect.com

archival supplies geared especially to visual materials

Metal Edge Inc: Archival storage materials. 1 800 862 2228

www.medaledgeinc.com

Full range of archival preservation, conservation tools, including pigma and archival pens, paper clips, book ID strips.

University products: quality materials for conservation, restoration, preservation and exhibition. 1 800 628 1912

www.universityproducts.com

Email: info@universityproducts.com

Full range of archival tools and products.

Comments and questions

What questions do you have? If your questions may be shared by other Kodaites, the class yahoo website is a good place to raise them. Otherwise, please email jean.reed@gmail.com or call 704 588 8507. Dave Dickason is another good source for you, particularly regarding photographic matters.

You are launched on a great venture. Go for it.