

Appraising Archives

By John Henley

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At least once a week someone asks me if I would like to appraise a book. So I look the book over, tell them the general range of retail value and about the time I start to explain my services and fees and to figuring out the assignment conditions, they interrupt me and ask what I want to pay for the book.

There's this general notion that appraising is the same thing as buying.

Like Hobbes, the tiger in the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon strips once said: "Maybe we can make language an impediment to understanding."

So, before I get started, I want to make sure we are all on the same page by defining what an archive is. According to the publication: A Glossary of Archives and Records Terminology, by Richard Pearce-Moses, and published under the auspices of the Society of American Archivists in 2005, an archive can mean one of six things.

- "1) Materials created or received by a person, family or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the Enduring Value contained in the information they contain OR as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control; permanent records.
- 2) The Division within an organization responsible for maintaining the organization's records of enduring value.
- 3) An organization that collects the records of individuals, families, or other organizations; collecting archives
- 4) The professional discipline of administering such collections and organizations.
- 5) The building, or portion thereof, housing archival collections.
- 6) An archive can be a published collection of scholarly papers, especially as periodicals."

I will not focus on definitions two through six, as these are easily understood and I don't appraise them. We're going to focus on number one since that is what will be appraising: materials collected.

When the archivists say that archives are materials created or received, they are not very clear. What kinds of materials?

The archives I have appraised have things like letters, scrapbooks, diaries, journals, newspaper clippings, drawings, patents, legal documents of all kinds, and artifacts. Sometimes they have home movies, or professionally made motion pictures for advertisements run on television or for instructions on how to use newly invented machinery.

These “materials” are so diverse we naturally have to ask ourselves what these archived items all have in common? The answer is that they are a kind of record. So, I'd like to have you think of all the items in an archive not so much as materials, but rather as records.

Once I was asked if while working on author's archive if I could also include in the appraisal his writing desk, recliner, fireplace and chimney. I stuck to what I knew, which is archives and books, and I never did find out if they had the chimney appraised, although I know the library that purchased the collection did, in fact, recreate that author's room in their building..

We have to open our minds as to what constitutes a record and we have to understand that there are many reasons why records are kept. The primary reason that records, or archives, are kept together is for later retrieval.

The three primary sorts of archives are 1) personal, which may include such items as diaries, scrapbooks, family photographs, and personal letters, and 2) professional archives that may have ledger books, accounting records, invoices, documents relating to the nature of the business, such as patents for a new mousetrap, copyright, and of course, receipts. 3) But hardly least is the archive is both professional and personal, which most literary or artistic archives are.

These three sorts of archives have to be sorted into two distinct categories as they relate to their usefulness. The first is current records and the second is historical records.

Many public agencies such as city and state, and national governments have archives of records that are considered to be current, such as police reports, court proceedings, judgments, tax assessments and the like.

There are lots of places that have historic archives – that is to say, records that are not currently in use for day to day use.

Before starting on how I go about appraising archives, I want to mention that archivists also use the word appraisal quite a bit.

When an archivist appraises a collection, he or she is in the process of analyzing the historic, legal, administrative, fiscal and intrinsic value of a group of records and their relationship with other records, usually based on their organization's collection policy. The two main questions that an archivist must answer in his or her appraisal are: are the records historically important, or likely to have enduring value for their historic importance, and are the records appropriate for his or her repository.

After the archivist performs their appraisal, they go through a process of accessioning, which entails the transfer of legal ownership of the archive, documenting the content and act of physical transfer, perform any activities regarding the legal transfer, such as purchase agreements, deposit agreements, and issuing deed of gift, and so forth.

It is often in this phase of accessioning that we appraisers are called in. Many people will want to gift their professional or personal records to an archive or public institution that will archive their collection and we need an appraisal for their non-cash donation to a non-profit organization that will maintain and use their archive. Sometimes the archivists are told by their organization's Risk Management team that they need an appraisal for insurance, so proper coverage can be obtained for either restoration or replacement of items in case they are lost or damaged.

So, you have current or historic records, or archives, that are personal, professional, or a combination of the two,

The next subdivision to define our archive is to determine whether it is a public or a private archive.

A public archive is where any record of the community may be kept and retrieved upon demand for legal purposes by anyone wanting or needing access to those records. Some people may need public records to help them make a bid on a contract for building a road, or to study the receipts from a local politician from their business trip to Las Vegas. Other public records may include court

transcripts or any other public activity. Our society usually grants access to public information, with only some exclusion for public safety and national security reasons.

Archives that are closed to the public are private archives and ordinarily have collections of historic records, photographs, papers, diaries, journals, or items that are kept within a family or business.

When it comes to accessing Native American archives, there may be a unique procedure to access an archive. Native American archives fall somewhere in-between public and private because the records may be accessible by the members of the tribe, and thereby public to that extent, but someone outside the tribe may have to first get permission from the archivist, who may in turn ask a tribal council, who may or may not seek permission from a council comprised of elders, and this council may or may not have to weigh heavily the words of the tribes' spiritual authority.

Now that we've established some parameters for what an archive is, the next question is: is there a market for archives? .

We know that there are components in an archive that could be taken out of the entire collection and sold separately. For example, we all know that there is a market for old photographs, so that part of an archive has a market. We also know that there is a market for autographed letters, so that part of an archive has a market. There is a market for historical ephemera, so that part of an archive has a market. People also collect diaries, scrapbooks and other peoples' journals. But is there a market for an entire archive, with all of its components? And what if the archive looks, well, rather drab - a lot of old ledger books and receipts for the operation of a dentist's office?

The answer is yes to both personal and professional archives. The principal buyers for archives are special collection librarians in University Libraries. The secondary buyers for archives are private collectors, who often end up donating the archives to special collections. The third sort of market tends to be specialized libraries contained in such places as museums and research facilities for historical societies.

My first experience with appraising an archive was for a university in the Pacific Northwest whose collection focuses on books and records of regional authors. A local periodical that exclusively publishes poetry by women had an archive of

approximately 100 quart size boxes that contained correspondence with many women poets from around the world. Some of the poets were famous and many were not. There were also thousands of documents that showed the day to day operation of this periodical from the day it started to the time of the appraisal. The reason I was asked to appraise the collection was because the University librarian wanted an objective opinion of the value of the archive.

I first calculated the retail prices for the items that had obvious collectible value, and that was the photographs and correspondence. Then I calculated the value of the business records. The collectible items could have been sold independently, but the business records would not have been very saleable on their own. I didn't know it, but I was attempting to arrive at a value by unit pricing. I could not price the letters from the lady poets who were not yet famous as though they were famous, and the collector's market at the time for such an archive was nearly non-existent. Yet, it was obvious that this archive had records that had enduring value because the Librarian at the university definitely wanted to purchase the archive. And there were some records of sales for archives, but none quite like this.

Using what I believed to be the cost of labor and materials to create the archive, I arrived at another opinion of value for the entirety.

I also had to take into account that when someone buys an entire collection, this is usually done at a discounted rate. When I gave my statement of defined values, both the Library and the owners of the poetry periodical were delighted.

Many of the archives I have appraised are for purposes of determining a fair market value because the owner wishes to donate an archive to a special collections library. I once appraised fifty boxes of highly technical papers, creating while developing high octane gasoline, for aviation purposes during the Second World War. A museum whose focus is the history of aeronautics and space flight was extremely anxious to obtain this archive. I had to hire a chemist to explain to me the significance of much of the material so that I could determine the enduring value of this collection.

I similarly performed an appraisal where a man in his late 90's was donating his research archive on glaciers to a university. I had to hire a glaciologist to explain to me the relevance or even importance of the photographs and research notes. There were over 400 boxes of papers and photographs where the cost of materials to him over 70 years had to be calculated.

The obvious problem with this appraisal was the issue of "self generation." By virtue of the so called Nixon Rule, someone donating their papers and archive to a non-profit organization can only deduct the actual cost of the materials for the items that they generated themselves.

Many of the archives I have appraised are not terribly valuable. But allow me to give you some examples of some archives that have sold to special collections for extreme values.

The Watergate notebooks compiled by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein sold for five million dollars to the University of Texas in 2004.

Cambridge University purchased seven boxes of the great British poet, Siegfried Sassoon, for 1.25 million pounds, approximately two million U.S. Dollars. These boxes contained 34 journals and the pocket books kept by the poet during his service for the British Army on the terrible Western Front in World War One - where he composed some of the greatest anti-war poetry ever penned.

The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas purchased 20,000 pounds of unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, and a life time of records - this all being contained in about 500 boxes - that belonged to the Pulitzer prize winning author, and sometime iconoclast, Norman Mailer. They paid 2.5 million dollars.

Most of the archives I have appraised fall into the range of \$30,000 to \$150,000, with some as high as \$250,000

I have found that a useful resource for finding out what archives have sold, and what they have sold for, to special collections and university archives is the Society of American Archivists newsletter, which one can find easily on line. Newspapers, such as the New York Times, will also have articles on the purchase of papers and archives of famous individuals.

It is useful to attend conventions such as the Organization of American Historians and Society of American Archivists as well as pending time getting to know the curators. If you do this, and ask a lot of questions, you come to understand the demand for the many kinds of archives.

I can tell stories about my appraising all day and site even more examples of sales. However, I think I've established the point that archives have monetary value and that we appraisers can effectively determine a value them.

Here are some of the things I employ in my methodology when gathering data and analyzing that data on the archive in question.

First, I need to know the date of the materials in the archive. Are these current records, or historic records, or perhaps a little of both. Are these records inclusive of a person's life or time specific? Are these records inclusive of a business history, or again, specific to a time or project?

Second, I have to understand the interest in these records based on geographic scope. Are these records interesting to people all over the world, or just in the United States, or in Nevada, or just in Clark County, Nevada?

And of course, I need to gather the particulars that would go into the legal description of the property being appraised, such as the owner, the intended user, and the client – of which may be identical or completely separate entities, and relevant characteristics of the archive.

If this is a personal archive, I have to find out if this person's autograph or personal effects collected. A back-up musician playing for Madonna will not likely get the same price for his autograph or piece of his wardrobe as will Madonna's. It's extremely important to identify who generated the contents of the archive.

When it comes time to write your report and you come to where you write about who generated the contents, I highly recommend you pay close attention to the words “of” and “about.” Let's look at the language in the following two sentences: “The records of the Shoshoni people,” versus: “The records about the Shoshoni people.” The first sentence indicates that it is generated by the people, the second sentence sounds like it could have been written by anybody.

But veering back to gathering important data about the contents of an archive, if you are examining the archive of an author, it will prove useful to see if the author's works have been continually used as a textbook in colleges and high-school. If they have been used as textbooks, the author's works may be considered to have enduring value.

One of the first questions you may have when appraising an archive is whether you should appraise each item, akin to unit pricing when appraising a new building by the cost for all the parts of its construction, or should you appraise an archive as a unit, in itself.

Suppose you had the love letters of John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Each letter could easily be sold at auction or through a dealer for its own merits. On the other hand, suppose you had the letters of an unknown American farmer and his wife dating from 1776 to 1805. Each letter may not be interesting enough to sell on its own, but when reading the letters, we follow the lives of two American citizens, their joys, their hardships, their lives at the point in time when the United States is being born. As a whole, the collection is significant and worth buying because of that significance. The key phrase to remember from the first definition of "archive" is "of enduring value." While we cannot price an archive for a future value, unless we state clearly that we are making hypothetical assumptions in our report, we are certainly free to weigh the values of an archive based on its enduring value at the time of the appraisal.

When I look at most archives, part of my methodology to assess whether or not the records' contents to see if they have enduring value.

Some components I look for to see if the records have enduring value are:

- 1) Are they evidence that will impact what we know about history? That is, do the records confirm or refute the known facts?
- 2) Do the records enhance our understanding of history, or of a culture, or even a person's inner feelings at a given moment in history?
- 3) Are the records appealing as
 - a. Artwork. That is, if written, is it really interesting, or beautifully written? If it pictorial, would you consider framing it and putting it on your wall.
 - b. Artifact. That is, something that people used in their profession or personal lives that tells us something about activities. .
- 4) Last, but hardly least, is whether or not I think the records might one day be more desirable than they are today. Even if there are no collectors or buyers for some records, it does not necessarily mean that the records are not going to be considered as evidence, art, or artifact. An example might be a collection of voting cards from Florida for the 2000 Presidential election. Nobody wants them now, but somebody might in a hundred years. While

this may not directly add a monetary value to the archive, it can be said to enhance its enduring value.

I would like to give you an example where the content of an archive was evaluated for its enduring value. I appraised the family letters of one of the West's earliest Senators from the Pacific Northwest. This Senator was appointed by a Territorial Governor and was in Washington City during the hearings and debates in the Senate chambers regarding his state's entrance into the Union. It just so happened that this state was coming into the Union at a time when the question of whether the state would be a free, or a slave holding was extremely important. You would think that these letters would shed some very interesting light on the personalities and hotly contested issues of his day. But no, his letters simply told his readers that they will read all about it in the newspapers and then went on to tell you what he had for dinner. This part of that archive was disappointing so far as content, but it is possible that some day in another part of the country, in another archive, some correspondence may turn up that will show that the reason that this Senator didn't write home about this State's entrance into the Union was because he was out having a great spree in Washington City and not at his desk in Senate chambers.

Interestingly enough, the Senator's son's letters were in that same archive. His letters about his experiences as in the Union Army as a commander of a Negro Regiment had many facts about events I was not able to locate in other histories of that unit. His letters will contribute a great deal to history when the right scholar comes upon them. To add gravy on this, these letters were beautifully written and could stand on their own merit as great writing.

Another aspect that gave this archive an extra punch up in value was that the Senator's letters still had the envelopes that were franked by various stage coach lines and the Pony Express. This is where the envelope serves as a sort of artifact.

This archive had all four of the things I look for in when determining enduring value of records: historical evidence that confirms and sheds new light; records that have artistic merit; items that are artifacts; and records that might be useful someday, but are not evidently so at present.

Besides content, I have to catalogue the various formats of the records. Because of the wide variety found in an archive, it's easy to see why archivists would call an archive a collection of materials:

Here are the formats I look for, though not necessarily in this order.

a) Are there images, such as paintings or photographs?

b) Works of art – such as paintings, drawings, or sculptures may pose an interesting problem for the appraiser. For example, the art collector views a ledger drawing – that is, drawings made by, primarily, the Sioux and other Plains nationals on ledger paper provided them by the Army or missionaries after they had been removed to reservations. The man who drew the image was not so interested in generating a piece of art as he was recording a brave deed or memorable moment. Therefore, what we may want to view as art, the Native American may see as both art and an historic record.

c) Audio recordings? Many Native American nations have recordings made of songs or sometimes even old reel to reel recordings of Elders reciting stories or genealogies. One has to be particularly sensitive here because some recorded songs may be sacred and only listened to by members of the people – in which case, an appraiser may have to make an extraordinary or hypothetical assumption in the appraisal report – that is to say, take somebody's word that the song is on the tape and that the recording is one of a kind, or if there are other known copies, and so forth.

D) Motion pictures or video recordings. One has to be careful with home movies, especially since the advent of the handheld camcorder. One time I viewed the contents of some VHS tapes in an archive and failed to look closely at the label that read: "Honeymoon." The family was grateful to have the tape back instead of it going into a university archive. Equally embarrassing to a large timber company donating its archive to a local university were motion pictures showing the creation and destruction of a splash dam in the course of one of its logging operations.

Splash dams have been illegal since forever. The loggers cut down the trees on the sides of a ravine, using some of the logs to block a stream in that ravine, and when the water rises, one continues to clear cut until all the logs are floating on the risen water. The dam is broken, usually with dynamite and all the logs go sailing down the stream in a tidal wave to join the rest of the logs in a nearby river or lake. . This would be alright, except for anyone downstream who doesn't know a tidal wave filled with logs is coming at them.

As you may be aware, Native American tribal archives can be very sensitive about motion pictures. It is not uncommon to see signs at pow-wows prohibiting the use of camera and camcorders. Besides motion pictures, I also look for:

e) Books, serials, and manuscripts.

f) Sometimes I have to take into account such things as biological, botanical, architectural, or even geological specimens. I appraised an architectural historian's archive that contained thousands of samples of 19th century paint chips as well as examples of fixtures and woodworking. .

f) Sometimes I have been asked to evaluate items that have been digitally stored.

g) One also has to examine ephemera, which any of you who go to conventions for booksellers or movie goers would refer to as "Swag," which might be posters, postcards, pamphlets or advertisements. Swag is an acronym for "Stuff We All Get."

h) Not unusual to Native American archives are artifacts – weapons, instruments, costumes, textile arts, ceramic items, and baskets. Again, the collectors may view such things as works of art, which indeed they are, but the Native Americans feel differently. The Native Americans began to trade with the European immigrants, a number of items were made as "trade goods," not really meant for utility. An appraiser of a tribal archive may have to look at such items not only as antiquities, but as cultural records.

All archives have the potential of having materials that may have patent or copyright issues. The copyright belongs to the life of the author plus 70 years unless the family has signed away those rights. The question arises for the appraiser – does he or she need to have a specialist in fair value appraisal, or business evaluation specializing in copyright and patent values, to perform an appraisal independent or in conjunction with the personal property appraisal.

A collection I recently appraised has unpublished manuscripts by a major American author. In my opinion, these manuscripts are better than the books the author has published. I expressed my concern to my client and intended user of the appraisal that these manuscripts should be given a business evaluation because in my experience in new bookselling and publishing, these manuscripts could generate serious income and that would be their highest and best use.

Many Native American archives have stories, recorded, or written, and the families are due their copyright. A great many writers have been granted access to tribal archives and used records for their own publications. Often the published acknowledgement was never accompanied by a royalty statement from the publisher. I am hoping to hear of improvement in this area.

If you haven't guessed by now, I have started to address some of the issues that come up when appraising Tribal archives.

First of all, and you have to really get this, and so I will repeat myself: The primary difference between most archives and a tribal archive is public accessibility. Most archives are publically owned. Many archives may be found in major universities that are funded by the federal, state or local government. The National Archives, that houses the American Declaration of Independence, belongs to the people of the United States. As citizens, you can walk right in and expect to get access to the records that your tax dollars have housed and maintained in the public archive.

Tribal archives, on the other hand, belong to groups that were once distinct nations that have through a variety of historic actions become assimilated by the United States. These tribal archives are not owned by the public at large, but only to the tribe. Each tribe will have its own rule regarding accessibility.

Some tribes may require a historian or person accessing the materials in their archive to have special religious training.

Some tribes may require a historian or person accessing the materials in their archive to go through a process that obtains permission first from the archivist, then a tribal council, the Elders of the Tribe, and perhaps a spiritual leader of a community, such as a chief or Medicine Person.

Access is an important aspect to an appraiser because the value of an archive may be based on its contribution to historians and the community. If the access is extremely limited, this may, or may affect your opinion of value because you may be forced to make extraordinary assumptions in your report.

I have found some sensitivity when it comes to appraising Native American archives. Many Native Americans have come to resent how they have been portrayed and this includes the displays and exhibits one finds in museums and special collections. Archivists and curators may unintentionally present a people in

an unfavorable light by the way they select, collect, describe and present the collections they acquire. For example, in my home town, a local art museum displayed large ceremonial clubs with signs that said these clubs were “Slave Killers,” that is, clubs used by the Chinook people to kill their slaves. It has come into question whether or not their axes and clubs were ever really used for such a purpose. Moreover, putting such items on display with a label like that will affect how people may think about Chinook people after seeing something like that.

Appraisers, like archivists for such artifacts, likewise need to show some professionalism in their data gathering, data analysis, and of course, in their appraisal report. When writing the appraisal report, the facts must be correct and the presentation unbiased.

I like to switch gears and discuss things that must be weighed when considering the highest and best use for an archive.

First of all, how do the records within an archive relate to one another and how do they relate to the records already existing in an archive?

Are other archival collections in the archive facility are going to be enriched by the items that are going into the archive? For example, suppose you have letters from Teddy Roosevelt to Gifford Pinchot. Wouldn't it be perfect if the letters of Pinchot to Roosevelt were also going to be placed in the same facility? This would enrich the value to scholars because they could look at the different letters at the same time and in the same place.

When looking at the records within an archive, both the archivist and the appraiser must assess the cultural context of the records. Sometimes that isn't possible, as may be the case of extinct peoples, such as the Molalla or Tygh of Western Oregon. But in many cases, there may be ways to find out about the context of the culture and values of a people at the time the records were created.

For example: what if you find baskets that have distinct Modoc patterns, but they are among items in a tribal archive of the Osage? It might mean there was trading, or a marriage, or some kind of alliance. It might also mean that there were members of one group forced to live on a distant reservation with a group of people they had never met. These actually happened to a number of the Modoc of southern Oregon and northern California who were forcibly relocated to a reservation in Oklahoma after the Modoc War.

Other factors I consider when trying to determine the highest and best use for an archive as such things as:

- 1) Will the archive facility perform a community service or outreach as a result of holding this archive.
- 2) Is the facility going to digitalize the archive and make it accessible online?
- 3) Do the persons working at the facility have specialized training to be archivists? Training in archival science is every bit as rigorous as becoming a designated real estate appraiser, perhaps more so. This issue of specialized training can be especially important for Native American archives because it may take specialized training to know rituals and customs when handling certain items.
- 4) Are there any problems with the staff at the institution, tribal or otherwise, such that there are signings of sustainability issues, such as lack of funding or a serious backlog of cataloging yet to be performed?
- 5) Are there other danger signs: pests in the archive; no smoke alarms; harmful, lousy security, environmental conditions that are bad for records such as varying temperature, bad lighting, or poor shelving?

These factors do not so much help me form an opinion of monetary value, but if I see a situation where an archive is going to a bad environment, I will always make note of it in my work file – and will document my work file with appropriate photographs and notes. Depending upon my assignment conditions, I may report my findings to the intended users and clients of my appraisal in my report.

I would like to close by addressing a question that that many Native Americans ask me. How can I assign a monetary value to something that may have immeasurable cultural value?

I understand their feelings. Putting a monetary value on a cultural record makes it, for lack of better words, feel dirty.

And the reason that we feel this way is that we have been taught that the love of money is the root of all evil. The harvest for greed accounts for much human misery.

I try to explain to my friends that we all want justice. If someone steals from you, you want them to pay you back for the value of the item stolen and perhaps more for the grief you felt when you realized you had lost something.

And yet, tragically, there are injustices done that are impossible to compensate.

What if you lose an arm on the job? Does money really give you back your arm? Or, what if you have lost your lands and been told to live on a Reservation? Does money give you back your lost heritage? And the answer is, of course not. It can't.

We have agreed upon a universal form of economic exchange, which we call money. Unfortunately, the best we can do to make good on an injustice is to compensate the injured party with money. It isn't quite justice, but it is certainly more civilized than killing one another or by recreating the wrongs done in a feeble attempt to right them. Such a course of action will only lead to more injustice in the end.

An appraisal on such an intrinsically valuable thing as a tribal archive, or any item contained therein is not meant to debase the value of that item or the archive. It is an attempt to establish a value so that if something should be lost we have an agreed upon value for some kind of compensation for its loss, or if we are lucky, restoration or repair.

A few years ago I got to watch the Siletz people perform the Feather Dance. It was the first time this dance had been done in over one hundred years. You see, the missionaries and Overlanders banned the performance of this dance as it was intended to instruct members of the tribe about human sexuality. Because the dance was outlawed, it was all but forgotten except to those who remembered stories about it.

But someone preserving records and recordings in a distant tribal archive for another people uncovered a description of the steps and the rhythm of the drums used in the Feather Dance.

The dancers' eyes welled with tears as they danced. The people held their breath as first the little boys and girls came out and danced around one another, turning their backs on one another in disdain, followed by the teenagers, their hips undulating, their arms flailing and their movements anything but smooth, followed by the parents, whose erotic motions were unmistakable and suddenly, the children are dancing alongside them, and then, the elders, their erotic motions slow, but steady, and with the greatest grins. In the end, all and everyone in the cosmic family were leaping and turning with one another in joy, and with great life force.

It was a great honor and a great gift to see it, but it might not have been possible except that someone had taken the time to collect and preserve those records so very long ago. There is great magic in archives: for that which was lost may yet be found.