The most public of all history: family history and heritage albums in the transmission of records

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Family History remains one of the most enduring cultural forms of recordkeeping. Its rich history has been shaped by education, religion, materials, technologies, gender, class, race, migration, and, fundamentally, access to records. Family history practitioners also hold a majority among all researchers in public repositories, making up from forty-five to ninety percent of all users who cross the literal or virtual portals of libraries and archives. Yet, archival science has devoted little attention to understanding the tasks and functions involved in documenting ancestors.

This dissertation seeks to correct that imbalance by exploring and interpreting influences and processes among people who practice genealogy (family historians who use primarily public records) and people who make scrapbooks (heritage album makers who use primarily oral accounts, private records, and family heirlooms). The two groups were specifically chosen in order that obvious ways of knowing the past—through written records accessible in repositories—and less obvious ways—through orally transmitted and privately held memory texts of various sorts—could be compared. The two groups were also chosen so that changing technologies could be studied as part of both a lived and an archival path to memories about families. To learn the context of such pursuits, an ethnographic approach was undertaken. Fifty-two people were interviewed and time was spent with family historians and album makers, primarily in Alabama and Louisiana. Among these people, the migrations of Acadians and Cajuns, African Americans, Sicilians, Croatians, and other ethnic backgrounds were also explored as motivations for studying family history. In addition, an historical perspective on gender and family-history keeping was interwoven in the study, and the opinions of family historians and album makers were sought in an exploration of the propensity of women to dominate the work of family recordkeeping.

Commonplace processes, theories on memory, and the mediation of memory in sundry individual and communal problems all were shown to be involved in family history. In the give-and-take among themselves, their legacies, and their movement between private and public sources, family historians and album makers were shown to demonstrate ways that public records are used and private records are created. This focus on records also illuminated conceptualizations of archives in general, and the means by which records are transmitted, especially as more and more people develop personal archives. The study then was cognizant of the transformations of environments where access to records and communication about records occur. Descriptions of these milieux,
these places and the work in these places, proved central to the study, as part of family history’s settings, a word chosen not only to tell about surroundings but also to suggest the overall crafting of communities of records. Overall, information was obtained about the ways in which family history is first approached and subsequently written, disseminated, and left to future generations (e.g., archivalization, transmission, recontextualization, pluralization)—and the methods by which records, as intermediaries to the past, are used and created in everyday lives.

Two case studies, drawn from the interviews, illuminate these findings in-depth as the workings of collective memory by offering examples of the movement between public and private sources over time and space. These studies especially deal with the climate of memory for particular ethnicities in North America, and the online environment today which allows access to more and more records and which links individuals and ethnicities globally across cultural divides—past and present.

Taken as a whole, this work contributes new insights into those ideas that archivists share with others who use and create records. The study presents an expanded definition of the transmission of records, a broader understanding of archivalization, and examples of simultaneously lived and archival approaches to learning the past. Family histories are demonstrated to be parts of a new world in which private archives influence the overall understanding of records and public history. These findings in turn are important to archival science in establishing educational priorities, new programs, and changing professional roles, especially as more and more records are shared between public and private archives.