

Providing Access to Multi-Format Ethnographic Field Documentation: Archival Practice in the American Folklife Center

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The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress was created in 1976 by the U.S. Congress to “preserve and present American folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, and publication.¹ The Center incorporates the Library’s Archive of Folk Culture (AFC), originally founded in 1928 as a repository for American folk music. Today, the Archive’s multi-format, ethnographic field collections are diverse and international, including over three million photographs, manuscripts, sound recordings, and moving images documenting traditional music and culture.

In this paper, I give a synopsis of the American Folklife Center’s archival practices, from acquisition through processing. I also elucidate the philosophy followed in the processing of archival materials, in which the Center strives to maintain the integrity of original field collections while providing access.

Because our understanding of what we are studying as ethnographers informs the organization of the materials we collect, and because the field of folklore and folk music has broadened in the past 50 years so that we are not just interested in the songs that we have collected or the geographic distribution of tale types, our archives have also changed. We have become equally interested in context, and have collected rich and varied documentation of what we are researching; consequently, the ways in which we organize our materials have been transformed.

The history of the Archive’s numbering system reflects our archival history. From the beginning, unpublished ethnographic field recordings that were received were given individual AFS (Archive of American

Folk Song) numbers. The numbers were assigned to items, sometimes comprising one disc with one recording on it, sometimes encompassing one cassette tape with numerous recordings.

In 1990, our basic archival numbering system changed to mirror the field's broadened concept of what constitutes ethnographic research. Consequently, we began to assign AFC numbers for whole collections, beginning with the year in which the collection was received, if available. The Gheorghe and Eugenia Popescu-Judetzu Collection, for example, received the number AFC 1990/022, identifying it as the twenty-second collection received by the Archive in 1990. Included under that AFC number are not only the sound recordings the Popescu-Judetzes collected in Romania from 1938 through 1974, but also the field notes, graphic and moving images, and other materials documenting their fieldwork on Romanian folk dance and music.

At the same time, the Center re-defined its concept of what constitutes an ethnographic collection. Former Archive of Folk Culture Reference Librarian, Gerry Parsons, and Head of Processing, Marsha Maguire, formulated our new archival direction eloquently when they wrote:

What we in the American Folklife Center call *ethnographic collections* are *unpublished, multi-format, created works that document aspects of human culture*. It is true that collections of personal papers found in manuscript repositories also are made up of unpublished, multi-format materials, but those collections are usually formed through a process we might call "accumulation." What distinguishes "ethnographic collections" from these is the presence of a creative force or intent to document an event, social customs, or practices, traditional beliefs, oral histories or narratives, etc. into a multi-sensory collection – one that can often be seen through photos, heard through sound recordings, viewed on video or film, touched (as in artifacts), or documented through field notes, correspondence, and other forms of manuscript materials. . . . This guiding intelligence establishes an implicit, integrating unity that underlies all the different actions the ethnographer takes to record his or her experience of the subject's way of life. And, the processing archivist's job is to demonstrate the interrelatedness of the collection's separate physical components, and thus lead the research back to the ethnographer's overriding intent.²

In order to reflect the ethnographer's sense of purpose in collecting field documentation, the Center has adopted a holistic, collection-centered approach to processing. The items that come into the Center as a collection are, therefore, not separated and processed by format (as often occurs in other parts of the Library of Congress); rather, they are treated as interrelated components of the whole, consciously woven or yoked together to achieve a rounded statement by the ethnographer.

Archivists at the Center process collections that vary widely in the treatments they have received before they arrive on our doorstep. Some are well organized; many are in disarray. Unpublished ethnographic collections almost always pose special challenges to the processing archivist, and some of them involve circumstances that archivists working with record or manuscript collections rarely face.

I'd like to walk through the process of what we do from the time shortly before a collection comes to the American Folklife Center until it is fully processed and ready to be used in our Folklife Reading Room. Each step is, of course, a considerable topic in itself, with many parameters and conditions to consider, but let me consider them briefly.

The first step in the archival process is *acquisitions* or *pre-processing*, as it is sometimes called. This step entails working with donors to find out basic information about a potential acquisition (who created it, its scope and significance, a physical description of materials, special restrictions and intellectual property rights issues, if there are companion collections existing elsewhere, information on how the collection is organized, if it includes inventories or finding aids, what kinds of preservation needs might eventually be required, and so forth.)

Once a collection has arrived in the Center, we *accession* it to provide basic physical, legal, and intellectual control of the materials and add this information to our in-house Access database. For this step, we note the donor, the general subject focus of the collection, and included formats, among other things. We also inspect collection materials and take note of any imminent preservation. We survey the collection and provide it with a temporary title and number. A preliminary count is made of the items in the collection by format. The AFC, like many repositories, has a limited number of staff for collection

processing. Consequently, there is often a backlog of accessioned materials awaiting full arrangement and description.

Processing refers to the archival activities that provide full physical, administrative, and intellectual control of the collections in the Archive of Folk Culture. We strive, whenever possible, to adhere to standard guidelines and techniques of professional archival administration established by the Society of American Archivists. For archival description and cataloging, we have adapted rules from Steven L. Hensen's *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, to create MARC catalog records on the collection-level for the Center's unpublished multi-format ethnographic materials.³

With the formal *arrangement* of a collection, we are involved in the heart of the work of processing. For archivists, a key principle in documenting and organizing archival collections has become known as *respect des fonds* or the principle of *provenance*. This concept means that archival materials of one provenance or origin should not be intermingled with those of any other provenance. In the Center, we honor this fundamental principle when we retain the original order in which materials in an ethnographic collection were intentionally chosen and structured by the ethnographer who collected them.

While arranging materials in a collection, we are likely to discover new preservation issues that need to be dealt with, even if they were not noted before. Usually, collections need to be re-housed in acid-free folders, boxes, or other containers. We often seek assistance from the Library of Congress (LC) Conservation Office or elsewhere in the Library for help with damaged manuscripts or photographs or deteriorating/moldy recordings, videos or films. Once the collection materials are re-housed, each container is labeled according to our guidelines.

As far as formal AFC *archival description* is concerned, we create preliminary accession records in our Access tracking database, collection guides (sometimes in an Encoded Archival Description [EAD] format), and collection-level MARC (machine-readable cataloging) records. In the AFC, a Collection Guide is a finding aid designed to assist researchers by describing individual processed

collections in the Archive of Folk Culture. Generally included in the Center's collection guides are a collection description and summary; a biographical note about the collector; information about access, reproduction, and restrictions to the collection; a listing of the physical formats in the collection, listing both original materials and their reference copies; a Scope and Content Note (an interpretive narrative providing all manner of background information we think a user might find useful); a series-by-series description (manuscripts, graphic materials, etc.); and a container list or inventory, organized box by box, or folder by folder, to facilitate access to the materials.

And then, finally, when processing is complete and the Collection Guide has been written, we create a collection-level MARC record describing that collection in a bibliographic record. The MARC record is then added to the online LC database with electronic links to the appropriate Collection Guide that describes the collection in more detail.⁴ Archival description is an ongoing activity, involving the continual refinement and revision of information, as materials are added or clarification is enhanced.

The AFC also maintains an in-house Collections Manual. The Manual includes everything from our guidelines on working with ethnographers and donors, to acquisitions policy statements and procedures used by the Center, as well as the myriad details of accessioning and processing collections, templates for creating collection guides, guidelines for cataloging and preserving collections, not to mention filing procedures followed in the Archive of Folk Culture, a glossary of terms used in archival work, and other useful documents and forms for our work.

Although a short paper cannot do justice to the involved work that we do as archivists, I hope I have provided an inkling of how we work with collections at the American Folklife Center. I'd like to close by emphasizing the critical role of the collector of field materials in the archival process. It is the creator, not the archivist, who is most intimately familiar with ethnographic materials collected and given to archives. The ethnographer best understands such things as why the cultural expressions a collection documents are significant, how the research has been organized, what events are captured in its photographs, field notes, and sound recordings, and why performers responded in

particular ways to the interviewer's questions. Unfortunately, many ethnographers lack sufficient training in how to label and log tapes and photos, and to create thorough field notes and summaries. Our most valuable collections may forever be underutilized if we simply don't know enough about them to inform potential users of their meaning and significance.

Luckily, educators, researchers, funding organizations, and fieldworkers are becoming increasingly aware that unorganized and unidentified archival collections are of little use to anyone. And gradually, we're hoping that the professional field techniques of consistent labeling, numbering, logging, and inventorying will be accepted as a routine part of a fieldwork educator's curriculum or the funding requirements of a grant-giving agency. Folklife and ethnomusicology archivists should encourage their disciplines to consider such techniques a crucial component of professional fieldwork methodology. We, as curators and archivists of ethnographic materials, play a key role in making such materials accessible, but in the end, it is the creators of ethnographic collections who must help to make their collections accessible to the users we seek to serve.

Notes

1. U.S. Congress, *American Folklife Preservation Act* (P.L. 94-201), 94th Cong., H.R. 6673, 2 January 1976, Sec. 2, pt. B (20 USC 2101).

2. Marsha Maguire and Gerald E. Parsons, "Introduction," *American Folklife Center Collections Manual* (Spring 1992):4-5 (emphasis in original).

3. See Steven L. Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, 2nd ed. (Chicago : Society of American Archivists, 1989).

4. Electronic versions of individual collection guides can be accessed on the American Folklife Center website at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/guides/findaid.html#guides>.