

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
August 22, 2011
Chicago, Illinois**

**Discussion Item: Smithsonian
“Connecting and Collecting” Initiative
(Prepared by: Deborra Richardson and Christine Friis)**

BACKGROUND

At the Society of American Archivists’ Council Meeting, January 27 – 30, 2011, in Chicago, Richardson discussed a prospective institutional “connecting and collecting” project that would encourage participation in assembling, recording, and preserving communities’ histories, and she asked for feedback on the concept and SAA’s interest in supporting it. The Council provided positive feedback and Tibbo agreed to write a letter of support.

Documenting History in Your Own Backyard is a “connecting and collecting” project facilitated by Smithsonian Institution Archives and Special Collections (SIASC) council and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) to engage individuals, communities, or nations in assembling and recording the evidence of contributions they consider important. The hope is to work with Smithsonian Institution Affiliates (SI Affiliates), Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies (SCEMS), Museums on Main Street (MoMS), and the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) to partner with archives professionals nationwide. This systematic and umbrella program would use archives collections to:

- Introduce local- and under-documented communities to archives;
- Answer questions about documentation and selection of materials of lasting value;
- Teach the issues around paper, photographic, and digital formats; and
- Unlock the “mystery” surrounding the negotiation process with prospective repositories.

The central piece of *Documenting History in Your Own Backyard* is a toolkit that communities can access online to begin their archival work. The kit would contain bibliographies of and pathfinders to conservation entities, vendors, and grant programs. It would also contain facsimiles from SI collections as examples and tools to support simple hands-on activities in caring for collections. Through virtual interaction with archivists, communities would learn the nature of archives and acquire the tools to make informed decisions about the creation, care, and disposition of their archives.

DISCUSSION

Creating a social networking page, such as a Facebook group, that is monitored by reputable and knowledgeable archivists (such as the Smithsonian's SIASC and the Society of American Archivists) would allow communities and their leaders free access to a toolkit to create community archives. This toolkit will eliminate barriers between established archives and community leaders who desire to create their own archive. With an open forum feel to the group, community leaders and organizations would have unrestricted access to information provided by the Smithsonian Institution, Society of American Archivists, and other credible archives organizations on the best and basic ways to preserve materials of lasting value.

In conducting our research, SIASC has found that there is a desire for a toolkit of this sort from the communities around the country. Community leaders agree that in their process of establishing an archive, a toolkit like this would be useful. Individuals surveyed have included a recent graduate school graduate at a Virginia Community College, an experienced teacher creating an archives within the Independent Dallas School District, and an independent middle-aged woman who has created national firefighter photographic archives. Their request is for a "central website to keep track of what's going on in these projects," a "clearinghouse for information" that provides "step-by-step instructions," and a place for "[community leaders] to talk to each other."

With no less than ten different "tab" options for community leaders to look through and utilize, and established archives to contribute to, the information provided is broad and basic. This approach of giving plentiful information in layman's terms is ideal in giving the community leaders what they're asking for, which in turn allows them to create an archive in a responsible, correct, and practical way.

Sections would include (but are not limited to):

Content Support: Consultants, Institutions (the host organization and partners), Donors and Foundations (contacts).

More Information Resources: NEDCC information, AIC information, Vendors and Suppliers (contacts).

Discussion Board / Chat Room

Technical Support: Selection and Appraisal methods, Conservation techniques, Miscellaneous material as needed, such as granting agencies, etc.

These sections provide information in every avenue of documenting community history, including the creation of born-digital archives. The established organizations, such as the Smithsonian Institution and the Society of American Archivists, for instance, could participate by contributing information, participating in an "Ask an Archivist" program, and maintaining a presence on the site.

Program Goals:

- Promote archival collections and programs [supporting the Smithsonian Institution’s goals of “Broadening Access,” “Crossing Boundaries,” and “Revitalizing Education” work through technology].
- Support SAA’s strategic priority of Advocacy and Public Awareness by “promoting the importance of archives,” thereby “increasing public support” and “obtaining [for communities] the resources necessary to protect the accessibility of archival records that serve cultural functions... and...to ensure... the accessibility of historical records.”

Intended Outcomes:

- Well-developed relationships between communities/individuals and reputable repositories.
- Collections coming to repositories from communities that participate in this program would require considerably less of an investment to be made ready for public access.
- Broader, more diverse, and richly documented history of the American people brought about by Smithsonian Institution staff and archivists throughout the US.
- New initiatives and relationships with American communities.
- Deeper understandings of the American experience for both the communities and archives institutions.
- Intellectual exchanges during program workshops that lead to new discoveries about cultural and social history on a family, local, regional, or community level.
- Further outcomes could be products and programs as diverse as virtual heritage trails, storytelling, and music performance.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

We recommend that SAA suggest this initiative as a vehicle for the Lone Arrangers Roundtable to help the Society respond to Strategic Priority #3, Advocacy and Public Awareness. SAA and the Smithsonian Institution (with the possibility of other institutional partners such as those mentioned above) would use this as a collaborative piece to strengthen community documentation and forge partnerships with the involved communities. In accordance with SAA’s Strategic Priority #3 as set forth from FY2010 to FY2014, this initiative would be an active way of promoting the importance of archives, increasing public support, and creating measures to make archival records more easily accessible.

Support Statement: Collaboration between the Society of American Archivists and the Smithsonian Institution could create an initiative that strengthens the foundation of larger archival goals. With communities yearning for the tools to document their own history, the larger organizations can play the role of a resource-provider and build relationships around the country. The benefit from a project like this would be a forged partnership between the Society of American Archivists and the Smithsonian Institution, as well as strong relationships with community archives.

Fiscal Impact: The creation of a Facebook page is free until the idea of placing ads is formulated. This project could be completed with little money spent by either organization. This lends itself well to the creation of the project because it could be given to the communities for no cost.

As with any project, if money is put into it, the end result is going to come out to a higher degree than without the money. Positions such as Webmaster, research assistant, and reference assistant would ensure that the Facebook site functions accurately and stays updated with the most recent information. The financial impact on the Society's budget could range from \$45K (for three interns per semester per year) to \$200K (which includes salary and benefits for 3 full-time employees) if all of these incumbents were hired. SAA might consider applying for a grant to offset these costs.