

It's Not Busy Work

Veronica Denison
Assistant Professor, University Archivist
Kansas State University

Tara Coleman
Associate Professor, Web Services Librarian
Kansas State University

Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Kansas State University, all campuses closed, and staff were sent home. While many staff members' work could easily be done outside of the library, there were a significant number of people whose work was tied to the physical building or campus. Several weeks into the pandemic, some staff were running the risk of not getting paid due to lack of work.

An archivist and the web services librarian got together to develop several digital projects that could be completed at home without any special equipment other than a computer and internet. Those four projects included documenting the histories of people and departments at K-State, creating a timeline of university activities, and two citizen archivist projects. These projects help make university history and information accessible and visible to people around the world.

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Introduction

While not all experts agree on exactly when the COVID-19 virus started, the first confirmed case of someone on United States soil with the virus was January 21, 2020. On February 3, 2020, the United States declared the COVID-19 virus a public health emergency (World Health Organization, 2021). Kansas State University moved to reduced capacity on all campuses beginning March 16, 2020. All employees able to work remotely were told to do so and all in-person classes were suspended (Kansas State University, 2020). In a very short period, classes went online, students were sent home from the residence halls if possible, and most workers were sent home. At the libraries, all students, staff, and faculty were sent home. While many people's work easily translated to work from home, that was not possible for everyone. The K-State Libraries were able to pay everyone regardless of their ability to work for several weeks, but that was not possible for long. It was decided that staff and faculty without work to do would have to be furloughed for financial reasons.

The concern for colleagues and the knowledge of project backlogs inspired the Web Services Librarian, Tara Coleman, and the University Archivist, Veronica Denison, to come together and create a list of projects that would allow people to work from home requiring nothing more than a computer and internet connection. They developed a list of projects they had always wanted to do but kept getting pushed back due to other priorities. Coleman and Denison set out to create projects that were not just considered "busy work," but ones that could help build resumes or further skills.

Literature Review

Many university libraries and archives found themselves in a similar situation to Kansas State University. Purdue University is one such instance (Anderson-Zorn, Harmeyer, et al). They had 20 staff in the archives and special collections, as well as an additional 75 staff members in the rest of the library that suddenly found themselves at home and many in need of remote work. Neal Harmeyer, the Digital Archivist at Purdue, recently presented the various projects that were made available to his colleagues in the library. These included a large-scale text correction project of their student newspapers. Harmeyer found that some of the best ways to work with staff, especially those outside the archives and special collections was to virtually meet them where they are most comfortable when discussing the projects, for example Zoom, Microsoft Teams, a telephone, etc. April K. Anderson-Zorn, University Archivist at Illinois State University, also suggested the flexibility in mode of contact when coming up with remote projects. Anderson-Zorn, who mostly had remote projects for student workers during the pandemic, said that she found many seemed incredibly overwhelmed, cried, or felt isolated. However, while some students had a challenging time dealing with all the changes, others really thrived (Anderson-Zorn, Harmeyer, et al).

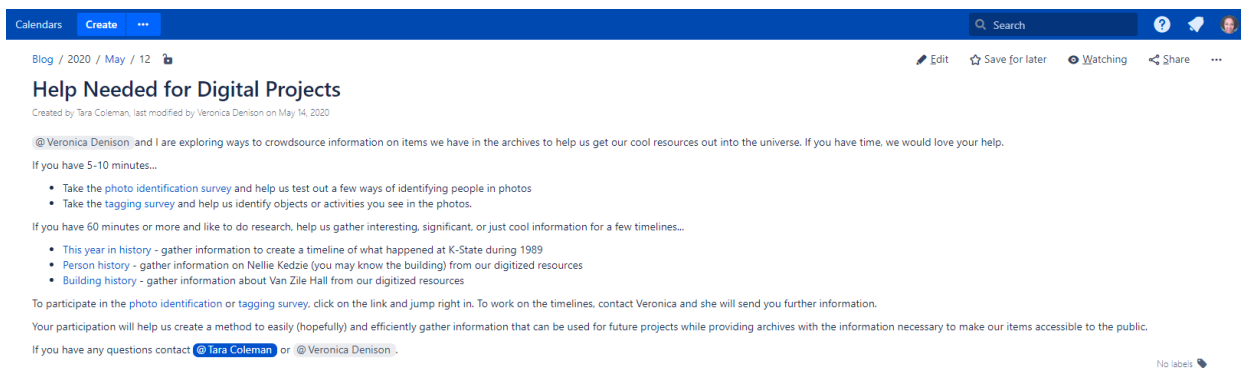
Projects

The projects Coleman and Denison put together included gathering information relating to building history, biographical information about people who worked or studied at K-State, administrative histories of the different units and colleges on campus, and a yearly timeline of events, as well two

citizen archivist projects involving adding metadata and identifying people in photographs. The biographies, histories, and timeline projects were ones that the university archives had been wanting to do for some time, but other projects and reference services to researchers had taken precedence. Some years ago, a few histories were made available on an old archives and special collection website, which is now only available via the Wayback Machine. The goal was to have the completed histories, biographies, and timelines added to a Kansas State University wiki.

Coleman and Denison put out a call to staff via email, an internal staff blog post (see Figure 1 below), and at a library all staff meeting. Staff were told that the libraries were exploring ways to crowdsource information on archival items and would like help. The projects were divvied up by the amount of time staff would need to dedicate to each project. If users had 5-10 minutes of time, it was recommended staff work on the photo identification or the photo metadata tagging projects. If users had an hour or more to spare, staff was invited to work on the “This year in history,” person history, or building history projects.

Figure 1



Citizen Archivist

Citizen archivist is a crowdsourcing project run by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Digital photos are selected by archivists, shared online, and the public is invited to organize, transcribe, and classify the images (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). Like NARA, K-State Libraries has thousands of photographs, print and digital, with little to no information available in a catalog, making it hard for the public to find. This is a common challenge in special collections and archives. While an important and necessary project, adding metadata to photos often gets pushed back as other priorities arise.

After the pandemic started and staff were sent home to work, the idea of getting staff to help assign metadata to photos seemed like a fun and easy way to get staff projects to keep them on the payroll. The approach the libraries took with their citizen archivist project was to start with a pilot by asking staff to identify people in photos as well as describe what they see in each photo. Because the libraries do not have access to a wiki like the one NARA uses for its citizen archivist project, it was decided to use the survey system provided by the university, Qualtrics, as well as open-source software for photo editing. The vision behind the citizen archivist photo identification project was to crowdsource the identity of people in popular or culturally relevant photos. It was determined that the project would be easy and accessible enough that any student or staff could

open the project and start working with nothing more than the Internet, be it on their own computer or their cell phone.

Three photos were selected for the photo project: a photo of Library Ambassadors posing during the 2016 library gala, a group staff photo circa 1980s, and a photo from 2014 of patrons attending a celebration of the opening of Jimmie Rodgers' Champion for the Blues exhibit in special collections.

Each photo was resized using photo editing software to make them web accessible, then uploaded to a Qualtrics survey. Since users needed to select the person they wanted to identify and type their name into a box, it was decided to use Qualtrics' heat map function. The heat map function allows a box to be placed over a section of the photo, which then allows the user to leave comments.

The easiest part of the photo identification project was selecting the photographs. There were multiple challenges to this project. While Qualtrics is a wonderful tool, creating a heat map with several pictures or several people in a picture was a challenge, especially if people were standing close to someone else or part of their body was hidden behind another (see the two people on the left in Figure 2). This created problems when using the heat map. When there were multiple people in a photograph, the original high-quality photo was edited into sections before resizing to be web accessible, allowing users to see the people in the photograph better.

Figure 2



For the metadata tagging projects, which was also done using Qualtrics, six photos were selected: Denison Hall, the K-State formal gardens, a band playing at the opening of the “Jimmie Rogers: Champion for the Blues” exhibit, the old anatomy lab, two people conversing at a table in front of the Native American and African American portions of the “We are the Dream” mural, and a group of women studying canning. To make things simple, users were asked in Qualtrics to select photos of interest (they could choose to do all six or just one), then list any item or activity they

could identify in a text field box below the image (see Figure 3 for example). Metadata examples could be “Books,” “Women,” “Men,” “Tables,” “Murals,” etc.

Figure 3

List any activities or objects you see in the photo.



Two people converse at a table in front of the Native American and African American portions of the mural. 1980. From Dow Center. Mural Album.

This Year in History

The “This Year in History” project is one that had been completed periodically within the university archives, but usually by subject and never comprehensively; for example, a year list of all lecturers who came to campus, or a list of musical acts by year. For this new rendition of the project, a person would page through one year of digitized university newspapers and note any events, building dedications, disasters, visitors, lecturers, theatre performances, musicians, etc., that occurred at K-State. The university archives had long wanted to be able to post on social media events that occurred on specific dates and having a “This year in history” list would be a benefit. Additionally, there might be information or campus occurrences in the newspapers that are not reflected elsewhere within the archival record at K-State. Also, many alumni like to reflect on their time spent at the university, and a yearly timeline could enhance their experience. Each new event received its own date and line, and if two events occurred on the same day, they would be two separate entries. A sentence of the event would be described and hyperlinked to the online university newspaper page where the full article could be found. See figure 4 for example.

Figure 4

1998 March 11-12-The Student Government election for [Student Body President](#) is held, but no candidate receives the necessary 51 percent of votes to win, thus requiring a runoff between Tracey Mann/Andy Macklin and Greg Davis/Jim Boomer.

1998 March 13-Actor and performer [Dan Kwong](#) speaks in the Union Little Theater in a performance that is part of Asian-American Awareness Month.

1998 March 18-[Tracey Mann](#) and Andy Macklin win the runoff election for Student Body President, receiving 54.5 percent of the vote.

1998 March 31-The [K-State football](#) team and Coach Bill Snyder are honored at the Kansas Capitol Building in Topeka by legislators and Governor Bill Graves for the team's 1997 Fiesta Bowl win over Syracuse.

1998 April-The Union Programming Council [designates April](#) as "80s month," showing a different 80s movie each weekend for students to watch.

Person, Building, and College/Unit Histories

While the person, building, and college/unit histories were all separate projects, they were completed and developed the same way. Like the "This year in history" project, many of these histories had been completed over the years. Additionally, if the archives had the papers or records of a person or administrative unit, then the finding aid would have that information. Finding aid biographical and organizational notes are typically tailored to what can be found in the collection. For example, if a person donated their professional papers to the archives, then the biographical note would have more detail regarding the person's professional life and not their personal. These added history projects would provide more detail than some finding aid notes.

The histories of different colleges/units and buildings at K-State, as well as those affiliated with the university, especially ones who are well-known, are of tremendous interest to researchers, both internal and external to the university community. Therefore, these projects would benefit the archives, as well as researchers. The Kansas State University Archives also has plans to create a wiki for K-State history where this information can be found.

Luckily nearly every issue of the university newspapers had been previously digitized, as well as almost every yearbook and catalog. Additionally, *The History of Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science* by JT Willard had been digitized. The "Willard Book," as it is referred to among those in the K-State archives, provides a history of the university from its conception to 1939 when the book was published. All this digitized content is available to everyone within the Internet Archive.

For each of these projects, Denison created folders in a SharePoint folder called "Digital_Projects," which was shared with those interested. The building and people/admin history folders included documents with suggested topics and instructions which also had links to the digitized content that could be of help, as well an example of how to collect and display information found. The "Timeline" project folder only had an instruction document. Also, within the main Digital Projects folder, Denison included a subfolder that contained tutorials on how to search the Internet Archive. Within

these documents, it was also shared why these projects were important and how they would help benefit not only the university archives, but also the K-State community.

Project Review

Regarding the citizen archivist projects, the metadata tagging project was not as popular with staff as the person identification project. However, the end products of both projects were good, especially given the tools available. Staff seemed to struggle the most with the metadata tagging project. Feedback received included that the instructions were too ambiguous. Participants did not know how much metadata they were supposed to list or what would be helpful. A better explanation of the project and how the list of items or activity is used, along with example descriptions would be beneficial in the future. Whereas the person identification project was more fun for the staff who participated, as indicated by the feedback, with some saying they enjoyed looking at the photos and naming people they knew well. Some were so excited they reached out to former retired colleagues to get help identifying people. The feedback received was generally positive, and many people said it was a lovely walk down memory lane to see photos of people that they have worked with or events that they had attended. Many also thought this would be a wonderful way to engage alumni and crowdsource more names and that this could be a fundraising activity in the future.

Initially six staff members and two archives' student workers said they were interested in working on the history and timeline projects. However only one student continued to work on the projects through the spring 2020 semester, and one staff member continued the projects through the beginning of fall 2020. It is important to mention that all student workers were laid off at the end of the spring 2020 semester due to budget constraints and were rehired that fall. They also were not required to work from March 2020, when the stay-at-home order went into effect, to the end of the semester when they were laid off. Student workers still were paid based on the number of hours they would have normally been scheduled to work. The staff member who worked on the projects until the fall 2020 semester slowly was able to do her usual pre-pandemic work, but still worked on the projects for the archives until what she set out to do was finished. She created detailed timelines of a person and building on campus, Mary Van Zile and Van Zile Hall respectively. One other staff member did finish a building history they were working on, and another partly completed a timeline. One student completed a full year's timeline, one biography, and one building history. When this student was rehired in the fall of 2020, he continued his work and created more timelines and histories. Since fall 2020, Denison has had the student workers continue the history projects and create interactive timelines with the information on Van Zile (the hall and the person).

The photograph identification and metadata projects garnered more interest than the others. About nine people participated in the metadata tagging project, and 16 participated in the person identification project. There were many varied factors and reasons why there was not much interest in the other projects. Many in the library felt overwhelmed or intimidated by the research required to find the information needed. Although the research seemed straightforward, and even monotonous, those whose position was in jeopardy were support staff and had little experience researching. Additionally, many struggled with the "new-normal," i.e., the sudden switch to having to work from home and COVID fears. Some also were worried that they would do the projects incorrectly and get into trouble if they did since many had never worked closely with the archives and special collections. There also was just a general lack of interest—history and research sounded

boring. Added to all of this, at the time, some employees did not have a computer they could take home and it is largely discouraged by the institution to not use your own personal device to save work. Others did not have working Internet or had limited access to Wi-Fi.

If this would be done again, setting up a meeting with those interested before sending out a project description would be ideal. While the project instructions were available for anyone interested to view, many may have become overwhelmed by them and decided the project was not for them. It is likely that meeting with Coleman and Denison so they could go over the project and answer any questions, would be less daunting.

Although some of the projects did not garner much interest, the work completed was still incredibly helpful. Student workers are still creating interactive timelines using information found during the process. Kansas State University has a rich history, and with the help of those who worked on these projects, that history can be shared in new and fun ways.

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