

Volunteers and the State Library of Queensland

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Synopsis

In a presentation to ANZTLA's twelfth Annual Conference held in Brisbane on 6 July 1997, Brian Randall, Manager of the John Oxley Library, briefly discusses the role of volunteers within libraries and archives, particularly in relation to the State Library of Queensland. He highlights the many benefits as well as some of the problems or difficulties which can emerge over time. However, he argues that the benefits flowing from the involvement and input of volunteers far outweigh any of these difficulties or problems.

Volunteers form an important component in the operation of many libraries and archives, in particular within special or research libraries where the need to arrange and describe material prior to access is so important. At the John Oxley Library, which houses the State Library of Queensland's history collections, volunteers are able to assist with a range of activities including:

- newspaper clipping
- transcribing manuscript material
- typing transcriptions
- identification of material, in particular photographic images
- special "one off" projects
- listing material
- library tours, and
- community library activities (eg. assisting with exhibitions)

It is important to consider the interaction between professional staff and volunteers in terms of appropriate duties being undertaken by each. Ongoing consistency of approach to work such as arrangement and description of manuscript and archival material necessitates consistent control or supervision of projects by the professional staff involved with the volunteer performing, essentially, a back-up or supporting role. The relationship between librarian or archivist and the volunteer can be argued to be a partnership and when operating in this way it can be particularly successful.

I would like to examine one such arrangement which recently operated at the John Oxley Library and which illustrates both the many positives as well as some problems which can emerge. For some time a team of volunteers worked at the John Oxley Library, specifically assisting with the arrangement and description of material from the Uniting Church in Australia's archives. This collection is amongst the largest held at the John Oxley Library and comprises a wide variety of material. The volunteers involved all had connections with the Uniting Church and were familiar with its operation. This has a number of benefits including the ability of volunteers to provide, over time, an insight into the operation of the Church which resulted in effective description of material. In addition, the material was able to be better described contextually, that is, a more accurate historical description was able to be put in place. Volunteers were able to assist with identification, in particular with the photographic images contained in the collection. These volunteers were committed and positive about the work involved as well as being reliable and working well together.

The main task undertaken by this team of volunteers, usually numbering six or seven, was listing individual items within series on specially prepared listing sheets. An associated task of great

importance, which is ongoing, is the indexing of the Church's births, deaths and marriages records.

Large quantities of archival material were involved, and the listing of material by Church volunteers was seen as an important step in gaining an understanding of what was in the collection. There was also the backlog to be dealt with, which in the main comprised the initial material handed over to the Library in the 1980's and early 1990's. In terms of size, the Uniting Church in Australia's archives comprises approximately seven hundred shelf metres of material. In many ways the collection was taking up a significant proportion of the time of library staff, in terms of arrangement, description and provision of access. As a means of overcoming this constraint the Uniting Church in Australia contributes, by way of a full time archivist, to the operation and maintenance of the collection. The programme of Church volunteers, although an important component, is presently on hold but hopefully will be revived in the near future.

But, in looking at this specific collection in the John Oxley Library, were any difficulties encountered in the use of volunteers? A number of real as well as potential problems were identified, and these relate mainly to resource constraints within the Library. For instance, difficulties were encountered in "keeping up" with the volume of listings generated by the volunteers. Some volunteers were less interested in this listing work than others. Moreover, John Oxley Library staff time was limited and was, at times, insufficient to provide adequate supervision of work.

How were these problems dealt with?

In terms of "keeping up" with the volume of listings created by the Uniting Church volunteers, this proved to be an ongoing difficulty. In essence, the stage beyond these handwritten listings was to input the information to a database enabling some basic level of intellectual control over material as well as allowing for material to be accessed. This input of information was, by necessity, undertaken by Library staff. Over time, this task proved difficult to continue. Backlogs developed, negating to some extent, the excellent listing work undertaken by volunteers. Many would argue that arrangement and description of archival and manuscript material is most effectively undertaken at the one time and that arrangement and description done in stages simply proves counter-productive.

Some volunteers were less interested than others in this listing task. Library staff searched for alternatives, for instance indexing of material or inputting to a database, details of births, deaths and marriages. However, this takes time in terms of locating suitable alternative tasks and then providing initial training and ongoing supervision. It is however vitally important that volunteers are provided with work which is both interesting and stimulating. Finding such work is not as easy as it might sound. The reality is that much of the work in libraries and archives is routine, for instance transcribing, listing and indexing must be done. This is not a problem which is any better or worse in the case of the Uniting Church collection, it can be said to apply across the whole range of library activities. In my experience, those volunteers matched with tasks in which they are interested are far happier and work far more effectively than otherwise.

Unfortunately, staff limitations within the John Oxley Library, meant that insufficient time, particularly in terms of supervision and guidance, was being provided to the Uniting Church

volunteers. Desk duties, reference queries and other duties were becoming more demanding of staff time, allowing little time to devote to overseeing the tasks being undertaken by these volunteers. This problem became increasingly more evident due to a shortage of staff, over a prolonged period, in the Library's Archives and Manuscripts Unit. This can be a particularly frustrating problem to deal with, and in this instance we had no alternative but to put on hold the Uniting Church volunteer programme. It was at this point that negotiations were commenced aimed at employing an additional archivist to work specifically on the Church's collection. It has always been seen that, in due course, the dedicated Uniting Church archivist would be in a position to re-commence the volunteer programme and provide volunteers with adequate and relevant guidance and supervision, but in a more structured and controlled manner than was previously the case.

Some of the valuable projects which have been undertaken by other volunteers working the State Library of Queensland include:

- The index to World War 1 and Boer War soldiers' photographs from the *Queenslander*;
- Identification of motor vehicle photographs;
- Identification of train photographs;
- Indexing of the *Boomerang*, *Queensland Heritage*, *Queensland Society and Homes* as well as *Pugh's Almanac*;
- The newspaper clipping project;
- Maintenance and arrangement of the ephemera collection;
- Indexing and organisation of the *TV Week* photographic collection;
- Index to fires reported in the *Australian Insurance and Banking Record*;
- Pre-separation index; and
- The index to personal names in the John Oxley library manuscripts collection.

In conclusion, it can be seen that projects such as these are invaluable contributions to collection development and enhancement of access. To a significant extent, without the assistance of volunteers, it would be difficult to achieve the range and depth of work undertaken. On balance, it is clear that volunteers are an invaluable asset to any library or archive and their individual and collective contributions cannot be overstated.

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An "Odd Spot"

A theology student at the German University of Goettingen stole no fewer than 17,000 books totalling A\$411,662 in value over five years, police said. The student stole an average of 14 books a day, some of them rare or irreplaceable, before a bookseller gave his description to the authorities.