

Laura Frizzell, Journeyman Archivist  
Palmer Museum of History and Art  
Report for Weeks 1-6, May 13, 2017-June 23, 2017

## Introduction:



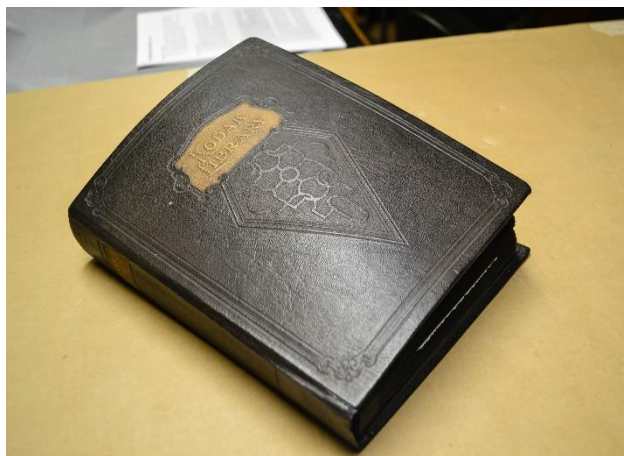
*The Palmer Museum of History and Art*

As part of the Journeyman Archival Processing Program sponsored by ASHRAB, I ventured to beautiful Palmer, Alaska to work at the Palmer Museum of History and Art. This report will detail the projects I undertook and any accomplishments made over the course of my six weeks at the museum. To meet the objectives set forth in the Memorandum of Agreement proposed by ASHRAB, I processed and created finding aids for two collections: the Elsie Blue Photo Collection and the *Alaska* Magazine Collection. During my sixth week in Palmer, I was also able to begin processing a portion of the Louis Odsather papers.

Upon arriving at the museum, my first item of business was to meet with Selena Ortega-Chiolero, the Museum Director, and Richard Estelle, the Collections Manager. We discussed the collections I would be working with, including their concerns and goals for the future use of the materials. Once I had these things in mind, I felt more confident about the various approaches I would take in my processing. Because the Palmer Museum does not have the software needed to create EAD-encoded finding aids, I prepared PDF versions that can still be accessible online via the museum website under the “Recent Acquisitions” heading.

## Elsie Blue Photo Collection:

The first collection I was assigned was the Elsie Blue Photo Collection. Kept within a single photo album, this collection is comprised of 446 photographs depicting the life and travels of Elsie Blue in the 1930's and 1940's. A young nurse originally from Chicago, Elsie relocated to Palmer to work for the local hospital. Through her photography, she documented her life with her husband Walt, the development of Palmer, Native individuals and cultures, wildlife, and her extensive travels around the state. As a collection, Elsie's photos represent a wonderfully diverse depiction of Alaska in terms of both residents and geography. Throughout the photo album's 71 pages, Elsie presents working women; Native



*The Elsie Blue Photo Album*

women, students, and families; and villages, parks, and towns from Denali National Park to Juneau and many places in-between. As such, this collection is potentially of great value to not only Palmer and the surrounding Matanuska Valley, but all of Alaska.

Surprisingly, Elsie's photo album was in very good condition considering its age and the amount of photos that had been stored within it. While the binding of the album was somewhat stressed from the thickness of the pages and a handful of photos showed wear on the edges from being bent in tight binding, the majority of the photos were in excellent condition. On each page, photos were arranged in a vertical column in an overlapping fashion which required lifting each individual photo to see the ones beneath. As she arranged her album, Elsie wrote captions on the back of most of the photos, providing important context for each.

Before I began working with the photo album, I spoke with Selena and Richard about their intentions regarding the artifact. During this conversation, we decided that, because of the album's condition, it would be acceptable to leave it intact with the photos inside. We also determined that the greatest threat to the album was overhandling, which could easily result in torn binding and damaged photos. With this in mind, I resolved to enhance the accessibility of the photo collection while preserving the original artifact.

My first step was to further assess the photo album's physical condition in order to better



*A page containing mylar and tissue paper*

preserve it. Because of the overlapping arrangement of the photos on each page, I was initially concerned about photos becoming scratched or stained from the ink-written notes on their backs. My plan was to interleave tissue paper throughout the whole album, but this proved difficult because of the already strained binding and the photos' unique arrangement. As such, I reassessed and decided to prepare mylar sleeves only for the photos that showed significant signs of wear and

those that had come loose from the album entirely. I liked the idea of mylar sleeves in this scenario so that the fronts and backs of the photos could still be seen and individual photos could be lifted without being touched. Being selective in this way prevented the binding of the album from becoming further stretched. To ensure that the mylar sleeves didn't scratch the photos beneath, I used tissue paper for a layer of protection. Before committing to these measures, I consulted two former supervisors, one of whom is the Conservation Manager for the Tennessee State Restoration Lab.

Because Selena, Richard, and I decided to leave the photo album intact and therefore in its original arrangement, I could spend more time determining efficient ways to assert intellectual control over the artifact. Fortunately, Richard and the museum's volunteers had already digitized the bulk of the photos inside the album. I saw this as an opportunity to create a relationship between the born-digital images and their original photos by adding physical locations



*A sample filename*

(page number and the sequence of individual photos on pages) to the previously established filenames. For instance, the filename of the first photo on the 62<sup>nd</sup> page of the album would become: 62,1\_Hospital #4-Blu. Next, I wrote the filenames with an archival marker on pieces of non-acidic artist tape and applied them to the pre-existing adhesives binding each photo to the page. Adding this element to the filenames Richard had devised added an important layer of communication between the physical photo album and the digitized photos that came from it. By looking at the filenames, a person could ascertain exactly where in the photo album's 71 pages a specific photo could be found; by looking at the notation attached beneath each physical photo, a person could quickly find the digitized version on the museum's hard drive.



*Final step: housing*

While preparing a finding aid for the photo album, I wanted to incorporate standardized elements while also taking into consideration the unique needs of the museum staff and potential researchers. Therefore, in addition to modeling my finding aid after one in use for a photo album in Special Collections at Humboldt State University, I also created a searchable inventory that details the arrangement of the photos within the album and offers key information such as: the previously mentioned filename for each photo, descriptions, dates, and additional comments that include condition reporting. In lieu of a DAMS, this inventory brings a similar findability component to the collection. Once the finding aid was complete, I cataloged the album using Past Perfect 5, wrapped it in tissue paper, and stored it in a Hollinger box.

## Alaska Magazine Collection:

Having been in publication since 1935, *Alaska* magazine offers news and information about many aspects of living in Alaska. Founded in Ketchikan, Alaska by Emery Fridolf Tobin and Ray Roady, the publication was initially titled *Alaska Sportsman Magazine* and catered primarily to the discussion and photography of fishing, hunting, camping, dog sledding, and other physical ventures. In 1969, a new title, *Alaska*, was adopted and has remained in use to the present day. Since then,



*A portion of the Alaska magazine collection, including a cover featuring the Matanuska Valley. Never fear! The Coca-Cola bottle in the background is empty!*

the magazine has come to reflect different facets of Alaska living, including spotlights on Native cultures, the environment, the arts, cooking, and individuals. In addition to a broader focus in content, the magazine also expanded its readership to audiences outside the state of Alaska. The publication strives to represent many areas of the state; as such, articles frequently feature Native villages, Nome, Barrow, Juneau, Fairbanks, the Aleutian Islands, etc. This expansive focus on locations that are diverse in terms of culture, population, and geography creates a well-rounded depiction of the state, including Palmer and the surrounding Matanuska Valley.

Richard had preemptively arranged this collection, giving me the opportunity to manage other aspects of its processing. Much like with the Elsie Blue Photo Collection finding aid, I adopted a



*A portion of the Alaska Magazine collection.*

standardized format while incorporating elements specific to the collection and the different ways it could be accessed. I created a searchable inventory that provides the following fields: issue (month and year), description, comments, location, and the corresponding object ID within Past Perfect 5 (when available). This inventory reflects the 485 individual issues in the museum's possession. In addition to creating this finding aid, the entire collection was photographed (including covers and tables of contents) and I arranged the photos by year on

the museum's hard drive. A portion of the magazines had been cataloged using Past Perfect 5, so I added photos to these records, attached subjects to each record, and included article titles for

pieces that featured Palmer specifically. For the most part, the collection was in very good condition with the exception of some older issues that had experienced water damage or other forms of wear. These issues were placed in mylar sleeves to prevent further damage and protect the other magazines. All told, the collection ranges in date from November 1946 to June 2012 and spans eleven oversized boxes, which I arranged chronologically, leaving room to grow if additional issues are acquired.

### **Louis Odsather Local Committees Collection:**



*The Louis Odsather Local Committees Collection*

During my sixth week at the Palmer Museum, I was able to process a portion of the larger Louis Odsather collection. Donated in 2015, the Odsather papers pertain to many facets of life in Palmer, Anchorage, and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Richard has been working on housing many parts of this collection, but had not yet touched a box of papers documenting Odsather's involvement in several area organizations and committees. I wanted the opportunity to arrange, house, and prepare a finding aid for a selection of documents, so I treated this sub-collection as its own entity and did just that, titling it the Louis Odsather Local Committees Collection.

These papers represent the Pioneers of Alaska, the Grand Igloo Emblem Committee, and the King and Queen Regent ceremonies and conventions. Housed within eight folders inside one box, the collection is comprised of historic booklets, handwritten notes, typed manuscripts, correspondence, and a space for miscellaneous papers. It ranges in date from 1908 to 1988. The majority of the collection is in excellent condition with the exception of the historic booklets, which show signs of age and wear. As such, I housed them in mylar sleeves to prevent further damage. A 1988 newspaper featuring a special on the 1989 Iditarod race was originally included in one of the folders, but I relocated it so that it could be unfolded and stored in an oversized binder. It was then cross-referenced to this collection. Each document was arranged chronologically, and I prepared a finding aid. I was especially excited to work with this collection because I felt that doing so would leave a solid foundation to guide museum staff through similar document collections.



*Historic booklets in new mylar sleeves.*

## **Challenges and Suggestions:**

Like all archival materials, the three collections I worked with at the Palmer Museum came with their own idiosyncrasies. The Elsie Blue photo album, for instance, presented a series of physical challenges because of the unique arrangement of its photos. The *Alaska* Magazine collection had been efficiently arranged, but lacked other imperative elements of intellectual control. And the lack of organization in the Louis Odsather Local Committees Collection meant that several documents originally lacked the proper context. In addition to these, the Palmer Museum, like many archives and museums, functions without a digital asset management system and, in some cases, physical resources. Because of this, my work as a Journeyman Archivist primarily entailed finding creative ways to render artifacts physically and digitally accessible while also enhancing their longevity through preservation-minded rehousing. After spending as much time as I could with all three collections, Richard and I discussed the different ways he and the museum volunteers could further my progress. These include: finishing the digitization of the Elsie Blue Photo Collection and editing the finding aid with new filenames; cataloging the rest of the *Alaska* magazine collection and adding photos and subjects to the new records; and incorporating any relevant materials from the Odsather collection to the Local Committees Collection.

## **Collections Storage and Rehousing:**

In addition to processing collections and creating finding aids, Richard wanted me to address some questions and concerns he had about proper collections storage. While he had done an amazing job of housing most of his collections properly, there were a few instances where plastic storage bins, Styrofoam, Ziploc bags, and Scotch tape had been used out of necessity. As I have usually been employed by archives that were already established and operating by the book, this presented me with an interesting and exciting opportunity to learn more about protocol. Together, Richard and I researched *why* these materials are unacceptable and learned which ones could be used in a pinch. For example, while Hollinger boxes are always preferred, if a plastic storage bin contains a number 5 on its base and is made of polypropylene resin, it is apt to be physically stable enough to be used until other materials can be gathered. In the event of a flood, these bins are actually more helpful at preventing water damage. Upon leaving the museum, I prepared a typed document detailing advice for specific collections, general notes, links to preservation guides proposed by the Library of Congress and National Archives, and a shopping list of basic but essential supplies I thought would be of use (Plastiklips, archival pens, cleaning sponges, legal-sized folders for larger documents, etc.).

## **Community Outreach / Conservation Workshop:**

Another highlight of my six weeks at the Palmer Museum was preparing a collections care guide for family history in the home and leading a workshop for community members. I divided the guide into the following segments: Photo & Document Care Tips, Digitization Guidelines, Preserving Home Movies & Other Moving Images, and Links to Important Preservation Resources. Much as I had done with Richard, I discussed materials and locations to avoid while working to preserve and store collections and provided links to additional information from



*Setting up the conservation workshop with Museum Director Selena Oretga-Chiolero*

reputable sources such as the National Archives and the Library of Congress. The Palmer Museum hosted the workshop at a local venue for two days, and I was pleased with the response from the community, some of whom brought in their family histories, and, in one case, even antique furniture. I feel that the event was successful in providing the community with teaching moments, but also in bolstering the museum's outreach initiatives and raising awareness about the institution and its collections. Leftover care guides can be found at the museum, and Selena and I have since discussed having a digital version available on the museum website.

### **Final Thoughts:**

In conclusion, I feel extremely fortunate to have been selected for this Journeyman Archivist position. When I applied, I knew that it was something I wanted to do, but I never could have anticipated just how much I would enjoy working with the wonderful staff at the Palmer Museum of History and Art and getting to learn about the fascinating history of both the area and Alaska. I have come to believe that the Journeyman Archival Processing Program is an asset to the state as well as the archival profession. Being able to fulfill this role as a young archivist has been an incredible learning experience personally and professionally, and I know that I will be able to apply many of the things I've learned here in future positions. As per my agreement with ASHRAB, I will be writing a piece for the newsletter of the Northwest Archivists Association, *Easy Access*. However, I will also be writing a two-part series about my experience for the Society of Georgia Archivists newsletter and a larger article for their publication, *Provenance*. My intention is to bring as much visibility to this program and the state of Alaska as possible. I am very grateful for this opportunity to grow while having the adventure of a lifetime, and I am hopeful that my time here has been as beneficial for the Palmer Museum of History and Art, the Journeyman Archival Processing Program, and the Alaska State Historical Records Advisory Board.



*With Richard Estelle, Collections Manager at the Palmer Museum of History and Art.*