Out of State But Not Out of Mind

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Mercy Heritage Center is the national archives for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. It contains records dating back to 1843, when the first community in the United States was founded in Pittsburgh, to approximately 2008 when the majority of the former communities were realigned. The Heritage Center is a state of the art facility with 5,700 linear feet of shelving in the main repository. It holds 30 collections consisting of manuscripts, books, artifacts, photographs and a variety of audio visual materials. In addition to archives, Mercy Heritage Center is an education center with research space, education rooms and exhibition gallery.

From concept to creation, Mercy Heritage Center was a major undertaking on many levels. Moving the collections from across the United States to Belmont, North Carolina was a journey in and of itself. Now that the collections are here the journey continues as we provide accessibility and reference services to the Sisters of Mercy as well as to the general public. This is a story of consolidation and care, and of service to those whose records we now hold.

The Seed is Planted

In 2004 the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Americas was on the verge of a reconfiguration. Twenty-five regional communities were to become five Communities with consolidated administrative centers and leadership teams. During this period the Mercy Regional Archives Network (MRAN) began to address the future of the archival collections in their care. Sister Sheila Carney, the Institute Leadership Team (ILT) Archival Liaison and a Pittsburgh Sister of Mercy, suggested the possibility of a centralized location. The seed was planted.

Over the next several years a flurry of activity ensued to flesh out the details of a centralized archival repository. There needed to be a consensus from the various communities to send their historical records off-site. Working with Institute leadership it was agreed to form a committee to explore possibilities of an Institute wide archival repository.

The Institute Archivists Committee (IAC) was formed in 2005. It consisted of a member archivist from each of the soon to be formed Communities: Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, NYPaW (New York, Pennsylvania, Pacific West), South Central and West-Midwest. The records of the sixth Mercy community, CCASA (Caribbean, Central America, South America) were retained at the Community offices in Buenos Aires. The archivist for each of these new Communities would be responsible for maintaining records after the creation of the new Community structure.

The IAC held meetings with the MRAN archivists to discuss details and get feedback on the project. The archivists debated the merits of one central archives as opposed to maintaining and staffing 25 separate archival repositories. It was concluded that the benefits of one location with a state of the art facility and professional staff outweighed 25 separate repositories.

Now that the general consensus for one location had been reached, the search was on for the site. The IAC had certain criteria for the new archives center. It had to be easily accessible and have ample parking. The repository should be a stand-alone building, not shared by other entities and, most importantly, the building should be Mercy owned.

Seeking the Site

Three cities were selected as a potential home for the central archives due to their historical significance to the Sisters of Mercy and the accessibility of the location. Pittsburgh was the first community of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States. It was founded by the “original seven” Sisters from Carlow Ireland in 1843, led by Mother Frances Warde. The Chicago community was founded in 1846 by Sister Agatha O’Brien, one of the original seven from Pittsburgh. The St. Louis Community, founded in 1856, was the third choice. Several additional Mercy communities put their hats in the ring as well. Belmont, North Carolina, a relatively small community compared to others, became a serious contender when it was designated as the administrative headquarters for the new South Central Community.

Eventually the search came down to two options. The former site of St. Xavier Academy in Latrobe and the McCarthy Spirituality Center in Belmont. At the October 2008 IAC meeting the options for Mercy Heritage Center were discussed. The Latrobe site was recommended for new construction. The Belmont site was recommended as a renovation project.

The property in Latrobe is a lovely site in the rolling hills of the Laurel Highlands. St. Xavier Academy and Convent was established in 1845. It burned down in 1972 and was not rebuilt. The Pittsburgh community’s cemetery is also located on the property and five of the original seven founding sisters are buried there. The site’s strong historical significance was a factor in the selection process, however the cost of new construction was unknown and accessibility to Latrobe by US 30 was an issue. The McCarthy Spirituality Center was built in 1966, originally serving as the library for Sacred Heart College. After the school closed in 1987, the building had served several temporary functions but was currently underutilized. Because of its history as a library, the building was easily adaptable into an archival repository, with plenty of space for exhibits, programs and research. In addition, Belmont’s proximity to Charlotte, accessibility to Interstate 85 and the Charlotte-Douglas airport made it an ideal location. The nod went to Belmont.

Renovation, the archivist and the first collections

In 2009 the renovation project began in earnest. The director of engineering on the South Central campus attended a Society of American Archivists workshop on best practices in the construction of an archival repository. Using that as a guideline, architects and contractors were selected. The building was completely gutted and new electrical, HVAC and fire suppression systems were installed. A generator was added later so that Mercy Heritage Center (MHC) would always have HVAC and fire suppression. New furnishings, work spaces and high density shelving were added on the ground floor. The upper level was converted into rooms for research, education and exhibits.
Out of State But Not Out of Mind (continued)

By the fall of 2010 the rehabilitation of Mercy Heritage Center was nearing completion and the IAC began the search for an archivist. I applied and was interviewed in Belmont. Part of the interview included touring the building. I was amazed to see an archival repository that was not an afterthought but, rather a top notch facility. Usually archival spaces are inadequate for collection storage, such as basements with no climate control. Mercy Heritage Center, in contrast, was palatial. After seeing MHC I immediately knew I would accept the job if I had the good fortune to be selected—and I was.

I started in late January 2011 and the first four collections were shipped from the Institute office located in Silver Spring Maryland in early February and the consolidation officially began.

**Pittsburgh**

The next collection due to arrive was Pittsburgh. Since Pittsburgh was the first Mercy community in the United States and the first community specific collection scheduled to move to Mercy Heritage Center, I flew to Pittsburgh to introduce myself to the sisters there to discuss the moving process. As a former resident of the Southside and Lawrenceville, I have many fond memories of Pittsburgh and was delighted to come home to my adopted city.

I reported to the Mercy Motherhouse on Fifth Avenue and was greeted by Sister Patricia McCann the Pittsburgh community archivist. Sister Patricia showed me the collection and gave me a tour of the Motherhouse. The next day we traveled to Latrobe to see the St. Xavier’s site and cemetery; lovely.

On April 27, 2011 a Dorr’s moving van arrived at MHC. I thought it very appropriate that a moving company based in Wilmerding brought the collection. Sister Patricia, along with Sister Clare Smith arrived to supervise and assist in the unpacking process.

With every move the archivists came along to make sure their collections arrived safely and to visit their beautiful new facility. We documented each event with photographs to share with the other collections arrived safely and to visit their beautiful new facility. We documented each event with photographs to share with the other collections. We began a Collection Assessment, Review and Evaluation project (CARE). Betsy and I went through each collection, box by box, to determine the condition of the documents making notes on arrangement, condition and contents (mixed media items, photographs, oversize materials, etc.). We then reviewed these CARE sheets to determine what actions need to take place to update and streamline preservation, arrangement and description.

More Collections, More staff

Over the next few months I familiarized myself with the collections here and worked on scheduling the transfer of collections to MHC with the archivists. As we gained knowledge of the size of each collection we began to designate shelf space for them. We wanted to make sure each collection remained intact to maintain the identity of the community from which it came.

In the summer we interviewed candidates for the newly created Assistant Archivist position. Betsy Johnson came on board in late September just in time for the next wave of collections to arrive. Betsy is a graduate of Middle Tennessee State’s graduate program in public history with a concentration in archival management. She is a great addition to the team.

The collections began arriving in earnest in October. Within the span of a week Cincinnati, Nashville, Knoxville and Louisville were delivered followed by Rochester two weeks later. On November 9th all the former regional communities that form the Northeast Community arrived. This was a whole tractor trailer with collections from Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Providence and Albany. In addition to archival materials these collections contained artifacts.

We started 2012 with another tractor trailer arriving with the St. Louis collection. This collection contained many artifacts and framed items. Then in June the Buffalo and Erie collections arrived. The Baltimore collection was transferred in August. We closed out 2012 with all the former regional communities that now form the Mid-Atlantic Community. Brooklyn, Hartsdale NY, Scranton, Watchung NJ and Merion PA arrived all at once.

The following year we transferred part of the Institute collection in the spring and the North Carolina Collection in the summer. The only collections left were the former regional community collections of West Midwest Community. They arrived in November from the Omaha, Cedar Rapids, Detroit and Chicago communities. The final collections, Auburn and Burlingame, California, were delivered in the spring of 2014.

We successfully transferred 30 collections consisting of 5,000 linear feet of records plus a room full of artifacts. The former regional community archivists, the Community archivists and their respective communities pulled together to make this happen. This was truly an impressive effort and something we were proud to be part of, but there’s more to be done.

**Getting to know you**

With 30 separate collections we needed to get a handle on what we had. We began a Collection Assessment, Review and Evaluation project (CARE). Betsy and I went through each collection, box by box, to determine the condition of the documents making notes on arrangement, condition and contents (mixed media items, photographs, oversize materials, etc.). We then reviewed these CARE sheets to determine what actions need to take place to update and streamline preservation, arrangement and description.

A by-product and helpful component of the CARE process was gaining knowledge of the collections; we began to familiarize...
ourselves with the topical strengths of collections and quirks to their organization. This is helpful when conducting research and answering reference questions. Although the staff has gained significant knowledge of the material at hand, we are still learning more about these collections every day.

Reaching Out; Accessibility

One of the challenges of having all the records of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in one location is that of accessibility for the membership. We can hardly expect members (sisters), leadership and administrators from across the country to travel to North Carolina to do research. When we do get requests from members we go out of our way to respond as quickly as possible. We want to show them that although the collections are far away, the information is accessible and that it can be delivered efficiently.

Another challenge is that we are a completely new facility and therefore do not have an established presence outside the Sisters of Mercy. We have worked diligently on outreach, hosting workshops, participating in professional organizations and promoting our presence through the Sisters of Mercy website. Although utilization of our exhibition space is still in the planning stages, we are using temporary exhibits as a way to reach out to the public and our membership. Our current exhibit, “Civil War Sisters; Sisters of Mercy Healing the Wounds of the Nation” addresses the role of the Sisters of Mercy as nurses in the American Civil War. The history of women religious is history waiting to be discovered. By revealing the little known but crucial role Sisters played in tending to the sick and wounded, the exhibit provides a way for people to discover the Sisters of Mercy.

The exhibit is open to the public on Thursday afternoons and to groups by appointment. We have also hosted field trips from local Catholic schools. To expand our reach to those who cannot visit we created an online exhibit. People can tour the exhibit by going to www.civilwarsisters.com.

On the radar

As early as fall 2011 we began receiving reference inquiries through the main website Reference questions are funneled through two question categories, “Search for a Sister” and “Archival/Historical.” “Search for a Sister” inquiries are often former students seeking to make contact with a favorite teacher. Sometimes they want to thank the Sister for having an impact on their lives or to apologize for being a rotten kid. “Archival/Historical” questions run the gamut, from genealogy questions to graduate students writing dissertations and include topics as varied as “great aunt Mary who became a sister” to the fire at St. Xavier’s in Latrobe.

We also began to keep track of all of our reference inquiries. We developed a database to follow the types of questions we received, including who, where, length of time required and the degree of difficulty. We adapted this from the Reference Effort Assessment Data (READ) scale http://readscale.org/. This was developed by Bella K. Gerlich and G. Lynn Berard at Carnegie Mellon University. It is a useful tool to analyze reference usage. In 2012 we had 374 reference inquiries. In 2013 we had 473.

In the fall of 2013 a new Institute wide website was launched that gave MHC more exposure http://www.sistersofmercy.org/heritage. Early on in 2014 we realized we were on pace to exceed 800 inquiries. With the READ scale we were able to calculate how much time we were spending on reference inquiries. We were now using a quarter of our time doing reference. With this data it became apparent that we needed an additional staff member. Our initial estimate for 2014 was incorrect. We actually responded to 1,019 reference inquiries! We are now on pace for 1,100 for 2015!

As for our third staff member, Emily Reed joined our team in the fall as our Digital Records Archivist. You all will be glad to know that she is a graduate of Pitt’s School of Library and Information Science and is doing a fine job. Emily is developing a digital preservation program for Mercy Heritage Center and addressing the preservation needs of our audio-visual collections. She also created the online Civil War exhibit.

In the first four years of its existence, Mercy Heritage Center has grown from an empty building to a research center housing rich resources which more researchers access each year. In some instances, due to the amount of material and limited resources, it is not possible for us to provide research services ourselves. More and more scholars are finding it worthwhile to make the trip to Belmont. Best assured the Pittsburgh collection lives on in Belmont; think of us as Pittsburgh south. Visit us on line or make the trip; you’ll be glad you did, and so will we if you bring pierogis or Primanti’s.