

MAKING ARCHIVES COME ALIVE THROUGH DOCUMENTARIES

I want to tell you a story. Once upon a time, a young woman took a Shakespeare course from a poet. After the last class, he asked if she would be his literary secretary, and she said, "Yes." Years passed, and the woman helped the poet prepare his books for publication. He was appointed the poet laureate of Florida. She helped arrange his poetry readings. More time passed. She helped him record his poetry. After many years, she helped him with his final project- creating 3D animations to illustrate his poetry.

One day, the woman received a phone call from the President of the Florida State Poets Association asking if the poet would present his animated poetry at their annual conference. Sadly, the woman answered, the poet had grown old and could no longer travel. The president suggested the woman create a video documentary from the archival materials in the poet's collection to show at the annual conference. And the woman did.

By now you may have guessed I was the woman in my story, and this was how I began producing documentaries.

More and more special collections are being digitized and are available on the internet. I have been working for several years with students to digitize special collections at Florida Tech. Digital archives present information about a collection in depth and are capable of reaching a world-wide audience.

Why should an archivist go to the trouble of producing a documentary? It is certainly not in the job description. I am not proposing an archivist do the job alone. I had a lot of help with my small efforts.

Our common goal as archivists is to unearth and preserve records of enduring value. The main reason for creating and maintaining archives is to have an accurate record of ourselves.

A documentary opens the door to the record room, reaches out to a large audience, and provides a tour of the highlights.

Techniques an archivist does not know about making a movie should be delegated to movie-making experts. Let someone else push the buttons for you.

Even if you have a team to assist in making a documentary, what purpose does it serve? A documentary tells a story about your collection. It introduces the collection in a way that makes it inviting and exciting. It delivers champagne on a silver platter. For those who want dinner, the archives await.

The old cliché, *write what you know*, applies to creating a documentary about a special collection. Who can tell the story about a collection better than its archivist? No one can surpass the person who understands the essential nature of a collection. No one can choose relevant photographs or recordings or letters better than the person who has processed each record and knows how they relate to one another.

As archivists, we know how a collection we protect comes alive in our minds, and when we are lucky, in our hearts. Do not be afraid to show the passion you discovered in your collection. One of the great documentarians of our time, Ken Burns, likens his job to “waking the dead.”

Such a very special collection is a candidate to make into a video documentary.

“It is not enough to lay out the evidence,” Ken Burns tells us. “The documentarian must seek genuine stories about things that matter.” This is an easy job for the archivist. Select those exact materials that brought you a revelation, a chuckle, or a tear, a shout for joy, and you will succeed in waking your own dead.

Editing video materials should come naturally to the archivist because making a movie follows standard rules of organization.

Documentary films follow this simple formula:

WHY? The *Introduction* is the purpose of making this documentary.

WHO? The *Characters* are the people who are featured.

WHERE and WHEN? The *Situation* is the place and time.

WHAT IF? The *Plot* relates the events that take place.

WHY? The *Conclusion* explains how the story was resolved.

Use standard devices such as *mystery* or *discovery* to engage the viewer. Remember how it felt when you discovered the value of your collection. Then re-create that moment for the viewer. Do not hesitate to employ *conflict* and *resolution* in your documentary. Prepare the viewer for the *turning point* by building *suspense* or providing an *understanding* of the subject matter. A documentary that wins prizes *informs* and *entertains* simultaneously. It is not academic.

Digitized archives are ready made for creating a documentary. If your collection has not been digitized, there are tools to make the transition from paper or archaic recordings to movie screen. In fact, old photographs, film, or tapes do not last forever, so it makes sense to back them up in digital format.

If your collection contains images or sound, they can provide structure for your documentary.

If you are fortunate enough to have original audio or video recordings of the main character, use the real thing. If necessary, add captions to augment poor audio quality.

Still images become a feast for the eye under the direction of an accomplished documentarian. Movement created by zooming in or out, panning across a photograph, placing an image behind someone who is speaking on-screen, or manipulating multiple photographs, provides action and carries the story forward.

Letters, diaries, and other manuscripts deliver a storyline you can tell with the help of a chronicler, a voice-over, or a re-enactment.

How to Begin:

As an archivist, you have all the skills you need to produce a documentary.

The way you normally explain the collection is your starting point.

Find a genuine story to tell about the collection.

Select materials that show well on a screen.

If you have original audio or video, let it speak for you.

Ask experts to speak on camera about the collection.

Write a script and use a voice over.

Work with videographers. Let them slice it and dice it.

Make your documentary rich in imagery and content.

Keep it short and to the point.

Study and imitate good techniques in professional documentaries.

The famous actor/director Martin Scorsese recently delivered the Jefferson humanities lecture at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. He told his audience, "We're face-to-face with images all the time in a way that we never have been before. Young people need to understand that not all images are out there to be consumed like, you know, fast food and then forgotten." We need to educate them to understand the difference between moving images that engage their humanity and their intelligence, and moving images that are just selling them something."

Each special collection the archivist maintains represents a spoke in the wheel of civilization, the humanity and intelligence Martin Scorsese prizes above the illusory. And yet, the same artistic techniques employed in a well-turned advertisement may serve equally well for a content-driven piece. Make your point and spark interest in your subject matter.

If a short documentary hits the mark, it may draw attention to the archive itself. Who knows?

It might be discovered by a great producer who wants to make a feature length award-winning documentary based on the strength of the materials in the collection you presented so elegantly.

It might bring serious researchers to study the collection in-depth. It may even attract benefactors to add to the collection itself.

Let me leave you with a scene: An archivist pulls an old photograph out of an acid free box. Suddenly the camera zooms in on the photograph and explains with moving images and recorded voices why, who, where, when, and what in such a compelling way that it captures the significance of your special collection.

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