

## **Surviving the Archives: Historical Research for Non-historians**

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### **Key Words**

Historical research, research experiences, history

### **Introduction**

What interesting people and long-forgotten events are lurking in the archives? What could the characters caught up in the transitional periods of our profession tell us about the challenges of their era? What is involved in exploring the history of an institution, a profession, or individual leaders? These questions provided the impetus for historical research undertaken by graduate students in family and consumer sciences at the University of Georgia and Iowa State University. The purpose of this educational session is to reflect on experiences of conducting historical research, including frustrations and “ah-ha” moments, and to encourage others to undertake historical research. Topics include the use of archives, conducting personal interviews (oral histories), institutional review board procedures, and presentation formats and procedures.

### **Documentary Sources**

The many sources of information for historical research include archives at university libraries and state archives; historical society records in cities and counties; and personal papers, including letters, employment records, programs from meetings, and notes. Other institutional resources are helpful in understanding the institution itself and in providing the contextual setting for a topic. For example, in researching a topic related to education, course catalogues provide necessary information about what courses were offered during different time periods, and are thus a reflection of the societal and professional period in which they were offered. If the topic focuses on historical trends in the availability of consumer products and services, magazines, newspapers, and Cooperative Extension Service publications are valuable sources of information. These original documents are located in a variety of collections. Retrieval of historical journal articles is facilitated through JSTOR, an online archive of scholarly articles. The database is a search engine for a wide spectrum of journals. The *Journal of Home Economics* from 1909 to 1980 can be accessed online through HEARTH. This electronic collection of books and journals in home economics and related disciplines contains the full text of many of the documents that were published primarily between 1850 and 1950.

Novice researchers benefit from the expertise of the personnel at institutional archives in navigating the trail to the appropriate sources. Benson began her exploration of Lugenia Burns Hope’s life at Spelman College where Mrs. Hope played an integral role in the beginning of the Domestic Science program by teaching the College’s first millinery course. (This program was later developed into a Department of Home Economics.) Benson was guided to the Archives and Special Collections of the Woodruff Library located nearby on the Atlanta University Center campus. After studying the Spelman College bulletins and finding little information about Lugenia Hope, an archivist suggested to Benson that she look into the Neighborhood Union Collection. In that collection, Benson found a wealth of information in reports, news clippings, programs and photographs about Lugenia Hope’s leadership at both Spelman and Morehouse Colleges and in the surrounding neighborhood, as well as the history of community uplift in Atlanta.

Some individuals keep their own records and pass them along to family members, a practice that complicates the search for information about a research subject. Another challenge is that the records of an individual may be found in the archives of an institution that holds the collected papers of a more famous family member. Wilmarth found this to be the case in her search for information about Helen Atwater who worked from 1909 to 1923 as a writer and editor in the Office of Home Economics at the United States Department of Agriculture and later served for 18 years as the first full-time editor of the *Journal of Home Economics*. After disappointing results using other archives, as an almost “last-ditch” effort, Wilmarth contacted Wesleyan University where W.O. Atwater, Helen’s father, had conducted his pioneering nutrition research.

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Fortuitously, the Wesleyan University Archives contained not only the W.O. Atwater Collection, but also the Atwater Family Papers, which have provided a rich source of information about Helen Atwater's career and personal life. The AAFCS (American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences) Archives in the Carl Kroch Library at Cornell University provides a rich collection of original documents of the American Home Economics Association, correspondence between early leaders, program bulletins, publications, audio- and video-cassettes, scrapbooks, photographs, and memorabilia. Wilmarth and Nickols have found useful information in the AAFCS Archives. In pursuing their research interests, Nickols, Benson, and Wilmarth have individually and jointly conducted searches in the archives at the University of Georgia, Kansas State University, Penn State University, and the Atlanta History Society.

It is important to realize when using archives that there is not a "code book" or one way to locate information. The organization of each archive is unique. Most archives have a catalog of some sort. It may include an itemized list of items in a collection or just a short summary of general information in the collection. It is important to prepare in advance ("do your homework") before going to the archives. Most archives have restricted hours of operations, restricted access to the files, and regulations about how to record information, photocopying, and photography. Contacting the archives ahead of a visit can confirm the hours of operation and the status of the collection in which the researcher is interested. Archivists generally know the collections very well and can direct the researcher to additional information or related files that the researcher may not find on her own. This saves time and energy that can be used in the otherwise tedious process of going through archival materials. Benson, Nickols, and Wilmarth have found that with advance notice, the archivists have located the files pertinent to their interests and have the boxes waiting for them at the time of scheduled visits. The expertise and helpfulness of most archivists is exemplary. Their support helps the novice historian not just to survive, but to thrive in the archives.

### **Personal Interviews as a Source**

Interviews are a widely used method of collecting data for historical studies. Collecting oral histories has been a popular approach for engaging students in understanding the customs and living conditions of previous generations (e.g., the Foxfire Project in the Appalachian Mountains of Georgia and North Carolina). In her essay about conducting oral history, Walter (1996) identified "three R's" of interviewing: recording (audiotape or video or both), rejection (she says to expect that a few people will decline to be interviewed), and remembrances.

Interviews are especially useful if the subject of a historical biography is able to participate as part of the research process. In addition, the subject can provide leads for interviews with former colleagues, employers, and students, as well as information regarding services, publications and other work conducted during his/her career. Several authors offer advice about structuring interviews. Maxwell (2002) views the interview as a social situation that involves a relationship between the researcher and respondent, while Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe the interview as "a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening." The actions of the interviewer including the questions posed and responses of the interviewer can shape the relationship between the researcher and respondent and as a result influence the way the participant responds and gives account of his/her experiences. The personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity, and gender, as they intersect with those of the respondent, can also influence the dynamics of the interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Furthermore, the conditions, such as place, time of day, and degree of formality in which the interview occurs, can shape the interview and influence the outcome (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Being aware of and understanding these dynamics is considered crucial to the validity of accounts secured through interviews.

Riessman (2002) encouraged the development of an interview guide with five to seven broad questions about the topic of inquiry that can be supplemented by probe questions in case the respondent has difficulty getting started. Research conducted prior to the interview can be used in developing the interview questions. Sources of information for developing interview questions include curriculum vitas, information from professional associations in which the subject has been involved, and publications that reveal the subject's expertise and interest. Sewell experienced the challenges of the lack of a "paper trail" when she began her biographical research on Dr. Clinita Arnsby Ford. Even Dr. Ford herself warned Sewell that she would find very few written sources of information. One source was a book commemorating the centennial of Florida A & M, in which Dr. Ford was recognized for some of her contributions to the institution. The book also provided Sewell with an historical context for understanding Dr. Ford's career and the programs offered while Dr. Ford was Dean of Home Economics. Dr. Ford spent most of her career in administration where much of her work involved institutional support, curriculum matters, and mentoring of faculty and students. Dr. Ford's publications focused on student retention in higher

education and increasing completion rates of students at risk of dropping out of college, and did not reveal other information about her life. Sewell was fortunate to be able to use personal interviews with Dr. Ford herself and with former students as her primary sources.

### **“Quality Control”—Some Procedural Issues**

A principle of best practices when conducting qualitative research is to take work back to the respondents for their review. This process is known as a “member check” and consists of the data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions being reviewed by those from whom the data was originally collected (Riessman, 2002). Member checks are necessary to ensure that respondents are represented accurately. The credibility of the work is increased if the researcher’s reconstructions are recognized by the participants as acceptable representations. Sewell found that having her subject read her manuscript led to the clarification of some points of interpretation.

Although historical research typically involves events of the past and people who are deceased, living human subjects are often a source of data, whether they are the subject of the research themselves or are informants about other people and times. As Sewell’s project reminds us, when conducted through the auspices of a college or university, historical research is subject to review and approval by the Institutional Review Board of the researcher’s institution. The time needed to complete the institutional review board documents and applications, as well as the time required for the approval process, must be a part of the researcher’s plans. The time may vary between institutions but allowing at least four to eight weeks should be factored into the schedule when developing a timeline for the completion of the project.

### **Venues for Reporting Historical Research**

After surviving the archives most researchers want to find an outlet for reporting their work. A variety of venues is available including posters and presentations at professional association meetings, journal articles, and historical society and museum exhibits. Each reporting venue has its own conventions for style and format.

Sewell and colleagues’ manuscript (in press) entitled “Clinita Arnsby Ford’s Flight: Upward Bound” was submitted for publication in the book, *African-American Women: Contributions to the Human Sciences*, to be published by Kappa Omicron Nu. The paper was first written according to guidelines provided by instructors facilitating a course in the Family and Consumer Sciences Education Leadership Academy at Iowa State University. When the decision was made to submit a manuscript, the paper had to be transformed from one written to meet criteria outlined in a rubric encouraging the inclusion of extensive information regarding the methodology to a biographical story woven together with a theme.

Biographical posters for professional meetings and graduate and undergraduate research symposia offer another method and opportunities to showcase historical research. When preparing a manuscript, the author creates an historical narrative depicting the events and facts about the research subject, whereas the challenge for a poster is to determine what the key historical facts and background information are and then present them succinctly in the poster. Pictures from archives or other sources can be scanned (at a suitable resolution) and placed in the poster as an appealing design element and visual attraction for the audience. Although the amount of information on a poster is substantially less than a narrative paper or manuscript, the research efforts to secure the information for a poster still require perseverance, synthesis, and critical thinking. Benson and Wilmarth prepared posters on Lugenia Burns Hope, discussed earlier, and Jessie J. Mize, a renowned housing educator, respectively. Their posters will be presented at a professional meeting. Most states have magazines published by the state historical society, but this outlet has rarely been used by family and consumer sciences scholars.

The Centennial of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences being celebrated in 2008-09 provides an incentive for novice historians to explore local as well as national aspects of the field and its various specializations. Students find it both challenging and gratifying to study the events and the heroes and “she-roes” of their field. When conducting biographical and autobiographical research that provides an historical account of a life the categories of interest include but are not limited to family of origin, education, mentors, professional experiences, challenges and accomplishments, and community contributions. The four special issues of *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM* focused on “Legacies for the Future” contain many exemplary biographical and autobiographical articles (See Vol. 9, No. 2; Vol. 10, No. 1; Vol. 11, No. 2; Vol. 17, No. 1).

Undergraduate theses, directed studies, and topical seminars offer opportunities for undergraduate students to undertake historical research that can be reported in campus- or college-wide events. An example is the exhibition of garments and accessories from the College of Family and Consumer Sciences Historic Costume and Textiles Collection at the Georgia Museum of Art entitled “Shaping the Silhouette: A Glimpse into 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion” (December 1, 2007 to March 10, 2008). The exhibition was curated by students in a semester-long seminar museum issues in historic clothing and textiles. Local historical societies are often eager to collaborate with colleges to display artifacts and information about the historical events and people who shaped their communities. The on-line journal *Undergraduate Research Journal of the Human Sciences*, sponsored by Kappa Omicron Nu (2008) provides an opportunity for undergraduate publication. Yes, even non-historians can conduct historical research and deliver it to a variety of audiences.

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