

Recording Life as We Live It: The SHSU 2020 Archive

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2020 has been an extraordinary year characterized by continuous turbulence and defiance of expectations. Because of this unprecedented year, Sam Houston State University librarian and associate professor Erin Owens decided to establish an archive of materials from 2020 at Newton Gresham Library. Digital resources librarian Susan Elkins, special collections and archives librarian Trent Shotwell, and library staff members are assisting Professor Owens in establishing the project and publishing submissions online. The mission statement of the university archives states that the archive’s purpose is “to collect, preserve, and maintain materials related to the history of the past and present of Sam Houston State University” (“University Archives”; Hageman 6). Similarly, the 2020 archive is a digital collection of materials received from the community to record the many events of 2020. “We’re trying to stay very open-minded about what kinds of material people can submit, because I’d really like people to be creative and let them determine what documents their experiences,” Professor Owens said. “I’m anticipating things like poetry, photographs, drawings or paintings, artwork that people have created that helps them come to terms with their feelings.”

In addition to creative submissions, there will also be informative entries, including the university presidents’ letters that have been released during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Professor Owens stated that even everyday items like receipts could be beneficial to the archive. While receipts may initially seem like an unorthodox choice for records, they can denote the scarcities of supplies like toilet paper and hand sanitizer as well as the markup on N-95 masks and disinfectant wipes at local and online retailers. There will also be some entries that are directly related to course assignments that were given after all the classes went remote following spring break. “One of the things we got had to do with playing a musical piece and pairing that musical piece with visuals that represented that student’s feelings about the circumstances,” Professor Owens said. Clearly, an assortment of resources that vary in focus and medium will be valuable to the archive.

However, the archive does not necessarily only detail reactions to COVID-19, since 2020 has seen many different events and conflicts. For example, George Floyd's death on May 25 was the catalyst for protests all over the world that opened up discussions about police brutality and violence (Hill). Professor Owens explained that it was not only COVID-19, but also these protests that inspired her to establish the archive:

By the time we started discussing [the archive], that was just about the time that the protests were picking up around the country and getting very heated after George Floyd's death. So that's really what made us think about it, to say that COVID is very important, we want to capture that, but there's other things happening that might not have blown up to quite the same proportions if we weren't already under the stress of COVID. We want to think about how all those different events are intertwined and think about how much stress people are under from all of the things this year. (Owens)

Similarly, in addition to reactions to COVID-19, the archive has already received "some prepared speeches that local people have given to the commissioner's court about the Black Lives Matter protests or the Confederate monument downtown. We've been getting a lot of those speeches and transcripts" (Owens). Since people have experienced a variety of thoughts and emotions in relation to events during 2020, these experiences should consequently be reflected in the archive.

When making the decision as to who would be able to submit to the archive, librarians clarified that they wanted to open submissions up to individuals beyond the SHSU campus. "The people who are students and employees here, many of them are also residents here or they have family and friends who live here. In reality, we are one larger community and we didn't want to exclude anyone" (Owens). Because of this, anyone from Huntsville, Walker County, and the surrounding areas can submit to the archive. Importantly, Professor Owens emphasized, "Anyone who feels like they have a perspective that contributes to our community is welcome." Significantly, each creator maintains the copyright to their own work, with the archive simply "asking permission to share it in the archive. We make it very clear that it's a non-exclusive permission,

so you may also allow other people to share it in other places as well” (Owens). In other words, if someone writes a poem or creates a piece of artwork and submits it to the archive, that same piece can be published years later without any publication issues.

Seeing similar reactions and experiences within the local community may help individuals feel seen and validated during difficult times of social isolation and quarantine. In other words, it can help to “see other people struggling with the same fears and anxieties or expressing some of the same frustrations. When we are all being socially isolated, it’s easy to feel like you’re the only person who’s feeling this or experiencing this” (Owens). Professor Owens commented, “In a way, it can be cathartic to see other people sharing their thoughts and feelings and realizing that we really are in this together. I think it can help with feeling closer to people even when we are isolated.” Additionally, individuals sharing their experiences could also help them feel that they are contributing to a larger purpose, one of people understanding said experiences better.

As early as March, many historians began encouraging people to keep journals detailing their thoughts and reactions to events occurring during 2020 for both an individual source of comfort as well as collective prosperity (Bromley). Professor Owens agreed that journaling is very valuable. While some people may approach journaling as a very emotional subject, one in which they can work through their thoughts and feelings, others will “approach it as very factual journaling, keeping track of the limited places they go and their contacts in case they get sick. I think there’s real historical value in both of those sides of it” (Owens). It is important to consider how vital journals and diaries are as historical sources during similar times in history, such as the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, a little more than one hundred years ago (for more information on this subject, see Heather Howsmon’s article in this issue, page 13).

Professor Owens added:

There’s a lot of unique opportunities for what these journals can mean to future historians. For me, I look back at major turning points in American history, like the Civil War, and think about how much we rely on diaries and journals that were kept during events like that. I hope there will be a lot of that content from 2020.

Accordingly, Professor Owens and the rest of the 2020 archive team welcome various types of journal entries to the archive.

Many factors inspired librarians to establish the 2020 archive. For instance, Professor Owens explained that this project is partly an academic project as a researcher and a librarian, but it is also “partly a project of passion as a mother. My son is living through this; he doesn’t realize he’s living through this. He doesn’t realize the significance of this year. One day, when he’s older, he will want to know more about what happened” (Owens). Many younger children will have experienced the events of 2020 without fully realizing the ramifications of this year, and it is vital that people document events and record their experiences to share with future generations. Moreover, resources such as the archive will benefit generations to come by allowing people to learn about what their family members experienced during 2020.

The archive will be publicly accessible through the library’s website. Librarians and library staff members welcome questions and encourage people to send submissions to the archive. For additional information, visit <https://shsulibraryguides.org/2020archive>. ■

Works Cited

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