Winner of the 2016 Archives Short Fiction Contest

What's an archivist to do when her parents leave her no archives?

Family Stories

Marcella Huggard, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas

My mother married my father for his brown eyes.

That isn't where my story starts, but it's as good a place to begin as any.

Just so you know, appraising your own parents' records is *hard*.

I sat on the living room floor of my parents' house by myself one weekend, shredding check after check after check. Checks to the doctor's office, checks to the vet. Checks to Waldenbooks and the Book Bag (the local bookstore that was, before Barnes and Noble showed up, my favorite place when I was a pre-teen and teen), checks to Columbia House for all the VHS tapes of TV shows my mom got monthly in the mail, checks to the craft supply catalogs and K-Mart and my voice teacher. Checks for cash, checks to family members, checks to names I didn't recognize that tantalized my curiosity. The checks don't tell my parents' story. But there were patterns to these checks, patterns that reminded me of my childhood, and I felt guilty for destroying them.

I don't know *why* I felt guilty for destroying them. It wasn't like I was going to keep them, four boxes' worth or more, at my house. It wasn't like I was going to offer them to the local historical society or university's rare books and special collections unit. I know what both institutions would have said: We don't take that kind of material. I've said it often enough myself over the years, haven't I? I have gleefully and happily thrown more checks than I care to think about in the shred bins at work, glad to free up some space that never should have been taken over by *checks*.

And so I sat in my parents' living room, hunched over the little shred bin for hours at a time, only stopping to stretch my aching back when I overheated the motor on the non-industrial shredder. *Hogan's Heroes* and *Star Trek*'s various iterations on the television in front of me for white noise, the noise of my childhood, trying to cover up the grinding of the shredder and the strange echoing permeating the house now that some of the furniture had been moved out, now that nobody lived there anymore.

Opening the boxes reminded me of work too, envelopes and paperwork dumped willy-nilly into those boxes, and despite my misgivings, I still took the same pleasure in creating some kind of order out of that chaos. I had the patience now to deal with these records when I'd never had it while my parents were alive.

(Okay, I kept a few of the checks. Ones from early in their marriage, when they were young and bright and decades before I ever knew

them. Checks for rent and groceries and to doctors' names I didn't know. They were the oldest checks, there weren't as many of them; this is classic appraisal technique in a way, right?)

I kept a couple of my dad's earliest pay stubs too, I admit it. We fetishize age, and that age scale changes depending on context. It wasn't a sixteenth-century manuscript, it wasn't a nineteenth-century letter, but it was from the first year of my parents' marriage in 1968, and I'll take it.

I shredded a lot of pay stubs that weekend. I shredded and recycled entire boxes of material. I felt no guilt whatsoever about recycling the boxes and boxes of newspapers that had been sitting in the basement for the past ten years and more since my dad's retirement, smelling of must and mildew, after confirming with the state library that they had an entire run of the paper for those years on microfilm. (There had been a title change, late in the '60s or early '70s, not long after my dad started working there; I hadn't known about that until I investigated.) Entire newspapers my father had kept because a few of his articles were in them. He was always going to clip out his articles, reduce the amount of acidic newsprint lying around, but he never seemed to find the time for that project. Not when there were new newspapers to read and trips to plan to visit his children, scattered across the country. One Christmas I bought him a stock of acid-free folders, a gentle hint. He never used them; I can't remember what happened to them.

There are exceptions to every appraisal rule, of course, or maybe it's just that we all break every appraisal rule and thereby tell ourselves the exceptions are legitimate. I kept the couple of scrapbooks of news clippings I found in the basement. (I know, I *know*; at least I shredded the checks, okay?) Stories from early in my dad's career, carefully clipped out of the paper and preserved like puzzle pieces on the scrapbook page. I wonder if my mom or my dad did that. I wonder if it was a project for my mom while dad was at work and she was at home, taking care of the baby. I wonder how much pride there was behind the making of those scrapbooks, pride or restless discontent.

I couldn't keep the boxes and boxes of newspapers, but I couldn't get rid of the scrapbooks. Maybe someday I'll photocopy them onto better-quality paper. Maybe someday I'll scan them. Maybe I'll just let them rot, gently, in my house with its total lack of consistent temperatures and relative humidity. In the basement, because I'm nothing if not a hypocrite.

My parents left me very little of an archives. I dutifully keep the past few years' tax returns and shred the remainder; I dutifully keep the last year's worth of medical information for my mother, just in case there are questions. Evidential and informational value, short-term only. Not for nothing have I spent years writing retention schedules and reappraising records before they even come through my professional doors. Not for nothing did my siblings immediately agree that I should be executor to both our parents' estates.

I don't keep previous years' medical information; my mother was a private person. I don't keep the tax returns from the '80s and '90s; my dad never threw anything away if it said "Important." I renounced my packrat tendencies when I was still in college, and that has served me in good stead for most of my career, filled with the bulk of twentieth-century collections.

My sister and I go through the photographs and disperse them to the various branches of the family, as much as either of us can manage in our brief stints at our parents' house, hiatuses away from our own lives. This fills me with qualms, too, of course. I loathe split collections! We've destroyed any and all order that may or may not have existed!

But don't my cousins deserve to see these photos, too? Don't my cousins deserve to choose what should happen with their family photos, photos that may have been passed around among my mother's or her mother's generations but never quite made it down to my generation or my generation's kids? Don't they get to gasp and laugh and cry when they see familiar faces they haven't seen in real life in years and decades, faces that have changed, grown older, or passed quietly out of this life?

I have to remind myself my family is not, in fact, an archival repository. It's much like when I visit a friend who uses her seventeenth-century cabinet to hold her sixteenth-century lectern that's filled with her Grateful Dead CD collection. I have to remind myself she does not, in fact, live in a museum. The rules are different here, under these circumstances, and the rules aren't necessarily mine, or those of my profession.

My parents have left me very little in the way of a manuscript collection, and this disturbs me. Oh, there will be public records about them that genealogists can hunt down and collate and trace backward. Birth certificates, marriage license, death certificates. Wills, court orders regarding estate administration. House titles, real property deeds. I've felt the thrill of stumbling across a family member's name in a public record—I know it's strangely exciting

stuff. To see the name in print, official, *real*. Those distant future relatives probably won't get tennis elbow from turning the lever on the microfilm reader constantly, but I'm betting they'll still go cross-eyed and have an aching head from staring at tiny print on a screen.

There are very few letters, no diaries, just a few birthday or Christmas cards that I keep because they're a little more substantive than a "love you, Jerry" or "-s-" signature line. There used to be letters; my mother used to correspond regularly with her mother and siblings, but I have no idea where they've gone. She took to email and then texting later in her older years. She and I even wrote a short story over text once, round-robin style. At least I still have that, laboriously copied and pasted into a word processing file since I knew that texts on a phone would never last. (The word processing file has been saved as a pdf/A in my Dropbox account, in case you were wondering.)

I wonder, would those letters tell my mother's stories? Would they give me a different perspective on her? On my dad?

My mom liked to tell stories. She married my dad for his brown eyes because everyone in her family had blue eyes. She and my dad eloped to Vegas before it was popular; I suppose you'll see that on the marriage certificate. But what about when they met each other, not even six months before they got married, early in the fall semester at college, mom singing with the piano player at the bar and dad banging away at the salad bowl for a spontaneous drum? Dad was tone deaf; he usually played rhythm instead of singing, thank goodness.

Once there was a letter from my grandmother to my mother, stating "Well, I don't have anything to say because *you* were the news this week," not long after my parents eloped to Vegas. I know this letter existed because my mom has told me the story. I don't know where this letter went, if it survived multiple moves, if my mother decided it wasn't important, if a child got hold of it and made it into a coloring book. (All those checks survived multiple moves, why not the letters, too?)

Neither of my parents kept diaries, so far as I know. The few letters I found, cleaning out the records of the house, I set aside safely into a single folder. The formal correspondence from lawyers and bankers isn't in that folder. The letters from my aunt to my dad, the cards between my parents when they were younger. The round-robin birthday card from my mom and all her siblings, a ritual they had years and years ago when most of them were still alive. I labeled this folder "Personal" in pencil.

Does it matter that their stories aren't written down? My parents weren't famous, my dad was a newspaper writer, not a novelist. My mother was the curiosity of the dying breed of housewife in the latter half of the twentieth century. Who cares if their stories fade with their passing?

You can probably find hints of my dad still, if you read through the local newspaper over the decades and happen to notice a consistent byline. When he died, somebody at the newspaper still remembered him, nine years after he retired, and they found an old picture

Someone You Should Know

Marcella Huggard

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When your professional and personal lives collide, write about it! At least, that's what Marcella (Wiget) Huggard did in "Family Stories," which won our second Archives Short Fiction Contest. Huggard is the manuscripts coordinator at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, in charge of coordinating the processing of manuscripts in the Special Collections, Kansas Collection, and University Archives' personal papers. Previously, she worked at the Kansas Historical Society in the State Archives, first as project archivist, later as government records archivist, and then as public records program supervisor. She received her MA in history from Colorado State University–Fort Collins with a concentration in public history and her BA in history from Knox College.

We talked with Huggard about the real-life inspiration behind her winning entry and what's on her reading shelf.

SAA: What inspired the idea behind "Family Stories?"

MH: I have a confession to make: the idea was "based on a true story," as they say. In the past couple of years, both my parents have passed away and I have served as administrator for their estates. The thoughts my protagonist had in the story are very much what I've been struggling with through this process—what to keep, what to destroy, what to send to whom, how to remember my mother and father.

SAA: Are you often tasked with archiving responsibilities in your own family?

of him sitting at his desk at work, covered in piles of folders and research. (I think about my own desk at work, covered in piles of folders and research: like father, like daughter.) They put the picture with the article they wrote about him, full color, separate from the obituary, scrounged up a couple of other old-timer editors and staff for quotes. It mattered to us. It mattered to us that, when we were talking about the arrangements, the funeral director stopped when he recognized Dad's name and got the newspaper to give us the obit for free. I still have the article, tucked away with all the other estate paperwork, still on its original acidic newsprint.

> The rules are different here, under these circumstances, and the rules aren't necessarily mine, or those of my profession.

The hints of my mother probably lie best in her library, dispersed among us children and the rest of the world. Receipts and grocery lists for bookmarks, photographs of her own and her siblings' children. She willed me her mysteries, my sister the craft books, my brother everything else. (She and I had many discussions about the relative merits of Rex Stout's Archie Goodwin versus Erle Stanley Gardner's Donald Lam.) I grabbed her Betty Crocker cookbook from 1969, falling apart from so much use, the spine almost completely gone. No conservator will ever see this book, it will disintegrate within my lifetime. I have the recipes she laboriously typed out for me on the computer she bought when I was going away to college (she was damned if she wasn't going to be able to email me), her handwritten notes scribbled in the margin of the sugar cookie recipe because, good grief, it's ¾ cup, not ¼ cup of shortening. No wonder my cookies never turned out right in grad school. I'm still scared any time I work with this recipe.

I regret I never learned to make bread with her, never took the time nor had the confidence. I miss the smell of freshly baked yeast rolls permeating the house, like when I jumped off the bus after school in the fall and winter.

Perhaps her story is best told in objects after all, not words, not text. The ceramics she made, showing up in everyone's home; the frogs she collected and only a handful of which we were able to hand out at her funeral; the dresses she made me as a little girl, locked away in her hope chest. She was a maker of things, not so much a writer.

Not everyone ends up in an archives, after all. My father's stories are imaged onto microfilm that may or may not last the 500 years promised by the vendors, and my mother's stories—well. I'll remember and write down what I can for her and hope that it's enough for both of us.

My mother married my father for his brown eyes, and that can be where my story begins. ■

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Honorable Mentions

"The Backlog" by Christine Borne
"The Tell-Tale Diary" by Susan J. Illis
"Night, Memory" by Jona Whipple

To read the honorable mentions and for more information about the contest, go to *http://www2.archivists.org/2016-fiction-contest*.

MH: My family likes to call on me with housing questions, or I like to butt in on conversations with housing suggestions or demands—"Get that picture out of that frame!" "Don't just throw those papers in that filing cabinet, organize them!" But prior to my parents' passing, I avoided dealing with their records at all costs, much as they did. Taking a more active role earlier with their records would have helped later, though I'm not sure my parents would have appreciated me nagging them about their tax returns and refrigerator manuals.

SAA: What would you advise non-archivists going through a late relative's files?

MH: You're going to be overwhelmed. One way to cope is to break it down into smaller chunks of effort—just focus on this box today, or that pile on the corner of the table, or this section of a filing cabinet. If you can, take your time. Sort through the necessary stuff to keep (legal documents, documents about the house or other properties, recent medical info or other matters that might have led to bills) and the stuff you want to keep or you think somebody else in the family will want. Don't forget electronic records, which can be easy to do when it seems so invisible—make sure you have or can gain access to your relative's email, social media, and other electronic accounts, especially if they were very active online. Deal with what you have to immediately, but if at all possible save the really emotional stuff until you're ready to look at it. My family photos are still hiding in a closet until I can face looking at them.

And if you have an archivist friend or family member, talk to them—they can help!

SAA: What's currently on your reading shelf?

MH: Right now I'm reading a lot of graphic novels and history books—Alison Bechdel, Allie Brosh, a book on the history of Scotland and a book on 1215 and King John signing the Magna Carta. After I get through these I might turn to a mystery, and I've been meaning to reread Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series for a while now. Variety in reading, much as in my career, is a great thing. ■

Huggard would like to thank Lisa Dickson, who has been reading and critiquing her work for almost 15 years, including this story. She dedicates "Family Stories" to her friend Jen Levin, who passed away this fall.