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A Preservation Odyssey

By Daria Labinsky, Preservation Programs, National Archives at St. Louis

Proclaiming that “our concern for our documentary heritage doesn’t stop at our own doors,” Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero welcomed more than 160 attendees to the National Archives and Records Administration’s (NARA) 26th annual Preservation Conference, “A Preservation Odyssey: Paths to the Future,” on October 19.

The event, which took place at the National Archives Building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., featured presentations on preservation, conservation, reformatting, outreach, and environment and storage technology.

Keynote speaker David M. Rubenstein explained how and why he bought the last privately owned copy of the Magna Carta, the English document that inspired the authors of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

“I wanted to make sure that it was kept in the United States,” said Rubenstein, a philanthropist and cofounder/co-CEO of the Carlyle Group. “I thought that by putting it on display here, what I could do is not only ensure that it would stay in the country, but any discussions about it would help people remind themselves more about American history. It’s my theory that very few people know as much about our country’s history as they should.”

Rubenstein has made a permanent loan of the Magna Carta to the National Archives and has paid for its restoration and encasement. NARA conservators treated the document and worked with engineers at the National Institute of Standards and Technology to create an ideal housing environment for it before it went on public display in February 2012.

Doris A. Hamburg, NARA’s director of Preservation Programs, spoke about how preservation and conservation have changed over the years and what we can expect in the future. She noted that archivists and preservationists need to integrate preservation strategies and keep sustainability in mind when they consider how and what to preserve. For example, offering on-line access to holdings sustains community involvement, and digitization reduces handling of original documents. Reducing energy usage can save the environment, money, and the holdings, simultaneously.

Amy Lubick, a senior paper conservator and conservation digitization coordinator at NARA, spoke about the difficulties she has encountered when working with large, nineteenth-century maps of the Missouri River that belong to the National Archives Central Plains Region in Kansas City, Missouri. The conservation process has involved mending, tape and adhesive removal, and lining the maps, then digitizing them.

NARA Senior Photo Conservator Sara Shpargel discussed how NARA is treating and digitizing photos in many media, including lantern slides, and offered a look at conserving anti-German propaganda posters from Russia. Senior Paper Conservator Susan Page talked about the work she has done on a 22-foot-long drawing of the S.S. Leviathan, including the problems staff encountered when exhibiting the unwieldy piece.

The afternoon session opened with an up-close video of space shuttles blasting off, courtesy of Brad Lawrence, computer science lead at Kennedy Advanced Visualization Environments Digital Image Analysis Facility at the Kennedy Space Center. Lawrence’s presentation covered the equipment, processes, and formats used to achieve the highest quality imagery possible of the space shuttles in flight, and featured infrared and 3D modeling. He described how film and video footage have been used as flight data analysis tools.

Arkival Technology Corporation President Ronald D. Weiss brought the audience back down to Earth with some hard facts on problems inherent in digitization. While digital storage continues to get cheaper, product obsolescence, lack of manufacturer support, and unreliability can still lead to failures. Not even the cloud is one hundred percent safe, Weiss said, noting that cloud storage failures have cost \$70 million since 2007. The only way to prevent data failure, he said, is “backup, backup, backup.”

John Faundeen, archivist at the U.S. Geological Survey’s Earth Resources Observation and Science Center in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, discussed appraisal, environmental monitoring, and the repercussions of allowing free access to the data at his facility, which stores observational records such as satellite images and aerial photos. His agency has developed a set of 42 questions used to determine whether

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Sara Holmes, Assistant Editor

or not to retain a collection. Faundeen reiterated Weiss’s “backup” advice, noting that the digitized versions of his records are stored in three different locations.

The conference concluded with two presentations focusing on outreach. Nancy E. Kraft, the head of preservation and conservation at the University of Iowa Libraries, spoke about her experiences teaching basic preservation, conservation, and disaster response techniques to librarians and archivists from emerging nations. Conservator Beth Doyle, head of the Conservation Services Department at Duke University Libraries, offered advice on using a variety of social media to promote your institution. Doyle’s blog *Preservation Underground* includes a collaborative component called “The 1091 Project,” with which she and

Melissa Tedone of Iowa State University’s Parks Library Preservation Department share their perspectives on conservation topics that relate to both their labs.

Next summer, NARA–St. Louis and the National Personnel Records Center will host the 27th annual NARA Preservation Conference. The conference will commemorate the 40th anniversary of the facility’s tragic fire and will focus on emergency response and recovery. Visit <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/conferences> for updates.



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