

10 SOLUTIONS FOR PROCESSING LARGE COLLECTIONS

In 2010, the University of Illinois at Chicago Special Collections embarked on a four-year project to process more than five thousand linear feet of records from several of Chicago's commodity exchanges. The original project plan provided for one archivist and two graduate students to process the collection. Ultimately the project was completed on schedule with a revised project plan and the help of numerous interns and student assistants. We worked on the project as the project archivist (Jae Lurie), the assistant project archivist (Megan Keller), and the graduate processing assistant (Kit Fluker). Here's what we learned—sometimes the hard way—about processing large collections.

Jae Lurie, Megan Keller, and Kit Fluker

to anticipate supply needs to avoid delays. For our project, we found that graduate students with little or no experience took ten hours to process one linear foot. Graduate students with a year of processing experience took about three and one-quarter hours to process one linear foot. The professional archivists processed at an average rate of thirty minutes per linear foot.

- 1 Know the actual size of the collection.**
Don't estimate or guess. Count all the materials prior to making plans for processing. Don't assume anything about the collection; pre-existing inventories may be incorrect, or boxes may look full but are actually empty. Remember to account for materials in every possible location.
- 2 Estimate processing time, taking into account different variables.**
Assessing our processing speeds early on allowed us to properly assign series to different skill levels and

- 3 Conduct an extensive inventory with arrangement in mind.**
Use old inventories if you have them, but don't assume they're correct. If possible, get organizational charts from the donor, or conduct interviews to assess the way the organization was run. This information can assist you in considering logical series divisions as you conduct inventory on the boxes. If possible, mark the boxes with their potential series and map the location for easy retrieval.

- 4 Have an agreement for what to do with out-of-scope materials.**
Prior to processing, work out an agreement with the donor that lays out a plan for handling out-of-scope materials. This will relieve you from having to renegotiate each time

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Managed Chaos: The Chicago Board of Trade trading floor, November 24, 1930. *Chicago Board of Trade records: Series V—Public Relations Department records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.*

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and intention of the materials, we can better represent Patti's activities during his years following his service in the OSS. We also can determine where Patti sourced materials. Patti largely copied photographs, rather than creating his own. This was further proved through identifying charts of copy stand settings for creating negatives of prints that Patti had collected or no longer had negatives of. In the course of sorting and identifying these images, it was determined that as little as 25 percent of the total number of images could be attributed to Patti as the actual photographer, which was considerably less than we originally thought. This estimate comes based on the identification of copy negatives, some obviously from books and other works, as well as references in Patti's notes and book as to where and how he acquired the originals.

It is important to note that Patti appears in many of the images, and he often handed his camera to unknown people to photograph him. Due to the large number of copies,

the collection was pared down somewhat by selecting the best prints based on clarity, tonal range, and density so that no more than two prints of each image were kept and small boxes of photographs were returned to Patti's heir.

The Difficulties of Reprocessing

I believe it is often more difficult to reprocess than process. In reprocessing, we try to keep an order we did not find or impose while trying to improve on it. It was important for me to keep in mind that the previous archivist likely had the best intentions and surely had a different set of circumstances to deal with. Each archivist brings his or her own unique skill set and points of view to a project. My ability to focus on the photographs as their own small collection allowed me to direct my research very specifically to better define the content of the photographs and their relationship to one another, and therefore increase access through a more thorough and thoughtful arrangement and description that would not have been possible the first time the collection was processed.

In the end, what was once a box of folders filled with unidentified images became a rich visual timeline of a relatively short and intense period surrounding key historical events in 1945 Indochina. Through speaking with researchers and Vietnamese government dignitaries, I learned that many of these images don't exist outside the Patti Collection, especially those depicting the US military (Deer Team) training Ho Chi Minh's guerillas and Gold Week, when citizens donated their gold to raise money in support of the new independent government. Also included are photographs of Patti and the Mercy Team travelling to Hanoi; Patti's initial meeting with Ho's military commander, General Võ Nguyên Giáp; and many demonstrations and events surrounding the September 2, 1945, Declaration of Independence by the leader.

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Patti's entire collection has been opened to the public. When combined with Patti's research and other collected images, these photographs show the history of the people of Vietnam through what is no longer a "hidden" collection. ■

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out-of-scope materials crop up, and the unwanted materials won't take up valuable storage space.

5 Reevaluate your approach to processing. You may need to process a large collection differently than your institution's typical collections. It can be difficult to familiarize yourself with every part of a large collection; when you're processing, you're more likely to encounter materials that aren't what or where you expected. There will always be errors and unplanned additions. If you find you need to take a different approach to the collection, you may need to create a special project processing manual.

6 Divide work into manageable pieces. It's a good idea to break down the collection into series and subseries so you can assign a single unit to a processor. If you are working alone, creating these divisions will help you maintain intellectual control over the processing.

7 Build in a time cushion. No matter how well you plan and manage your time, you will most likely experience setbacks that are beyond your control, such as staffing issues, supply delivery delays, or mechanical equipment breakdowns. Consider the issues you've faced in the previous year and use those to estimate a time cushion. A good bet is that an extra month won't go to waste.

8 Be prepared to invest time in your student workers. Even with experienced library students processing the collection, time needs to be allotted for training, answering questions, and reviewing their

work. Investing this time from the beginning will save you time later. You don't want to find that a worker has been consistently making an error *after* they've finished processing three hundred boxes.

9 Address space and storage issues. Evaluate and configure your processing space before hiring students or interns. If materials are spread across sites, consider how you will handle the situation: Will you be able to transfer the entire collection to one location, or will you need to transfer it in pieces? Will all or part of it be processed offsite? Will you need to factor in travel time between sites?

10 Break up finding aids. Rather than having one massive finding aid, consider a separate finding aid for each series or subseries. Consider other nontraditional and creative ways to present the information so that it's not overwhelming to researchers. ■