Folklorists often accumulate large collections of ethnographic materials in their home offices, from independent research and also public folklore survey work. Sometimes original documentation created through public folklore projects is not archivally curated; even when placed in archives, it may not be processed or readily accessible to the public. In addition, established archives may not be receptive to acquiring folklore documentation in the first place, and when they do acquire it, the material may be low on the agenda for processing and access.

What is a folklorist to do, as s/he acquires and manages ethnographic documentation, or considers donating it to a prospective archives?

**REVIEW**


**SEEK PARTNERSHIPS WITH EXISTING REPOSITORIES**

For example, the *Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia (Missouri)* established a collecting effort in the early 1980s working with area folklorists, and a staff member acts as a liaison to the Missouri Folklore Society.

WHMC has posted donor guidelines which are representative of most archives’ policies in this area.

Another source of policies about donating to a repository is available in an online brochure on the Society of American Archivists website.

**BUILD YOUR OWN ARCHIVES**

Steve Green of the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada addresses the steps necessary to do this in two hand-outs made available at the American Folklore Society 2005 meeting in Atlanta:

*Key Concepts and Needs Relating to Archives*

*20 Steps for Developing an Archives in a Public Sector Folklife Cultural Arts Organization*

**ENLIST TRAINED ARCHIVISTS**

Archivists’ North American professional organization is the *Society of American Archivists.*

Regional organizations also exist, e.g. the *Midwest Archives Conference.*
Whether in private possession or in an archives, ethnographic materials often are inadequately organized, labeled, described, or cared for physically. By acquainting themselves with common best practices, and curating their own collections accordingly, folklorists can preserve their collections more effectively, and prepare them for an archives and public access.

**Organize Materials**

A basic manual for archivists is *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Kathleen Roe.

Available online is Introduction to *Archival Organization and Description* by Michael J. Fox and Peter L. Wilkinson

*Organizing Archival Records: A Practical Method of Arrangement and Description for Small Archives* (2nd ed.) by David W. Carmicheal offers advice to non-archivists.

**Describe Contents and Extent**

Brief summary descriptions might resemble those at the American Folklife Center.

The American Folklife Center also prepares more extensive descriptions called finding aids. These are common descriptive tools in an archives.

The Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures has published finding aids to materials in archives’ custody and in private possession.

**Evaluate Condition**

Examples from the “Survey of Public Folklore in the Upper Midwest” report include such statements as: “Aging audio formats, manuscript materials contain metal and lack acid-free folders, slides stored in archival-quality sleeves within three-ring binders.” “Video showing some signs of deterioration, mildew, non-acid free storage.” “Aging audio formats. Unprocessed collections contain brittle paper, newsprint photographs, bent negatives, and metal staples and paper clips.”

**Salvage and Preserve**

The Library of Congress provides advice on the care of books, photos, videos, and other media.

Additional sources of preservation information are listed in problem area 3 in this document.
Folklorists generate ethnographic documentation in many formats, so the typical multi-format folklore collection includes, besides paper, media such as sound recordings, video recordings, and photographs in older analog and newer digital versions. As preservation methodologies vary by media and change with new technologies, care for such a collection can be complex, expensive, and changeable. Folklorists can steward their collections by staying abreast of contemporary preservation practices related to the kinds of media and equipment they use for documentation.

**Preserving Archives by Helen Forde**

**Photographs: Archival Care and Management** by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Diane L. Vogt-O'Connor, with Helena Zinkham, Brett Carnell, and Kit A. Peterson

**Preservation and Storage of Sound Recordings** published by the Library of Congress

Film and Video guidelines may be found at Folkstreams. Another video project is the Evia Digital Archives

Treating a variety of original formats as digital data are the National Institute for a Networked Cultural Heritage and the Library of Congress

**Recording Equipment Guidelines:** University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections & Digital Programs Division, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History

**Archival Conservation:** Vermont Folklife Center Archive Field Guides and Archive Links

The Archivist’s Toolkit website has been designed as a community resource for use by those working primarily in small and medium-sized archives in British Columbia. It is particularly strong on preservation with many links to other information sources.

Potential users of folklore documentation face difficulties both in learning of the existence of documentation and then in gaining access to it. The best help is a live archivist or reference librarian who can help anyone locate archival materials at particular repositories through digital technology and older systems. They also can orient users to internet tools for locating collections and particular subject matter.

UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM

A University of California-Berkeley site presents a summary of research tools to find information related to Folklore. Though extensive, its listings demonstrate the intensive labor needed to locate documentation and the need for the existence of documentation to be noted in tools like those listed.

When documentation remains in private possession, access is difficult. But even documentation in an official archives often remains unorganized and uncataloged and therefore cannot be found or has restrictions on availability. The following guidelines introduce collections holders to some of the critical issues regarding collections description and access:

The American Library Association-Society of American Archivists discusses an archival repository’s responsibilities and goals regarding access in its “Joint Statement on Access: Guidelines for Access to Original Research Materials” (Note point 3 and 4b.)

“Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers,” a white paper for the Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections, 2003, discusses the problem of access.

REVIEW BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS


The University of Maryland Libraries has posted “Best Practice Guidelines for Digital Collections.”

EMPLOY A DESCRIPTIVE TRIAGE STRATEGY

“More Progress, Less Process: Pragmatically Revamping Traditional Processing Approaches to Deal with Late 20th-Century Collections” by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, is an influential article [published in the American Archivist 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208-63] that argues for minimal processing and description of all of an archive’s holdings before more detailed descriptions are made for parts of the holdings that justify such effort.
Release forms are not always available for folklore documentation, and even when present, they seldom address provisions for subsequent uses such as Internet publishing. What does someone do who wishes to use documentary material for which release forms are inadequate or not present?

**UNDERSTAND THE LEGALITIES**

A succinct summary of oral history interview legal issues is in the “Preparing legal documents” section of “Introduction to Oral History,” a Baylor University Institute for Oral History Workshop on the Web.

A lengthier treatment of this topic is on the United Kingdom’s Oral History Society website: “Is your oral history legal and ethical?” by Alan Ward

**PREPARE NEEDED FORMS FOR CURRENT PROJECTS**

Some sample release forms:

- Michigan Traditional Arts Program at Michigan State University Museum and Fieldwork Guidelines
- Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (sound and photos)
- Audio Engineering Society Historical Committee (sound)
- University of Mary Washington, “Introduction to American Folklore” class’s form (sound)
- Long Island University, Electronic Educational Village: Searington School, “Tell Me a Story” (sound and photos)
- State University of New York, New Paltz (videos)
- The University of Arizona (photos)
- The University of Houston (photos)

like the archivists at the Archive of Folk Culture at the American Folklife Center

**CONTACT WILEY VETERANS**