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## The documentation of tragedy in the archives: exploring the records of the campus shooting on Northern Illinois University, collective memory, and the archivist

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**The Documentation of Tragedy in the Archives:  
Exploring the Records of the Campus Shooting on Northern Illinois  
University, Collective Memory, and the Archivist**

By  
Michael Folkerts

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

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**The Documentation of Tragedy in the Archives:  
Exploring the Records of the Campus Shooting on Northern Illinois  
University, Collective Memory, and the Archivist**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Michael Folkerts  
May, 2011

## **Abstract:**

Archivists play a pivotal role in documenting collective memory through the records they preserve. With this responsibility, it is necessary for the profession to be active in their duties if they wish to preserve a more encompassing memory of an event, and is especially true in emotionally delicate, tragic situations. This paper explores collective memory in its relation to tragedy, and its effects on the archivist. It then looks at the archival collection of the campus shooting that took place at Northern Illinois University in early 2008. Through interviews and studying the records of the collection, it is shown how the numerous aspects of collective memory were handled by the archival staff.

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Donna Folkerts, who has stood by and supported every decision I have made, and is the reason I have gotten to this position in life.

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## Introduction

On Valentine's Day of 2008 in a large lecture hall on the campus of Northern Illinois University (NIU), a former student of the school and then-current graduate student at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, opened fire on a class of over 150 students. When it was all over, Steven Kazmierczak had killed five students and himself, while injuring over a dozen more. This event followed the shooting at Virginia Tech University by nine months, and although not as severe, was reported on by the national media for the rest of the day. I myself have a curious connection to the shooting. While I had graduated from the school mere months before, I still had several friends attending and participated in the Model United Nations (MUN) group for the political science department. Our club was representing NIU at the MUN conference in St. Louis at the time, and though I personally was not a student, most everyone else in our group was. During one of the general sessions, we were pulled out and told what was known about the shooting. The following days at the conference were surreal, and felt especially bizarre for me, as I was in a way disconnected from the school as a graduate, yet in the same sense connected through my relationships at MUN. Furthermore, I came down with a cold and could not leave my bed, so I was separated from my grieving friends. I was affected by it and at the same time completely removed from others that were directly related to it. A week later I attended the ceremony to honor the victims yet I still always felt strangely cognizant of the treatment of the tragedy, perhaps due to my relationship to the event. Everywhere around Chicago were billboards and signs with the phrase "Forward, Together Forward," the school motto. The University president and others highlighted the school as well as the local community's reactions and sympathies, with large memorials springing up on campus and throughout the area. As with the terrorist

attack of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the tragedy brought people together and was used as a means to strengthen the bonds of the community.

As time went on, life returned to normal on the campus of Northern Illinois University. The lecture hall remained closed, but elsewhere classes resumed and student life continued. I had already made my decision to attend graduate school to become an archivist, and was surprised one day to find that the newspaper pictured my former boss at the university archives, Cindy Ditzler, on the front page. The article discussed how she was documenting the shooting and collecting various materials for donation. Surprisingly, this was something that had never occurred to me. The shooting would become a significant historical moment for NIU, and of course it had to be documented. It was also my boss who had the responsibility of forming a collection of this memorable event. As time went on and my archival studies continued, the collection remained in the back of my mind. How can my boss, with such strong connections to the school, create a collection of records in an unbiased method? Yet who would be better for such a job? As someone who had one foot in and one foot out of the school's community, the shooting affected me in a strange way. Being a graduate distanced me from the events of that day, yet being with other students and watching the news involved me as well. I feel my memory of the tragedy cannot be the same as those who were on campus, and will be forever located in a peculiar place, where I was removed and connected (both literally and metaphorically) at the same time.

It is this idea of memory in relation to tragedy, particularly in regard to the one which occurred at my alma mater, which I wish to explore in this thesis. As an archivist at NIU,

Cindy Ditzler has a duty to make available the history of the university, which includes the shootings of February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008. She must also document these events in an objective manner. Can someone who is so intimately close to the history create an unbiased collection? How will the collection be interpreted? What are the possible dilemmas an archivist faces when documenting a tragedy such as this? As mentioned before, the community banded together immediately following the shooting and received support from many. It has since been forgotten by many outside the university community, to the extent that even a simple internet search of “NIU school shooting” retrieves as the first result a news article about Virginia Tech. How will the shooting be remembered in the future, and what role will the archival collection play in it?

My aim in this thesis is to explore the concepts of collective memory and how they relate to the archival record, specifically towards documenting tragic events. I will attempt to explain what collective memory is, why it is important in regard to archives, and its effect on the archivist, specifically regarding tragic situations. I will then discuss the collection process following the shooting at Northern Illinois University and explore how collective memory may have come into play in the records, as well as any other concerns that arise from it. The documentation of tragedy is a difficult but necessary goal for institutions which are charged with providing for the collective memory of the future. Emotions can come into play and those responsible for collecting may even be tied to the tragedy in some way or another. Even if they are more or less removed from the incident, it can be hard for those involved to distance themselves from the collective memory already formed of the incident and collect objectively.

This naturally leads to an even bigger question of the archivists' role in the collection, and specifically its formation. The debate whether archivists should be active or passive in a collection's creation has been central to scholars in the field for decades, and is especially important when discussing memory. Records are influential in the documentation of collective memory and its reinterpretation in the future. This being the case, many question whether the archivist should be the one to decide how collections are created and what is determined worthy to be saved. In emotionally delicate situations such as NIU, this can be especially troubling. As collections are subject to an archivist's own bias, the records may reflect a skewed version of the past. Even worse is the potential of turning the record collection into a memorial rather than a documentation of the event arises. Despite these lingering issues, the archivist is the best option for handling collection creation in tragic situations, and being active in this process is the best hope to documenting a richer, more complete history of an event.

While it can be argued that no collection is free from subjectivity,<sup>1</sup> tragedies such as the shooting at Northern Illinois University can weigh heavily on archivists, especially for those who experienced the event first hand. The documentation of tragedy in the archives presents unique challenges that archivists must address if they wish to represent the event accurately. Though the task is difficult, well-trained archivists have the proper tools and knowledge to address these challenges and become removed from the collection. The skills acquired through education and experience can prepare an archivist for the myriad of

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Cox, *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives By Rethinking Appraisal*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

problems that arise. With experience, the ability to remain objective and professional in the handling of perhaps controversial material will help strengthen a collection, and prevent it from becoming a memorial of an event. Coupled with proper archival education, an archivist can learn the advantages and disadvantages of collecting policies, and the roles they play in preserving memory.

Archives are repositories of collective memory, and it is an archivist's duty to document not just facts, but the emotions, memorials, and the feelings of those affected by a tragedy. These memories help future researchers to understand a more complete representation of the event. History and memory are both recalled through interpretation. Just as the trained historian is the best equipped for providing a history of an event, so is the trained archivist in providing a collection.

## Chapter 1: Collective Memory and the Archivist

One of the most pertinent issues of archives these days is the concept of memory. The post-modern era of thought in academia has brought light to the subject, as many have re-imagined the archives less as a repository and more as a creator of memory. Due to these thoughts, the archival community has given much weight to the idea of collective memory.<sup>1</sup> The term was coined by influential sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who claimed that individual memory was rooted in a social context, as all people are members of social groupings.<sup>2</sup> Halbwachs used the example of the family to show that people are always connected to some social group that impresses rules and influences us.<sup>3</sup> A memory we recall later then is never the same as when it happened, because it is being reinterpreted in the present through a collective framework. These memories are not remembered as a group in the same way, but more as individual memories of a group with “enough overlap in personal memories to warrant depiction of common perceptions.”<sup>4</sup> For example, following the American Civil War, different collective memories formed among Northern and Southern Americans concerning the conflict. Men of the South viewed themselves as victims of the North, with no mention of slavery or black freedom when remembering the war. Meanwhile,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to explore the basics of collective memory and relate its importance to archival thought. For a more complete historiography of the subject please refer to Joshua Zimmerman, *Memory Discourse in Archival Literature: A Semantic History of the Metaphor* (Master’s Thesis, Western Washington University: 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, trans. By Lewis A Coser. *On Collective Memory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>4</sup> Randall Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 201.

Northerners such as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of the event as the moralizing of America.<sup>5</sup> That view has changed as Benedict Anderson notes, and is now taught and remembered as a war “between brothers,” not as one between two nation states.<sup>6</sup> Thus, collective memory is fluid, changing as society changes and reinterprets history. Patricia Leavy provides a useful example of tragedy collectively remembered with the horrific events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. As a whole, the event is probably best remembered with the outpouring of “patriotism” throughout the country.<sup>7</sup> Whether history will change this collective memory remains to be seen.

If collective memory is formed through social frameworks and influenced by unconscious factors, how could it be reliable for its use in history? Indeed, Richard White calls history the enemy of memory, where “the two stalk each other across the fields of the past, claiming the same terrain.”<sup>8</sup> White acknowledges that sometimes only memory knows certain areas of the past, yet we must be careful. Memory has the ability to change, with parts added or forgotten over time.<sup>9</sup> As R.G. Collingwood points out, the past is wholly unknowable and exists only residually preserved in the present.<sup>10</sup> The historian must be careful then and use memories as a guidepost, contrasting with facts and other memories.

These concepts come into play more dramatically when dealing with issues as emotionally

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<sup>5</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Leavy, *Iconic Events: Media, Politics, and Power in Retelling History* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2007), 133.

<sup>8</sup> Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: A History of Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Collingwood in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187.

charged as a tragic event. Following such tragedies, memory can be the victim of emotion. Historians must tread lightly when dealing with such accounts, as memory can be changed to meet a certain expectation. It is in the archives where history and memory meet, Richard White discovered, and the two can be checked against each other.<sup>11</sup> In researching his mother's past, White found that the stories she told were not factually correct. However, as Zimmerman points out, it is here that he also discovers that while not historically accurate, they were indeed "emotionally correct."<sup>12</sup>

This is the key point in the benefits of memory to history. Though fallible, memory's usefulness is in its ability to show emotion and importance to both individuals and groups. In *Possessed by the Past*, David Lowenthal cites G.M. Young, who states that "The real, central theme of history is not what happened, but what people felt about it when it was happening."<sup>13</sup> Lowenthal dismisses this by saying that we can never fully know how the past was for those who experienced it, thus we can never understand the whole truth. He continues by saying that there is never enough material to collect everything to represent a whole truth of the past, and knowing it entirely is simply impossible.<sup>14</sup> Lowenthal is correct in this statement that the truth can never be fully realized due to the distance and immensity of the past. However, while it is true that the past as a whole is unknowable, a historian can understand the emotions and memories of those involved, which are certain shades of truth. Jeannette Bastian explains this relationship well, stating that "records can ground an event in

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<sup>11</sup> White, *Remembering Ahanagan*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Zimmerman, *Memory Discourse in Archival Literature*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> C.M. Young in David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>14</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 187.

facts in tangible documents, while memory can construct and sustain many different connections and relationships.” It is through those memories saved in the archives that the “continuity of a narrative” of an event can be recalled in “the ever-changing present,” and historians can begin to piece together more complete histories.<sup>15</sup>

This meeting of history and memory in the archives puts the archivist in a precarious position, and brings up one of the central debates concerning archival practice today. The “activist” archivist is a notion that, while gaining more popularity and acceptance, is still a rather unpopular opinion among some, who are troubled by the notion that archivists can play an active role in shaping history and memory. Proponents of Hilary Jenkinson’s belief argue that archivists should be passive in their duties, as a “moral defender” of archives and to let the records speak for themselves.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, subscribers to T.R. Schellenberg’s school of thought argue that a record’s practicality and usefulness should be the deciding factor in its inclusion in the archives.<sup>17</sup> Both sides make valid points, asking the question of who is fit to determine the archival value of records?

In his work, *No Innocent Deposits*, Richard Cox outlines his thoughts concerning appraisal and the archivist’s role. Cox makes the argument that archives are continuously shaped and distorted not just by archivists, but record creators, individuals, and institutions as well.<sup>18</sup> Through decisions of selection and appraisal, the archives become more than just

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<sup>15</sup> Jeannette Bastian, “Flowers for Homestead: A Case Study in Archives and Collective Memory,” *American Archivist* 72 (Spring 2009): 131.

<sup>16</sup> Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *Manual of Archival Administration* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1922).

<sup>17</sup> T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

<sup>18</sup> Cox, *No Innocent Deposits*, 12.

depositories of records, they come to represent the public memory of present society. Cox even suggests that future scholars may study archives for what they represent, not just the records they contain.<sup>19</sup> In terms of documenting public memory, this becomes increasingly difficult as archivists must be cognizant of their own views. He remains firm in the belief that archivists should be active in collecting, however, and should be diligent in documenting both their appraisal decisions and personal thoughts on a subject. The goal, if archivists are to effectively serve future researchers, is finding a balance between memory and historical interpretation, and representing a diversity of views.<sup>20</sup>

Helen Samuels agrees with the activist stance concerning the archival profession. In *Varsity Letters*, Samuels discusses the unique concerns university archives must address when collecting. The goal, she argues, is to adequately document the institution, and in order to do that an archivist must be fully aware of the many functions of the university. To accomplish that goal, Samuels believes that archivists must become documenters of the institution, not just the keepers of records.<sup>21</sup> Archivists must use their skills as historians and knowledge of research to predict future use of records. Coupled with their familiarity of the workings of their institutions, university archivists can create a representative record of the school.<sup>22</sup> Without being active in documenting the functions of the university, “the records,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>21</sup> Helen Samuels, *Varsity Letters* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 9.

not the institution, become the guiding force, and the archival record becomes synonymous with the documentation of the institution.”<sup>23</sup>

Randall Jimerson argues that through “selecting which records to preserve, providing information about their context, and assisting users in interpreting them, archivists play an active role in constructing memory for all members of society.”<sup>24</sup> In doing so, archivists are influential in memory and thus, history’s interpretation of these collective memories. The importance of this cannot be overstated, for as David Lowenthal points out, “where memory can validate personal identity, history perpetuates collective self-awareness.”<sup>25</sup> The view that the archives are just keepers of memory is outdated. The archivist shapes the future through the act of appraisal, where the decision is made on what is preserved and what is discarded. No longer is the archivist a bridge to the past, but the creator of social memory.<sup>26</sup> With all this power, some archivists may be intimidated by this responsibility to future researchers. Indeed, much of the literature surrounding the topic notes how aware archivists must be of the power they wield now. Solutions are not easily available for a problem as grand as subjectivity, but proper training and awareness can go a long way in preventing an archivist’s bias from arising. Proper education in the theories of post-modernism and the influence that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>24</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 192.

<sup>25</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 213.

<sup>26</sup> Terry Cook, “Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory,” in Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg ed., *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 169-170.

the profession wields in the decisions they make are a requirement for archivists to accurately depict an event.<sup>27</sup>

The archivist's role in collective memory is an important one in regard to its creation and use. Archives themselves are places where history can "illuminate memory" through historians.<sup>28</sup> Le Goff questions whether historians can themselves break away from collective memory and be impartial with history and memory, yet rarely is the archivist mentioned. The power that an archive wields is its holdings of collective memory, and archivists are the agents that provide it. As said agents, they are to remain objective with the creation of record collections so that their memories can be interpreted. In many areas, a trained archivist is well-equipped to handle such duties. However, in a tragedy, especially one to which they are linked, can the archivist remain as objective as needed to create an accurate record of the event? After the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Richard Cox pondered whether the Flight 93 Memorial Collection was doing an adequate job recording the event. The genealogical society in charge made an effort to "collect everything" and accepted donations. He observed that the curator removed "inappropriate material" which he surmises was probably deemed "unpatriotic."<sup>29</sup> While it is important to note that it is never mentioned whether archivists were involved with that memorial project, it raises some valid concerns. As

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<sup>27</sup> Post-modernism is always a difficult subject to discuss and understand completely. In archival literature, post-modernism generally refers to the role archivists have in shaping record collections. This is a break from previous thought, where archivists played little role in how collections were formed. Quite the opposite, record collections can be shaped through description, appraisal, and arrangement; decisions which are carried out by the archivist. In understanding their influence in shaping the records and thus future interpretation, more educated decisions can be made by archivists in regards to how collections are formed.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 111.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Cox, *Flowers After the Funeral: Reflections on the Post-9/11 Digital Age* (Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 19.

someone who is emotionally tied to the event, would an archivist still be the best person for the job? Even if they can distance themselves from a tragedy such as this, the fact remains that their own memory can be shaped by the larger collective memory of the event of which they share.

In his musings, Richard Cox ponders that in collecting after a tragedy, there may not be enough time to determine the significance of material.<sup>30</sup> This is why a responsible, “active” archivist is especially necessary for a collection such as this. Under normal circumstances, records are donated or requested by the archivist because of their historical importance. This is often long after the records have been created and significance can be applied to them. Archivists in a situation involving a tragedy do not have that luxury if they wish to document the event in full. In order to gather enough material for a complete collection, they must be active in gathering records. In these situations, no longer is the archivist removed from the records and appraising what is given, he or she is creating a collection from scratch and determining what is significant at the outset. Cox also argues that the 9/11 attacks were the first “digital age” tragedy, which marked a definite wake-up call to rethink how we view saving information.<sup>31</sup> With the digital realm only growing since then and being incredibly fluid, it is that much more important to collect immediately.

Being active in the collection process is imperative for archivists if they wish to gather a representative documentation of the event. A cognizant, experienced archivist should have the necessary skills to distance him or herself mentally, or at least recognize

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2.

when those emotions could be affecting decision making. However, in being so emotionally tied to a tragedy, can an archivist accurately portray the collective memory of the event? With the whirlwind of personal memory, media, and other influences that are emotionally charged when a tragic event occurs, there are several aspects of collective memory that should concern archivists.

The collective memory of an event is the representation of the dominant beliefs of a group. Randall Jimerson makes note that the misuse of collective memory can then be used to reinforce the more powerful groups in society.<sup>32</sup> A fine example of this would be Verne Harris' account of working in post-apartheid South Africa, where he blew the whistle on the unlawful disposition of records concerning the government.<sup>33</sup> Here one can see how the government attempted to control the memory of its citizens by disposing of "unpleasant" records. It is the record that is influenced by power, and the vehicle in which power preserves itself.<sup>34</sup> By controlling the records of themselves, the South African government essentially controlled the future collective memory of the country, helping to reinforce their power. The Soviet Union used similar tactics to remain in control of the collective memory, going so far as to doctor photographs to remove certain individuals whose views were not

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<sup>32</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 205.

<sup>33</sup> See Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Francis X. Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* 24 (1999), 102.

seen as congruent with the party line.<sup>35</sup> It is through this manipulation of the records that the government was able to achieve a state-sanctioned identity.

What is significant here is that the archives' role is crucial in helping to create a collective memory by what is chosen to be saved. Lowenthal points out the value of this in George Orwell's *1984*, where the manipulation of the records created an "endless present." Because the past is whatever the records and memories agree upon, the government is able to control what is believed through record manipulation and maintaining the status quo.<sup>36</sup> This control of memory is important, as it helps guide the future narrative for history and reinforces popular beliefs. Le Goff declares that "collective memory is . . . an objective of power" for the dominant beliefs and culture to be preserved.<sup>37</sup>

For many years, archives have collected what has been decided as "important" history. That is to say, records that were deemed important were the histories of those with power and of perceived importance, often half-jokingly referred to as concerning "dead, white guys." It has only been within the last few decades that archivists have become aware of their role in preserving and collecting memory, and they have used their power in attempts to collect a more encompassing history. A push for records concerning social groups and minorities has expanded the scope of collecting for many archives. Not only are the dominant beliefs being saved, but also dissenting and unpopular records. While it may be upsetting for some, the past is not always as pleasant as we would like for it to be. Frank

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<sup>35</sup> James V. Werstch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>36</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 190.

<sup>37</sup> Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 98.

Boles discovered this firsthand as curator of the archives at Central Michigan University Archives, when he authorized the collection of material from a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. What followed was outrage from the local community and students, who were distressed over saving the records of such a sinister group.<sup>38</sup> While it is true that the KKK is a hateful organization, it is necessary for us as a society to remember these groups and paint a more accurate picture of the history of this country. Rather than be forgotten, they should be markers of history and be used to learn from. Frank Boles had to be clear that while the archives did not endorse the group's message, it did wish to save a more inclusive memory of the local area.<sup>39</sup>

The past can cover many sensitive topics, and may be difficult for some archivists to handle. This is especially true for tragic events, where the temptation to memorialize victims might be overwhelming. For tragedies in which the archivist is a member of the community, or even part of the larger collective memory of an event, the collection could even unknowingly become more memorial than an objective collection of events. This is why the collection mentioned by Cox earlier is so troubling. Even though some views were considered “unpatriotic,” their exclusion does not provide a proper memory of the event. Archivists must be aware of these concerns and address them tactfully.

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<sup>38</sup> Frank Boles, “Just a Bunch of Bigots: A Case Study in the Acquisition of Controversial Material,” *Archival Issues* 19 (1994), 53-65.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet the archives are often part of a larger institution, and thus are subject to the same social pressures other institutions may face.<sup>40</sup> Due to these pressures, they may be subject to the whims of those in control, whose wishes may conflict with that of a more accurate portrayal of events. This may not always be as insidious as it sounds, but collecting may be done in a way to reflect what a parent institution wishes to see in order to retain funding. Thus the dominant culture and memories are the ones that are saved.<sup>41</sup> Other times, it is not the archivists' choice in what is saved but rather state agencies within the government. What might occur then is less of an accurate collection and more of what Terry Cook calls "state sanctioned narrative" of events. At one point in time, this method of record creation was considered "value free," but we know now that this method often ignores the documented stories of more marginalized groups and individuals.<sup>42</sup> All of this puts archivists in a position of conflicting interests, where they have to please both those in authority and their own desires of presenting a complete picture of the past.

This is all of course in extreme circumstance and many times would not often arise, but dealing with the memory of a tragedy places an archivist in an unfamiliar situation. Would the National Archives agree to document all the anti-American sentiments, letters, and threats in a collection documenting 9/11? A university campus shooting is a similar circumstance but on a smaller scale. Would a school agree on the inclusion of hateful opinions or criticisms into a collection documenting the event? There are possible factors

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<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," in Randall C. Jimerson, ed., *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), 36.

<sup>41</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 115.

<sup>42</sup> Cook, "Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory," in *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory*, 173.

that could affect the creation of a collection such as this. The university is an institution dependent on the tuition of its students. Large amounts of money could be lost if a change of perception occurred towards a university. If the collection showed the event in a light that could make the university look bad, the consequences could very well result in a loss of enrollment and thus funding.

The archivist then has an interest in portraying the university in a kind light, as her own job security could be at risk. The issue could be further compounded if any oversight was created over the archives. Since the school has such a vested interest in the portrayal of the event, they may wish to oversee the direction it takes. While an argument can be made that this may be beneficial for maintaining some level of objectivity, it also allows those unfamiliar with archives and collection creation to input their own ideas with how the records should be presented. To address this concern, autonomy for the archives is the best recourse. Archivists often have advanced training and experience to guide them with the collection process. While emotions and biases may exist towards the tragedy, the archivist should still be able to check those emotions and attempt to collect all the voices and stories needed to create a more complete memory of the event, even if it is viewed as unpopular.

In an ideal world this would occur without any sort of problem, but it can be very easy to imagine where an authoritative body would oversee or even take control of the collection process. The politics at play here could be overwhelming as there is a lot at stake. As the records go on to document the event, they have the potential to show certain aspects in a negative light. In terms of a shooting on a university campus, articles discrediting the

school's handling of the event, opinions on possible prevention, or even criticism of the memorials are all examples of possible material that could be considered unfavorable by some. The situations presented here are extreme measures, but that does not mean certain situations of this may occur to some sort of degree, leaving the archivist helpless and the collective memory of the situation held hostage by dominant groups.

When documenting a tragedy, archivists should be removed from the politics of the larger institution so they can attempt to paint an accurate portrait of the event. While they may be removed in a physical sense, however, they may still share in the larger collective memory of the school and community. James Werstch argues that it is through the manipulation of textual records that historical narratives are controlled.<sup>43</sup> While this may be true, the texts do not have to be directly manipulated to ensure a collective memory that those with power can agree upon. At the outset of the event, NIU focused on the mourning of the community and remembering the fallen. Memorials sprang up, not just across campus but throughout the Chicago-land area. Emphasis was placed on the kindness of others and the outpouring of support for the NIU community. Though it most certainly happened, was this a narrative pushed by the University as a means to deflect any negative light? If so, then the collective memory that is recorded and collected by the archivist, who as a member of the community may share in this collective memory, is skewed from the beginning.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Werstch, *Voices of Collective Memory*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> I am not necessarily arguing that this is what happened, but merely pointing out the concern.

Patricia Leavy believes that other forces may be at work. In *Iconic Events*, she argues that special interests and politics use tragic events to forward their own political agenda.<sup>45</sup> For instance, after the school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, the outcry for stricter gun control and against allowing violent video games to be played by children became media talking points.<sup>46</sup> Her thesis revolves around national events but the point still remains, and may be even truer today with the constant flow of information in the current digital age. Newspaper headlines and reports detailed the show of support by the NIU community and other academic institutions.<sup>47</sup> Did the media push the narrative of the tragedy at NIU? If this is true, then perhaps the administration merely responded to the media by stressing the community of the university.

This raises another interesting notion concerning the validity of the collective memory. While it has been elaborated on that memory can be fallible, changing as time passes, the collective memory is being framed at the very outset of memory formation. Further still, the archivist is a member of the collective memory, whose own memory is being shaped from the beginning. If this is all true, then what can we make of creating a record collection of a tragedy, where the collective memory may be influenced by those with power to control such things? While memory may be shaped by such influences, it cannot distract the archivist from the goal of creating a collection that is an accurate representation

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<sup>45</sup> Leavy, *Iconic Events*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>47</sup> The 2/14 Memorial Project. UA 51, Series II. (DeKalb, IL: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

of the event. Perhaps the most important and maybe the most difficult to detect is whether the collection is created with an accurate representation of the dominant collective memory.

The use of the word accurate should be elaborated on. As memory is considered inaccurate and untrustworthy, and the archives are keepers of these memories, why should anyone trust them? As mentioned earlier, it is the understanding of people's feelings that helps future researchers to understand history. Since the past can never be understood in full, the best an archivist can do is collect material that depicts a representation of what happened. Even if the memories saved are skewed or incorrect, coupled with objective facts they help to illustrate an accurate portrait of an event. Though they may be shaped by more dominant pressures, the memories and stories given show how people *felt* about an event and its effects on the community. When they are compared, contrasted, and coupled with facts, these feelings and memories help to enhance the history and allow researchers to understand it more completely, thus portraying a more accurate representation. It is for the historian at a later date to interpret the memories in the records and correct any falsehoods.<sup>48</sup>

Emotions associated with tragedy are perhaps the most difficult aspect of the collection process for the archivist, especially for one directly associated with the event. They must try to remove the feelings as much as possible to objectively portray the event, but this is easier said than done. Compounding this problem is the need to document the tragedy almost immediately, giving little time for personal grieving. An advantage that the archivist generally has when appraising and arranging record collections is that often enough time has

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<sup>48</sup> Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 111.

passed to be able to assess the significance of the contents. As time passes the meaning of events can change as well, including the memories associated. Kenneth Foote makes the argument that it may be necessary to wait so “protagonists, participants, historians, and [the] general public look back” and assess the significance of an event and “struggle with its meaning.”<sup>49</sup> Richard Cox acknowledges that hindsight may be something that we do not have, as many are quick to memorialize those lost in tragedies.<sup>50</sup> Foote is correct in the assertion that the meaning will be determined as time passes, but it is for precisely that reason that archivists should begin collecting right away.

Perhaps the best method of gaining insight to the collective memory of a tragedy would be the documentation of stories and recollections by those involved or even those who experienced the aftermath. Doing so closely following a tragedy would put those memories at risk to the influence of emotion, but would also give a researcher a better understanding of the collective memory as it was being formed at the time. This may be preferable to doing so long after an event, when the memories could be changed through reflection and reinterpretation. The use of oral histories and perhaps even written accounts would create detailed records for an accurate depiction of the past. Owen Bombard agrees that these records help to illuminate the history of events, as textual documents alone cannot tell a whole story.<sup>51</sup> In Joshua Zimmerman’s thesis, he highlights the rifts between history and memory. Historians noted how memory can be misleading, touching on only facts that support memory while ignoring others. However, although memory is subjective, so is

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<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Foote in Richard Cox, *Flowers After the Funeral*, 22.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Owen Bombard in Zimmerman, *Memory Discourse in Archival Literature*, 39.

history. As Mark Greene notes, history is interpretation, and thus subject to the same biases as memory.<sup>52</sup>

While it is true that history is kept honest through comparisons of memory, it can never be fully trusted. Memory can be both personal and collective, with each influencing the other. In order for the archivist to gain a proper perspective on the collective memory, it is necessary to gather the personal memories of those that experienced the event. Problems arise in the accounts given as these stories are told and recorded, however. The recollections of memory are of dubious nature, as they are retold and reinterpreted to meet whatever present need.<sup>53</sup> As Freud describes, our memories emerge from past experiences and are interpreted through associations we make as time goes on.<sup>54</sup> This means that memory is forever at our whims, being told and changed to meet a desired effect.

Halbwachs accurately conveys this through an example of rereading a children's book from one's youth. After not having read that book for a long stretch of time, the hope is to reread and experience the memories that are vague so that we may re-experience the memories of our childhood. What happens instead is that it feels like a new book is being read, one that lacks the same contents that we remember from youth. The memories experienced from our past are then directly challenged by the present.<sup>55</sup> This is because memories are always changed with our current knowledge that has been acquired and is one major reason why full knowledge of the past is never attainable, because aspects are always

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<sup>52</sup> Mark Greene, "Messy Business of Remembering: History, Memory, and Archives," *Archival Issues* 28 (2004), 97.

<sup>53</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 206.

<sup>54</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 199.

<sup>55</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 46.

lost in the retelling through a person. It is also how the collective memory of an event changes; as time continues, knowledge is gained and memories are reinterpreted for our use.

For tragic, emotional events like a school shooting, the range of meanings associated with memory can obscure the relation to the past.<sup>56</sup> As time goes on, the knowledge gained would affect the memories of those involved. While personal memory may be at risk to manipulation from collective memory, the listener, and the narrator's own bias, gathering accounts following soon after the event results in a more accurate recalling of the tragedy. Perhaps more minute details would be lost as time went on, and the narrator's own interpretation of events would be less influenced as well. It is for the historian to determine the value of the memories and interpret them for others. In doing so, the collected memories of those affected by a tragedy are great resources to help illuminate the collective memory at the time while helping to portray a complete history of an event.

Another benefit to an archivist beginning the collection process so soon after a tragedy is the fluid nature of the records. Cox points out that 9/11 was the first digital age tragedy, and it is certainly not the last.<sup>57</sup> The flow of information has only increased since his musings in 2002, and has grown more fluid in nature. Online newspapers can report on events instantly, while any blogger has a source to voice his or her opinion. Digital memorials become online sites of grievance for those who wish to share their sympathies with others. Yet these websites are not static, and could be removed or changed at any time. The handling of electronic media is something that the archival community is still struggling

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<sup>56</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 193.

<sup>57</sup> Cox, *Flowers After The Funeral*, 2.

with, as formats and methods of preservation are continuously changing. Several different strategies have arisen for documentation. The act of copying and migration of electronic media has been agreed upon as the best method of documentation, but many institutions do not have the means. Efforts must be made to document the new wave of media in one form or another, however. Whether it is through simply printing out material, saving media on storage devices, or maintaining electronic databases, the documentation of electronic media must occur if archivists wish to document a full representation of an event.

A common problem that Richard Cox mentions is the will to “collect everything.”<sup>58</sup> Of course he is correct that it is impossible to collect everything, as Lowenthal argues, but an attempt should be made to collect all that is possible. This includes the documentation of the memorials that Cox mentions as being so commonplace after a tragedy.<sup>59</sup> They depict the grieving and outpouring of support from many who wish to pay their respects to the fallen, and their remembrance can be important in showing how many felt after the event. Documentation of some form should take place, whether it be through pictures or descriptions, as they help future researchers understand the immediate reaction and emotions by those affected. Whether or not they are saved should be made after careful consideration, however, as their inclusion could lead to the memorializing of the event in the records. This above all should be avoided, because although archives have shown that they cannot be neutral, they should remain professionally objective in their collections.

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<sup>58</sup> Cox, *Flowers After The Funeral*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Debates could be had over the stance which archives take in their holdings. A distinction should be made between neutrality and objectivity in an archival collection. Whereas archivists should collect objectively and remain professional, this does not mean they are neutral. As they are people with thoughts, emotions, and opinions like anyone else, it would be impossible for an archivist to form a collection that remained neutral. For instance, general consensus would argue that a school shooting is a terrible event, and that the standard reaction would be sympathy and grief. A problem arises, however, when an archivist cannot distance him or herself from those feelings, and collect material objectively. If collecting focuses too heavily on the outpouring of sympathies, the event becomes memorialized and the purpose of the archives is lost. Where the archives should be a place where records can be researched and interpreted, they instead become a place for the mourning to pay their respects.

The influence of emotions affecting the records and the archivist are both something to be aware of, but the archivist should strive to be inclusive in collecting procedures to ensure a record collection as complete as possible. This could be hindered by more authoritative figures above the archives, but one hopes they would allow the archivist to make the correct decisions regarding record appraisal. Even still, the collection may be at risk to scrutiny. Since the collective memory of an event is that of the dominant belief, a records collection that contains memories or evidence contrary to those beliefs may produce objection. The exclusion of anti-American ephemera from the collection sites referenced earlier by Richard Cox may have occurred because the collections manager (it is unclear whether this was an archivist) deemed it unworthy of inclusion because of its very nature, or

perhaps that the resulting outcry may be too severe. Either way, it is the silencing of dissenting opinion in favor of the dominant cultural belief.

A noteworthy event involving collective memory versus the interpretation of history occurred in the mid-1990s with the exhibit featuring the Enola Gay by the Smithsonian. Veterans and others criticized the presentation, specifically statements made by historians suggesting that the United States prodded Japan into attacking Pearl Harbor, and that the use of atomic weapons may have been unnecessary. The outrage was so phenomenal that the Smithsonian was forced to have it changed, resulting in an exhibit that presented only “facts.”<sup>60</sup> Werstch uses this incident to illustrate how autobiographical memory can be used to trump historians. Of course, large groups like this have the ability to gain political allies, increasing the leverage needed to have an exhibit like this changed. Yet it is the emotion associated with the tragedy of Pearl Harbor and the bombings of Japan that can really influence the collective memory and cause some to take offense. In collecting all viewpoints related to an emotionally charged tragedy, some may abhor the inclusion of those materials. It is the archivist’s duty to document all aspects of an event, and to keep “memory honest.”<sup>61</sup> In doing so, they can let the historian make the proper interpretations later.

One important characteristic of collective memory is its use of the past to explain our present. As David Lowenthal explains, this focus on heritage domesticates the past for present causes with “legends of origin and endurance, of victory or calamity, [they] project the present back, the past forward . . . heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present

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<sup>60</sup> Werstch, *Voices of Collective Memory*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Patrick Hutton in Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 195.

purposes.”<sup>62</sup> In his book *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Michael Kammen explores the uses of myth and memory in the United States. He cites Bronislow Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss in explaining how myths are used as stories to justify the present, and may be used and changed to “legitimize a version of history that is useful.”<sup>63</sup> These heritages are perpetuated through collective memory, as tradition reinforces beliefs. It has the ability to celebrate the good while forgetting the bad, and uses collective memory to distort history into something agreeable for most. The result is a history that is dictated by memory and mythic in origin, to serve a greater goal.

David Lowenthal has documented the general uses of heritage according to country, and notes that the United States often collects to requite lost community.<sup>64</sup> The reason for this is simple enough, as Benedict Anderson explains, that through recording comes remembrance, which creates narratives and forms identity.<sup>65</sup> Lowenthal elaborates, stating that “heritage more and more denotes what we hold jointly with others – the blessings (and curses) that belong to and largely define a group.”<sup>66</sup> Through these collective experiences and memory, groups form identities to share what “defines” them. This is where the archives come into play. Archivists have the ability to play a part in memory creation through our selection, arrangement, and description practices. For cases like NIU and other tragedies, the archivist plays even a greater role by creating an entire record collection. It is here a

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<sup>62</sup> David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), xi.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. (New York: Knopf, 1991), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204.

<sup>66</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 60.

dilemma arises which archivists must face when depicting tragedy, for the line is blurred between accurate documentation and memorial creation. Outside influences, as stated before have possible roles to play as well. In situations where the archivist is at the whim of higher authority, situations such as Richard Cox's example of "anti-patriotic" items being excluded may be unavoidable. Patricia Leavy argues that special interests and organizations have vested concerns in event portrayal. In NIU's case, the school may wish to remember the tragedy of 2008 as one of community, where many gave their condolences and the school came together to mourn. Lowenthal explains how atrocities are invoked as heritage "not only to forge internal unity but to enlist external sympathy."<sup>67</sup> The problem is then in creating a collection that avoids memorializing the event while is still an accurate depiction of events.

When discussing the aftermath of 9/11, Richard Cox notes that grieving is important but questions whether the documentation of memorials are appropriate representations of what archives are intended to be.<sup>68</sup> Cox is correct in stating the importance of grieving but I disagree with his questioning of whether it should be documented; it can be possible to create a collection that documents the grieving while still avoiding memorializing. In fact, it is necessary to document it if the archivist wishes to portray the event accurately. A tragedy is much larger than an isolated incident, as it affects many more than those directly involved. A collection that focused on just the tragedy itself would be ignoring the many that were indirectly affected by the event. Their reaction is just as important, as it gives future

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<sup>67</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 75. (Although he uses this as an example of national identity, its use in smaller community identity is still valid).

<sup>68</sup> Cox, *Flowers After the Funeral*, 5.

researchers insight to how events were received and the emotions that were involved. The problem is showing balance between the aftermath and the event itself. If too much is centered on the reaction, the archives become more of a memorial and fails in its mission of providing the memories of the past for future use. The use of heritage diverges from history, as Lowenthal puts it, in its embrace of bias. Where history strives to be objective, heritage strives for the opposite.<sup>69</sup> It is when the archivist begins collecting for the sake of heritage that the archives are used for identity creation and fail in objective documentation.

Shaping identity through heritage collecting could lead to insidious appraisal methods. Often times, the forgetting of memories is just as important as saving others. Michael Kammen argues that public memory is important because it shapes identity, which is why it is often selective.<sup>70</sup> The formation of identity focuses just as much on not remembering aspects of an event. This makes the need for archivists to document as much as possible increasingly important. It is with uses of heritage that problems often arise like Cox's 9/11 example. Lowenthal states that the misuse of archival holdings is less the exception and more the rule in regard to heritage.<sup>71</sup>

In cases of tragedy, the focus on unity may warrant some to avoid collecting anything that might show otherwise. Cox questions the ability to document everything, which is a chore that may be impossible, as the past is too immense to cover in full. To document the memories that are painful and perhaps wished to be forgotten is the important difference. As

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<sup>69</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 122.

<sup>70</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> David Lowenthal, "Archives, Heritage, and History" in Blouin, *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory*, 201.

Kenneth Foote notes, “a society’s need to remember is balanced against its desire to forget.”<sup>72</sup> He goes on to cite Lowenthal in describing how features that are remembered with pride are celebrated and saved, versus those with shame which are ignored or removed.<sup>73</sup> This does not just involve documents, but sites of memory and tragedy as well. Debates continue nine years removed from 9/11 on how to utilize the empty space at ground zero. This balance between forgetting and remembering memory is difficult for many to navigate. Often times heritage and memory attempt to reconcile the past through forgetting painful memories. As Randall Jimerson describes, it is through this process that groups can heal.<sup>74</sup>

It is increasingly important then, to document these painful memories in order to create a more complete detailed history. Jimerson uses the example of the Qing Dynasty of China to illustrate a society where records saved were only those that highlighted the successes of the ruling regime. Archivists had to protect the emperor and officials, in order to maintain appearances of an orderly and strong government. Continuing, Jimerson explains how often times archivists work to contribute to the goals of their institutions, thus preserving power relationships in society.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps unavoidable, it should still be an archivist’s goal to document unpopular sentiments in the aftermath of a tragedy. It is through these attempts that an archivist steps away from heritage collecting and memorial creation to a more balanced and complete memory of an event. While many may wish to forget certain

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<sup>72</sup> Foote, “To Remember and Forget” in Jimerson, *American Archival Studies*, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 226.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 229.

aspects, the archivist should work hard for the opposite; saving even the minority opinion for future users to gain insight into the past.

## **Chapter II: A Case Study in Documenting Tragedy at Northern Illinois University**

On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, I stepped foot onto the campus of Northern Illinois University for the first time since the large memorial service that was held for the victims a week after the shooting. The campus had not changed in any discernible way to me; students and faculty strolled casually to and from class, and there was no noticeable change in the atmosphere from when I was an undergraduate several years earlier. Cole Hall, the building where the shooting took place, still stands empty as the school awaits funds to renovate it. Outside Cole stands a modest memorial to the five students who were killed in the incident. Not much attention is paid to it by passing students, which may be due to the fact that seniors and graduate students were the only ones who would have been attending NIU that fateful day. By all appearances, the university looked like a campus that had moved on from the events of February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008, yet there are some employees that are still dealing with the shooting and its aftermath, and have been every day since it occurred.

Two of those people are Joan Metzger and Cindy Ditzler. Metzger is the assistant archivist at the Regional History Center (RHC) and University Archives at NIU, whose offices are in the library, roughly five hundred feet from Cole Hall. Ditzler is the recently promoted director of the History Center, having been the interim director for several years after the previous director had retired in early 2007. Since the shooting in 2008, these two and several undergraduate interns have worked on documenting the tragedy and making the collection available for researchers. In fall of 2010, I was permitted to be the first researcher

for this collection, which was just made available to the public for the first time. They both also allowed themselves to be interviewed about the collecting process and how they dealt with the responsibility of creating and collecting the memory of a tragic event for future posterity.

Like any researcher, I came into the archives with a specific notion in my mind on what would be found and how the memory would be represented. Though I was not among the students on campus, I knew of several others who were. At that same time I was living in the Chicago-land area, which was inundated with news on the subject. Pictures and videos showed students, families and neighbors, and even well-wishers coming together to express their sympathies. Social network websites had many individuals putting their thoughts and prayers towards the victims and their families. A line from the school's fight song, "Forward, Together Forward" was seen everywhere for the following weeks. The idea of community, a memory of everyone coming together to get through such a terrible event, was what I expected to be the prevailing theme of the collection. Surely the school would have an interest in showing the aftermath of the event in this way. The reality of the matter, however, is that the school had no oversight in how the collection was formed. Ditzler and Metzger began collecting the following week after the shooting, bringing in newspaper headlines from their community as a starting point. No decision came from above regarding the documentation of the event, but both archivists decided that this was something that needed to be done.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cindy Ditzler . Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

This independence has both positive and negative consequences, but one may outweigh the other. Being autonomous, both archivists were allowed to collect and document at their own discretion, without much interference from the school. Certain protocols needed to be met, such as having to go through the office of Vice President of Student Affairs for permission to take down the memorials that had sprung up around campus following the event. Other issues were discussed with the then-interim Dean of the Library at NIU.<sup>2</sup> Besides going through these standard procedures, the formation of the collection happened organically. The week following the event, Ditzler wrote a brief deed of gift form for donations, as well as a collection policy so the staff of the RHC had a guideline on what to collect. In addition, she sent out a letter to faculty and placed an advertisement in the school newspaper asking for donations.

Through these methods, Ditzler was able to gather support and help from various personnel around the school. Not only the Dean of Libraries, but the editor of the school newspaper, several professors, and others came forth and either donated or helped to gather material for the collection. She kept a list of contacts which helped facilitate gathering anything the archives might have needed. Through email exchange from another university archivist at Virginia Tech and an anthropology professor at Texas A&M, both campuses which had experienced a similar tragedy in the past, she was able to receive some guidance and ask questions about the collecting that they had done.<sup>3</sup> It was through these connections

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

that Ditzler and Metzger were able to request help when needed and bounce ideas off others who were not necessarily as immersed in the subject as they were.

The relationships that the archivists had made at NIU were very beneficial in helping them succeed in gathering material for the collection. Metzger has worked at the university for over 17 years, while Ditzler has been there even longer at 21 years.<sup>4</sup> In a situation that is as emotional as this, potential biases should be accounted for diligently. Yet it is this immersion in the community and bureaucracy that helped both archivists in talking to the right people when collecting significant material. In having a personal relationship with several department heads and faculty members, the process of collecting became easier for the archivists. Ditzler posits that the fragile emotional state of the faculty at the school may have contributed to everyone's help and kindness. The only administrative setback that she received was the dismantling of the memorials, when the Vice President of Student Affairs gave instructions on how to collect that would ignore proper archival handling. This included having the memorials kept in inadequate storage for archival material and having to relocate them across campus first, when much of it was located near the archives to begin with. Ditzler decided to ignore these instructions and instead had help from the grounds crew in bringing these memorials straight to the library for storage.<sup>5</sup>

In a pragmatic sense, the length of time that the two archivists have worked at NIU is beneficial in facilitating the collection process. On the other hand, the deep connections that they have established may also have skewed their memories of the event, which could in turn

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<sup>4</sup> Cindy Ditzler . Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010. and Joan Metzger. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Cindy Ditzler . Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

influence how the collection was formed to reflect those memories. A point that Ditzler emphasized several times in the interview, is that this “was a time that NIU shined.” Many of the faculty and people on campus were “hugging and constantly trying to comfort each other.”<sup>6</sup>

When going through the collection, one finds that the majority consists of documents of remembrance following the events, including letters from other university presidents, photos of the memorials, and internet guest books signed with well wishes from around the world. The record group is labeled the “February 14, 2008 Memorial Collection,” and consists of 56 boxes of material divided into ten separate record series. The first has detailed information specific to each of the victims of the shooting. The second series outlines the day’s events, through newspapers, official reports, and oral histories. From series three through seven, information about memorials, condolences, the recovery of the university and students, and subsequent events of remembrance are collected in detail. Series seven describes the fate of Cole Hall while series eight contains material related to the events at Kishwaukee Hospital, where most of the victims were taken. Related material and information on campus security are in the final two series, with information concerning the shooter, Steve Kazmierczak, showing up at the end of the collection. One might argue that with 32 of the 56 boxes, too much of the collection consists of remembrance and memorials. While this may be true, it does back up the claims that Ditzler made about the campus coming together.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The documentation of electronic media in the collection addresses some of the concerns many archivists have with the subject, as well as the practical limitations many archives face presently. Though copying and migration are considered the best option for documenting electronic records, many institutions do not have the equipment, training, or finances for such an endeavor. For the RHC, finances and manpower were tight even before the tragedy, with Ditzler filling in as the role of Interim Director, and no additional funds being made available for the collection process. Luckily for the RHC, Ditzler explained, the salary for the former Director was still being appropriated, and a special case for the RHC was made to use those funds for the collection.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, resources were still strained, yet the many electronic sources needed to be documented. To address this problem, the staff at the RHC printed up many of the social media sites, online memorials, blogs, and message boards that were created after the shooting. Many of the news reports and online videos were saved to compact discs as well, with the ability to migrate these files to future media forms as time dictates. Though some interactivity may be lost through this change in medium, it is a better option than choosing not to save at all.

Another major portion of the Memorial Collection are the numerous oral histories that were collected. Besides interviews done by the archival staff or donated to the RHC, two major efforts of documenting personal memories of the event were conducted. Taylor Atkins, a professor of public history at NIU, had his students interview their peers and staff as an assignment for an oral history class.<sup>8</sup> Doing this six months after the event, students

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> UA51, Series II Sub-Series D.(DeKalb, IL.: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

recalled their memories and had time to reflect on the significance and results of the shooting. Another major oral history effort conducted by the RHC was through the cooperation of StoryCorps, a non-profit organization which helps conduct interviews and donates the material to the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. With the extra funds acquired from the leftover salary of the previous director, the staff was able to pay the price necessary for StoryCorps to come to NIU and conduct interviews.<sup>9</sup>

Advertisements were placed in the newspaper for volunteers, and the staff and Dean of Libraries helped to choose interviewees who were able to provide a unique perspective.<sup>10</sup>

Included in the StoryCorps interviews are one of the student interns who worked on the collection along with Cindy Ditzler.<sup>11</sup> Through both of these efforts, the personal memories and interpretations of events following so soon after the shooting are saved in the archives. These oral histories are useful for future researchers, and it could only be facilitated through the departmental connections that the archivists had established.

Yet being so entrenched in an institution can provide many unseen influences. When asked whether someone in a position such as theirs was best suited for the job, both archivists responded that they felt that an archivist could and should be able to handle a collection of such emotional weight. Ditzler specifically mentioned that archivists have the training necessary with which they should be able to remove themselves and create the collection as objectively as possible.<sup>12</sup> Is this truly the case with NIU though? Much of the material in the

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<sup>9</sup> Cindy Ditzler . Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Margaret Cook, Director of the LGBT Resource Center, and Dr. Rachel Cleaves, a professor who experienced a campus shooting at her undergraduate alma mater.

<sup>11</sup> UA51, Series II Sub-Series D.(Dekalb, IL.: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

<sup>12</sup> Cindy Ditzler . Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

collection appears to be documentation of the response and aftermath on campus. Did the archivists collect the memories of an event that was shared collectively by many, or just reflect those that they experienced immediately after, with the campus coming together?

In the two year span after the shooting, Ditzler and Metzger spent a majority of their efforts working with the collection. In that length of time, it was admitted that emotions became strained. Part of this is due simply to the nature of the event. A shooting that took place on the campus where these two worked for many years is psychologically draining. Ditzler mentioned how grief counselors were made available to any staff that needed them. Seminars and pamphlets were offered to any interested faculty to better cope with the situation and students. However, while other departments were able to go to counselors and essentially move on, the archives were dealing “with the tragedy every day, remembering it.”<sup>13</sup> Coupled with the fact that they were overworked and understaffed, both archivists became stressed, to the point that they would even get mad at each other.<sup>14</sup> In addition, on the day of the shooting Metzger’s father told her that he had terminal cancer. He would pass on a few months later, while she was helping with arranging the collection.<sup>15</sup> For many, all of these emotions would create quite the burden, and one could see the possibility of interference in how the collection would be presented. Being constantly reminded of the shooting and not necessarily being able to move on raises some questions over the collecting policy following an incident. As Ditzler mentioned, this is something many archivists do not have to go through, so there is no real protocol to collecting for an event such as this. For the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joan Metzger. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

university, “the push on campus right after the event was to heal.” For Ditzler and Metzger, they felt that pushing the collection along to make it available would help with that goal.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, they forsook their own chance to grieve and move on past the tragedy.

All of this leads back to the question of whether an archivist is the correct person to create a collection regarding an event with which they are emotionally tied, and whether oversight would be necessary. Both Ditzler and Metzger conceded that a group overseeing the collection process, either formal or informal, would have been nice but was not necessary in their minds.<sup>17</sup> Metzger took advantage of the free psychiatrists that were made available, and anyone working on the collection was allowed to walk away from it when they needed to. “There is just no way I could keep track of personnel time working on this, because you work on it a little until you can’t do it anymore and then you walk away,” Ditzler mentioned.<sup>18</sup> Although the burden was heavy, the archivists persevered in order to create the collection. When asked whether an archivist in a situation similar to theirs was the best candidate for the job, they both responded affirmatively. While the task is emotionally draining, an archivist has the proper training and skill-set to be able to remove herself from the records and portray the event objectively. In addition, the connections the two have made through working at the school for so long helped to facilitate the collection process. Without any oversight, the RHC staff were able to work on their own, and not have any input or direction from above. In doing so, the archivists are free from any potential biases that may

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<sup>16</sup> Cindy Ditzler . Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

be inflicted by the university, but it also leaves them to check him or herself when dealing with their own potential biases.

The other point of contention that arises from this is the collection process, and where to begin with it. The two archivists reached the conclusion themselves that it should begin right away. But is this the best policy, considering the emotional circumstances? With so much available immediately following the event, much work needed to be done to ensure everything they could get was collected. Ditzler took out an advertisement in the school newspaper asking for donations, and she made phone calls and emails to co-workers asking the same. Meanwhile, volunteers helped with dismantling the memorials two months after the shooting.<sup>19</sup> Just as Richard Cox was concerned about in *Flowers After the Funeral*, there was an attempt to collect everything. The archivists decided that all donations would be accepted and then sorted out later. In the end, Metzger noted that most was indeed kept, aside from duplicates, organic materials, and objects that became moldy.<sup>20</sup> Both agreed that collecting quickly was the best policy, for several reasons. A major point was that many objects were temporary, and had they not been captured soon they would have been lost. Also, contacting other offices for donations helped the RHC get material that otherwise would not have been donated, as some would be led to believe that what they had were not records (e.g. emails). While Metzger and Ditzler both believe that the collection process was carried out in the correct manner in terms of timeliness, the question of emotional burden still looms. Ditzler conceded that if it were possible, she would have preferred it if they were

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Joan Metzger. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

able to collect and accept donations, then leave it for two years until they were ready to deal with it on their own terms.<sup>21</sup>

If this had been the case, would the collection have been created differently? The advantage to collecting soon after an event like this is the abundance of materials, and in an environment such as a university, help from other departments and faculty enable the archives to compile a more complete portrait of the event. The disadvantage is one that Richard Cox has already made clear, that the significance of materials cannot be so easily determined immediately after the event.<sup>22</sup> With more time for the archivists to grieve and recover from the incident themselves, perhaps emotions may not influence the collection as much. After some reflection, Metzger realized that perhaps her partiality may have arisen in the collection arrangement. Only after being asked whether she felt that her biases may have influenced the formation of the collection did she realize that she had placed records concerning Kazmierczak, the Westboro Church<sup>23</sup>, and other material that would be considered hateful towards the victims and school, at the very end of the collection.<sup>24</sup> Metzger admitted that perhaps this was done subconsciously, wishing it to be the last information people see in the collection.

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<sup>21</sup>Cindy Ditzler. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Cox, *Flowers After the Funeral*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> The Westboro Church is a group that has become famous for their protesting of soldiers' funerals and other victims of tragedies. In the case of NIU, they immediately released a flier that claimed that the school deserved the shooting, as the campus was friendly towards homosexuality and other sins the church deems offensive. In the wake of the event, members of the church attempted to picket the funerals of the victims of the shooting. Their website is „www.godhatesfags.com,” and is generally viewed as an intolerant and hateful organization.

<sup>24</sup> The 2/14 Memorial Project. UA 51, Series XII (DeKalb, IL.: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

Does this ordering of the records take away from the overall collection? This may be an example of collective memory shaping the collection at the outset, wishing fringe opinions to be distanced from the rest of the material. What is important is that the information is still available, and that the collection was not weakened by removing it in order to avoid potential backlash for containing what may be considered by some as “unfavorable material.” Whether it is placed earlier in the collection or kept at the end, it takes a skilled archivist, regardless of which option is chosen, to make the right decisions.

When asked whether they would have done things differently in the collection phase, Ditzler remarked that with hindsight there are always things you may have done differently, but in an unknown situation like the one they faced, you have to rely on your training and experience. She concluded that “we can’t second guess ourselves, we did the best we could.”<sup>25</sup> In addition, in a final report of the collection, Ditzler documented the decisions she made. This included details and thoughts concerning being short-staffed, what was done with the myriad of materials, and how oral interviews were conducted were all explained.<sup>26</sup> A report such as this is invaluable for future researchers as well as laying out the decision process for justification of the collection. When asked whether the report was included in the collection, she replied that it was not, but upon reflection considered perhaps changing that stance, as it could be useful for researchers.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cindy Ditzler. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Final Report of the 2/14 Memorial Project in the University Project. (Dekalb, IL.: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

<sup>27</sup> Cindy Ditzler. Personal interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

The emotion associated with documenting a tragedy such as the NIU shooting increase the potential for biases to affect the archival collection. The difficulty for the archivist is navigating through those emotions and attempting to maintain objectivity throughout the process. To ensure all significant material is gathered, the collection process should begin immediately, but whether or not to start forming the collection so soon after the tragedy is a judgment call for the archivists if it is left up to them. While biases may arise that are unintentional, such as Metzger's placement of material on the shooter at the end, the ultimate goal is to provide all the material necessary for future researchers. The risk of the collection becoming personal becomes a potentially serious problem in this situation. For Ditzler and Metzger, the decision to keep almost everything that came in was not the original intent, but something that was concluded while de-accessioning. Ditzler remarked that she could not separate herself from the materials.<sup>28</sup> This might result in the very thing Richard Cox warns us about when collecting so soon after an event. Yet when asked whether this hinders the collection for the future, she disagreed. The ultimate goal of the records was to preserve the memory of the event and accurately show what happened on that February 14<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent aftermath. Whether or not the event is remembered the way the collection describes is uncertain, but when asked, Ditzler said she felt "that it is the most accurate that we could possibly make it."<sup>29</sup>

The desire to push the collection out so soon after the event was mainly for the Support and Advocacy office, Ditzler said, because they wanted to support the students and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

victims' families. Here is another problem that Richard Cox outlines, with the possibility of memorializing the records. This is especially troublesome when a collection is named "The 2/14 Memorial Project," as it has been by the Regional History Center. The collection should remain a tool for researchers, not for grieving. The staff of the RHC took steps to prevent this from happening. It was decided that the collection would be split, with one part being an archival collection housed in the university archives, while the rest of the material, mostly ephemera, would be displayed in the library and viewable online for casual visitors. In the manuscript collection held within the archives, researchers could browse through what would be considered traditional archival material. Included were documents pertaining to the shooting, reports, newspaper headlines and articles, in addition to newer media such as oral histories and videos of memorials. The policies in place regarding collection use maintain that it be used for serious research only, and as such those who access it must sign a Use and Policy Form which outlines their purpose of research.<sup>30</sup>

Contrasting the research collection available in the university archives is the 2/14 Memorial Room, which is also housed in the Founders Memorial Library at NIU. While the intention for use of the archival collection is for serious research, this room was established for grieving. The room holds all the artifacts that were left by the makeshift memorials after the tragedy, including teddy bears, posters and wreaths, as well as some photographs of the campus immediately following the shooting. It is clearly for the more casual observer. Though not open to the public, photographs and descriptions of the material related to the

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<sup>30</sup> 2/14 Memorial Project Use and Policy Form, (DeKalb, IL.: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

aftermath are made available on the website for those wishing to pay their respects in the privacy of their own home. Visitors can browse through the “Images of Hope,” which displays submitted photographs that, according to the site, address the question of “what does recovery look like,” and “what do you ‘see’ when you think of hope?”<sup>31</sup> Also available to visitors are high-resolution scans of the memorial panels that were written on by thousands of mourners and well-wishers for the several days after the event. A “tell your own story” option is featured on the site, where users can submit their own experiences of the tragedy and how it has affected them. Here is a great example of using web 2.0 technology to integrate users into the project whilst they contribute to the site. Finally, the finding aid of the archival collection is made available for those who may be serious in researching further into the event.

Richard Cox’s concerns about archives becoming sites of memorial are a legitimate worry; if this were to happen, the future memories of the event would be at risk of being altered. The archivists at NIU navigated this route well, by creating separate collections for use by casual mourners and serious researchers. In doing so, a public memorial website presents artifacts donated after the tragedy, while the archives provide more objective research through its records. This separation allows the memorial to become something more than a marker of a tragedy in the school’s past, and allows the archival records to be more than just a documentation of a day’s events on campus. The two collections complement each other, ensuring that the shooting is remembered through both history and memory.

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<sup>31</sup> Images of Hope Project, February 14, 2008 Memorial, Online Exhibit, <http://www.february14.niu.edu/items/browse?collection=1>.

Another byproduct of the 2/14 Memorial Room displayed on the website is that it creates a new site of memory, in that it allows visitors to remember and experience the memories involved with the tragedy on their own terms. Along with the one outside near Cole Hall, these sites of memory are permanent reminders of the past. As with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., visitors can experience the memories associated with the event it symbolizes, regardless of direct association. Sites such as these allow mourners to establish their own memories of an event. Cole Hall, the building where the shooting took place, still stands unused, a reminder in itself of the bustling student life that once occurred there. Often times, sites of tragedy are demolished, so as to erase the sad reminders of the events that took place there. According to Robert Bevan, the goal in destroying these buildings is to destroy the meanings carried with them, something he calls “enforced forgetting.”<sup>32</sup> This was actually the original intent of the University, with promised funds from then-Governor Rod Blagojevich to help build a new lecture hall.<sup>33</sup> An outpouring from students pleaded otherwise, as many had fond memories of classes held there and did not want it to be removed. This thought held firmly with the words of President John Peters, who declared that “this event will not define us” when speaking to the thousands who came to the memorial service in Dekalb a week after the shooting.<sup>34</sup> Cole Hall is currently awaiting funds to be re-appropriated for other uses.

These sites of memory that have been created on campus are important reminders to students, faculty, and visitors of the tragic events that took place at the school. They allow

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Bevan, *Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>33</sup> UA 54, Series VIII, Box 52, Folder 4 (Dekalb, IL.: Regional History Center, Northern Illinois University).

<sup>34</sup> Cindy Ditzler, Personal Interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

the observer to pay their respects to the victims; while their presence ensures that the event will not be forgotten. These sites are different from the archives, which is instead attempting to create an accurate representation of the events concerning the tragedy and the events following. The goal in separating the material into two separate entities addresses directly the fears of memorializing in the archives which Richard Cox ponders in *Flowers after the Funeral*.

Whether the archival records at NIU are considered a well-documented history of events or a site of memorial is open to debate. As tragedies such as these are rare, there are not many collections with which to compare. The campus shooting which took place at Virginia Tech University (VT) nine months prior is one of the few events that resulted in the similar outpouring of grief and emotions. The archives at VT faced the same problem as the RHC in documenting a heart-breaking event of the school's history. Online, VT hosts a digital memorial website that is similar to that of NIU's, and contains many photographs, articles, condolences, and tributes for visitors to browse through.<sup>35</sup> It is through this site that users can access the finding aid for material in the archival collection. The records group holds two series; series I contains condolence materials, while series II is listed as a small collection containing information about the victims.<sup>36</sup> Despite only containing two series, the collection consists of 517 archival boxes, compared to NIU's 56. Browsing through the scope and content, there are no mentions of news reports, information regarding the shooting, or

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<sup>35</sup>Virginia Tech April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Archives of the University Library. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/prevail/index.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Virginia Tech April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Archives of the University Library finding aid. Ms2008-020. <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaead/published/vt/viblv00656.xml.frame>.

anything outside of condolences for the victims. None of the material saved in the archives seems to present a greater context of the event.

One can only imagine the difficulties that the archivists at VT had to go through in creating their collection. Compared to NIU, there were more victims and media coverage. The emotional strain they faced was surely taxing. It is not my place to make judgment on the archivists, nor am I attempting to criticize their decisions. Through comparisons, however, I would argue that NIU does a better job than VT at balancing between documentation and memorializing the victims in their records. NIU's archival collection contains condolences as well, which are important to document, but it is coupled with reports, details concerning the event, oral history recordings, and even controversial material. In doing so, these records provide more context to both the event itself and the subsequent aftermath on campus.

The ultimate question that is raised then is: "are the archives effective in representing accurately the shooting that took place on the campus of Northern Illinois University on February 14, 2008?" It may be impossible to judge until years from now, when interpretations and descriptions detailing the event are written by people who may not even have been born at the time of the shooting. What the collection seems to be, from an archives student observing the collection as a whole, is an accurate description of the event and the aftermath on the campus of NIU. Oral histories detailing students and faculty experience on the day of the shooting and afterwards help to paint a more complete picture of the events and how individuals were affected by the tragedy. With help from other

departments and through documentation of newer media such as Facebook and MySpace, researchers can see what was happening not just on campus but on the internet as well. Even material contradictory to popular beliefs, such as fliers from the Westboro Church, are included within the collection and show the inclusion of opinions from marginalized groups. Though their views are not agreed upon by most, their inclusion in the collection shows the reaction of people who remained outside the popular memory of the event, and represents a more accurate retelling of the past.

## **Conclusion**

The frailty of memory makes its documentation a difficult task for the archivist. Memories, both personal and collective, can be manipulated, changed, forgotten, or even falsely created over time. The past cannot be re-experienced, as Lowenthal and others have pointed out, and can never be fully understood. Though evidential facts are what histories are founded on, it is through collective memories where a more complete understanding of the past begins to take place. As it is the historian's duty to interpret these memories and facts, it is the archivist's duty to collect them for future use.

For tragic events such as a university shooting, however, emotions and personal memory may blur an archivist's decision making when it comes to what should be documented. Outside influences and practical limitations can limit the collection process as well. The path for an archivist becomes difficult, as there is a fine line between documenting and memorializing a tragedy. Managing depositories of collective memory, archivists have a duty to document the collective memory, yet maintain the archive's mission as a repository of historical records. Often times the reaction to a tragedy is to grieve and memorialize victims, and it is the archivist's duty to document these memories and others to help complement the official records surrounding an event. Many factors must be accounted for this is to be done correctly. For the staff of the Regional History Center, navigating through the emotions surrounding the shooting was difficult. There are no guidelines to follow in these situations and only through their reliance on archival knowledge, experience,

understanding of the institution, and help from colleagues both near and far, were they able to finish the collection.

Richard Cox argues that in situations such as these, there is a desire to collect everything concerning the event, especially memorial related material.<sup>1</sup> Certainly this is true for the staff at NIU, where mostly everything but organic and duplicate material was saved.<sup>2</sup> Most likely this is due to the respect the archivists had for the victims, but it illustrates Cox's point. They addressed this situation well, however, through the splitting of material for both casual visitors and serious researchers. Attention was paid to the newer forms of media that were related to the event as well. The capturing of social media websites, news reports, and oral histories gives voices to those who experienced the event, and helps to create a more complete history for interpretation. Following Helen Samuels' lead, Ditzler and Metzger were active in their collecting, and through their knowledge of the institution were able to document material and memories that would have otherwise been missed.

When Ditzler and Metzger arrived for work the following week after the shooting, they both individually arrived to the conclusion that they had to begin collecting immediately. Through their experience, they were able to recognize the significance of the event, and that it would be necessary to be active in the collection process if they wished to document it fully. Situations such as a campus shooting are extraordinary, and will be an important event in the university's history. Their longevity at NIU allowed them to contact the right people quickly and to begin collecting anything involved with the tragedy. As this

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Cox, *Flowers after the Funeral*. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cindy Ditzler, Personal Interview. 2 Sept. 2010.

is a situation that many archivists will thankfully never have to deal with, and was one that was new to both Ditzler and Metzger as well, I believe experience and training took over, and helped to guide their decision making throughout the collection process.

A question of completeness arises from this discussion as well. With the collection process beginning so soon after the tragedy, the archival staff gathered material with the help of connections made throughout the campus. Cindy Ditzler is the first to admit that the collection is incomplete, however, and that it may remain that way. Police reports, the President's papers, and individual interviews with those related to the victims, such as the shooter's father, would be great inclusions to the collection, but may never be collected for a variety of reasons.<sup>3</sup> Yet is that not the case with most archival collections? There is always more to be included and lost records that would help shed light on the dark edges of history. The hope is that the history is complete enough that a researcher can gather enough information to draw accurate conclusions of the event. In this case the February 14, 2008 Memorial Collection is successful.

Some may argue that the archivist has too much influence in shaping the record collection in this scenario, and is thus potentially shaping the future collective memory of the event. In being active in the collection process, Ditzler does not allow the records to "speak for themselves," as could be argued if the records were collected in a more passive manner. As Randall Jimerson has noted, however, even if the archivist is not shaping through

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

collecting, her influence is felt in record appraisal, arrangement, and description.<sup>4</sup> This being the case, the archivist has been shaping record collections, and thus collective memory, all along. This understanding is important, as it allows archivists to recognize our role in shaping memory, and think critically of our impact and procedures.

The concept of the objective archivist is an impossible dream, but in being cognizant of their role, they are better prepared in forming a collection. Through an archivist's training and knowledge of records and their influence, it should be easier for him or her to acknowledge his or her own bias and keep emotions in check. Proper education and experience should help an archivist to distance himself from a tragedy, even if he is emotionally involved. Though impartiality is impossible, it is important to note that records are not objective either. As Le Goff explains, "documents [are] not objective, innocent raw material, but expresses past society's power over memory and over the future."<sup>5</sup> Just as memories have the ability to change and be reinterpreted through time, so too can documents and records.

In understanding and acknowledging this and the role they have in potentially shaping future collective memory, archivists have the proper authority in determining what should be documented and saved. This is especially true in tragic situations like the shooting at NIU. The staff of the RHC were able to document as accurately as possible a collective memory of the event through being active in the collection process. If left in the hands of those less experienced, the collection may turn into a memorial, rather than a documentation of the

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<sup>4</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 192.

<sup>5</sup>Le Goff, *History and Memory*, xvii.

collective memory of the event. Oversight may not be necessary, but collaboration can be an important tool for an archivist in a similar situation. Ideas from outside the tragedy's influence and help from other institutional departments can help create a more complete collection. In this respect, the RHC staff was lucky in being able to call on the personal and professional relationships they had built through the years. While this may not be an option for every archivist in a similar situation, it can be helpful.

It is important that archivists embrace their role in the creation of collections. With their experience of records, institutions, and users, who else is better to make decisions concerning what is saved? Though emotions and stress are high in difficult situations such as a campus shooting, the fundamental concerns remain. It is at this time when an archivist must be her most professional, and remain as objective as possible in collecting and documentation. As archives are depositories which help store collective memory, archivists have an obligation in taking all the necessary steps in ensuring that those memories are saved. Their skills and knowledge will be the difference in the accuracy of future researchers and historians' interpretations of the past.

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