

# Interview with Margery Sly: Director of the Special Collections Research Center

**Paul LaFollette:** Tell me a little about Special Collections in general and what your responsibilities are.

**Margery Sly:** About seven years ago, the person who was then Dean of the Libraries decided to bring two of the main special collections in the library system together. He named the new entity the Special Collections Research Center. It includes the old special collections—Rare Books, Manuscripts, Contemporary Culture, Science Fiction and Fantasy, Printing-Publishing, and the University Archives. To these were added the Urban Archives which had been separate and had just added the Philadelphia Jewish Archives in 2007. The goal was to put all of these collections under one umbrella, to have one set of policies and procedures, and to reach out to faculty for curricular use in a more coherent way than previously. Many of the collections complement each other, so bringing them together made a lot of good sense, and I think we have been able to help users better.

The Special collections started in the 1960s with Rare Books, and Manuscripts, and Temple History. Urban Archives was founded in 1967 by the History Department to document the urban experience in the region from the Civil War to the present, and to provide raw, primary source material for graduate students. It has expanded to provide raw material about the city for pretty much everybody. About 50% of our use today is Temple students, staff, and faculty. The other 50% is students and scholars from all over the world, many members of the Philadelphia general public, and the media.



Margery Sly

**PL:** Are you involved with the Blockson Collection as well?

**MS:** The Blockson Collection remains a separate special collection reporting directly to the dean, as I do. We have worked with them to process some complicated collections.

**PL:** 2017 is a special year for the Urban Archives, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding. Tell me a little bit more about what it is and what it contains.

**MS:** The History Department began collecting materials with great enthusiasm in 1967. They focused on the records of organizations which tend to be large and extensive. In particular, they looked at organizations that were doing social justice work, social service, civic engagement, neighborhoods, cultural planning, and so on. Some of the early collections that they acquired were the Philadelphia Housing Association, the Urban League, the Philadelphia Chapter of the NAACP. We continue a relationship with these organizations up to the present. We have a long relationship with the Nationality Service Center. We also have relationships with the Settlement Music School and many neighborhood associations. We have just acquired materials of the Philadelphia Zoo which is lots of fun. Traditionally, these have been ongoing organizations, so every once in a while they will give us another batch of material. We are now up to about 500 organizations. The collection occupies roughly the equivalent of 80,000 of those brown boxes you see stacked about you. It's a lot of "stuff" to use the technical term.

Initially the donation of the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin was handled as a separate collection, but it became a part of the Urban Archives in 1989. We also are now the archives of the Philadelphia Inquirer. That includes millions and millions of their photographs and clippings files.

**PL:** That sounds overwhelming.

**MS:** It's a lot, but it's fun. It's like a giant puzzle. We are also the archives for a couple of local TV news stations including video in every format known to human kind, starting with 16mm film in the 1940s and upwards.

**PL:** As a computer scientist, one of the things that I worry about is that we will probably always know how to play 16mm film unless civilization entirely falls apart, but the digital media change every few years, and I don't know how you preserve that.

**MS:** I think this is our biggest archival challenge because, yes, the media changes, the hardware changes, the media degrades. We have a digital forensics station that helps us run various legacy formats, and we try to capture what we can, but there is no way to capture everything.

**PL:** Apart from the Urban Archives, which of your collections do you think deserve to be better known.

**MS:** I think they are all well known to certain segments. Often the people who are intimately interested find their way here. We have the collections of several dance organizations that are well known to dance historians and choreographers. We have a really extensive collection of artists' books, that Tyler students regularly use. We just did a program last spring about the contemporary culture collection which is sort of about activism and counter-culturalism from the 1960s to the present. There is some incredibly cool stuff in there that we need to work on getting more exposed.

On the other hand, people seem to find a lot of our science fiction titles in the catalog and are disappointed because they cannot check them out. I think with archives, you collect things and know that someone will eventually find it and use it. With the internet, we are getting a lot more exposure. Often when we blog about a collection, a researcher will find it.

**PL:** To what extent do you actually have parts of the collection on-line?

**MS:** Despite everyone's belief that you can inexpensively digitize at great speed, it is a tiny percentage. We have been digitizing Evening Bulletin photographs, because we own the rights to them. We have almost 100,000 of those up on the web now. We've been doing all the Temple photographs. We have done all the Temple yearbooks. We are working on the Temple student newspaper. As we have gotten grants and other support, we have done parts of other collections. But doing preservation scanning and then having space to store the masters is pretty time intensive and expensive.

**PL:** How do you think the move to the new library will affect you?

**MS:** I think there are a couple of great things about that. We will have a reading room on the first floor, so when people walk in, they will see us. Since the early 2000s, there has been a belief within the library world that libraries will be defined by their special collections and archives, because that is where the unique material is.

We are getting a designated classroom, where we will be able to teach using our materials much more effectively than we can now.

**PL:** That sounds exciting. Where are these 80,000 boxes of stuff?

**MS:** They are in 20 different rooms of this building [Paley]. More are in the library depository which is in the Karden building.

**PL:** What else would you like me to know about? What have I not asked that I should have?

**MS:** I would love it if you could get the word out about why primary sources are important. We sort of view ourselves as a humanities lab where students can come and use primary source material. It helps them learn how to analyze evidence; it helps them gather data, synthesize it, and present it; it helps them think. That is why universities are committed to having archives and special collections. They provide the raw material that students can use and learn from. And also generate new knowledge from, because each one will see the material in a different way and produce new and different interpretations.

I think that the other thing that we do for Temple has to do with the fact that so much of the material that we collect helps document the history of the city and surrounding area. We are really the source of 20<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia history. A lot of the community knows that, and comes and uses our materials. I think this is a great way of providing service to and communication with the community.

**PL:** Thank you for your time and this information.