February 2, 2012

The Use of Primary Sources in Special Collections

Julia Stringfellow, Boise State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/julia_stringfellow/9/
The Use of Primary Sources in Special Collections
Graduate Student Workshop, February 2, 2012
Instructors: Kent Randell, KentRandell@boisestate.edu
Julia Stringfellow, juliastringfellow@boisestate.edu
Special Collections Hours: 8am-5pm, Monday-Friday
http://library.boisestate.edu/special/

What is a primary source?
- A primary source is firsthand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic.
- The nature and value of a source cannot be determined without reference to the topic and questions it is meant to answer.
- The search for primary sources does not automatically include or exclude any format of research materials or type of records, documents, or publications.

Primary sources typically include (this list shows that just about any form of material can be a primary source if the contextual circumstances are right):
- Archives and manuscript materials (unique handwritten, typed, or born-digital documents)
- Letters
- Diaries
- Scrapbooks
- Newspapers
- Photographs
- Government publications
- Books
- Printed ephemera
- 3-dminentional artifacts
- Audio and video recordings

ALL of these types of primary sources can be found in Special Collections!

Some basics for thinking about primary sources when doing research:
- Primary sources can either be first-hand observation/analysis, or accounts contemporary with the events described.
- Primary sources represent one person's perspective.
- It is important when using anything as a primary source that the researcher is aware of the bias of the observer/analyizer that created the primary source, and also to the broader cultural biases of the era in which the primary source was created.
- The researcher's perspective, or the arguments or points for which a researcher plans to use a primary source as evidence, is significant in determining what sources will be primary.
- The original artifact itself may carry information that no reproduction can duplicate.
- Reproductions of primary sources remain primary for many research purposes.

The Use of Primary Sources in Special Collections | February 2, 2012
- Trying to use primary sources in research is much more difficult if the researcher is looking for sources post hoc in support of an argument, rather than building an argument based on the sources.

What other types of sources are there?

- Secondary sources are those that analyze, assess, or interpret a topic, typically utilizing primary sources to do so.
- Tertiary sources include bibliographies and other reference resources.
- Most (but not all) books in bookstores and the general circulation sections of libraries are secondary sources.
- Many commercial books that are published as primary sources will also include secondary text (for example, a transcribed diary will be a primary source, but the footnotes and commentary are secondary sources).
- The classification of a given source is subjective and contextual. For example, a modern encyclopedia might be generally considered a tertiary source, but an ancient encyclopedia is generally considered a primary source. The difference is because the modern encyclopedia is used as a source for information about a topic, and the ancient encyclopedia is understood as a source of information about the state of knowledge in the time period when the encyclopedia was written. However, even a modern encyclopedia is a primary source for some facts, such as the name of its publisher.
- Society of American Archivists definitions are here: [http://www.archivists.org/glossary](http://www.archivists.org/glossary)

What if I want to use content from a primary source?

In order to use/cite content from a primary source in Special Collections for a student paper, publication, or display, you need two kinds of permission:

1. Permission of the physical custodian of the material in the case of materials not covered under Fair Use. In most case this is Albertsons Library Special Collections and Archives.
2. Permission of the copyright holder of the material (owner of the intellectual property as defined by U.S. copyright law). Although Special Collections and Archives is not always the copyright holder for collections housed here, we can provide you with information about contacting copyright holders.

What are the “four pillars” of Fair Use?

United States Code 17 U.S.C. § 107: “The fair use of a copyrighted work … for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright. In determining whether the use made of a work in any particular case is a fair use the factors to be considered shall include:

1. the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes;
2. the nature of the copyrighted work;
3. the amount of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole;
4. the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.”