A NICE TO HAVE

The value of community archives

Opinion piece

By Stephen Hardman

Over the past few years, I have been involved in writing a number of grant applications to funding agencies on behalf of associations and organisations who hold important local archives and collections. In doing so, I have faced the same frustrations experienced by many when looking for funding for the cultural heritage sector, and indeed for all not-for-profit organisations. There is the economic reality of limited (and diminishing) pots of funds, competition between many worthwhile organisations, and in New Zealand, a small economy with limited tax revenue.

I was recently writing a grant application for a small association that holds a nationally significant historic collection but no money. I was told by the funding agency that what I was asking for was seen as a *nice to have*. The lack of understanding shown by this response goes to the heart of the myriad problems faced by small community archives — that is, lack of funding creates a cyclical process that causes the lack of proper facilities, lack of training, limited staff, and over-reliance on volunteers.

This lack of funding can also create a state that can lead to the perception that community archives are less important when compared to other archives such as those managed by a library or museum. For example, people may think community archives are 'just' run by enthusiasts (many are, but the term is perceived differently in many quarters), and therefore not *proper* archives, which then places them in the *nice to have* category when it comes to funding.

But how do we break this cycle? I would argue that the issue comes down to the question of value, and how the value of community archives relates to the larger question of how we value history and its associated narratives. This question can be broken into further questions such as, what is the value of community archives? How do we quantify this value, and how do we convince funders, both government and non-government, of this value?

Research on the issues faced by small community archives in New Zealand is patchy at best, possibly again due to people's sense of value around what these archives are. For example, are they *proper* archives and therefore the right subject for professional and academic interest? The limited research that exists is full of hard evidence of the value of community archives. Sarah Welland's 2015 report, *The Role, Impact and Development of Community Archives in New Zealand*, is a comprehensive assessment of many common issues faced by community archives.[1] Sadly, many of the issues outlined in Welland's report are still with us today, implying that people still underestimate the power of community archives for research and other purposes.

When it comes to funding community archives, the problem seems to come down to the fact that to get money, you need to prove value, and with no money, you cannot prove value. Therefore, people assume the archives has no perceived value. It is this *perceived value* I want to address. Many of us may be familiar with the process of writing funding applications, and the requirement to match our grant applications with the *outcomes* asked for by funding agencies. Funders often want to see what they are funding — a playground, a new building, an event. Physical things that they can point to and say, "I funded that". What follows when you start a funding application are those moments of head-scratching where you are forced to wordsmith what seems obvious to you and others in the sector. Broadly, the value of community archives rests on understanding the value of community history, and this is a difficult concept to quantify. For example, how do you quantify the value of gaining knowledge, or the joy of discovering a photograph of one of your ancestors?

Therefore, when exploring the value of community archives, we need to understand what community archives are about. But there is a problem in defining what we mean, as "the concept of community archives is still somewhat ambiguous."[2] Most people involved in heritage-related funding approvals are clearer on the distinction, for example, between the National Library, Archives New Zealand, and Te Papa, and may also have a reasonable idea of the professional expectations, statutes, and guidelines around how these are run. Community archives however are often a combination of different types of archival practice (and more), making them harder to define. For example, they may also be a social hub, and a repository of things people are not quite sure of but believe there is value in holding them. This shows how community archives have often evolved - organically, responding to community needs and specific collections as they become available. They operate not from a top-down acquisition programme, but through a bottom-up response to the actual community they were created for. This can mean that

(for instance) one day you can have a surplus of antique prams, while on another, the recipient of a recently discovered rare Bible (real examples!). But national narratives are not comfortable with this type of messy and the random. National narratives, around the world, thrive on coherence and key defining features. In New Zealand this is typically around such things as self-sufficiency, biculturalism and multiculturalism (to varying degrees), the environment (*Nature*), and ingenuity. These are then embedded in such things as food, music, and sport. But not long after I had arrived in New Zealand, I asked a class I was teaching for the key features of New Zealand culture, and of course rugby came up high on the list. I then asked how many of them watched rugby and only three out of over twenty put their hands up. And one was from the United States. And this leads me to think of another of the challenges for community archives, in working without a defined narrative and with disparate materials. It is a real skill to craft meaningful stories from the bits and pieces and fragments that are unearthed in the community.

I was a lecturer in History (yes, big H) for many years, and I was at pains to teach students that history was not the clear national or global narrative that the textbooks can teach. (This was a shock to many of my students of course!) Instead, history, like life, is fragmented, chaotic, reactive, and, crucially, its memory and reconstruction are contested. I can see a parallel in our different heritage institutions. For example, we have the textbook *grand narratives* in big institutions such as Te Papa and to a certain extent the National Library. I *am* exaggerating somewhat here, and I don't want to downplay the importance of these institutions and their role as custodians of historic memory. I am also aware of places like the Turnbull and Hocken who do collect local and regional memories, and other archives such as religious archives. However, I do believe there is a difference between these institutions and the smaller community archives beyond the professional/amateur distinction. The larger national, and indeed, regional narratives can often only be more fully understood within the context of local narratives, and this is where local community archives are crucial. These archives add context and layers of complexity to aspects of the wider narratives.

The *local*, like many of the community archives themselves, is messy, somewhat chaotic, and yes, often poor. The *local* is the *lived experience*. It is where cultures and identities such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality stumble over each other, sometimes in cooperation and other times, (mostly even) in conflict. This is why these local histories can ask difficult questions of the national narratives and provide uncomfortable, but crucial, counter-narratives. As Andrew Flinn has pointed out in reference to the UK, "the very existence of community archives, by documenting and recording the lives of those hidden or marginal to formal archives, challenge the legitimacy of the mainstream sector"[3]. I am never quite sure with some funding providers, whether there is a genuine lack of understanding of the nature of local and community histories or a clear ideological decision not to allow these histories to be told.

Then there is the moment funding becomes available to a group or association and the question of what to do arises. The main purpose of the funding application is to raise the standard of the archives – such as improved buildings and storage facilities, more effective record keeping or digitisation. But this often involves bringing in experts, which in a way reinforces the perception of the *amateur* status and perceived lack of *professionalism* in community archives. There is danger of this being seen, as Cook puts it, as "professional archivists jumping to the rescue".[4] As mentioned above, community archives are often made up of a wider range of material than other, mainstream archives, and they have their own longstanding traditions and necessary skills particular to these archives, many of which can stem from the community itself. It is important to recognise that community archives are different, certainly more democratic and disparate. Any investment should be in harnessing these traditions. This may include allowing the breaking of some traditionally applied mainstream rules to achieve the shared outcome of preserving these archives and making them available in ways the community agrees with and has control over. A different way of managing local archives *in partnership* with the mainstream archives is a much-needed discussion.

There have been exceptions in heritage funding recently that demonstrates the value of local archives and collections. The Library Partnership Fund (https://natlib.govt.nz/about-us/collaborative-projects/new-zealand-libraries-partnership-programme) although targeted at a branch of government, was spent in ways that impacted positively on many community organisations and groups, along with the Cultural Sector Regeneration Fund (https://www.apraamcos.co.nz/about-us/news-and-events/cultural-sector-regeneration-fund). We can see material outputs from these in the many worthwhile groups and projects funded, and they are important to celebrate. But the huge excitement that was generated by the availability of these funds shows that these examples are the exceptions and not the norm. For instance, with the Cultural Sector Regeneration Fund, there were over 690 applications and only

86 were funded. The Museum and Heritage sector received only 13% of the total $28.3 million. But even the $28.3 million across the cultural sector is actually not that much in the grand scheme of government spending.

However, it has been heartening to see how the Library Fund has proven so successful for many local communities and how this was driven by community-engaged librarians. In my own Waimakariri region, the local Library has done an incredible job working with local communities, museums, and archives. The result is a programme where the Library engages with schools, enabling students to discover their own history, their ancestors, the history of their street and their school - not by being told, or from a book, but by discovery and activity. And yes, the learning process often matches the content of the material: it is messy and complicated, but its theirs, and they own that. In fact, I believe children are more effective learners when it is seen as play and a bit chaotic. As they build their own history, they can understand how history is always in construction. They can then take this knowledge that history is complicated and constructed when they visit the Big Museums and learn how to read those constructs for themselves. For example, an exhibition on World War II would be enriched by the knowledge that a person from your street or town or school was directly involved, and you were in possession of a personal story to relate to. Many groups and individuals are often dissuaded from heritage institutions as they feel out of place or it's not about them. Community archives are the places that start to enable this broader engagement between people and history.

My reason for writing this piece is that I have recently had the honour of being appointed a Trustee of the Ferrymead Heritage Trust, which manages the Ferrymead Heritage Park in Christchurch. One of my tasks will be to secure funding for the various associations associated with the Trust and their important collections. From experience, it is going to be challenging, and more so in today's rather arid climate. I will also likely be competing for the same funds against many of you who are reading this. It is a harsh reality, but I have found that discussion and collaboration in the sector will make us all better at writing funding applications and wordsmithing the value of community archives. The more we debate the value of what we do, the better we get at articulating the value of the archives, as well as the wonderful and dynamic complexity and diversity of the communities our archives serve. Maybe, one day, local archives will be valued for more than just *nice to have*.

I would like to finish by returning to my opening comments about the conversation I had with the funding agency. At the time, I was putting together an application for a community museum. This museum has a magnificent collection of photography equipment and cameras, and an important collection of photographs from across the Canterbury region that reaches back to the nineteenth century. This collection documents the lived lives of thousands of people from all backgrounds and identities. If anyone has the wherewithal and desire to fund this *nice to have* collection — please get in touch!

ENDNOTES

1. Sarah Welland, 'The Role, Impact and Development of Community Archives in New Zealand: A Research Paper', 2015, available at https://repository.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/handle/11072/1752.
2. ibid., p. 5.
3. Andrew Flynn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges', Journal of the Society of Archivists, vol.28, no.2, October 2007, p.167. available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00379810701611936.
4. T. Cook, 'Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms' Archival Science, vol 13, no. 2-3, p.115.