

Family Photos and Memories: A Personal Reflection¹

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The community I have chosen to present about was one that my mother became a part of when she moved to Titahi Bay as a child in the 1950s. Mum moved to 'the Bay' with her family when it was set up as one of Wellington's first Government State housing settlements. I have gathered from observation and conversation that the settlement was quite a rich community in its heyday. Today I am focusing on a subset of that community, the people that my Mum grew up with; her family, friends and neighbours.

When I read Laura Millar's paper *Touchstones: considering the relationship between memory and archives*,² it triggered my memories regarding a series of events I witnessed at home as a child, whereby members of Mum's community would visit her and they would exchange memories of the past. On occasion, often after a large reunion or social event, a small group of people would gather in the living room of my family home to reminisce over a large collection of photographs my mother kept from her youth and early motherhood. The group of people consisted largely of those my mother grew up with: her family, friends and neighbours: the children of a few of the first occupants of Titahi Bay's new state housing settlement in the 1950s.

These people grew up together, and for the most part grew old together. On reflection they all shared a strong sense of place, a sense of community and ultimately memories. They played together as children, their children played together, and my mother had collected and recorded the best part of 30 years in a large collection of photographs and ephemera that would come out on occasion for the purpose of reminiscing.

I never ever saw Mum looking at the photos on her own, yet the photographs were very special to her; their significance is a strong memory in my own mind. I remember the large tatty orange bag with the WELLA logo on it well. It was overflowing with loose photographs and broken photo albums. The photographs had no order, and no metadata. Mum would tip them out and her people would gather around them time

and time again for a jog down memory lane: "When was this taken?", "Who is this?", "Remember this guy?", "What was this event?", "How old were we?", "You were only sixteen here", "Those were the days!"

They bonded over the sharing of information and memories. Nothing was ever written down, it was not an exercise in collecting information it was an exercise in sharing memories. At the end of the night the photos would all be bundled up again, and shoved back in the bag, only to have the exercise repeated the next time there was a reunion.

Millar's text caused me to analyse what was happening when Mum had her gatherings over the bag of photos; it made me wonder what role these photographs had as memory texts supporting the collective memories of her community. Millar pointed out that "Records are ... triggers or touchstones that lead to the recollection of past events..."; they trigger episodic memory, which is the "the remembrance of personally experienced events or experiences ..."³ Millar says that "we may recall not only the events themselves but also our feelings and emotions about them ... Episodic memory is, in effect, our ability consciously to reflect on our life and recall experiences and emotions from our past."⁴ Mum's photos were used to stimulate discussion about past events and to allow a sort of collective remembering based on the bringing together of everyone's episodic memories. On instances where a photograph was looked at, and only Mum had a connection with it, it would be overlooked. It seemed there was no point getting excited over an image no one else had a relationship with. When a photograph inspired a set of memories for the group, it was an exciting photograph and would stimulate much conversation.

Millar tells us that records and archives are "used in the process of transforming individual memories into collective remembering. Records ... are used to shape memories into narratives and to transform information and recollection from the individual to the collective ..."⁵ "The programmes, letters, diaries, photographs, reports, and other records we retain are our touchstones, and we return to them when we wish to resurrect and pass on our memories. That sharing of evidence and memory not only shapes our sense of ourselves as individuals but also gives us a place in our family and our community."⁶

Mum's collection of photos was well known amongst her friends and seemed to be a bridge to memory lane for many of them. I accompanied Mum often when she visited friends from her old community and no one else seemed to have photos like she had. On many occasions visitors would ask to see the photos, in fact they were referred to as 'the photos',

there were many other collections of photographs in the house, but when someone mentioned they wanted to look at 'the photos', we knew what they meant and out they would come. Mum was quite proud of them too, and they seemed to be off limits; only she was allowed to have access to them. Mum was a sort of gatekeeper of memories for the community that was so important to her.

Mum is no longer with us, but before she passed away I made a promise to put the images into some order for her. I was not quite an archivist at that point and there were a few things I should have done that I did not, but to start with I purchased a large album and sought Mum's help to put them into an order that meant something to her. I didn't however note any metadata, so to this day the photographs remain without context. I was lucky to have Mum, as the gatekeeper of the images, to instruct me in placing the images into the album. If had attempted to make the album now, there would be no way I'd know the order. Millar reminds us that "... archivists simply cannot know what records will trigger what memories", she says that "if there is no one-to-one relationship between touchstone and remembrance, then we must turn to our society for guidance ..."⁷ So, if I had left the album making until after Mum had passed away, I could have used her community to help me put it together. I guess I could use them now to help me give context to the images, but the album is in Auckland with my brother, Mum's oldest child, far away from Titahi Bay, and it will likely stay up there to be passed along the family line as Mum requested.

Mum's photos include a few of my brother that may be touchstones to his own individual memories; but aside from the occasional photograph of their Dad as a child, it is unlikely the photos will trigger memories for his own sons, and even less likely for his grandchildren; and some day in the future the community who has so many touchstones within the collection will no longer exist and the album will have little meaning for anyone. I dread the day my great, great, great, great niece or nephew does a clear-out and attempts to donate the album to a local museum. It's quite possible this could happen with no knowledge of the history or context of the images or the album. My father himself has a box of loose images he has kept from his own parent's home, he cannot identify anyone in the photos, he keeps the images simply because he thinks he should. I wonder if I will have that same sense of responsibility towards them. I have worked in a Museum archive. I have seen many donated collections of photographs relevant to communities and families long forgotten, most of which do not have any context associated with

the photographs. As Millar reminds us, “the fact is, we simply cannot remember something we did not ourselves experience ... we cannot share anyone else’s episodic memories. Records can help us ‘know’, but they won’t necessarily help us remember.”⁸

Endnotes

1. Originally presented as an in-class requirement as part of Eric Ketelaar’s master class on Archives, Memories, and Identities, Wellington, September 2013. Participants were asked to present on the specific role of archival documents as memory texts supporting collective memories, for a community of their choice.
2. Millar, Laura. Touchstones: considering the relationship between memory and archives. *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 105-126. <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12537>
3. Ibid, p.114
4. Ibid, p.110
5. Ibid. p.119
6. Ibid, p.119
7. Ibid, p.118
8. Ibid, p.118