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Taking a Different Look at the University of Akron: Researching in the Archives

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In the Spring semester of 2020, I began my capstone project for the Museum and Archives Certificate program offered by the Institute for Human Science and Culture. My project was to stem from the work I was going to be doing in an internship I had with David Lieberth. Lieberth was beginning the process of making a video course for the University of Akron's Sesquicentennial. My role as one of Lieberth's interns was to research photographs for him and to also find any other information he might need for his project. The bulk of my research was going to be done at the University of Akron Archival Services. The archives have a vast collection of University of Akron photographs, and many other historical documents about the University as well. With thousands of photographs to go through, it was going to be challenging to find all of the right ones to fit the vision of the project.

For the capstone project that was going to coincide with my internship, I chose to write a blog named "UA Snapshot 150," at <https://blogs.uakron.edu/uasnapshot150/>. I wanted to write a blog to work on my storytelling, and how I can start a conversation with archival documents. The blog was a place for me to put all of the photographs that struck me as interesting that may not have been needed for the internship project, because even though Lieberth was not necessarily going to use them, I still wanted them to be highlighted. While researching in the University of Akron photograph collection I noticed myself being more drawn to the photographs of student life more than any other type of photograph. I think what interested me the most was the comparisons I could make with the historical images of students, and how students are in contemporary times. By doing this, my blog really became a cultural comparison with a dialogue between the past and the present. The cultural comparison was not only about the good that University of Akron students have gone through, but was also about the bad. With half of my internship being during a global pandemic, I used other traumatic events from the past to help relate to today's issues.

Half way through the project research was going smoothly, and blog posts were great. My work was about to change completely though, because the whole world was about to be in lockdown due to a pandemic. In the beginnings of Covid-19, I really did not know what my internship, or my blog was going to become.

Was I even going to get to complete my internship? How will I have research to write my blog? All these uncertainties ran through my head, and not to mention the stress of living through a pandemic. Worried about many things when this started, I will have to be honest when I say writing a weekly blog post was the last thing on my mind. I had to move forward though. Life goes on, and I was going to get the experience I sought out to have with this project even though things were going to have to change.

Before the change though, I had a very common research experience when it comes to researching in the archives. When researching I would always begin with the finding aid of the collection. The finding aid is a guide to what the collection is made up of. The finding aid can be as specific as stating what every individual item is, or it can be as broad as stating what is in each box. Archivists are not picking and choosing how specific they want to be with a finding aid; rather they are working with what information the collection offers them. With the University of Akron Photograph collection the finding aid was specific in some areas, and in others not so much. When researching, this is one issue that a researcher can run into. Some photographs were individually titled, and the years were indicated on them as well. Some photographs were in a folder labeled something as vague as “Classes, 1960”, and that would be all I would have to go off of. The specificity of labeling all goes back to whoever donated these photographs over the years, or even the person that took the photograph. If a photograph is not properly labeled from the beginning, the less specific a researcher is able to be with it. Therefore, many of the photographs I would look at had always had a bit of an assumption, especially when I needed to categorize it for what category the photo would fit in Lieberth’s project. As for my blog, sometimes I would see a really interesting photo that did not have much information behind it, so I could not really talk about it. Something can look intriguing, but if there is no context, it is hard to start a conversation about it.

I made a blog post about how photographs can be misleading if one is only looking at its visual context. I saw photographs of what I thought were students working on a farm, and thought that maybe this was their job while also going to school (Figure 1). The title revealed that the photo was students clearing snow off the football field to play a game of ball. Students having to clear snow off a football field did not cross my mind, because today there are snow plows that do that. The photographs just go to show how important context is to understanding a photograph, and how if there is not information on a photograph it may be interpreted the wrong way. Especially if someone from the present is looking at a

photo from the past. A lot can change within just a year, and compare that to one hundred years and what is being depicted may not even exist. The way people lived their lives is completely different as well. My research being mostly photographs helped bring this idea to light, and when I was dealing with only photographs, I was missing the context I usually have in other research projects.

In the time I started researching, many of the photos in the collection I was researching were either digitized, out being digitized, or about to be digitized. So luckily there was a lot of digital material to already work with. However, if I found a photo that seemed of value for either project that was not digitized, I would have to digitize it myself. Digitizing was another skill I wanted to be working on, and through this internship, I was able to. The University of Akron archives even had digitizing equipment that I had never worked with before, like a book scanner. Instead of using a flatbed scanner, I was able to use the book scanner, and this helped to not damage any creases or binding certain archival materials that I needed to scan. For example, I found an exciting scrapbook of a young woman's daily life that went to the University in 1910 (Figure 2). Inside was the life of Hazel Bessy Hart, and there were photos of fish fries, first dates, and her just being silly with her friends. The scrapbook, being over one hundred years old, was very fragile. The material could be easily damaged, so I had to handle it with great care, and that is why pressing it down in a flatbed scanner was not ideal. By using the book scanner I was able to lay it down flat and have it scanned without having to put anything on top of it. Besides just looking at photographs I also looked at the school's yearbook, the *Tel-Buch*, and also the school's newspaper, the *Buchtelite*. These were also archival materials I did not want to press in a flatbed scanner, so if something of use came from those sources I would also use the book scanner. Digitizing skills will always come into use with preserving archival materials, especially if they are older and decaying faster.

Finding photographs that I wanted to highlight in my blog was the easiest part. There were so many interesting photographs in the collection it was hard to leave some out. The part I struggled the most when creating my blog was what to write about. Looking back on my early posts, I did not write too much on the photographs, and I think that was because of how new a format the blog was for me. I have little experience with writing blogs, but I knew they were on the shorter side of writing. With that, I probably kept the first few posts too short, but my blog really did evolve over time. I think I became more comfortable with the format in which I wrote about the photographs, and also the tone I wanted to have with the blog. For my format using more pictures was better, and the photos gave me a lot

more talking points. I also began to talk about the photographs with my experience in writing about art in my art history classes. Analyzing the photographs in this way helped me find my voice in this blog. I realized the tone of my blog had to be as if I were talking to a friend showing them the photographs, and telling them of my experience. With that the idea of the blog became a cultural comparison between the past and the present lives of the University of Akron students. Since I am a student myself, I felt more validated in my opinions and statements I would make in my blog posts overall, helping to make the blog what it is, and that is a research project through a student's eyes.

My blog post consisted of many different aspects of student life. I really tried to not only highlight the photographs I liked, but to also have a wide variety of photographs as well. I had a blog post of photographs of men and women's dorm rooms (Figure 3) from the beginnings of the University, and was able to compare how the students were in the dorm then, to how they are in the present. I also found photographs of an art class from 1890 and was able to see how similar it was to art classes today. There were photographs of the school's radio station during the 1950s (Figure 4), and I found it fascinating to compare the radio station then to modern times. The use of records was a big point to highlight, but also just radio in general was a big difference. Today, many people, especially young adults, just listen to music on a streaming service, and very few still listen to the radio. Our cars now have bluetooth to connect to our phones to play music. Looking through many of these photos there was a lot of evolution to discuss, especially with technology over the years. I would have to say one of my favorite blog posts would have to be my post "Photoshop with a Pen" (Figures 5) where I discuss photographs I found with some strange markings on them. Again, these photos are a great example of how, when out of context, they do not really make sense. I found multiple photos that either had areas blacked out, white highlights drawn in, or even one where a man without a shirt had a shirt drawn on for him. With all humor set aside, these photographs were made to be taken seriously even with their markings. The reason the markings were there, were to enhance the photo once it was printed into a newspaper. A photograph in a newspaper as most know is very one dimensional, and if the photo is to stand out in the print it must have a very high contrast. That is why some areas are made darker, and some made lighter. As for the shirtless man, that was probably less for contrast, and more for censorship.

Researching, and writing the blog was going great, but it was March 10th, 2020 when students received an email that the University would be closed until

further notice due to the spread of Covid-19. Many changes were made, one huge change is the University archives being closed. The source for all my research was now closed off from me researching. There were some digital photographs to still look through, and luckily all of the photographs that were not digitized had already been looked through. I could look through the archives digitized collections at home, which made me even more appreciative of what digitization can do. However, not everything is digitized, and there is only so much to work with from home. My main focus for research ended up switching from photographs, to the *Buchtelites*, the schools newspaper, for articles that pertained to the project.

Along with the research changing, my blog posts also had to change. For me it felt wrong ignoring the pandemic in my blog. Being quarantined, the virus, and everything that comes with it was so prevalent in every aspect of my life, I had to add it to the conversation in my blog. I made my first blog after the pandemic was humorous. I found some photos of students being funny in them, and I took my blog as a place to take a break from the pandemic. I wanted my post to be able to give people a laugh even if all they can do is worry at the moment. This is when my tone in my post really changed. I was now a friend to the reader, and I always came at my writing with a sympathetic approach. I knew how hard life was for me, and everyone around me at this time. I wanted to use my blog as a way to still address what was happening in the present, but to look to the past to find comfort. Relating past struggles to today was a big factor in being able to accomplish what I wanted my blog to bring. I wanted to find a way to talk about how amazing our healthcare workers are right now in a pandemic, so I looked at the photos I have already found to see where else in the past healthcare workers have been amazing in a time of a crisis. I found photographs of a World War II training program at the University (Figure 6), and it showed young women, who knew the war was going to need more nurses, rising up to train to become a nurse for their country. I found their courage to be very inspiring, and relatable to our healthcare workers today. I also thought of how intense of a crisis a world war can be, and if countries were able to survive that, then we can survive this war with a virus.

I also discussed the topic of school spirit in a pandemic. I know right now more than ever it is hard to have school spirit. Students are not on campus, and many had to move back home away from the city of Akron. All sporting events are cancelled, and any other events that require large groups of people. I found pictures of school spirit in the past, with cheerleaders (Figure 7), and homecoming decorations (Figure 8). Most importantly I found the different ways Zippy looked

throughout the years (Figure 9). She is the true face of the University of Akron, and seeing those photos are bound to give any Zip school pride. I felt addressing school spirit was a good topic not only because of the pandemic, but also because of how this project has affected me. Researching through the history of the University with these photographs has given me so much school spirit. I truly believe that if all students took some time to look back on the University's past they would find something that made them proud to be a zip.

One of the most exciting finds through this whole project had to be the *Buchtelite* articles I found on the 1918 flu pandemic. The articles proved to be very similar to what is going on during today's pandemic, even though it happened over one hundred years ago. There were articles talking about quarantine still being in effect, and how students must mail in assignments to their professors (Figure 10). Articles announced dances being cancelled, and discussed how freshmen would be having a very different introduction to the university with quarantine being in effect. All of these topics could easily have been written today, just change mailed in assignments to virtual zoom meetings. With these findings, I was hoping to give a sense of relief that this is not some strange scenario that has not happened before. Students one hundred years ago had to deal with the same things, and they were able to survive. I think many people thought the idea of the pandemic was only for fiction, but looking back on the past it is a real crisis that has happened before.

With all the work that I had put into my blog, and this internship I wanted a chance to tell more people about it. I chose to enter into the UAIS conference, where I would be able to showcase my blog. UAIS stands for University of Akron Interdisciplinary Synopsis, and at the conference students from all majors can enter in their projects in poster form. The student's poster would tell of their work, and their projects main goals. I received the great news of being accepted to present, but unfortunately because of Covid-19 the conference was canceled. That did not stop me from wanting to present my work, and I also applied to the Ben Auburn Award in Cultural Criticism. With this I presented through a WebEx meeting about my blog to a panel of judges, and other fellow participants. The award opened up a second option other than just cultural criticism, and it was communication in the time of quarantine. I felt like my blog turned into a great form of communication in a time of quarantine, so I went ahead and entered it. I unfortunately did not win an award, but I received great feedback. The judges, and the other participants showed an interest in my blog by asking very thoughtful

questions. I was just happy to have had more people know about, and be interested in it even if I did not get the award.

Overall, this blog has helped me grow so much as a writer, and has helped me work on my storytelling. I have been able to accomplish creating a dialogue between the past and the present in a relevant way. I think the cultural comparison my blog has brought between student life in the past, and student life today is significant for all present and future University students. Through this internship, I was able to become better at researching within an archive, and created the skills to find information using primary sources. I have also been able to refine my digitization skills, by broadening the different ways I now know how to digitize materials. Being able to look at the University's past through photographs has given me a stronger sense of school spirit. Knowing the history of the school has allowed me to feel more connected to the school. Although half way through this project I was thrown a pandemic curveball, I am almost glad I had adjusted the goal of my blog. Feeling like I had to be there to connect with people in these trying times, I think made my writing better. I do wish I could connect my storytelling with people under different circumstances, but I do hope that the people that do read my blog still get something out of it. I also hope that the work I have done to help the Sesquicentennial helps students to become more interested in their school's past.

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Figure 1, Football field, sweeping snow off, 1913, University of Akron Archives

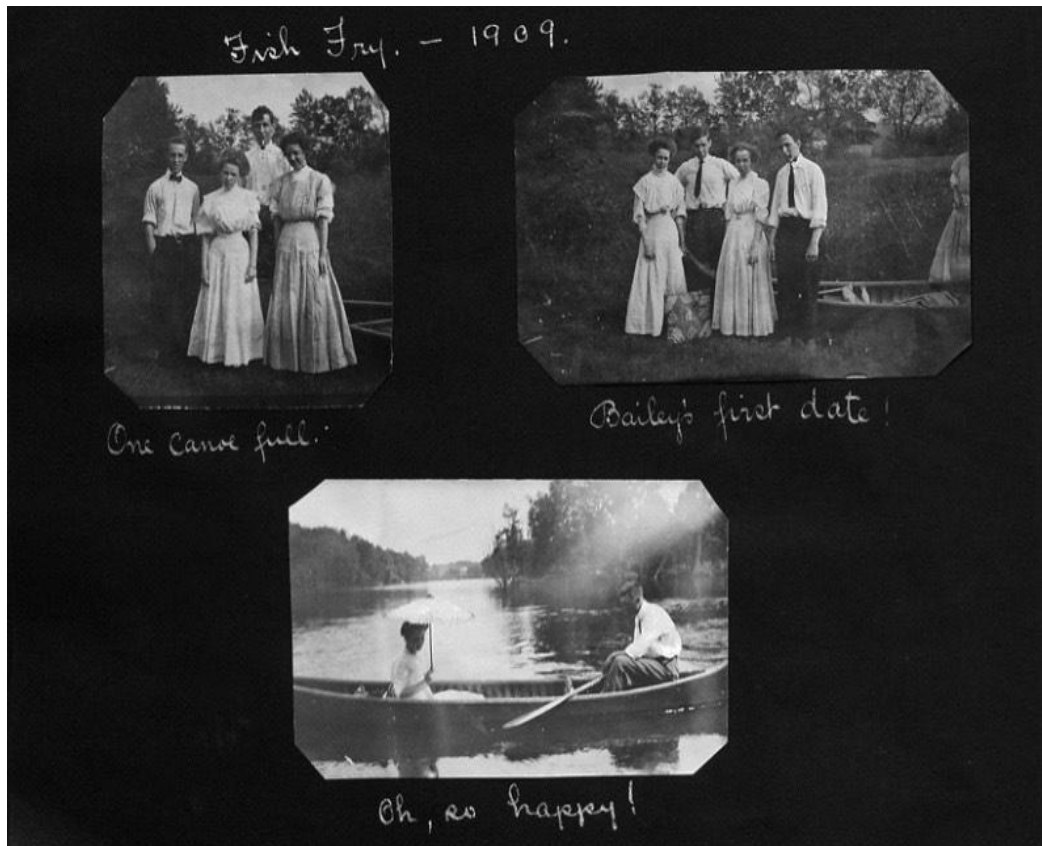


Figure 2, Scrapbook pages from the Hazel Bessey Hart Collection, University of Akron Archives.



Figure 3, Men's Dorm (students), undated, University of Akron Archives



Figure 4, Radio, WAUP, 1957, University of Akron Archives



Figure 5, Science Lecture Series, 1952-1959, University of Akron Archives



Figure 6, World War II College Training Program, Student Nurses, 1943, University of Akron archives



Figure 7, Cheerleaders, 1939-1941, University of Akron Archives



Figure 8, Homecoming, 1954, University of Akron Archives



Figure 9, Zippy, undated, University of Akron Archives

QUARANTINE STILL IN EFFECT

As a precautionary measure the college was quarantined October 14; all men not belonging to the S. A. T. C. and all women students were not allowed on the campus. The men in training are continuing their attendance to classes but the instructors of most subjects are attempting to give work supplementary to the regular courses. In classes where this was impossible assignments were made and mailed to the civilian students on October 23. It is requested that the students prepare the lessons as carefully as if they were reciting at regular periods in college. The assignment of lessons to November 3rd does not necessarily measure the period of quarantine. Quarantine is growing irksome to civilian students and it is hoped that conditions will warrant its being removed soon.

Figure 10, Articles from *The Buchtelite*, Vol. 30, No. 1, University of Akron Archives