

# **Preservation Needs Assessment of the Local History Collections in the Alameda Free Library**

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On May 31, 2018, a consultant from the California Preservation Program (CPP) conducted a preservation needs assessment of the local history collections in the Alameda Free Library to assess risks to the long-term survival of the materials and to recommend actions for their mitigation or elimination.

This assessment was occasioned by the Library's participation in the CPP's Collection Preservation Assessment Project to address its concern that it is taking appropriate actions to preserve its collections and to ensure that these materials continue to be able to be used by current and future library patrons. The Library is the city's main repository for many local history materials; taking appropriate actions to ensure the protection of these information assets for current and future use is a stewardship responsibility of the Library.

## Findings and Recommendations

Preservation and access priorities for special and archive collections generally are 1) to protect against catastrophic loss; 2) to manage the storage environment to maximize their service lives; 3) to digitize for improved access as well as for preservation, and 4) to repair (via conservation treatment) as needed to ensure availability both now and in the future.

The Library does an excellent job of protecting against catastrophic loss with automatic fire detection and suppression systems, collection and building security, and controlling access by using staff intermediaries. Because the collections are in several locations in the Library and mixed in with staff and patron spaces, the storage environment is determined by staff and user comfort rather than cooler conditions preferred for collection longevity; however, by conditioning for human comfort the collections avoid at least the damaging extremes of high heat and high relative humidity too often found in storage. Use of the collections is modest, reducing urgency for most repair and conservation activities, and suggesting opportunities for digitization to increase use.

Findings and recommendations below are informed by the principle of maximizing benefits for the collections while minimizing costs, thus ensuring the greatest possible protection of assets and gains in service with available resources. Some recommended actions can be accomplished with few resources; others require significant resource commitments. The next logical step, a review of the feasibility of taking the recommended actions, could lead to implementing first those recommendations requiring only resources currently available to the Library, and to leave to special funding opportunities those recommended actions requiring additional resources.

**1. Finding: The Library is not completely prepared to salvage collections in the event of a disaster.** For the sake of all the Library's collections, including local history collections, disaster response plans help protect collections because they prepare the staff to respond effectively and efficiently; if significant portions of the collections were to get wet, the guidance of a concise and current written disaster response and salvage plan, plus training to implement it, would allow the staff to make optimal use of the short time before water and mold cause irreparable collection damage. Three days is a normal window for salvage operations, but this time may be longer or shorter depending on the prevailing environmental conditions. The Library has a written disaster

response plan nearly completed, missing only information on local sources of emergency supplies and services.

## **Recommendations**

**1a. Complete the Library's draft disaster response plan.** Inquire of BAMAN members about their discoveries of local suppliers and service providers to speed up completion of the plan

**1b. Mount staff education and training events on disaster preparedness and response like those offered by the California Preservation Program.** See the CPP's webpage (<http://calpreservation.org/disasters/exercise.html>) for an example of a staff education and training event. Prepare a combination of drills (evacuation, fire extinguisher, disaster) and tabletop exercises to train staff to respond to the most likely emergencies.

**1c. Investigate pre-registration agreements with commercial disaster response and collection salvage companies.** Companies with good track records for salvage of archives collections include BELFOR and Polygon. Some companies, e.g., BELFOR, offer no-cost pre-registration agreements to ensure the Library gets priority attention should a region-wide disaster make multiple simultaneous claims on local resources.

**1d. Confirm with the City's insurance company that a) collections are not excluded from coverage, and b) insurance will pay for salvage of materials that cannot be replaced.**

Justification for recommendations 1a-1d: These recommendations provide the greatest protection for the collections at the lowest possible cost. If these actions are undertaken with participation of staff, everyone becomes sensitized to potential problems before they become disasters.

## **2. Finding: The Library history and oral history collections are stored in a janitor's closet.**

Since the janitor's closet has running water, it has the potential to flood. The collections are stored in filing cabinets, so there is little probability of their getting wet, but they could suffer damage from high humidity in the closet in the event of an accident.

**Recommendation 2: Consider alternate storage spaces for the Library history and oral history collections to reduce the risk of loss.**

Justification for recommendation 2: While the risk of loss seems relatively low, if another space can be made available without a large investment of resources, the cost of eliminating the risk is even lower than carrying the unnecessary risk.

## **3. Finding: The local history maps are at risk of damage from handling without protective enclosures.** The use of the maps is very light, but when they are handled, some of the maps appear to be fragile and vulnerable to further damage or loss of fragments.

**Recommendation 3: Use large acid-free folders in the local history map drawers to separate maps into smaller groups to protect them when handled; use individual folders for any maps**

**that have deteriorated or otherwise are especially vulnerable to handling damage.** For example, see Gaylord 20pt Map and Print folders at [gaylord.com](http://gaylord.com) for appropriate folders.

Justification for recommendation 3: The cost of map conservation is significantly more than the cost of folders to protect the maps, making the folders a very cost-effective action.

**4. Finding: Many of the scrapbook clippings in the Library history are newsprint and are deteriorating.** Though they likely will be sufficiently intact to be copied after another couple decades, the potential for loss increases with each passing year. The folders of photos are too tightly packed to be used without causing damage.

**Recommendation 4: Review the Library history collection, especially the scrapbooks of clippings, for their long-term value.** If a decision is made to retain them, consider photocopying the pages of newsprint clippings on acid-free paper. Digitizing the scrapbooks also is a possibility, but not advised until the Library has access to an IT infrastructure to serve and preserve them digitally.

Justification for recommendation 4: The Library history collection is unique, making the review highly desirable while preservation action still is possible.

**5. Finding: Among all the Library's local history collections, the oral history magnetic tape cassettes are at the greatest risk of loss due to deterioration of the tape.** They should not be played other than for digitization because the next play may be the last if the magnetic oxide layer flakes off from the tape support during playback.

**Recommendation 5: Make digitization of the oral history collection magnetic tape cassettes a high priority if the collection needs to survive.** Consider participating in the State Library-funded California Revealed Project (<https://calpreservation.org/california-revealed/>) to preserve and make accessible online historically significant Californiana at no cost to the Library. Contact Pamela Vadakan at [pvadakan@californiarevealed.org](mailto:pvadakan@californiarevealed.org).

Justification for recommendation 5: The collection is unique, the content of considerable value to the community, and it currently is inaccessible.

**6. Finding: Local high school yearbooks were digitized some time ago, delivered on CDs, and now are at risk of loss due to obsolescence of the CD format.**

**Recommendation 6: Migrate the digitized yearbooks from their CDs to provide online access and digital preservation.** The California Revealed Project is planning to accept already digitized materials into its collections, providing both public access online and digital preservation, again at no charge to the Library. If you are interested in exploring this opportunity with the thought of nominating the yearbooks to be added to the California Revealed collection, please contact Pamela Vadakan.

Justification for recommendation 6: Though the original yearbooks still are accessible, the opportunity to provide access online likely will greatly increase use of the collection.

The major risks to which the local history collections in the Alameda Free Library are exposed, and the benefits of actions to eliminate or reduce the associated risks, are clear. The California Preservation Program stands ready to offer further information and assistance with implementation of key recommendations when the Library is ready to proceed, and to assist it to identify and evaluate future actions following completion of higher priority actions addressed in this report.

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