



a newsletter from the Washington State Archives

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Office of the Secretary of State

Employee Spotlight

Meet Mike Saunders

This month's Employee Spotlight showcases Puget Sound Regional Archivist, Mike Saunders.

What is your role at the State Archives?

I am a Regional Archivist. I manage the operations of the Puget Sound Branch Archives in Bellevue, provide records management advice, and do archival appraisal and transfer for local government agencies in King, Kitsap and Pierce County. I also do records management training for state and local government agencies, training on the basics of historical research for educators, students and the general public, and represent the State Archives on the Washington History Day Advisory Committee.



Mike Saunders, Puget Sound Regional Archivist

Do you have any tips on how to efficiently search the Archives?

Start in the library system by using secondary sources. They provide a context that will help you make sense out of the bits and pieces of information that you will find in primary sources, and those with the best footnotes and bibliographies will lead you to primary sources. Look for "Ask a Librarian" buttons on library websites. Reference librarians can help researchers save time and locate more valuable secondary sources. Once you are ready to use the primary sources in the State Archives, start by using the "Ask an Archivist" button that is displayed prominently all over our website. The most effective primary source research starts out with a conversation between the researcher and the archivist. This enables the archivist to focus on the collections that will be most valuable to the researcher.

If you could change anything about the Archives, what would it be?

I wish we had the staff to support opening our research rooms at least a few weeknights and Saturdays. Our restricted weekday search room hours pose a real barrier for many researchers.

If you could witness any historical event in Washington, what would you want to see and why?

I would like to go back to the Seattle World's Fair. As a 10-year-old, I was free to explore the fair for three or four hours. It was great to have that freedom, but I missed much of what the fair had to offer. I would have been better off with a little less freedom and a better idea what I should have taken the time to see.



Mike Saunders and State Archives staff, c. 1979.

What legacy would you like to leave at the Archives?

My legacy is the records that I have appraised and transferred that are now available for researchers to use and the growing public awareness and understanding of where those records can be found and how they can be used.

Describe which technology has affected your job the most.

Imaging technology and email enable us to provide records to researchers much faster and more efficiently.

What would people never guess you do in your role?

Help confused citizens locate and contact the government offices that they actually need.

What did you know about the Archives before working here?

I was steered into the archival profession in graduate school, so I knew enough to be almost useful when I actually started working here.

What has been your favorite project at the State Archives?

My favorite project was the design and construction of the Puget Sound Branch Archives. Very few archivists get the opportunity to participate in the development of a purpose-built archival facility. It was tremendously rewarding to work with the process from the point of finding a site to opening of a brand-new facility.

If you could interview one Washingtonian (dead or alive, non-family member), who would it be and why?

I would like to interview slain Seattle civil rights activist Edwin Pratt. Most of our significant historical figures have been able to speak pretty effectively for themselves through extensive writings or in interviews. Ed Pratt was gunned down outside his home in 1969. He was just 39. He had come to prominence in Seattle as Executive Director of the Seattle Urban League and was recognized as a promising young civil rights leader. What was his vision? How did he see us

bridging the racial divide that still exists today? Outside of just a few speeches and interviews, we can only guess.

What is the strangest thing you have ever discovered in your research?

One of the strangest collections that you will find at the Puget Sound Branch Archives is the Port of Seattle Frozen Fish Museum Photographs. The Port operated this "museum" in the 1930s and 1940s at its Spokane Street Cold Storage Warehouse. Fish, octopi, eels and rays found in ships' holds were frozen and put on public display. Classes from Seattle Public Schools, bundled up against the cold of the freezers, regularly toured the museum. One photo shows the "curator" in coveralls with half a cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth, holding (bare-handed) a frozen moray eel that spiraled straight up in the air.



Mike Saunders preparing a table for an event.

What 3 words would you use to describe the State Archives?

Unrecognized, undiscovered, rich.

If you could go back in time to give advice to your 18-year-old self, what would it be?

Be more curious and more venturesome.

Did you do anything for the holidays?

Just gathered with friends and family.

What is the first thing you would buy if you won the lottery?

Peace and quiet, if only...

What would be the title of your autobiography?

Who, Me?

If you had a talk show, what would it be called, who would be your first guest, and what would you most want to ask him or her?

Title: "If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say, Come Sit by Me" Guest: Alice Roosevelt Longworth
Question: "Why did your brothers never amount to as much as your cousin?"

Tell about a time you took a huge leap of faith.

In 1979, the State Archives took over two buildings at an abandoned junior high school in the North Clear Zone of Sea-Tac Airport because we had no space in our system to take in significant collections from the large agencies in King County. Over the next 19 years we managed to keep those buildings from falling down and built up 11,000 cubic feet of archival collections from agencies in King, Kitsap and Pierce counties and were able to make the case for the construction of the Puget Sound Branch Archives facility that we have today.

How would your friends describe you?

You would have to ask them. Happily, they haven't shared that description with me.