

Out of the Archives

a newsletter from the Washington State Archives

November 2016



Employee Spotlight

Meet Ben Helle

This month's Employee Spotlight showcases Olympia Branch Archivist, Ben Helle.

What is your role at the State Archives?

I handle a variety of public and agency research requests and assist in several digital preservation projects to ensure online access to maps, photographs and documents. I also work on [October's Washington Archives Month](#) which celebrates the value of our historical records in Washington and promotes collections at several archives across the state.

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

The [Digital Archives](#) is, of course, our best starting point. Also, our [Collections Catalog](#) holds many more records that can be accessed here in Olympia and at our regional archives. We have a great reference staff that can help, too. Give us a call or send us an email—we can help!

Describe which technology has affected your job the most.

Social media has been extremely beneficial in the past year where we can share documents, photographs and items that are found buried in the collections. Recently, I came across a file labeled "Sasquatch" in the Governor Dan Evans Papers which, not surprisingly, drew my interest. Turns out, in the early 1970s there was great concern for sasquatchii rights – someone had announced a hunt for the beast – so the staff decided to have a little fun and designate Sasquatch as the State Monster. It was too good not to share.

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

So. Many. Boxes. But once you get the chance to look inside these boxes, you'd be amazed what you might find. Last month, I found a negative that was identified as "MSH 1986" but was mislabeled. Turns out it was a 1980 photograph of State Patrol Chief Robert Landon and Harry Truman of the Spirit Lake Lodge at the foot of Mount St. Helens. In May of that year, Landon attempted to talk Truman into leaving the lodge, but was unsuccessful. Twelve hours later the volcano erupted and the lodge and Truman were lost. This may be one of the last photos taken of Truman.



Before working at the Archives, what was the most interesting job you've ever had?

I worked for nine years at the Ohio Historical Society and State Archives where I worked in several positions, including manuscripts curator and acquisitions archivist. I had the opportunity to acquire several collections, including personal letters of author Zane Grey, Civil War diaries and artifacts, and records of the Ohio Bicentennial Commission. Ohio has a rich history and I worked with some of the most important manuscripts that documented its heritage.

What legacy would you like to leave at the Archives?

I often take the opportunity to take photographs of events, festivals, and celebrations across the state, including Hoquiam's Logger Playdays, Olympia's Processions of the Species, Canoe Journeys, and the Scottish Highland Games in Enumclaw. They are the type of photographs I hope might be enlightening to future Washingtonians about what we celebrate today.

What has been your favorite project at the State Archives?

The Washington State Quasquicentennial was the 125th anniversary of statehood. The State Archives worked with several heritage organizations, including The Washington State Historical Society, several state agencies, and the State Keepers of the Capsule, for a celebration at the Legislative Building on November 11, 2014. It was an occasion that allowed us to share some of our most important documents and photographs to a really receptive crowd that came to wish our state a happy birthday. And three days later, we welcomed our daughter, which was a real treasure and I'll always connect the two.

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

As a singular point in time in which Washington turned from a territory to a state, the November 18, 1889 inauguration in Olympia would have been something to record. We are only aware of about three photographs of the event, but I would love to have been there to take dozens more of the procession through town (decorated with evergreen boughs), the assembled dignitaries, the crowd, and inaugural ball.

