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# From the Archives & Museum of Optometry

## LOOKING FORWARD IN 2016

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**T**here is no time like the present to curate the past. In 2016, we are doing what needs to be done *today* to preserve and provide access to our holdings *tomorrow*. This means taking significant steps toward our goal of rehousing and digitizing our collections.

When I became the archivist and curator at the Archives & Museum of Optometry (AMO) in May of 2013, the repository was a remnant of the defunct International Library, Archives & Museum of Optometry (ILAMO). The circulating reference materials that had formed the core of the Library's services to members for more than 40 years had been de-accessioned in 2009. The electronic catalog was lost and the staff of five, full-time librarians had been reduced to one part-time Heritage Services Specialist. The institutional memory held by the last librarian, Linda Draper (Figure 1), was lost to us with her retirement in 2012.

The condition of the archival collections was poor. A portion of the AOA records—the House of Delegates proceedings and Board of Trustees meeting minutes—had been minimally processed and housed in acid-free boxes and folders. However, materials in boxes were often inconsistent, poorly arranged and museum items were housed together with paper records. Other media were at-risk of deterioration or obsolescence. Finding aids took many forms; none were comprehensive, conformed to archival standards nor were they up-to-date. No procedures for basic archival management existed and policies were rudimentary. Accessions to the collections were sporadic and idiosyncratic. Many unprocessed donations accepted throughout the decades were little more than random collections of ephemera or unrelated material of unknown provenance.

The museum objects, once on display throughout the AOA Headquarters and featured in publicity pieces for the Library, were poorly curated. Several attempts at cataloging appear to have been taken up and then abandoned. Connecting an incomplete set of donation records with artifacts was all but impossible. A large portion of the collection was in off-site storage, some remained in exhibit cases inside the small repository, and still other objects were in random boxes on shelves in a non-climate controlled storage closet. Objects were subject to improper handling and movement by staff and visitors.

We have set the stage for better preservation. Last year, we consolidated materials, devised a system for inventory and implemented a cataloging system. We no longer allow untrained and unsupervised handling and removal of our holdings. However, the move in August brought home the need to step up our preservation efforts. The prospect of a

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brand new facility in the AOA Headquarters also provided a deadline for achieving greater accessibility. Therefore, in 2016 we aim to provide preservation housing for a significant portion of our collection and to bring those collections online.



*Figure 1: Librarian Linda Draper demonstrates the use of the Cameron's Syntonizer (2015.FIC.0166), 1974. Draper retired after nearly 40 years of service; she was on staff during critical transitions in the history of the repository. The Archives & Museum of Optometry. Unprocessed images.*

## PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

Designing storage that ensures preservation and facilitates access for researchers presents a unique challenge for curators of diverse collections such as ours. In 2016, volunteers and staff at The Archives & Museum of Optometry are paying special attention to preservation and access both for our physical *and* for our electronic resources. As we inventory and document our collections, not only must we ensure that our three-dimensional objects and media are protected from damage, but also that our born-digital and digitized records are not at-risk of obsolescence and deterioration.

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## Housing Museum Objects for Long-Term Preservation

One way to house physical collections safely while also providing access is to segregate collection storage into classes of material determined by both function and form. Last year our University of Missouri St. Louis Museum Studies Intern, Sarah Budai, conducted an inventory of our large diagnostic and therapeutic instruments which are primarily composed of iron and copper alloy. Housing for these materials, which are at once heavy (20-50 lbs.), delicate and uniquely shaped, needed to be sturdy and secure, but also provide viewing and identifying objects easily with minimal handling.

We solved our housing challenge with adjustable, open shelving of inert, baked-enamel and dust covers which provides both protection and compact storage (Figure 2). Objects with moving parts, decorative elements and odd shapes can be arranged on open shelving to maximize the use of space. Dust covers of untreated, washed muslin can be used to cover shelving and keep objects clean. Artifacts are photographed prior to storage and these photographs are made available to researchers and exhibitors to minimize the necessity for physical handling. If a researcher or exhibitor does need physical access to an object, it can be easily located by matching the location and unique object identification number in the PastPerfect database with the Tyvek tag attached to the object.



*Figure 2: Open storage of large instruments saves space and provides protection for and access to objects. The Archives & Museum of Optometry's Off-Site Storage, August 2015. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

This winter Budai is working her way through our eyewear collection, which includes spectacles, lorgnettes, monocles, quizzers, pince-nez, industrial and sporting goggles, and a multitude of specialized objects that illustrate innovation in technology, treatment and our understanding of vision correction, health and safety. By treating this

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class of objects separately, she is able to ensure that objects with similar function, size and material composition are housed together. Eyewear is housed in acid-free trays lined with inert Ethafoam® which are then stacked in acid-free boxes made from strong B-flute archival board (Figure 3). This method allows both efficient individual storage for each object and safe segregation of material to prevent damage from contact with other objects that may have corrosive properties.

More than 3,000 pieces (approximately 50 cubic feet) including cases will be photographed, assigned numbers, and cataloged into our PastPerfect database. As with the larger objects, photographs and catalog records are made available to researchers and access, if necessary, is easy to accomplish.



*Figure 3: A single cubic-foot box provides protection for approximately 60 pairs of glasses. August 2015. Photograph courtesy of the author*

## **Digital Preservation and Access**

In January the Foundation signed a contract with *Preservica* to ensure that our digital resources are preserved and accessible in the long-term. Preservica is a digital archival system (DAS) and trusted repository that automates the migration of electronic records and other digital objects into a preservation format, provides consistent monitoring of material for deterioration or “bit rot” and employs geographic distribution and redundancy in Cloud storage to protect against environmental threats. The system also allows us to provide access to our resources online through a Wordpress website. This year, in addition to placing images of our museum objects online, we will begin digitizing our large collection of thousands of print photographs for preservation and exhibition (Figure 4).

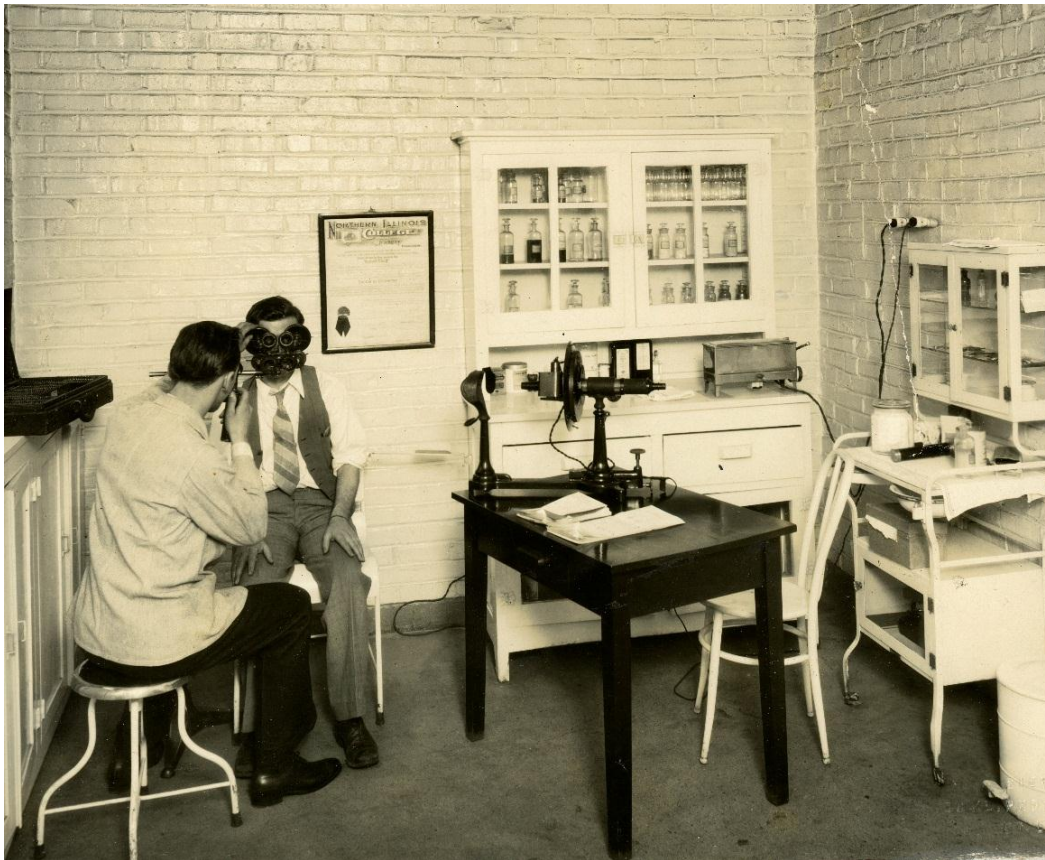


Figure 4: *Workplace Vision, circa 1940. Example of uncatalogued historical black & white print that will be digitized and available online by the end of 2016. The Archives & Museum of Optometry.*

## **Beyond Access: Public Education and Exhibition**

Public education is a critical mission for all museums and we continue to search for ways to exhibit our archival materials and museum objects to diverse crowds. Our unique objects do not often find a home in exhibits frequented by the general public, but this year we are entering into an informal partnership with the St. Louis Science Center (SLSC) to feature antique ophthalmic instruments and devices in a variety of contexts. In this way, we will be able to expose children of all ages, educators and families about vision science, eye care and how optometry contributes to science, healthcare and culture.

On February 19, 2016, the Science Center installed an exhibit of our objects to be featured in their *First Friday* event on March 4. This event, entitled “Steampunk Science,” is one in a series of themed evening exhibitions that seek to expose the “science behind science-fiction”<sup>1</sup>. *Steampunk* is a science-fiction literary and artistic genre that uses Victorian- and Edwardian-era material culture as motifs and elements of setting.<sup>2</sup>

A staple of Steampunk costuming and art are late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century eyewear, including railroad and safety goggles, pince-nez, and tinted, mutli-lens spectacles modified in fantastic ways. Technology powered by springs, gears, and other simple machines but embellished with decorative elements are also a critical element of the Steampunk lexicon.<sup>3</sup> Our collections includes many diagnostic and therapeutic

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instruments from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century that fully embody these characteristics.

The era of steam engines and factories was one of great innovation in optometry. The increased regulation of industry gave rise to an interest in eye protection for factory workers.<sup>4, 5</sup> The automation of manual tasks increased the need for skilled workers with improved visual acuity and literacy became more common among the working class.<sup>6,7</sup> Optometrists and their optical partners stepped into the public health arena to provide solutions for the new challenges of the industrial era. The proliferation of optical devices and instruments between 1880 and 1920 explains the presence of eyewear in Steampunk fashion, but the union of function and form in these objects what has captured the imagination of the Steampunk movement. <sup>8, 9</sup> Artist John Coulthart whose numerous Steampunk illustrations (Figure 5) feature eyewear observed:

The Steampunk genre makes a point of exposing the machinery of the industrial world that is now largely obsolete, hence the fetish for wearing bits of machinery. Spectacles, goggles and other eyewear are a convenient way of attaching machinery to the human face.<sup>i</sup>



*Figure 5. John Coulthart's first Steampunk piece (2008) "features a device that's a combination of goggles and a pair of outside optician's frames" (2016). Image provided courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.*

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The exhibit features two cases of objects (Figure 6). Staff members were joined by Dr. Joseph C. Castellano and his brother Nick Castellano, a fourth-year student at the University of Missouri's College of Optometry, to facilitate hands-on activities and to interpret the materials. The Science Center estimates that we had as many as 3,000 visitors on March 4 and we were very busy assisting visitors in trying on replicas of antique glasses and interacting with the Castellanos about the history of optometry. We



*Figure 6. The Archives & Museum of Optometry's "Steampunk Science" Exhibit at the St. Louis Science Center. February 22, 2016. Photo courtesy of the author.*

are very excited to offer this exhibit and to embark on this partnership with such a popular tourist attraction and recreational destination. Furthermore, it was a wonderful way to engage young optometrists and students in promoting the history of the profession. Our objects occupy a distinctive place at the nexus of science, technology and culture history and it is rare to have an opportunity to display and describe their importance. The exhibit will stay on display at the Science Center until June 30, 2016.

## CONCLUSION

This year we are gaining traction in our preservation and access efforts that should propel us forward. I am hopeful that this early inertia will place us in a position to embark on new activities in 2017. We encourage the Optometric Historical Society members to continue their mission with our repository in mind. Original research on objects and archival materials held in our repository will only improve the visibility and viability of The Archives & Museum of Optometry. Donations not only of archival and museum objects but also financial support for our preservation efforts are a key component of any

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archival and museum program. The membership of the OHS is the AMO's conduit to support for all of our efforts. Together, the AMO and the OHS can ensure that the history of the profession is always in focus.

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<sup>i</sup> John Coulthart, e-mail message to author, January 17, 2016