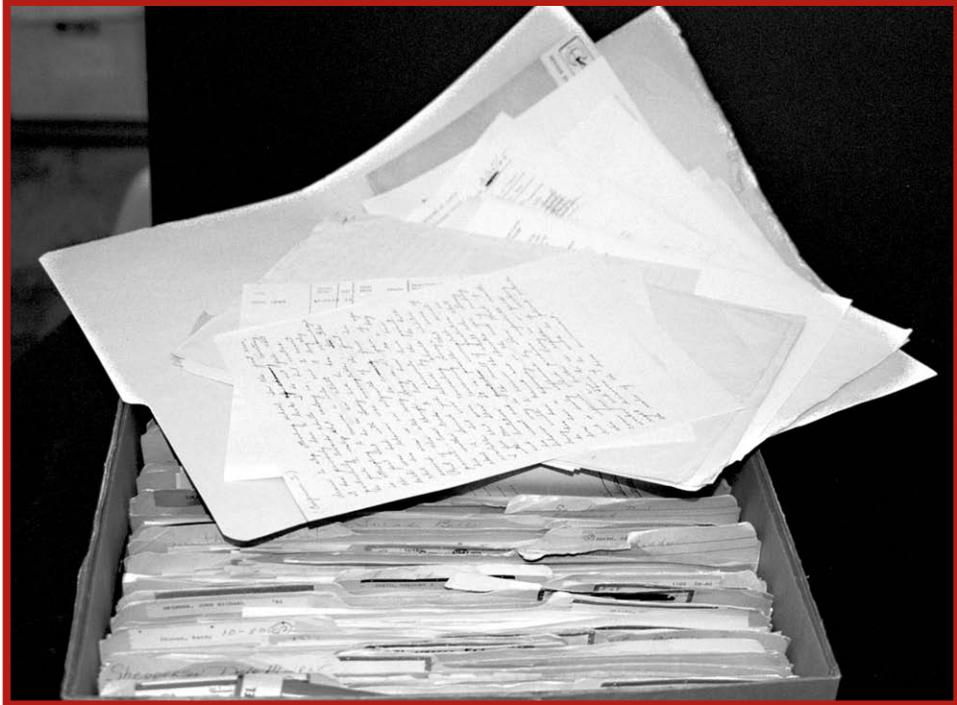


So you  
have a box  
of papers...

A quick lesson on  
Archives and Manuscripts.



## identification

*So you have a box of papers?  
Then the first order of business  
is to identify what they are. Detective  
skills are handy!*

*Archives* are records of long-term value from a public office or private organization. *Manuscripts* are the personal letters, diaries, and other papers commonly kept by an individual or family.



photo courtesy Wyoming State Archives

## **identification**

Records are important because they tell the story of who we are as individuals, families and communities. Photographs and manuscripts can provide a glimpse of where we come from and how we got to be who we are. Business and government records can tell us what we value as a society. Taking the time to identify your box of papers ensures that the stories contained within are not forgotten and are factual.



## **identification**

Basic identification requires figuring out who created the papers, along with where and when. This information is called the paper's *Provenance* and it is important to write it down and keep it with the papers. If it is decided that the papers are worth keeping for historic, legal, personal, or other reason, then they will need to be arranged, described, and preserved.



photo courtesy Wyoming State Archives

## arrangement

*To sort or not to sort...  
that is the question!*

Whether 'tis nobler to preserve *Original Order* of the papers, or to assiduously rearrange everything so as to bring order out of chaos? Well...that depends on what you have. If your box of papers contains neat file folders created according to an existing filing system, then the best advice is not to disturb its arrangement.



## **arrangement**

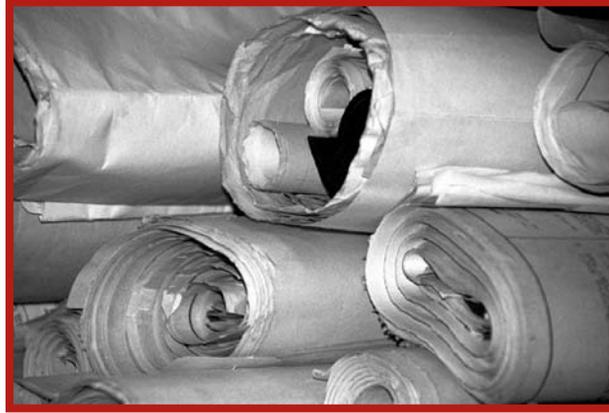
This allows access to the files in the manner originally intended, and provides clues as to what information was considered important. Rearranging the contents of established files would harm their original order, and so it is not encouraged. But, if your box of papers is a jumbled mass of paper without any discernible order, then you will need to spend time figuring out how they should be organized.



photo courtesy Wyoming State Archives

## **arrangement**

Arrangement can be by whatever manner seems best for a given group, i.e. alphabetical, chronological or by subject. Consistent order is important for whichever organizing principle is used. File folders are the universal means of grouping papers together.



## description

*Once you have an arrangement, whether original or imposed, a description of that arrangement is very useful.*

The first step is to make sure that each file folder used has a title. When the file folders are then put into a box or file cabinet drawer, a list of the file folder titles then becomes the basis for making a *Finding Guide* to the *Collection* of papers that has been arranged. At this point a name and/or number can be given to your collection — useful if you have more than one collection.



## **description**

If your box of papers is all that you have, as is common for personal manuscripts, then add your provenance information to the list to complete a simple finding guide. If your papers are part of a larger archival collection, then the provenance information for your box should make clear that they are part of a larger set of related papers. Often large sets of related papers, or *Series*, are all described together in a master finding guide.

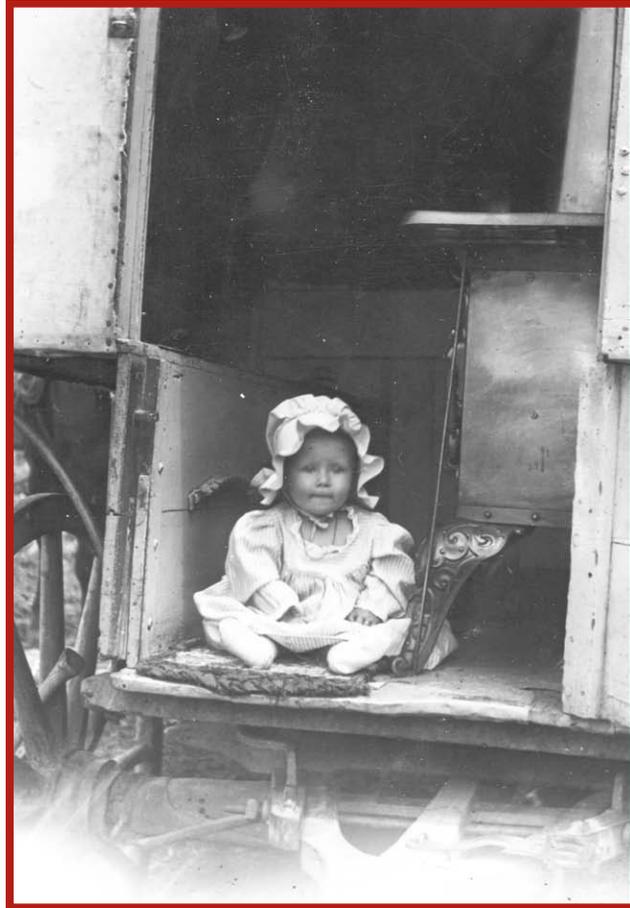


photo courtesy Wyoming State Archives

## preservation

*Knowing which documents to retrieve and where to find them is of little advantage if the records deteriorate to the point that they can't be used.*

Once your collection of papers has been arranged and described, *Preservation* becomes an issue. In an institution, there should be a place designated as an *Archives* or *Records Center* that is secure, out of direct sunlight, and of stable room temperature and humidity. File cabinets are often used and eliminate the need for loose boxes.



## **preservation**

*Acid-free* boxes (using acid-free folders for papers to be kept forever) are easy to use and to transport, but they do need appropriate shelving. In the home environment, a safe place in a house at room temperature is the norm. This means: don't store papers in overheated attics, damp basements, or unheated outbuildings.

**The following organizations or websites can provide more detailed information on preserving and protecting historical records, and about archival and records management principles:**

**Wyoming State Archives**, Cheyenne, WY, 307-777-7826,  
e-mail: wyarchive@state.wy.us – <http://wyoarchives.org>

**Wyoming State Library**, Cheyenne, WY, 307-777-6333,  
e-mail: refdesk@state.wy.us – <http://www-wsl.state.wy.us>

**American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming**,  
Laramie, WY, 307-766-4114, e-mail: ahc@uwyo.edu – <http://ahc.uwyo.edu>

**Wyoming Chapter of ARMA International or ARMA International**  
<http://www.armawyoming.org> or <http://www.arma.org>

**Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists** – <http://www.srmarchivists.org>

**National Archives and Records Administration** – <http://www.archives.gov>

**National Historical Publications and Records Commission**  
(NHPRC), 202-501-5610, <http://www.archives.gov/nhprc>

**National Park Service- Conserve-0-grams**  
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservoogram/conserv.html>

**American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works**  
<http://www.conservation-us.org>

**Council of State Archivists** – <http://www.statearchivists.org/index.htm>

**Wyoming Press Association**, Cheyenne, WY, 307-635-3905,  
e-mail: wyopress@wyopress.org – <http://www.wyopress.org>

**Wyoming Association of Municipalities**, Cheyenne, WY,  
307-632-0398, e-mail: wam@wyomuni.org – <http://www.wyomuni.org>

Other self-helps are available on the State Historical Records Advisory Board's website, including the resource notebook, "Managing Papers – Recommended Practices for Wyoming Historical Records". – <http://wyoarchives.state.wy.us/shrab>



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# **ARTS. PARKS. HISTORY.**

Wyoming Department of State Parks & Cultural Resources

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