Erik Nordberg

CONVERSATIONS

Although every college or university has a library, fewer support an archival program with professional staff and storage. And while many academic archives collect historical material about their campuses, a minority have significant holdings relating to their communities or regions. Michigan Technological University is one of a handful of institutions in Michigan that has both. Erik Nordberg, who has managed Michigan Tech's archives since 1997, sat down recently with *Michigan History* Editor Patricia Majher to talk about his work.

MH: To set the stage for our readers, please explain the difference between a library and an archives.

EN: Libraries, for the most part, collect and share published material. This can be traditional printed items such as books, magazines, and newspapers or digital media like databases, e-books, or web content. Although archives often include book collections and use digital media to share their collections with a wider audience, most are built around manuscript collections. These are one-of-a-kind, original documents created by people, institutions, and organizations. Because they were made by the people who actually witnessed events, we refer to them as "primary documents" and we place more trust in them as evidence of what happened in history.

MH: When did Michigan Tech develop its archives and what prompted this action?

EN: The first manuscript material came into our campus library in the 1930s and 1940s. Because Michigan Tech started as a mining school, some of these early collections were personal papers of alumni who had distinguished careers in the industry. Other collections, such as the records of the Arctic Coal Company, were accepted because they documented mining activity in other countries and would be useful in educating student engineers. In the 1960s, when the area's last copper mines closed, two of our librarians—Bob Patterson and Dave Thomas—

realized that something should be done to secure important records documenting the Keweenaw's varied history, and that Michigan Tech was likely the best institution to do that. Patterson and Thomas worked to set aside space for a local history collection in the new library being built at the time, and they were ultimately responsible for Michigan Tech hiring its first professionally trained archivist in 1978.

MH: What sorts of materials can be found in your archives today?

EN: Copper mining was the region's most significant historical activity, so it's no surprise that the records of mining companies—big and small—form an important segment of our holdings. We also have manuscript material from social and fraternal organizations, diaries and firsthand accounts of local residents, and records of a variety of other business enterprises, including quarrying, retailing, and maritime industries. We serve as a regional depository for the Archives of Michigan, and hold public records for six counties in the Western Upper Peninsula, including court documents, immigration and naturalization records, jail records, and property assessments.

Of course, we also collect information about Michigan Tech: its programs of study, faculty, students, athletics, buildings, and campus life.

MH: And what is your role in all of this?

EN: The nice thing about being an archivist in a smaller shop is that you get to be involved in every aspect of the operation. For instance, I recently spent an afternoon digging through abandoned records in an old mining building trying to figure out what might be brought into our collection. I also spend time writing grant applications to fund our work and do a fair amount of speaking, encouraging the public to take advantage of our programs and services. But I enjoy working with researchers in our reading room the most. There's so much satisfaction in helping people find the right resources to inform their research. And listening to their questions helps us figure out exactly what we should add to the archives.

MH: What are some of your most valued materials?

EN: The employment records from the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company immediately come to mind. It's amazing to see the details the company kept about each individual: job held, rate of pay, and the address of the company house they rented as well as personal information including date and country of birth, whether they were married or had children, and the reasons why they left the company (and sometimes where they went). These are obviously valuable to genealogists, but they're also of great interest to historians who track workplace and social issues relating to ethnicity, housing, and communities.

Another important collection came to us from our local newspaper, *The Daily Mining Gazette*, which donated thousands of photographs depicting Houghton in the 1950s and 1960s. Some people think that an archives only collects "really old stuff." But the *Gazette* material covers almost every aspect of our local community for a period that isn't exactly ancient history.

Finally, I'm always amazed at the variety of wide-format material we have, including maps, architectural blueprints, and engineering drawings. These graphic materials are incredibly rich in detail and give our patrons an unexpected spatial sense of things.

MH: Obviously, the Archives benefits the students, staff, and faculty of Michigan Tech. What other kinds of researchers do you serve?

Opposite page: Courtesy of Ryan Holt Photography.
Above: The J.R. Van Pelt and Opie Library, site of the MTU archives, courtesy of Michigan Technological University Marketing and Communications.

EN: We see just about every imaginable type of patron. We have local homeowners doing property history research, often trying to find information that will help them restore their historic homes. Every year—usually during the few months we don't have snow—we host hundreds of genealogists who are seeking to connect someone on their family tree to a local town or mining location. We have scientists interested in Lake Superior and the flora and fauna of the Keweenaw and Isle Royale, geologists planning the next start-up mining operation, and structural engineers who are rehabilitating old buildings for new uses. The Archives also serves as a sponsor for Michigan History Day, so we see a fair number of students from area schools here performing research to develop exhibits and other History Day projects.

MH: What about long-distance researchers? Can they take advantage of your resources?

EN: Starting in the late 1990s, we began to receive an increasing number of requests for digital scans of images. About the same time, we were exploring ways to use the web to look at the different ethnic groups that have lived in this area. So we kind of mashed the two ideas together and used funding from the Michigan Humanities Council to develop our "Interior Ellis Island" website and—in support of that—the Keweenaw Digital Archives. Although the content of the digital archives is mainly photographs from the Copper Country and Michigan Tech, we've added documents and maps when researchers have requested duplications. We went online with it in 2006 and recently added our 10,000th image.

We had more than 1.7 million hits on the site during 2010, so it's clear that people like it. This is just a small start for the Copper Country history we plan to share online in the future.