

Helene Williams

LIS 590 A: Directed Fieldwork

3 January 2024

### How to Fall Upwards: Reflection Upon My Internship at the Pacific Northwest Railway Archive

To begin, I want to declare how lucky I feel to be completing this reflection, and also how ashamed I am to be putting this course behind me. Foremost, lucky to be alive and well, but ashamed to have collected three university credits and completed my 150 hours depending upon the grace of other people. While I did the work required of me, there was certainly no method to my madness, and my behavior has been erratic and extremely unprofessional. My reflection and the delayed submission of my final assignments relates both to the weeks I spent bolting ten kilometers in driving rain at two in the morning or passed out over twenty hours on my couch, and also the weeks I spent unfurling sixty-foot track profiles or interviewing railroad telegraphers. My host site, the Pacific Northwest Railway Archive, is only about six blocks from my house. It was one of the few opportunities offered to UW students this quarter with a stipend. Archival sciences is my expressed passion, and I flew through the interview phase this summer with early acceptance. Everything should have been perfect. Perhaps due to all the times I spent in great health, I often forget about my disability until it is too late. This new quarter is a new chapter, but regrettably I remain sick. But the archive, nor UW, has seen the last of me yet.

At the archive, my duties were manifold. Everyday tasks switched hourly, but usually included naming files according to internal digitization standards, unboxing and scanning maps and mechanical drawings, digitizing and labeling film slides, debriefing with staff and volunteers, assisting users with technical difficulties, greeting guests, deaccessioning records, and consulting seasoned members for information about specific railroad signatures or engine

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features. Four big projects defined my 14-week internship: I performed a research assessment and listening tour to gather buy-in for a new digitization file naming standard I created, I scoured archive collections to develop and publish a set of uniform and Linux-compliant .XLSX templates (photomedia, ephemera, railroad documents, and drawings) for broad use, I restored, curated, and preserved a large box of unidentified slides using my own templates, and I am continuing to develop a six-part Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan, which will become a poster on every door of the archive. The thing that I loved the most about my internship has been the company—I grew up with my grandparents, who are now eighty, and laughing along with the other archive members as I learned about their fascinating career lives has made me feel that I am part of a lively community of kindred intellectuals. It's the main reason I will stay.

The transferable skills gained from this internship are enormous and indispensable. Not only am I an absolute wizard of Microsoft Excel now, but I am proficient with wide-format scanning, restoration of documents using archival tapes and Adobe Photoshop, as well as a deep wealth of customer service skills. The Pacific Northwest Railway Archive, being the overhead of five Railway Historic Organizations, struggles intensely with conflicting interests. What the Great Northern Railroad representatives consider useful metadata, the Northern Pacific and Seattle and North Cascades people likely think is frivolous. There's even a pejorative for those who are overly particular about trains—"foamers". That word was thrown around constantly when I was trying to tease out concessions from RHO leaders to build my templates and digitization policies.

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Towards diversity, equity, and inclusion—or the iSchool’s IDEAS (which I personally prefer as a disabled student)—I deeply feel that my internship has bridged gender, age, ability, and technology in a meaningful way. For fourteen weeks, and moving into the future, I might talk shop with deaf ninety-eight year olds, restart computers for those reared on World War Two ration stamps, and operate box lifts with recent stroke survivors. My Emergency Preparedness Plan is heavily centered on health emergencies and disability. However, my job is to bring tangible history (mainly maps and railroad documents) into the hands of all demographics via the Internet, foremost by publishing usable data and managing an accessible and navigable website. My templates are WCAG compliant, and I will continue to work with the PNRA website to move it towards screen reader compatibility through OCR and Alt Text. My course on XML with Elli Mylonas, LIS 542, prepared me well for that, as well as Ricardo Gomez’ LIS 570 and my LIS 590 experience with the Open Access Digital Theological Library last summer. My work this quarter has been almost entirely dedicated to access and diversity—to information and of information, and to people and of people. Because of how deeply that mattered to me, it was extremely difficult to take a break due to my own disability.

Yesterday was my final day on contract at the Pacific Northwest Railway Archive (although I will certainly continue volunteering) so my supervisor Dean O’Neill took me to Panda Express as part of intern tradition. He told me that I possess indomitable will and I am highly effervescent, but that members of the archive have grown very tired of my pressured speech and manic disposition, and that I should take a few weeks at home recovering before

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continuing to volunteer. I understand this better than anyone, and he said it with kindness and goodwill, but it was deeply hurtful to receive with a smile. Years go by, and I struggle to cope with the fact that my bipolar, even when treated to the best of the UW Medical Center's ability, presents more like schizophrenia than depression or anxiety. So every guardian, friend, partner, sister, mentor, or teacher who puts their hand on my shoulder and tells me with love that I am incapable of working a standard job breaks my heart a little. Dean has been an absolute superhero in building me up with patience as I learn new skills, but he has seen my lowest and has concerns like many others. Personally, I will always contribute to the best of my ability, however many walls I hit, and I will be getting my degree this June. Sometimes, mistakes happen, but I learn from them and exchange that wisdom for skills. From Dean and the Pacific Northwest Railway Archive, I have not only gained relevant archiving and digital preservation experience, but a lesson in workplace professionalism and crisis response. My experience during this Directed Fieldwork has been incredibly challenging, but also heartening, as I have discovered a secret locus of culture in my neighborhood to which I may always return. I've missed so many days I was scheduled to arrive—but I'll be back next Tuesday to scan more maps, and the Tuesday after that!

Thank you, Helene, for your faith in me during this time. Never has my daily life been so challenging as this recent episode, but I walk away with increased education about myself, others, and the professional environment. You are a gifted teacher, and I am fortunate to have worked with you in any capacity. Your continued enthusiasm means the world to me.