

Toward Personal Digital Archives

Theo Armour ~ 2025-01-19

Introduction

I am an older man who leads an interesting life with an interesting family background. I like to think that, just as many of my ancestors have done, I've made a positive impact on the world.

For fifty years, I have collected documents, images, photos, slides and negatives, drawings, and objects that tell the story of my life and the lives of my family.

It is now time to get much of this material digitized and shared with people who will appreciate it—now and forever.

Current Status

While many documents have already been scanned, the great majority of the images and objects have not. They are currently stored in a 10' x 20' storage unit in San Francisco.

Many of the documents are in binders and boxes, kept in folders and envelopes. The major task is to extract the actual documents from whatever they are stored in and to prepare them for sending off to be scanned.

Planning

My thought is to have somebody who has managed this sort of process come to the storage unit, take a look at what is there, and prepare a proposal for how to proceed.

The actual preparation might be carried out by workers under the manager's supervision.

Content Overview

Much of the material is of little interest, such as old telephone bills. However, there are many gems, such as the letters my father wrote to my mother during World War II.

In general, I prefer to be a keeper rather than a thrower-away. However, I am open to suggestions. Personally, I find a telephone bill from the 1970s to be quite fascinating, and I wonder what a historian five hundred years from now will think of it.

Estimating the Work

I have difficulty estimating the number of items that need to be scanned. However, the number that comes to mind is around a hundred boxes, each with about a hundred items—10,000 items in total. It is unlikely to be twice that number or half that.

Next Steps

What happens after the items are scanned and online is another matter. I have some ideas, but I am open to suggestions. In any case, I plan to devote much time to cataloging and curating the project in the coming years.

In my dreams, the effort becomes some kind of extended reality timeline. Ultimately, I hope the project becomes a way to help people design interesting lives of their own.

Open Access

For the information in such a repository to be truly useful, to have agency, and to provide benefit, it must be freely accessible to all. This is the only way that the information can be used to help people design interesting lives of their own.

My intent is to make all the information readily available and editable by hosting it on public repositories like GitHub and backing it up on the Internet Archive.

Creating the How-To Guide

There is little guidance available on how to undertake a project like this. I plan to create a how-to guide that will be freely available to all. This will be a living document, updated as new information becomes available on how to digitize and share personal archives, who to contact, what to do, and what not to do.

Potential Partners

Large libraries are often collectors and maintainers of notable personal archives. There must be people who go to individuals' homes and offices to collect and assemble material into boxes. Any insights on this approach would be appreciated.