

# 100 Years of Resource Stewardship Mount Rainier's Archives Project

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**O**n a clear day the phrase, “the mountain is out” can be heard throughout Washington’s Puget Sound. It can mean only one thing. Mount Rainier is visible today. For days, sometimes even weeks in the gray winter, Mount Rainier will remain hidden. Then suddenly, the mountain appears from behind the clouds. Mount Rainier is an icon to the people of the Pacific Northwest and a reminder of how much they love living in this special region. In 1999, we celebrate Mount Rainier’s centennial as our nation’s fifth national park. The park’s centennial provides not only an opportunity to enhance the public’s sense of resource stewardship but also a chance to focus public attention on the park’s rich cultural resources.

With the upcoming centennial in mind, a team of NPS curators came to Mount Rainier National Park in 1993 to survey the archives. It was obvious the park had a wonderful collection including textual materials, maps, architectural plans, lantern slides and photographs. Unfortunately, the collections were scattered throughout the park and access to the materials was difficult. If the park’s cultural resources were going to be celebrated in 1999, the archives had to be identified, processed and made available to both the park staff and the public. The park looked to nearby Western Washington University’s Graduate Program in Archives and Records Management for assistance and the Mount Rainier Archives Project was born. The project is a result of a cooperative agreement begun in 1995 between the NPS and Western with technical support provided by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)—Alaska Pacific Region (Seattle).

Phase one of the project was to identify materials of historic value for processing and microfilming. Over the years, the office of the superintendent maintained a central files in the administration building. These records were created by all park divisions including

Administration, Education, Natural and Cultural Resources, Maintenance, Planning and Professional Services and Visitor Protection and Resource Protection. After consultation with NARA and park staff, a decision was made to include some files, normally scheduled for disposal. The most significant addition in this category was the historic concessions records.

While some materials were not stored in ideal circumstances, including a bat infested attic and a leaky basement, overall the records were in fairly good physical condition. The biggest obstacle was the loss of provenance and original order for a large portion of the records. While it was clear the majority of records were created by park staff, additional information about the origin of the records was often difficult to establish. The materials were arranged after the fact using the current NPS filing system, even though a majority of the records was created earlier than the start of the system. The result was the loss of provenance. Some records transferred to the project did have clear provenance including the Superintendent’s Annual Reports and Summit Registers. Other collections were artificially created by park staff including the history collection that contained materials collected by park employees during research projects on park history. In each case, the project did not attempt to recreate the original order but maintained the existing order. A history of each collection was placed in the scope and content notes of the finding aid.

Another challenge during the early months of the project was park staff anxiety about removing materials from park offices into a central, archival repository. Would the materials still be accessible to park staff? Over time the park staff came to trust the project and realized that once the material was processed and microfilmed, everyone would have increased access to the archives. All the permanent textual collections were processed, stored in acid free folders and containers, and microfilmed by NARA. A copy of the microfiche was placed in the park’s library.

A finding aid, *Records of Mount Rainier National Park*, was prepared by project archivists, Nancy M. Shader and Reid Coen and published by the Government Printing Office (GPO) in 1998. The 117-page publication includes a brief administrative history, a folder level description of the materials in the archives, and a microfiche index. The GPO distributed one copy of the finding aid to every repository library in the United States. Soon the entire text of the finding aid will be placed on the park's web site.

Phase two of the Mount Rainier Archives Project addressed the park's substantial historical image collection containing over 14,000 photographs, negatives, and lantern slides. Since a majority of the images was already identified by the photographers, or other park staff, an item level inventory was created for each collection. The information was stored in a Microsoft Access database, which contained several fields including description, date, photographer, and subject. The database was developed prior to introduction of the upgraded NPS Automated National Catalog System (ANCS+) which has an image component. Knowing a database would make answering reference and media requests for historical images more efficient, the Access database seemed the best solution at the project's outset. Future plans include downloading digital images for a portion of the image collections and cataloging each archives and image record group into ANCS+.

Gaining physical and intellectual control over the archives led to an increased use of the records of Mount Rainier National Park. With each reference request (from the park staff or the

public) the project was able to provide a variety of materials. Extensive use of the Mount Rainier archives was made for the following centennial publications and projects:

- Archives and artifacts from the museum collection figured prominently in the Washington State History Museum (Tacoma) exhibit, "Sunrise to Paradise: The Story of Mount Rainier National Park" and its companion book by Ruth Kirk
- Archival records and historic image collections were used in the official centennial book, *Washington's Mount Rainier National Park: A Centennial Celebration* by Tim McNulty and Pat O'Hara
- Author Bruce Barcott used quotes from the park's summit registers in his book *Measure of a Mountain*.
- Historic images and motion picture film were integrated into the one-hour documentary, "Rainier: The Mountain," by KCTS (PBS-Seattle)
- Architectural plans and historic images were consulted in preparation of *100 Years at Longmire Village*, by Sarah Allaback, Victoria Jacobson, and Ronald Warfield which focused on a portion of the park's National Historic Landmark District
- Archival records and historic images were used during the restoration of the White River Patrol Cabin and for preparation of an upcoming, permanent NPS exhibit at the structure celebrating the history of the park's trail system

The Mount Rainier Archives Project is now in its third and final phase. During the next few months the project archivist will answer numerous reference requests and conduct outreach to promote both the archives and the Mount Rainier centennial. The project archivist will also work closely with the park and NARA to ensure the continued growth and management of the archives. Only through consistent records management will materials created today be available for researchers into the 21st century and beyond.

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"Summertime Sport in Paradise Valley" Publicity photo by the Rainier National Park Company, 1928.

