

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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Interviewee: Emily "Emy" Scherrer

Interviewer: Sophia Etier

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Sophia Etier: The first question I have is, can you please briefly describe your background in historic preservation as well as what you do at the Missoula Historic Preservation Office?

Emy Scherrer: Ya so I've worked for the City of Missoula as the Historic Preservation Officer for three years now. This is my first job as a historic preservation officer. But before that, I worked as the assistant to the historic preservation officer for Virginia City, Montana. Before that, I was in Eugene, Oregon where I got my Masters of Science in historic preservation. And also, during that time, I ran my own private consulting firm on preservation on people's house histories and creating documentation for customers.

SE: When was the first time you heard of COVID-19 and how did you react?

ES: I first heard about it, I believe it was December, November or December, in 2019, and I was just reading the news on NPR and I saw a small article about China and a new virus that was going around. Honestly, I didn't really react because at that time it wasn't a pandemic it was just limited to China. And then it just seemed to happen very, very fast. And the first time I really reacted was when it came to Washington state which is where I'm from and that got me, caught my attention about how this is spreading, and it's come to the US and it's come to the coast and it's only going to move inward. So, that's when I knew this was a big thing was when it hit Washington.

SE: Watching many historic preservation groups struggling to keep their heads above water due to limited funding and grant access during the pandemic, what do you foresee the long last impact of coronavirus being on historic preservation either at state or local level?

ES: So, I mean one thing that's always been challenging with historic preservation is funding. Um, especially government funding. There's not many private funding opportunities out there, so I imagine this is going to be pretty detrimental to our funding infrastructure. From the federal government and the state government, and especially the local government, because they are going to be hit really hard with caring for those in need and the impending economic collapse. So, I see this hitting preservation pretty hard, but that said, preservation is always resilient. It will always be resilient. It is one of the most resilient disciplines there is because preservation never goes away. There's always something to preserve and there's that identity and place to preserve in community, and also, things like that really bring communities together. So, if anything, there's that intangible that goes with it. So, if there's not that funding, there's still that community pride of being together and being how thankful we are in

protecting what we do have, even after global collapse. So, traditional funding will probably be scarce, but that's nothing preservation isn't used to.

SE: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted local preservation projects?

ES: Ya, so, before this I'll just use a specific example. We got an adapt and reuse ordinance passed which allows for private developers to adapt existing buildings into new uses and higher densities, and basically, incentivize the maintenance and upkeep and continued use of historic buildings. We had our first applicant apply and actually go through submitting their zoning application and working with the city and getting that going. And then COVID hit. And they had to pull back their application and reevaluate whether they had the funding to even continue with the project. So that was hard to see, um, just on a very basic level of seeing one of the first projects that we got going through that new incentive program not be able to fund it due to COVID and due to those economic circumstances. I know that some of their partners pulled out of the project due to COVID. It's not to say it's not gonna happen, but it did delay it and they're just taking a step back. So, on a local level, we're seeing things like that happening. You know, projects that were going to involve funding and private development funding are stalled right now. We've seen a slow down on all projects coming through the city and that's just because people are pretty shaky about where their finances are, and it does cost money to keep up buildings and to invest in them. So, those investments are definitely stalled and that's something that we've seen, you know, on a pretty big scale at the city in the last couple months.

SE: Has this pandemic given you the opportunity to start any new local preservation projects, and if so what?

ES: Ya so, one of those is actually this project which initially started with County Commissioner Dave Strohmaier and he put together a, kind of, a steering committee to gather practitioners in history around the community to meet and start documenting how our community responds to COVID through the government, through the schools, through the hospitals. Just community members, non-profits, City, County, and what our response to it was as a community. And that's really the first time that, you know since at least the [Missoula] City/County split which was back in the early 2000's, there's been such a hefty partnership of some many agencies that I've seen come together for the sake of documenting the future and archiving and working on history. And I think this kinda opened a lot of people's eyes that history is important. We're gonna- going through this and we're going through it every minute and that should be documented for the future, and if we don't, we're losing a lot of important information moving forward. So that was a really neat thing to come up, especially as it was brought to by the County Commissioner and government to devote time and effort to this. So, you know, one of the silver linings of COVID is that I think it really got a lot of people thinking about history and archives and our reactions and that all of this will be documented moving forward. How we react as a community and what we went through and learning from that for future impacts and pandemics and economic declines and anything that's going to happen, um, so this is kind of

Missoula County's first kind of opportunity to lead by example for history and for the benefit of history, and for documenting, which has always been kind of put on the back burner in the past. It was never a real priority in really any government, is to document what we did. So, that's been really special to see and inspiring.

SE: So, kind of reaching more broadly, with many preservation sites currently under threat of destruction worldwide due to forces, you know, like climate change, war, or the current pandemic, how do you foresee preservation adapting to these conditions in the coming decade?

ES: That's a great, great question and the inner historian in me is kicking in. It's often that you find the most well-preserved cities and sites and towns, are those that actually went through economic or social turmoil. Certainly not war zones, but you know, for example, cities in the West that relied on natural resource extraction which went away, they didn't have that new economic boom to build new buildings. So, all they really had was to preserve what was existing and that existing infrastructure. So, I'm hoping actually that this may in fact help our existing buildings and infrastructure, or at least lend a hand to the funding that we do have to work on what we already have instead of building new. Um, which you know, is recycling and reusing. It's been how we've built building since day one as humans. And this is going to be a huge lesson for America, in that, we need to start paying attention to what we do have if we don't have the wealth to create new. It's preserving what is existing. Um, so, that I'm really interested to see if that will happen this time. History always repeats itself and I could see that happening now. Butte is always a good example of that. And nationally, we're lucky because we do have so much existing infrastructure in the United States. Even in Montana and Missoula. So, it'll be a new lesson, and even kind of following other countries and following Latin America's examples of maintaining our infrastructure and our environment, in lieu of moving forward without, you know, that American ethos of new, new, new, new, new, new. Hopefully it's gonna be old, old, old, old, old, old. And that's a good thing in my mind, I think that's a good lesson to learn.

SE: Kind of touching on that, as Missoula suffers financially due to layoffs or stalls in employment, could preservation efforts be overshadowed by developers providing Missoulians much needed jobs?

ES: Can I read that one?

SE: Ya...right there. It's kinda like...could preservation efforts kind of be halted because developers would, you know, cause need for construction projects or you know...?

ES: You know that's...I'm going to say no. Only because there's so few preservationists here anyway. I mean you look at city/county, both offices of hundreds of people and there's only one person in preservation anyway, um, that I, to be quite honest, can't see it getting any lower than that. I'm happy to say that out loud. I mean, if they get rid of me, then that would be, that would be the lowest. That would be no one. So, I see it staying the same because hopefully they

won't get rid of me. I don't think, I don't think that we're gonna see the preservation efforts suffering just because we've always suffered so much in the past that we're used to it. We're resilient. It can't get much worse than what it is.

SE: From this point forward, how do you see, specifically the Missoula Historic Preservation Office, carrying on into the future?

ES: Well, this is a timely question because I'm actually submitting the Historic Preservation Office budget today and we've been so under budgeted and understaffed for so long, we've done so much in the past couple years that I'm putting a request in to actually get new staff. And that's also in lieu of the fact that we've proven that preservation is resilient no matter the economic conditions. It's never going to go away. We've created economic surplus just from the tours and from the incentives that we're providing. We're actually building economic development and we've shown that to the city. So, this will be the first time that we're putting in a request for bringing on an assistant HPO. Which is interesting that it's happening now when there's lot of layoffs going on, but I do think that because we've shown that no matter what and no matter what's going on in the world, preservation does make money and it always will. It's one of the most sustainable efforts out there. And, so moving forward, I think if anything, COVID is showing just how resilient preservation is, and that we're actually asking for more money right now during a pandemic, I think says a lot when we haven't asked for more money in years and years and years so.

SE: Just kind of touching on the Missoula tours side of this, um, while having to adhere to social distancing measures, how will the Unseen Missoula Tours be impacted by the current pandemic?

ES: It's majorly impacted. We've had many discussions on whether to even have them this year. Whether that's safe. Whether it's cost effective. We did decide that we are gonna have them and start them in late June. But that's taking in certain safety precautions. We're capping the tours at ten people per the state recommendations. They were at fifteen. Because that we're not gonna be bringing in as much revenue, so we're gonna have to, we did have two tour guides per tour, and now we're just gonna have one. So, it's not going to be as enriched of a tour, but we're going to be trying. We're requiring everyone to wear masks. Um, it's gonna be interesting with the six feet social distancing, but it's also kind of an experiment to see if people even sign up for them because we don't know if people are going to sign up. I know I would be hesitant to take a tour right now for anything. But we're also hoping that it could be something to get people out and about while social distancing and, again seeing what a great community and downtown we have already and investing in what we already have is what those tours are really all about. So, um, we're gonna try, we did have a few of the sites pull out just because they're not comfortable with people coming in which is completely understandable. One of those is the tunnel under the Dana Gallery, which is the coolest part, so we're trying to rework it so there's other really cool hidden spots this year. Hopefully, we'll be going into the Union Club and going through all the old union meeting rooms and Cranky Sam's, which just opened.

But, it has a huge impact on that. Huge impact. We'll see if, you know, if the program can even survive because programs like that are really dependent on funding and people paying to come and experience that and if we don't have anyone paying to come and see it, we won't be able to keep it going. So, we're taking a gamble with it, but fingers crossed.

SE: My last question is, is there anything you would like future generations or future listeners to know about this pandemic, either from a personal standpoint or from a historic preservation standpoint?

ES: I would say, I want to end this on a positive note, and watching our community respond locally and statewide, and even nationwide to some extent, on the community level of people working together, agencies joining to document such as the COVID-19 documentation program this is, has been one of the cooler things I've seen in my job. Again, I've never seen people from every agency come together for one thing until now and, that gives me hope and pride, and that you know, we are resilient, and we can get through this and we're a community that does really care. And we care about this place and we care about our people. And that's been proven to me through this so that would be that would be my lasting thing, is that, I'm proud of Missoula right now through COVID.

SE: Well, I think that's—

[End of Interview]