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Researching Environmental Justice

A Conversation

By Virginia C. Thomas and William W. LeFevre

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”¹ The concerns that arise in this complex environmental context extend beyond the scope of traditional legal research resources to include historical, social, scientific, and governmental documents that reside in unique archival collections.

Through the conversation² that follows, senior archivist William LeFevre of the Walter P. Reuther Library shares his experience and insights on how archival resources can provide essential support for legal researchers seeking to discover the foundations, background, and motivation underlying environmental justice concerns.

Thomas: Can you give some examples that would highlight the range of environmental justice cases and issues you’ve encountered in your experience as an archivist?

LeFevre: Well, I can, in fact. This is an area of intense interest to me simply because we’ve had so many patrons over our many years here in the Reuther Library who have been interested in issues having to do with environmental justice.

In our own collections, we have several really wonderful examples I’d like to highlight. First and foremost among those is the Thomas W. Stephens Papers.³ Stephens was a leading environmental justice attorney in Detroit who spearheaded the ultimately failed attempt to stop the Detroit garbage incinerator from being built. This is interesting from a historical standpoint, but also from the standpoint in 2014 as the areas around the incinerator are increasingly gen-

erated and people who have moved into the newly improved neighborhoods are very unhappy the incinerator is there. They have problems with, for lack of a better term, smell pollutants—it smells like garbage in the neighborhood—and toxins spewed into the air from the incinerator.

We also have the papers of Al Fishman,⁴ a leading Democratic operative in Michigan. Interestingly enough, his wife was a Radulovich, and you may remember the Radulovich Air Force case in the 1950s. Lt. Radulovich was denied an Air Force security clearance as a meteorologist because he associated with known Communists—the Communists being his father, who had once subscribed to a Communist newspaper; and his sister, who was Al’s wife. Al’s been a crusader on many fronts since the 1950s, but he certainly was a crusader in the Detroit area and greater Michigan for causes having to do with environmental justice, dealing with everything from waste removal to anti-nuclear power organizations in Michigan.

Our collections also include the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments collection.⁵ SEMCOG, as it’s called, is a multijurisdictional super-governmental organization that deals with large areas of infrastructure, including transportation, and the environment. The organization does big data studies on the area, and the collection is often mined by environmental activists and environmental lawyers to pinpoint

what goes on in the environment in both a macro and a micro sort of way; for example, to pinpoint changes caused by environmental toxins.

Thomas: So all their science and strategies are made available to researchers?

LeFevre: Yes. And then, certainly, there are charitable organizations like Focus: HOPE,⁶ which was concerned with the environmental justice issues in neighborhoods around its campus. The papers of Coleman Young⁷ and Jerry Cavanaugh⁸ as mayors of the city of Detroit and the papers of city council members Maryann Mahaffey⁹ and Mel Ravitz¹⁰ can be explored for environmental justice information.

Thomas: Haven’t labor unions taken a lead in identifying and pursuing environmental justice concerns that affect their memberships? Can you describe the types of content researchers might expect to find in their collections?

LeFevre: Yes, and, as you might guess, because we are the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at the Reuther Library, this is of particular interest to our staff archivists. One of the interesting things about trade unionism in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is that unions have traditionally been on the forefront of promoting not only major social and economic issues, but also issues dealing with the environment.

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Now, I'm thinking about a movie, *The China Syndrome*,¹¹ about a meltdown in a nuclear power plant in California. That film was based on a book from the early 1970s called *We Almost Lost Detroit*,¹² which was a history of the Fermi nuclear power plant disaster in which Fermi almost went critical. Because of the design of the plant, had there been a breach, Detroit would likely have been uninhabitable to this day.

Fermi is in Monroe County about 25 or so miles south of the city. When Fermi-I was being built by Detroit Edison, the chair was Walker Cisler, and he figures prominently in the book. He also figures prominently in the Reuther collections because the organization that led the fight against that nuclear power plant was the UAW, and it was a very personal fight for Walter Reuther, who thought it was just a fantastically bad place to build a nuclear power plant. This is just one example of how labor unions have fought against environmental dangers that could disproportionately affect their workers and the communities in which they lived.

Thomas: What are some of the other resources available in Michigan archives for investigating environmental justice issues?

LeFevre: Throughout Michigan there are a host of different repositories that should be considered when you are talking about researching environmental justice. Chief among them is the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan.¹³ And among the interesting collections there are the papers of most of the governors of the state of Michigan. Their stances and, more importantly, the replies to their stances—how Michigan citizens react to state action—can be found in this collection.

Thomas: Would those items largely comprise correspondence files?

LeFevre: Yes, correspondence files—not to be missed. And so the papers of William Milliken,¹⁴ James Blanchard,¹⁵ G. Mennen Williams,¹⁶ and others can be mined for that.

Other records that I find particularly useful for this research are the League of Women Voters records¹⁷ and its branch records, most of which reside in the Bentley Library. Since its inception, the league has been in the forefront of environmental issues. Its records on political candidates, both

successful and unsuccessful, and its views on environmental justice issues are telling, not only for what they reveal about individual candidates, but also for what was hitting the public eye at the time.

The Bentley also has papers of non-profit and private groups like Citizens for Alternatives to Chemical Contamination¹⁸ and Michigan Citizens Against Toxic Substances,¹⁹ two grassroots organizations that really battled to even the playing field when it came to chemical contamination of our air, water, and land.

On the regional level, city and county governments can be a great source of material.

Finally, one collection that is very dear to my heart is the Mary Sinclair Papers.²⁰ For anyone not familiar with Mary Sinclair, she was a leading environmental activist and anti-nuclear power activist in Michigan in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Among other things, she led the push to keep Consumers Power from opening a power plant in Midland and was ultimately successful. Her papers are very rich. In the 1970s, she was viewed as a bit of an outcast, fighting nuclear power before the Three Mile Island incident, when nuclear power was thought of as being a savior. Then, of course, after Three Mile Island, more people rallied to her side. She was one of the few—a voice in the wilderness—who was getting information that may not have been classified per se, but may have been tough to get out of companies and the government. It's good to see that archives around the United States collect the papers of people like her.

The records of the Michigan State Archives,²¹ especially the records of the various departments of state government, are broader than the Bentley's. For example, the Department of Agriculture conducts numerous studies on toxins and pesticides in soils. The Department of Transportation studies

the effects on the environment of automobiles and the various toxins they spew. The state conducts many environmental studies. Anytime there is a big road project, or if there is a question about opening a coal fire plant within a city or a proposal for a concrete ash project, the state generates environmental studies. These studies can be mined for their findings, but also for the public response.

On the regional level, city and county governments can be a great source of material. Grand Rapids, for one, has a city records center²² that has, among other things, the Sanborn Insurance maps that tell you about the insides of the various structures of the city buildings. It also has plat atlases that can be used to trace property ownership and even daily fire logs. There's nothing like a fire log to bring out information about what chemicals were used in an office building or plant. You're going to learn a lot more than what the public knew before there was a fire.

An interesting thing about the archival records in all these areas is that you can often take seemingly esoteric records and search them for a bunch of different data points beyond the primary purpose for which the records were created. The daily fire logs are a perfect example. When there's a fire in condos that were formerly a warehouse for automotive supplies, one of the things the log is going to reveal after the fact is the kinds of accelerants that were in the building in its earlier incarnation.

When you go to the Upper Peninsula, of course you have Michigan Technological University,²³ which is really one of the greatest resources on the history of mining—the iron and copper mines and the environmental impact those have had, the tailings, and the leaching of mercury and other substances that have been used to extract these metals.

Thomas: When your patrons, particularly legal researchers, ask for assistance with questions on environmental justice issues, what kinds of information do they bring to you?

LeFevre: There are two kinds of patrons, basically—those who have used archives before and have an idea of the kinds of things archives collect and how they disseminate that information, and those who

haven't used archives. Ultimately, especially as we get more content from our collections online, we see a shift from traditional researchers who know how to use finding aids and guides to researchers who don't necessarily know how to use these tools and don't have a good understanding of what we mean when we say we have the Coleman Young collection,²⁴ for example. Collection of what? And finding aids, though useful to the more experienced researcher, would be difficult for these individuals to use in interpreting where those subject headings might lead them.

Because of the way discovery works, lawyers tend to take a "big bucket" approach when they step outside of traditional legal research—it's a "vacuum up everything" sort of deal. Archivists can quickly help attorneys refine their search requests and zero in on specifically pertinent resources. I'll give you an example. If someone comes into our reading room and asks for everything we have in the Reuther on labor, I say, "Cancel Christmas, because we're going to be here for a while." Very quickly, we have to go from 75,000 linear feet of records down to a few boxes of records the individual needs. When a lawyer comes in to research a case involving a UAW union member who was exposed to industrial solvents at a plant, and the union member belongs to Local 157, the lawyer may be tempted to home in on the UAW Skilled Trades Department records, not knowing that the UAW Health and Safety Department²⁵ has all the environmental records associated with that plant. As archivists, what we have to do is back up a little bit and ask, "What is it about Local 157 that is of interest to you? Membership records? Routine correspondence? Environmental toxins in the plants? Because if it is, we may need to go into this collection over here." The natural structure of archives and their finding tools make researching a multifaceted topic like environmental justice tough to do without the knowledge base of a subjectivist. You're going to encounter a lot of red herrings.

Thomas: What are some of the best practices or strategies that attorneys can use to enable archivists to help them research more effectively?

LeFevre: I would advise lawyers and others who are doing in-depth research into complex subject areas such as this not to spend a lot of time looking at archival finding lists and guides. I would get a hold of the subject specialist, because the specialist will cut through everything and be able to provide any content, or alternatively, tell you the content you're looking for doesn't exist but that you have data points for similar content.

In this increasingly globalized information economy where we expect everything to be online and easily findable and understandable, archives tend to be a bit of an anomaly. Because of the way the information is indexed, arranged, and described, sometimes it's not easy to interpret.

Even in this information age, the best approach to conducting archival research is often seeking out the person who has actually arranged and described the records. Through finding aids and guides, the archivist has provided indexing to a certain level. But the knowledge base the subject archivist has is much deeper and is essential to reaching the level of specificity researchers need to retrieve relevant content. ■



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William W. LeFevre, CA, CRM, is a certified archivist and certified records manager and is the senior archivist at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs on the campus of Wayne State University.

He has served as secretary of the Institute of Certified Records Managers and as a director of ARMA International and president of its Detroit chapter. He currently chairs the ARMA International Educational Foundation.

ENDNOTES

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6. Walter P. Reuther Library, *Focus: HOPE Records* <<http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/node/2543>>.
7. Walter P. Reuther Library, *Coleman Young Papers* <<http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/node/6493>>.
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9. Walter P. Reuther Library, *Maryann Mahaffey Papers* (Unprocessed).
10. Walter P. Reuther Library, *Mel Ravitz Papers, Parts I & II* <<http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/node/2818>>.
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15. Bentley Historical Library, *James J. Blanchard Papers 1982-2002* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-9940>>.
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