Spelunking in the Archives:
Or How I Learned to Love the Art of the Unexpected
by Kathryn La Barre

EDITOR’S SUMMARY
Drawing on her archival research skills, the author took the opportunity to dig into the American Society for Information Science records (1939-1990), a special collection housed at the University of Michigan. The exploration was prompted by ASIS&T’s 75th anniversary and Special Interest Group/History and Foundations of Information Science (SIG/HFIS). The archives represent the evolution of the society, starting as the American Documentation Institute. The material retrieved on the author’s first visit did not correspond to the online finding aid, but subsequent inquiry found a new finding aid, which was not online, describing the collection, including expanded holdings. The ASIS&T historical records collection is open for additional deposits, including documents, personal papers, presentations, oral histories and images, with the goal of placing all materials online. It is hoped this adventure will prompt ASIS&T to become an example for implementing best practices in organizational records preservation and management.

KEYWORDS
information science history special collections archives professional associations records management

Last October, at the annual planning session of ASIS&T Special Interest Group/History and Foundations of Information Science (SIG/HFIS), I volunteered to undertake a visit to University of Michigan to assess the contents and condition of the elusive and legendary American Society for Information Science Records, (1939-1990). This collection is maintained by the Special Collections Library located on the seventh floor of the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan. As an experienced archival researcher, a member of the ASIS&T 75th Anniversary Task Force, and chair of SIG/HFIS, I was eager to begin. A phone query to the Special Collections reference desk led to an online version of a detailed finding aid and the online request system for ordering the materials I would visit in February 2012. The 16 selected boxes promised to be rich in photographs and materials about the early development of special interest groups in 1966 on the cusp of the metamorphosis of the American Documentation Institute into the American Society for Information Science on January 1, 1968.

The ease of requesting these materials was soon overtaken by an unsettling discovery. When I arrived at the archive all 16 boxes were in excellent condition – yet none of the presented boxes had contents that corresponded to the online finding aid. Thus began a process much like the old Milton Bradley board game of Battleship, in which players are directed to “call out your coordinates and mark your hits and misses.” My attempts to quickly discern a pattern that might allow me to see if I had somehow received a box that contained any of the desired material were fruitless. After comparing the online finding aid with the physical edition held by the reading room attendants, the mystery remained. The two finding aids were identical. This discrepancy wasn’t a simple case of wrongly numbered boxes. No further material could be ordered, due to the lead-time necessary to arrange for off-site retrieval. There were a few glimmers of gold in the boxes, but no one
could offer an explanation until after I returned home, entirely defeated after expending four days and a chunk of my scant research budget.

The finding aid noted that the ASIS records were open to additional materials, which proved to be the key to the mystery. Though the first 118 boxes were processed in 1988, a second deposit of 70 boxes was processed between 2004 and 2005. The consequential renaming and reorganization of the collection resulted in a new detailed finding aid, which was not loaded into either the electronic system or into the physical back-up file of finding aids. Today, the initial deposit of ASIS records has expanded to accommodate the new material and an additional name change for the society. *American Society for Information Science and Technology Records, 1925-2001* (bulk dates, 1937-2000) [1] now consists of 185 linear feet in 188 boxes.

All materials held by the University of Michigan Special Collections Library are open to the public, and visitors must register prior to requesting and viewing materials. Restrictions may be placed on the number of boxes requested at a given time, due to the logistics of transporting the ASIS&T records to the reading room from off-site storage. Visitors are advised to place material requests at least two weeks in advance. A recently undertaken move to a new Special Collections reading room may result in the lifting of such restrictions. Some material in the ASIS&T collection is further restricted because of legal and privacy concerns, though it may be possible to seek written permission from ASIS&T headquarters. This material is contained in 29 boxes and includes the past 30 years of Council meeting minutes and the society’s financial series. Restricted tax documents will open on a rolling basis according to date of creation, beginning in 2035 through 2068. The finding aid also notes that permission to publish material from this collection must be obtained from the University of Michigan Special Collections Library and the individual copyright holder, which in most cases is either ASIS&T or the author of a given document.

A recent interview with the curator of the ASIS&T records – Peggy Daub, past director, curator and outreach librarian – elicited several insights about the collection. The original set of documents comprising the ASIS records were obtained as part of a preliminary effort by this archive to expand the holdings of materials from the early days of microfilm and microphotography and also to document first efforts at scholarly communication. The University of Michigan’s collection in this subject area remains quite small and little has been done to further expand holdings.

Despite this fact, the ASIS&T records remain open for further deposits. The curator is very supportive of the ASIS&T 75th anniversary activities and especially excited about the ongoing oral history and image scanning projects. Participants in the oral history project are invited to execute a deed of gift that will deposit the transcript and/or audio of their oral history interview in the ASIS&T records collection. The archive is also especially eager to obtain permission to place these oral histories online in both transcript and audio format. This level of online access is not required in order to deposit interview materials into this collection. Absent such permission, deposited interviews would be available in the reading room subject to any restrictions placed by the interviewee. (See contact information at the conclusion of this article for more information.)

Another natural outgrowth of the preparations of the 75th anniversary consists of queries from longtime members of ASIS&T with offers to deposit personal papers in this collection. The curator encourages individuals to consider depositing material directly related to the American Documentation Institute, ASIS or ASIS&T to expand this collection. Two such offers of materials are in process. The first, from Marcia Bates, includes six inches of materials from 1973-4 from her time as SIG councilor, as executive committee member and member of the publications committee. I had the pleasure of examining a small subsection of these records and have found that they extend existing documents in the collection and promise to fill in many gaps especially with regard to the continuing discussions of the role of SIGs in ASIS.

In early September, I assisted with a deposit from Carlos Cuadra, the first editor of the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, of a collection of more than 40 file folders from 1963 through 1976. These papers include correspondence with ARIST authors and supporting material for the *American Documentation* article, “Identifying Key Contributions of Information Science”[2]. This donation also includes planning materials for the 1966 annual ADI conference in Santa Monica which was developed around the *Annual Review*, with each chapter providing the basis for a
technical session with a presenter – the chapter author – and panelists. Also included is the reel-to-reel audiotape (and a digitized version) of Dr. S. I. Hayakawa’s 1966 ADI annual meeting keynote address Information and Communications: A Semantic Viewpoint.

After examining about half the boxes I can say that the collection contains numerous hidden gems, including the following:

- **The Irene Farkas-Conn historical and research files series** with material in support of her book on the history of ASIS [3]
- **The Early Leaders File** of correspondence to and from some of the early leaders of ADI/ASIS, including founder Watson Davis, Robert C. Binkley and Vernon Tate
- Extensive documentation about regional chapters and special interest groups – in some cases quite fragmentary
  - A smattering of photographs
  - Scattered audio and video tapes from paper presentations and other sessions at convention meetings from 1972 through 1982.

The ASIS&T preconference on the History of ASIS&T and Information Science and Technology Worldwide (October 2012) will expand what is known in this area. Inspired by what I have found in the archive at the University of Michigan, I have at least two papers under development, one on the fractious negotiations around the formation of the first seven SIGs, another on the professionalization of information. I know of other authors who are hard at work and seeking to expand our collective understanding of this area of information history.

In conclusion, this brief discussion and the open status of the ASIS&T records collection highlights ongoing and urgent considerations in records management. The papers in the ASIS&T collection are fragmentary in many areas – in part because material has been retained at ASIS&T headquarters for one reason or another or because, like all societies, ASIS&T is largely reliant on faithful volunteers to submit required records and documentation in a complete and timely fashion. With society communications occurring across a variety of digital formats, what is ASIS&T doing to preserve digital documents? With the devastation of Hurricane Isaac foremost in the minds of members in the United States, what is the disaster plan for organizational records?

The most recent deposit in this collection occurred at the same time that “and Technology” was added to the name of this society. It would be useful for members to know the scheduled timing and anticipated scope of future archival deposits. Though one of the smallest, but by no means among the least active, SIG/HFIS members have expressed strong interest in forming a task force to assess the long-term records management plan for ASIS&T and, should one be lacking, to assist in the development of a plan to ensure the preservation of our information history. An organization for a profession dedicated to excellence in capturing and exploiting the world’s records should be an exemplar!

For more information about the 75th anniversary activities and the oral history project, please visit www.asis.org/asist2012/historyofASIST.html.

**Useful Contacts for Information about the ASIS&T Archives**

Peggy Daub, past director, curator and outreach librarian. Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, pdaub<at>umich.edu, 734-936-2309

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**Resources Mentioned in the Article**

