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2019 ULRA Application

No one ever tells you that research is simultaneously exciting and difficult, but over the past nine months I’ve had the wonderful opportunity to discover both aspects. During this time, I have been completing an original research project exploring how the Dust Bowl influenced women’s clothing in Oklahoma and working as the Digital Humanities Intern, where I researched how the Depression influenced students at Oklahoma State University. Learning how to do research well has been enormously difficult but ultimately one of the most fulfilling skills that I have learned.

In June 2018, I began working on my Wentz project by reading through the Dust, Drought, and Dreams Gone Dry oral history collection. When I found excerpts that pertained to my research question, I copied them into a word document. Additionally, I recorded my thoughts and observations in a journal, which was later fundamental to writing my thesis. At that time, I didn’t realize how complicated doing history was, though I was often confused by things I found. For instance, two women said that town dresses were black, while another said they were white. I was confused as to why there would be this discrepancy.

As school began, I started looking at the extant garments at the Stillwater History Museum. I had helped to tag and date the garments the year before, so I knew what the collection held. Through reading how to study extant garments and practicing those techniques, I learned about the transient nature of fashion and the near impossibility of placing garments in a timeline. In addition, I utilized the OSU databases and the Library of Congress photos to find 1930s clothing images.
I began work in August and my five supervisors generously tailored the internship to my 1930s focus, asking me to explore how the Depression influenced OSU students. I began searching the oral history collections for people who had attended OSU during this era. While this didn’t yield much information and I was disappointed, I’ve come to learn that false starts or detours are a part of the research process and can still be beneficial. After working with the oral history collections, I looked over the 1930s O’Colly magazines and 1930s yearbooks, which proved to be a better source.

While reading these documents, I took notes, jotted down questions, and printed off pages that I thought would be useful. In the bi-weekly meetings with my supervisors, we would go through those notes. I shared the overall themes I found, tid-bits of information that were fascinating, and any questions I had. Preparing for these meetings forced me to think about broad, overarching themes and interrogate the primary documents. My supervisors would get excited about my work, ask me questions, and give me more sources to look at, such as the various collections in Archives, Maps and Spatial Data, and Government Documents. The time that my supervisors invested in me has made me a better historian.

In the meantime, I was taking Introduction to the Study of History with Dr. Anna Zeide. In this class, I was required to write a historiographic essay and, in an effort to understand 1930s Oklahoma better, I wrote my essay over the causes of the Dust Bowl. For this project, I utilized the books in the library, the online databases, and Inter-Library Loan. That project gave me a framework to set my own research in. I found myself engaging with the sources and the author’s arguments, creating critical thinking skills which are of paramount importance for historians. This class gave me a taste of what going to graduate school would be like and I found myself excited at that prospect.
Around October, my work and research began to overwhelm me as I realized just how little I knew and how complicated doing history was. The amount of information around me was gigantic and I felt very, very small. I felt a massive burden to give due justice to the primary sources, and I was afraid that I would create a false picture of history. For instance, Dorthea Lang has been criticized for taking biased photographs. How could I balance that bias and the usefulness of seeing people in such poverty? These pictures were important, but using them incorrectly could hurt what people knew about this subject.

This feeling came to a head one day in a meeting with Patrick Daglaris, where our conversation focused on how using oral histories is complicated. The message of the meeting was clear: oral histories are an excellent resource but, like any source, it is flawed and it takes a massive amount of work to use them well. It was an informative and necessary meeting, but I went to class, trying to keep from crying. I asked myself if I would ever be able to use these sources properly. But in *Introduction to the Study of History*, Dr. Zeide discussed how doing research could be overwhelming and difficult. A wave of relief came over me; I was not alone, there were others who struggled. That day, I learned how to be okay with the responsibility of doing history.

It is the Spring of 2019, and I have just finished writing my research thesis and I am working on my final internship projects. Through the writing, putting my ideas out on paper, I see how the pieces of history work together. I understand why there might be discrepancies in the oral histories. I’ve learned how to use Lang’s photos. I can complicate my narrative without fear. On March 1st, I presented at my first conference and the feeling of standing up and talking about my research and my internship projects with the ease of a professor made every moment
worth it. These projects have been difficult but my time has not been wasted. I can say without pause that these past nine months have been some of the most fulfilling in my life.

Word Count: 985