Transportation Librarians Roundtable

Meeting Date: January 22, 2026
Topic: How a Solo Librarian Plans on Transporting the Oregon DOT History Center into the 21st Century

Bob Cullen: For the record, the red light is on so I can continue talking here. The title is "How a Solo Librarian Plans on Transporting the Oregon DOT History Center into the 21st Century." And I do love the play on words there, Amanda. But the "transporting"—very good, very appropriate.

Let me go ahead and start off with a bio of Amanda and here it is. Amanda J. Carter joined the Oregon Department of Transportation in July of 2024. Time flies. She took the reins from the retiring Laura Wilt as the new librarian of the Oregon DOT Library and History Center. Amanda's library background is in legal and academic libraries, modern political archives, and Historically Black College and University archives. Her transportation background is in drafting cable routes and barges, and as a software tester and technical writer for transportation-related third-party logistics software (3PL software).

New to Oregon, Amanda loves learning about the magnificent nature and history of the Pacific Northwest, especially Oregon's unique transportation history. She lives in Salem with her two cats and thoroughly enjoys her proximity to both the coast and the mountains.

Let me just add, first of all, I'll leave it to Amanda to confirm whether or not I'm pronouncing her great state correctly. I always seem to have a couple of different pronunciations; hopefully I landed on the correct one for today. But I do want to say that we are very fortunate to have Amanda not only as our speaker today, but also as a very active member of our community. Just like a few of you, I had the privilege of actually getting to meet Amanda in person last year at the SLA Conference in Pittsburgh. It was always wonderful meeting people face to face and, among other things, my conversations with her motivated me to actually start watching a great 1970s sitcom, *Barney Miller*, once more, which had kind of fallen off my radar. We talked about that in Pittsburgh.

In any case, I think all of you are in for a wonderful presentation from Amanda today and without any further delay on my part, I'd like to pass the microphone on to her. So the floor is now all yours, Amanda.

Amanda J. Carter: Thank you, Bob. That's nice. *Barney Miller*—great baseline on that intro. Hello everybody. My name is Amanda Carter and, as Bob just mentioned, I'm the Oregon Department of Transportation Library and History Center librarian. I took over from Laura, who many of you probably know and worked with closely.

So today I'm going to be presenting on how a solo librarian plans on transporting or moving or pushing the Oregon DOT History Center into the 21st century by expanding the access to a largely physical archival collection. Can you see my screen? It is sharing. I just want a thumbs up... okay, perfect. Good deal. We shall carry on.

First, let's do a little background. The Oregon DOT Library was established on November 15th, 1937. The first librarian didn't start until 1951, so I'm going to run through their names real quickly because they all need a little bit of a shout out. Dorothy Hewitt started in 1951 and was assigned as the first librarian. Faith Steffan followed in her footsteps in 1954. Not long after, it starts to expand from there. So Marie Elefante took over in 1983, and then Garnet Elliott in 1991. Laura Wilt took over from Garnet in 2004, and I took over from Laura in 2024.

So I am the sixth librarian and the second accredited librarian. A year after Laura took over the position, the accreditation kicked in and you had to be an actual accredited librarian to have the position, fortunately. That said, the History Center itself merged in a little bit later because the librarian, Laura, moved under the Research Section. Originally the library was in Business Services and then it moved into the Research Section after Laura started somewhere around 2008 or 2009.

And then there was a move, because this library moves between buildings a lot. Apparently there was a move, and when it moved over somewhere by 2015, the History Center was then moved under the library as well. And so the History Center's history itself is a little murky. I tried to do some research but these are all physical records we're talking about and it's time-intensive, so I wasn't able to dedicate all the time I wanted to it.

But here's what I know: In the 1980s, there was a legislative mandate here in Oregon—which I do believe that is how you pronounce it, by the way, Bob—for state agencies to maintain a history. I did some research and I think these are the state rules or state laws, but I'm not fully sure because they have also morphed since they were created, as laws do. Now it's a separate entity who maintains agency history. In any case, ODOT took this mandate seriously and hired a historian and created a history committee, and the collection itself was created.

So when the history moved over—largely a physical collection, remember—it also came with what was known as the "general files," which explains everything, right? You know everything that's in there, right? Exactly. So it turns out to be a digital collection, but it's an internal collection. This is not going to be made public, in case you're wondering; this is going to have to be requested for the future. But it is a digital collection of various materials: documents, some microfilm printouts, right-of-way maps and files, correspondence, and various things that are historic. And this database, as it turns out, is no longer monitored or managed. And so I, and perhaps one other person, are the only people with access, and I can already foresee this being a problem.

Moving forward, as I've had some recent conversations about some of the historic value—but that's in a different conversation entirely. So let's stick to the topic, Amanda.

All right, so physical indexes abound, but they all have slightly different bits of information on them. I'll show you some examples later, but it kind of complicates things. Meanwhile, a few cool tidbits: here are some images that we have. These are digital, except there's maybe one or two that I took a picture of with my phone. But these are digital right here in the middle—that's Multnomah Falls. That is an old slide, so that's a digitized version of a slide, which I think we have a lot of those and they're beautiful.

We have maps, so the first state highway system, tentatively in 1920. We have that map available. We have the Clackamas County, which is Portland. We have market roads which were pre-state roads, so that was really interesting. The "corduroy roads," if I pronounce that correctly—that's what these wooden roads were and it blew my mind when I first saw this image. But we have some of these images back here too. There were a lot of wooden roads in Oregon because of the mud. There's this whole thing—the Oregon Highway Department was created as a legislative mandate to, quote, "Get Oregon out of the mud." So that's a different historic research as well, but it's very interesting.

We have flyers and different pamphlets on the Oregon Trail. We also have a lot of cool images and other things like the ferries that used to transport vehicles and people across the rivers before all the bridges were built. We have tunnels, lighthouses. I think the collection of the decals and the various signage from the World Wars is really interesting as well. We have a lot

of women workers during that time period too, which is a cool history, and this photo in the bottom middle kind of speaks to this.

There's a lot of film here, as you can see, so those are all rolls of film and there's just some of our workers monitoring the rolls of film. I thought that was a neat image that shows the variety of types of photographs that we have in the collection—not just maps and correspondence and other types of things—but all that to say that we do have a lot of resources like biennial reports, newsletters, Commission meeting minutes, photos, files, right-of-way maps, agreements, resolutions, forest highway files, Oregon laws, blue books, and a variety of other things. We have oral histories and things like that.

So one issue is the formats. We have a variety of formats as well, as I just showed the image of the film. I actually have seen a few rolls of film in this History Center. We have CDs and DVDs, floppies, photographs, slides, negatives, microfilm. And one thing that tells me that perhaps I am the first archivist with archival training that's been in this position is how all of this was arranged and described, and how there is limited to no actual ability to access these formats. Like, there is a microfilm reader—thank you, Laura, for getting your hands on that—except it's broken now. Like once we moved, which I'll talk about in a minute, it doesn't really work well. I finally got my hand on a floppy disk; I finally got my hand on a DVD drive. But everything else is virtually inaccessible between the lack of maintenance of the equipment to access these things and the way that the collection is arranged.

That kind of hints to me that perhaps an archivist—which I did find in the history of the History Center, I did find some titles of "archivist," and so that relieved me some—but then also I wonder, I don't know what the requirement was to have that title as well. But it seems like perhaps there hasn't been anybody with the training for the describing and accessing and all of that that some of us get in information science school to really understand how to maintain this collection for the long haul and for the future of people who want to access it. So that's my goal here. That's what I want to do.

But upon arrival I had other priorities, right? I personally had to move from Tennessee, so when I started this job in July of 2024, I had never been to Oregon. I flew over here to start this job and I'm glad I like it; I'm glad it's beautiful because I was all in at that point anyway. So then I had to go back to Nashville, I had to get my house ready for sale, I had to get everything packed up, I had to arrange a cross-country move. I had to get everything sorted on that and then move over here and it took me a week because I had to pack up two cats. It was a different cat initially, but I had to pack up two cats and move them over and I actually took the Oregon Trail, which I did not realize until the second day I was in St. Louis and decided to look it up and I'm like, "Oh, at least I'm doing my own little history research here." So I stopped midway at Wyoming DOT—so thank you, Enid, if you're here, for giving me space and availability to work that week in Wyoming DOT—and then to finish my journey on the other end of it.

So I got to Oregon and moved into Oregon by the end of August 2024, beginning of September. But then the Library and History Center itself had to move buildings. Originally when Laura had taken it over, she was in the Transportation Building, which we call the T Building. She had to move it to the Mill Creek Building a few blocks away. I took it over in the Mill Creek Building, and then we had to move it back to the T Building.

So I spent the next few months focusing on getting the Library and History Center ready to move. This included cataloging things that had not been cataloged because I was working remotely and Laura had retired, handling publication requests, doing literature searches and reviews, and learning the process for that, because before this job I was at a law firm library and the research approach was a little different. Then there was the influx of donations because

everybody was moving at this point in time. Oregon DOT is a little bit underfunded at this moment in time, in case you haven't heard the news, and so we have been preparing for that for a few years. Everybody was moving out of rented buildings into owned buildings. There was a lot of moving, so a lot of people were offering up donations: "Do you want this? Do you want this?" There was a lot of double-checking to see what I had and if we would have space. I didn't even know until November, when we moved, whether or not I would have extra space to take anything in.

Initially, the challenges were that once the library did move back to the T Building, popularity rose. People wandered in and wanted to look at the library. I was getting members of the public and agency employees. I had also been doing outreach for the historic society and local libraries in the area, so they would come in and tour. The State Archives was one of them as well. Another challenge with the History Center specifically is that the arrangement, as I mentioned, is very broad and it's by location and subject. Some of the indexes were shelf list indexes saying, "Here's where this collection is on the top left shelf in the reading room." As you know, that is very hard to trace after a move. So that was a bit of a challenge to figure out where everything is now.

Then we also had a lot of physical files. I'll show you some images in a minute, but these physical files are full of newspapers and staples and paper clips. They're in old folders with sticky labels that are falling off, and they were just out in the open air. There is a lot there that needs to be processed. Online access was available—thank you, Laura—she was actually able to put something online and provide other digital access, but it was a bit dispersed. There were some things on the website and some things in the Internet Archive, and to corral it all together in a place that's easily accessible was also one of my goals.

Here is the current status. When I arrived, here is what one of the indexes looked like. We have construction contract indexes all the way back to the first one in 1917. This actually recently became a problem because these contracts are not on site; they're in our Records Center. There's been a lot of turnover here at ODOT and a lot of people have retired. The previous records management people retired, and they had some of these records on hold instead of following the record retention to be permanent. Apparently, none of the new records management people were aware of how to access these or where they were, because it's up to the departments who submitted them to get the accession information. It was a long journey, but recently I had a request for this and I was finally able to access a contract. So now I know how to do that, but as you can see, I was having trouble identifying where it is because this is the information I have.

These are all construction contract indexes over the course of years, and they all record slightly different bits of information in different formats. Laura did digitize some of these things, but they're not OCR—which for anyone who's not familiar, means Optical Character Recognition. You can't hit "Control + F" and find the words; you have to physically view them and search in the section names.

Here is another index, the physical file index and the General File index. The Excel file with the yellow highlight in the top left is the broad index of the physical files, and that is what Laura pointed me to and what is very helpful. But sometimes I would go and look for something that is on this list and I couldn't find it. Is it in the wrong place? Was it moved somewhere else? It really took me a while to get familiar with it.

Then we have these other indexes like this 1918 index. It literally says the file is named "1918," and then you open it up and it's just numbers with words. I don't know what it means. I'm still trying to figure that out. Somebody does, I'm sure, but they're retired. We have photograph

indexes that tell you what the photograph is, but then we have this file code. Something tells me this was part of the original organizational structure because all of the files in the History Center are labeled "ORG 7," and I see a similar naming scheme here, but I don't see any of these files under this naming scheme in the History Center. So it's a challenge.

Furthermore, here are the files. We have these bins of various and sundry items that I suspect were used in some of our publications. I suspect these were taken out to be photographed or used in a report and then either not refiled or they didn't know where to refile them. You have all these open files laid about intermixed with boxes of unknown contents. Notice that "Red Closed Stacks" sign—I'll get to that in a minute. Then we also have bookshelves of binders—binders, binders, and more binders. Most of these are images: bridges, highways, aerials, historic markers, and equipment images. They don't all have indexes and it can be complicated to figure out what's where when somebody asks a research question.

On the right side are more boxes of maps that have not yet been processed. Before we went fully into a deficit, I was able to purchase a bunch of acid-free archival boxes, folders, and plastic paper clips in preparation for the work I'm going to be doing. The result then was that any research was lengthy. It required in-person research only and took a lot of time. You can't "Control + F" a physical file; you have to go and read it and find the keywords. I tried to do the preliminary research to see if we even had it, but sometimes applicable information is not found. I am limited by time constraints because I am a solo librarian and I have other duties to tend to, so it requires a balance. Not everybody can come in for in-person research, and I was noticing a big trend of people out of state asking questions too.

When we moved to the T Building and everything got more popular, people just wanted to walk in and touch everything and pull things out, which I understand the interest, but it can impact my ability to find things later. Just like library books, when you take them off the shelf, you want people to put them on a counter and not try to refile them. I did have a volunteer momentarily, but the parking at the new location is more challenging and she was retired, so she could no longer volunteer.

So what this means is planning. First, I had to take time to understand the collection and do my own inventory. That has taken a lot of time, recording what people were asking and what their interests were. I basically spent the first year doing that, and then I had to develop practical short-term and long-term goals. What we do as librarians is provide access, so I had to figure out the best way to do it quickly. Let's take some small wins. You have to have an "Agile" mindset. I worked in tech for a little while, and the Agile methodology is where you build in small chunks and give it to the customer so they can use it and provide feedback. The opposite is the "Waterfall" methodology where you build the whole thing all at once and it takes a long time, and then the customers usually want tweaks anyway. Why not build in small pieces?

So I'm looking at easy wins, starting with updating the website. A second goal is a research request form, which is simple; I just haven't got to it yet. That's going to help me filter requests so I can pre-ask those reference questions and get more information before I follow up. For digital access, I created some research guides or finding aids for what is available, and a long-term goal would be a repository. I know that Washington DOT recently had a project similar to that, and I'm definitely going to be bending those ears before long.

To address the "handsy" folks, I was sitting here one day at my reference desk on a call, and somebody walks in and just grabs a file and starts pulling it off the shelf. My heart goes into my throat. I get off the call and go and introduce myself. It turns out they were from the Highway Division, and they were familiar with the files, but still, I don't know where it goes because I hadn't finished the inventory. Later, somebody came in and emailed me: "Oh, I forgot to

mention, I took a book I'd like to check out." They just grabbed a book and left. I ended up having to create signage. These little red signs are for "Closed Stacks" to indicate you need to contact the librarian. Visual barriers and signage tend to make people at least think for a moment.

Some other easy wins are research guides for the digitized materials and "processing while researching." When somebody says, "What do you have on the Oregon Coast Highway?" I pull those folders and go ahead and switch them to acid-free folders, take the paper clips out, put the plastic clips on, and make copies of the newspapers. I write in pencil instead of trying to relabel things.

If you go to the ODOT History website, there is a new section that talks about researching state highways and requesting a research appointment. I found out you have to be very specific about in-person research. I once had it open from 9:00 to 4:00 and somebody literally stayed the whole day, even having lunch with me! Now it's 9:00 to 12:00 and 1:00 to 4:00 on pre-scheduled days. The instruction guide talks about where to start, because a lot of information is already online, but people don't know about it. It pulls together where to find meeting minutes and right-of-way files, and then tells them what is left to ask the librarian for. It made me feel really great when somebody emailed me recently and it was clear he had used this document and found everything except one or two files.

Thank you to everyone involved with the pooled fund—thank you, Laura, for getting us involved in the first place. It enabled me to get a lot of microfilm digitized, which has made things a lot more accessible. I'm working on some of the metadata on that. I also created a chronological research guide for the Highway Commission meeting minutes. They had been digitized in different places, so I created a guide where you want a certain date, and here is the link.

Ultimately, the goal is just to take the time to do it right. I came from a law firm before this where everybody wanted everything immediately, so I have to teach myself to stop and breathe. This is the first job I've ever had where I can see myself retiring here. I love it. My midterm goal is to inventory the entire collection. I'm on the photographs now and I think I'll be able to finish that this year. An ultimate goal of mine is to have a finding aid or digital access so that anyone interested in research can look at that guide and point to that box or folder and say, "This is what I want to look at."

It's an ongoing process and it's going to take time. Long-term progress requires vision, diligence, and patience. Adaptability is key as things may change, but currently, that is my vision. Does anybody have any questions?

Bob Cullen: Thank you very much, Amanda. Excellent presentation. We have at least one person already with a hand raised—as always, just do the electronic raising of hands. Let's proceed with the first person, the great Lamarra Williams from North Carolina.

Lamarra C. Williams: I appreciate that—the great Lamarra Williams, thank you. No, I just mainly had a comment. It sounds so much like the NC DOT library. Today I'm getting some items because somebody's moving and it's so much stuff—pictures, binders, everywhere. I don't want them to toss it, so I feel your pain. Great presentation, thank you.

Amanda J. Carter: Thank you.

Bob Cullen: Amanda, you gave one of those wonderful presentations that wasn't just talking about the nuts and bolts, but also the context. One thing I wanted to check on is the Agile methodology. I think I know what it means, but it sounds like an incremental approach initially?

Amanda J. Carter: Yes, Agile methodology comes from software development. Historically, you would build a whole big piece of software and deliver it to the customer months or years later, and then the customer would have feedback and you'd have to change things. Agile methodology was a shift to building pieces at a time so the customer can use it and provide feedback as you go. I took that for the History Center. When somebody asks for information on a folder, I pull that folder and start processing it—doing the archival processing on just that folder or those folders. That way, the collection is getting properly processed in small bites. You can't eat the whale all at once. I'm double-tasking—researching it, but also taking out the staples and putting it in an acid-free folder.

Bob Cullen: I appreciate you framing it that way. We have a couple more hands raised. Next is Enid.

Enid: Thank you for the shout-out for the Oregon Trail, because it does come through the great state of Wyoming. Amanda, as a non-librarian, that was fantastic. You had a lot of focus on the users of the library. Thank you for keeping those people in mind. I like the touch/do-not-touch reminders and the hours of operation. You took into account not only the library, but the stakeholders. Congratulations.

Amanda J. Carter: Thank you, Enid.

Bob Cullen: Next, I'd like to call upon Gabi Hysong.

Gabi Hysong: Thinking of your end-user is really important. As a solo, I can appreciate all that work. When I first took over at Rolls-Royce, you feel a little overwhelmed, but prioritizing what gives you the best "bang for your buck" and remembering to take care of yourself is important. Thank you very much.

Amanda J. Carter: Thank you, Gabi. By the way, I still have your "parts petting zoo" in mind! One of my long-term goals is to have a little petting zoo of sorts of some of the things we have.

Gabi Hysong: That's funny because that's going to be one of my big projects this year. I started out with 16 parts and now I have hundreds, and I'm going to try to get an intern to catalog and photograph them. People donate them and it just goes on the shelf, but this is a good way for someone new to learn about the parts. Thanks.

Bob Cullen: I have a question regarding the research request form. Was that an easier-said-than-done task for you? Do you have it available online?

Amanda J. Carter: That's a great question, because I have an outline of what I want it to look like, but then I got distracted by a standards issue with ASTM standards. I'm using Microsoft Forms. I'm trying to make the form broad enough that it asks for enough detail, but also not too overwhelming so that people will actually use it. So my time is kind of restricted, but eventually, it's going to be in a Microsoft Form with a link on the ODOT History website.

Bob Cullen: Thank you for clarifying that. I look forward to seeing the finalized form. I think you did a wonderful job with framing the significance of the "easy win." Too often there's the perception that it's just low-hanging fruit, but easy wins provide that traction to get the bigger things done. Did you have to go through a long-term struggle to appreciate the easy wins, or has that been embedded in your career from day one?

Amanda J. Carter: That's a really good question. I started out in archives at the University of Tennessee, and I reprocessed a large collection which felt long and arduous. Later, I ended up in tech for about eight years, and that's when I learned about Agile and software testing methodologies. When I went back to libraries, I was able to apply everything I learned. Easy

wins are still wins because they still provide access. It's for the researcher. It's not only that—I can show my manager, "Look, I don't have as many questions directly because they're using these forms." This might take more time right now, but in the long term, I won't have to spend as much time on it.

Bob Cullen: Outstanding. I am going to call on Kathryn Devine for her comment.

Kathryn Devine: You mentioned Estes Kefauver—I grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and I once came across a letter my mom wrote to him. There's a good chance you saw her letter in his papers!

Amanda J. Carter: Likely very likely! They keep all those letters.

Bob Cullen: Thank you, Kathryn. And thank you, Amanda, for sharing your knowledge and your vision. We are lucky to have you as a member of our community. On behalf of Rosalyn Alleman and myself, I want to thank all of you for joining us today. The next TLR will be three weeks from today, on February 12th, for our annual Open Discussion Forum. Please mark your calendars. I hope everybody has a great rest of the day and stays safe in the winter weather.

Amanda J. Carter: Thank you.