Sourcing the Sanctuary Movement
Emily Brodman

Like clockwork each August, I chip away at my book collection in my childhood bedroom in Phoenix, Arizona. I carefully pack away another few boxes of assigned reading and young adult fiction to donate, sell, or re-gift. Each year several cubic feet of paper survive each sweep, carefully organized in dated bags and expanding files: my collection of primary and secondary materials related to the Sanctuary Movement in 1980s Tucson, Arizona, the vestiges of an extracurricular research project and what may be the among the most extensive collections on the Arizonan Sanctuary Movement in the country. At one time, I took the most pride in the original research my collection supported. Now I look more proudly at my mini-archive, gathering dust on the overcrowded shelves. It has taught me about the historical discipline I study, the materials I’ve since read, and the libraries and archives I’ve since visited.

I began my collection in 2006 to supplement independent research on the history of the Sanctuary Movement, a 1980s political and religious campaign in southern Arizona that defied federal law to form a makeshift “underground railroad” for undocumented aliens fleeing Central America. The movement was ultimately short-lived; the INS and the federal government quickly brought 11 of the movement’s leaders to trial, and the movement ended with dramatic trials and impassioned political speeches. To this day, historians, INS workers, and human rights campaigns dispute even the most basic facts of the movement—the number of immigrants aided, the strength and size of the network itself—but its historical legacy is its most contentious feature. Was this movement motivated by faith, as its leaders claimed, or was it a publicity ploy to draw sympathy and attention to civil upheaval in Central America?

I set off to answer these questions in earnest. My collection would eventually become the architecture for opposing stories, made up of letters and newspaper clippings, pamphlets from religious groups, transcripts of lectures, and notes from interviews with the movement’s members and strongest opponents. The movement remains a point of interest among a niche group of Arizonans and immigration activists. This small contingent was all too willing to donate their materials to a burgeoning historian, the first person to ask them about their involvement in the movement or its counter-movements in decades. With a great amount of luck, I assembled a ragtag archive of first editions, photocopies, and faded pamphlets.

My collection is unique for its depth (dozens of newspaper articles and newsletters from a ten-year period make the collection particularly unwieldy) but also its breadth. I was both invigorated and unnerved when archivists at the Arizona Archives could point me to fewer than half a dozen sources. I would be treading new ground as a historian but also as a curator and collector. Materials from the movement were more often owned by its very participants or detractors: Border Patrol enthusiasts’ collections paint a different picture entirely than the exhibits lining the walls of the former Sanctuary Movement headquarters. I believed, in my earnest search for objectivity, I would need to gather diligently every artifact I could find.

Truthfully, I committed myself monomaniacally to the collection as procrastination, to prolong the research process and avoid the excruciating work of writing. I began to collect, compulsively and constantly. I photocopied newspaper clippings and carefully annotated the file folders and scrapbooks called up for me by a small community library’s volunteers. Over the course of several months, I found book after book, newsletter after newsletter, and received countless letters and pamphlets from generous librarians and movement participants.

The books and pamphlets were often cheap, with shipping rates rivaling the cost of the item itself. Each new artifact or contact would point me to several others, so my collection developed a voracious appetite of its own. I knew each media mail package piled up against my front door meant
I was that much closer to answering my research questions, but I more viscerally remember the feeling of treasure hunting. I was giddy from accumulating, always shocked that the dealers, vendors, and donors gave away so readily or so cheaply what I saw as so precious. The thrill of finding and acquiring something rare was heady, and I reveled in the process of sheer accumulation if not the process of writing. I worried constantly about amassing a complete collection that told both sides of the movement’s history, and referenced both national narratives and the local Arizonan story.

I worried my collection was unbalanced, that every newspaper clipping with a conservative slant needed a mate in a more liberal press clipping. I believed that a hallmark of a fair history of the movement would be a complete bibliography and a balanced archive behind it. I then attacked my collecting with the brute force methodology of a search engine: accumulate every material, artifact, and source objectively, and then sort and evaluate later. The result, I assumed, would be an objective evaluation of the Sanctuary Movement.

Months into my project, I slowly began to realize the fallacy of this assumption and the weaknesses my collection. I had believed that record keeping and collecting were neutral and objective by their very nature. I had focused my energies on collecting what materials were available but not yet in my possession, tucked away in antiquarian book shops or buried in garages. Even the broadest, most democratic, most “objective” collection or search engine result is biased in some way – the archivist or collector might collect and preserve the same voices again and again while never once hearing a different perspective’s voice. I see this in my own collection: I have assembled a small library of papers by Jim Corbett, the movement’s leader, yet I have no artifacts that speak to the experience of the refugees aided by the Sanctuary Movement; I have stories and newspapers from across the United States, but not a single document produced in El Salvador or Guatemala, the two Central American countries I wrote about the most. I searched for months to assemble my “objective” collection, but I now believe that a collection can be objective as much as a history textbook can be pure fact, or a history teacher can be unbiased.

I once saw archives, library catalogs, and collections as monolithic and completed, and this informed how I constructed my own collection. I now see these institutions, and my own small collection, as more like constellations in the sky: there are unique sources and voices that shine like bright stars, to be sure, but when looking at the sky, one also sees darkness, or the absence of a recorded narrative. When writing history, or when evaluating my own collection, I needed to take into account these absences in the recorded history as seriously as I evaluate the recorded materials. I learned as much from the process of collecting as I did from the sources themselves, and now read archives and collections (their materials, their order and structure, and the materials or stories they lack) as closely and critically as I read the discrete sources that comprise them.
Primary Sources


I take this particular article as a sample of the 33 other *Arizona Daily Star* articles spanning 1983-1989: a blend of political sensationalism, facts, and opinion. I received many of these articles in a disorganized folder from a kind librarian at the Scottsdale Public Library, with the date of the article written on the back in faded pencil. In many of the articles, individual names are circled, and Scotch tape residue stuck fast on the backs of the faded newspaper— I can imagine many articles were once saved carefully in scrapbooks before passed along to me. With no online archive, and rare microfiche copies available at archives, the Tucson local newspaper seems to live on in these scrapbooks and personal collections. The *Arizona Daily Star* consistently had the best external coverage of the Sanctuary Movement, especially before the federal trial.


Governor Babbitt’s letter is in response to a Quaker organization’s request to make the state of Arizona a “Sanctuary” State, as New Mexico did. Governor Babbitt was sympathetic to the plight of refugees but did not want to become involved with all of the movement’s aims, and this letter shows this. While this letter did present this position, it does not offer much insight into the reasoning behind Babbitt’s actions. That information is better found in newspaper articles that report on Babbitt’s decision that also include analysis from other politicians or activists. This letter is also made more interesting when Babbitt’s views are compared to the views of the Federal Government, which considered the Sanctuary movement activists as smugglers with possibly little to no humanitarian motives, at least according to federal prosecutor Don Reno.


I received the transcript of this speech from an attendee, after he learned of my interest in the Sanctuary Movement. The speech is type-written, with visible white-out marks.


This article, and 18 others from the *Arizona Republic* spanning 1985-1987, trace the backlash to the Sanctuary Movement. The *Arizona Republic*, the state’s largest newspaper, found the church vs. state issues within the Sanctuary Movement’s trial the most compelling.

The resource guide, distributed first at a Sanctuary conference, and then briefly in print in the Bay Area helps explain the religious underpinnings of the Sanctuary Movement. Corbett, one of the movement’s leaders, had alluded in interviews to the distinction between the Sanctuary Movement and outright civil disobedience, but here he makes it clear. This essay, and others in the resource guide, are fundamental texts when arguing the causes and legacies of the Sanctuary Movement.


Still in print. Corbett, one of the leaders of the Sanctuary Movement, wrote this memoir in which he reflects on the movement, his philosophy, and his connections to the Quaker religion. While the Sanctuary Movement factors only briefly into the work, on the cover, the book’s publishers have embossed the author’s name with “Cofounder of the Sanctuary Movement” below it.


This pamphlet related the Sanctuary Movement to Quaker ideology, heavy with near-impenetrable (for the uninitiated) jargon. Internal documents like these, intended for Quaker distribution, support the historiographical theory that Corbett and other activists were interested only in advancing the personal and spiritual lives of the immigrants, not just the political and publicity agenda of refugee rights. The pamphlet lists the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, AZ as a point of contact.


The hour-long Frontline program came at the height of interest in the movement and contained useful interviews with John Fife, one of the movement’s founders. The show’s producers were able to interview Guatemalan refugees who were in the process of transitioning to the United States, with the help of the Sanctuary Movement. Most newspaper articles and primary sources lacked the refugee voice, as many were unwilling to speak to reporters.

A pamphlet sponsored by an anti-immigration nongovernmental organization, likely intended for communities with strong Sanctuary Movement ties. The pamphlet does not address the political upheaval in Central America, but instead how the United States adhered to international refugee law. I personally suspect this seven-page pamphlet to be from 1986, as it addresses key issues from the Sanctuary movement in 1985.


A photocopied handbook from the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights. It discusses the subtleties of the definitions of “asylum” under 1980 refugee law, particularly the phrase about the need of a “well-founded fear of persecution.” The handbook is notable for its dry tone but its clear earnestness and clarity of mission.

Hoidal, T. Recorded interview with author, notes from interview. 30 Apr. 2007.

I interviewed Hoidal, the defense attorney for one of the 11 indicted Sanctuary Movement activists. Hoidal confirmed there was more dissent within the movement itself than many of the newspapers and publicity materials would reveal.


Nelson worked for the INS and describes how the Sanctuary workers were not pursuing a noble goal as many believed, but instead were engaged in commonplace alien smuggling.


Reno was the prosecutor for the United State Federal Government for the Sanctuary trial, and maintained that “the Sanctuary movement was founded to attack the Reagan administration’s anti-communist stance in these Central American countries…it was politically motivated contrary to what romanticism the media might have advanced.” In the interview, Reno advocated for an even more radical position about the Sanctuary movement, as he claimed that “the sanctuary workers wanted communism to prevail in Central America.”


This pamphlet contains statistics and anecdotes about the bias inherent in the 1980 Refugee Act’s interpretation.
Secondary Sources


Bau places the Sanctuary movement in a broader historical context, mainly the history of Sanctuary, but also the government vs. church aspect of the issue. This book’s bibliography was extensive and alerted me to the existence of some papers by Sanctuary activists.


Coutin’s book, initially a Ph.D. dissertation from the Stanford Anthropology Dept. in 1990, touches on the gender and class dynamics of the movement. The Sanctuary Movement seemed to attract the support of two main groups: religious middle-class Americans and liberals. Even though the leaders of the movement tended to be male, the majority of the volunteers were middle-aged females involved with their churches.


Ann Crittenden provides a gripping “true crime” perspective on the Sanctuary movement, and the more salacious stories about the federal investigation into the movement’s legality. Crittenden used extensive research, consulting dozens of newspaper articles and interviewing nearly anyone even tangentially involved with the movement.


A chronological and heartfelt account of the Sanctuary trial written by an Arizonan reporter. It offers many excellent photos of the movement’s leaders and its supporters. I purchased it secondhand at a used book fair by an Arizonan historical society.


This book deals with the irregularities in granting asylum to some nationalities but not others, but does not focus on El Salvador or Guatemala. Konig makes the argument that the irregularities can be credited to a bias against Latin Americans and against those who were believed to have leftist beliefs.

A collection of essays and poems by a woman who was tangentially related to the Sanctuary movement. She became involved after the initial indictments and worked mainly in Chicago with the Nicaraguan population.