



## IRIS Summer Fieldwork: Post-Grant Summary

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September 22, 2023

With the assistance of a 2023 IRIS Fieldwork Grant, I was able to spend 12 weeks digitizing local newspapers, interviewing local business elites, and searching for small local archives in Davao City, Philippines, a city of some 1.6 million people in the southern Philippines. The timeliness of IRIS' support allowed me to complete the second half of my dissertation research, which in all covered a little less than six months in-country. The work completed during that time will be crucial on several fronts, helping me to complete my PhD in history in Spring 2024, present on my research at two major academic conferences, and donate a major new digital archive to the community of researchers and students in Davao City.

The focus of my trip was to digitize local newspapers from Davao City, the city whose late 20<sup>th</sup>-century economic history I will narrate in my dissertation. For any historian of Davao City, the importance of these newspapers is paramount. While the local government's own public archives are limited to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to a combination of natural disasters, pests, and chronic underfunding, the newspaper collection I worked with stretched back to the 1970s, covering five major newspapers and totaling more than a quarter-million pages. Credit is due to the Ateneo de Davao for collecting and maintaining this collection, but soon after I began examining the archive, I learned that the university's collection faced several major long-term challenges. Chief among these was the lack of climate control in the periodicals storage room, which is located on the top floor of the central library. Many issues in the collection had already degraded, leaving them spotted and torn sometimes to the point of illegibility. After my first visit to the library, it was clear to me and to the library staff at the Ateneo that saving this collection — and if possible, modernizing it — would be crucial to preserving the recent history of the city.

Working with the Ateneo's library staff, over several months I conceptualized and oversaw the digitization of the bulk of the collection. This involved hiring and managing four full-time research assistants, who scanned more than 250,000 pages, and writing the computer code necessary to make those scans searchable using a custom-built search engine. This search engine, which can be accessed through the open internet, allows researchers to search the Ateneo's collection for the first time. No other university in the country has a resource of this scale or sophistication, making it a boon for any researcher interested in the recent history of Davao City. I am now working with the Ateneo de Davao, the Davao Historical Society, and other local organizations to make this search tool available as a public website. Local K-12 educators are particularly excited to use the search tool, given that the local government of Davao City has recently mandated that all K-12 students must study Davao City history. Our digital library offers them unprecedented access to the primary sources they will need.

The goodwill generated by this digitization project helped other aspects of my research as well, far beyond my expectations. As word spread about our project, I was able to interview a dozen or so local business

elites in Davao City, including several entrepreneurs who could speak directly to some of the most important aspects of the city's economic history. Additionally, I was contacted by several members of the community who had small archives that they wanted to share with me. I digitized those archives and returned copies to their owners.

The relationships, digital resources, and academic presentations that have come out of my research in Davao City will play a vital role in my future career in academia or related fields. I am eternally grateful to IRIS for providing the funding necessary to conduct this research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Johnny Bassett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Johnny Bassett**  
University of Wisconsin-Madison