

# Digitizing the UAE's History

**A** bustling, modern city with broad boulevards, gleaming skyscrapers, and busy shopping malls, Abu Dhabi welcomed as many as 20 million passengers at its international airport in 2014.

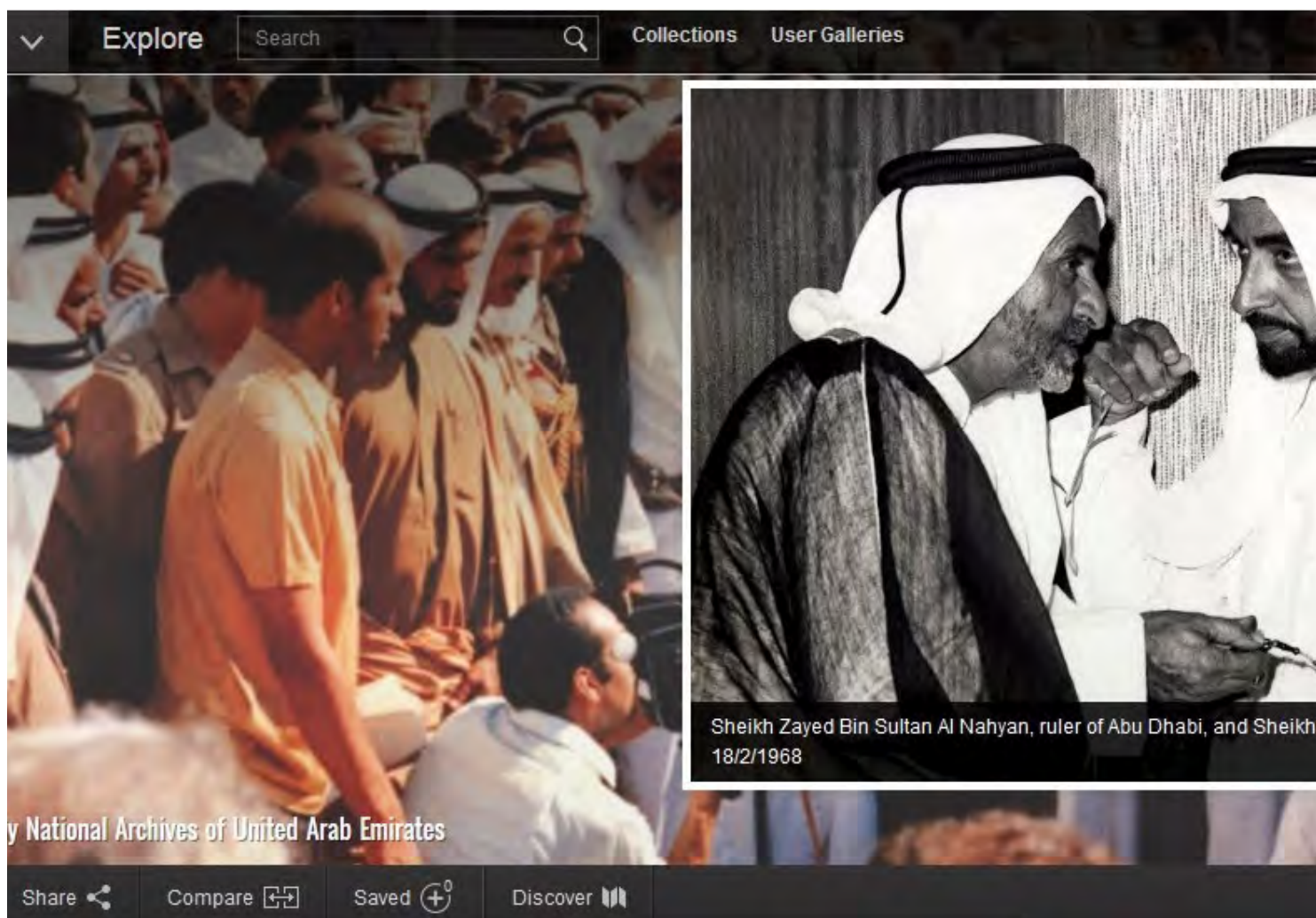
Less than 70 years ago, however, the emirate was little more than a Bedouin village, and a visitor had to

drive through a shallow part of the sea in order to reach it. Security guards were stationed at forts such as Al Hosn and Al Maqtaa, and there were very few signs of oil.

These and many other fascinating facts about the UAE are now accessible to the public and preserved for future generations thanks to the UAE's National Archives, one of the

oldest and largest archival repositories in the Arabian Gulf.

From the prices of pearls in the 1930s, to the locust attacks on the Trucial Coast in 1959, the depth and detail of the collected information is astounding.



## A wealth of archives

Since its establishment in 1968, the National Archives, formerly known as the Centre for Documentation & Research, has been tirelessly collecting and translating thousands of records about the UAE and the Arabian Gulf region.

In just over 40 years, the organization has achieved a pioneer status as the first of its kind in the Middle East and sixth in the world following its adoption of the latest technologies, in addition to being recognized by UNESCO as a foremost Arab cultural institution.

Indeed, its state-of-the-art facilities include a 700-person auditorium, a 3D theatre, and an in-house printing facility, all supported by a team of

**“These archives are priceless as they promote the national identity and serve as a unique and useful reference to researchers and decision makers,” Dr. El Reyes.**

1,600 specialists who work in print and digital documentation management.

About five million historical documents are now stored at the National Archives, dating from before the federation of the seven emirates. Additionally, the research entity has set up archives in 200 government departments, nearly 93% of all federal and local authorities.

“The National Archives collects a wide variety of indigenous sources ranging from oral and written histories to rare books and manuscripts

and audio-visual materials like photographs, films and recordings,” states director general of the National Archives, Dr. Abdulla El Reyes.

These records, according to him, have been collected from repositories around the world, including American, British, Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Ottoman, Persian, Portuguese, and Russian.

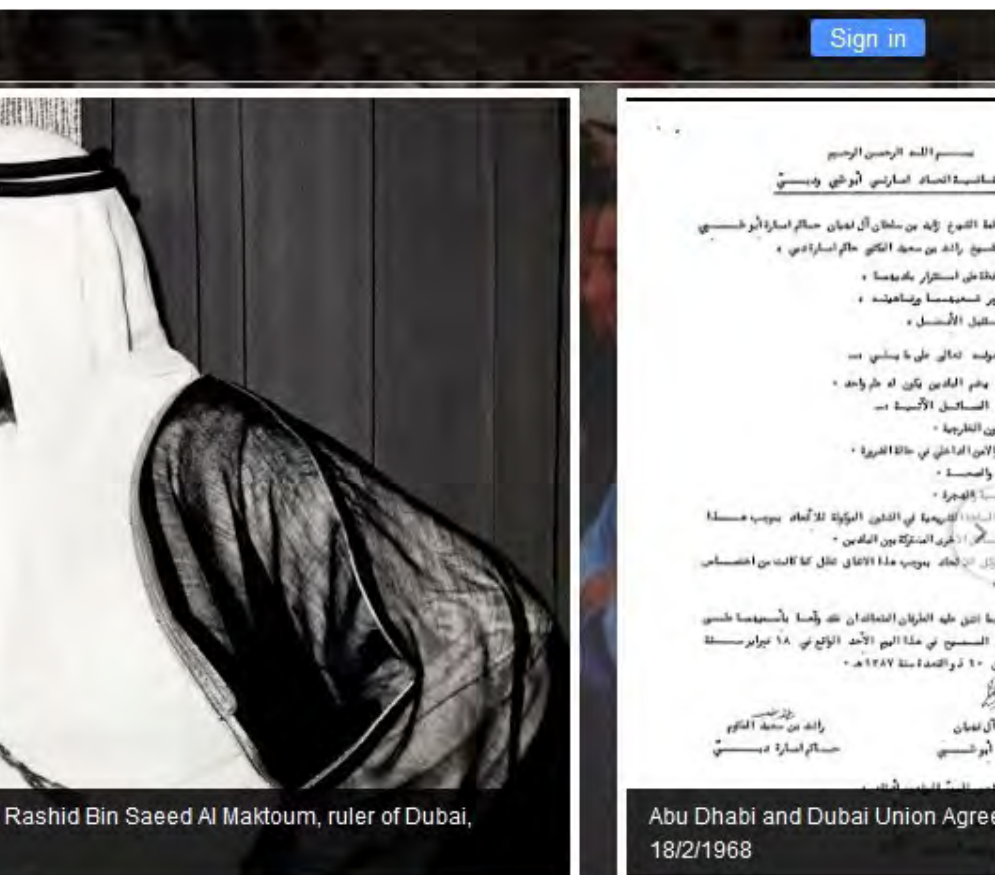
Personal family records of Emiratis in the UAE, however, remain limited in number, a gap which prompted the National Archives to launch the “Watheq” campaign in late 2014.

The movement urged all Emiratis to scan digital copies of rare historical documents or photographs that they have, and submit them to the agency either physically or via USB drives that it had distributed. By mid-2015, a second phase will be launched, targeting historical documents held by expatriates.

## Oral history

At present, the National Archives is in the process of establishing an audio library that will compile quotations and opinions of its late founder and first president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

The oral history project began in 2008 to document events witnessed by older generations of Emiratis and those who lived through them. So far, it has gathered more than 800 audio-visual recordings of Emirati storytellers and elderly citizens, documenting local dialects and songs, and folk tales abundantly present in the local heritage.



Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai,

Abu Dhabi and Dubai Union Agree  
18/2/1968

Image: National Archives of the United Arab Emirates



Expert meeting on the establishment of an International Archives Centre of Excellence in the UAE

As a result of this initiative, the UAE has become the first Arab country to be granted membership in the International Oral History Association, enabling the National Archives to participate in the association's 18th conference that took place in Barcelona, Spain in 2014.

### Abu Dhabi Media

Largely aiding the UAE's archiving efforts is Abu Dhabi Media Company, which embarked on a mammoth nine-year programme to restore all of its historical videos, sound files and documents by converting them into a secure digital format.

Set for completion in 2020, the project started with the foundation phase, which took two years to accomplish and was completed in the summer of 2013. In this phase, Abu Dhabi Media digitized three million files and images from across its newspapers, 16,000 hours of radio broadcast and 5,000 hours of unique TV footage of the UAE history.

Together, the digitized records illustrate some of the country's most important social, cultural, and

historical events.

'As the oldest media organization in the country, many of Abu Dhabi Media's assets chronicle the history of the UAE from 1950 up until today,' Saif Saeed Ghobash, chief operating officer of Abu Dhabi Media said at the time of completing the first phase.

### Electronic archiving

Soon after, the company transferred

3,500 documentary films about Sheikh Zayed to the National Archives, along with their digital versions to serve as a backup and provide easy access to these files. The electronic copies were saved on 3,500 XDCAM discs, which are known for their large capacity and quality, enabling them to be preserved at the archives for the long term.

'These archives are priceless as they promote the national identity and serve as a unique and useful reference



UAE National Archives signs MoU with Bahrain's Isa Culture Center



UAE National Archives adds new publications to its library

to researchers and decision makers," says Dr. El Reyes.

Among the many researchers who benefitted from such records was the Japanese researcher Dr. Shohei Sato, Assistant Professor at Kanazawa University, who was finishing his academic research on the historical usage of water resources in the UAE.

According to the National Archives, electronic archiving is a system that converts documents to a digital format in order to facilitate their management storage, research and recovery. This sensitive work is the responsibility of the Digital Archives section, which carries out photocopying and microfilm projects and digitizes documents.

Keeping pace with the latest developments in smartphone technology, the organization has created several apps that are available on the Mac App Store. One of them is the NA App, through which users can buy, download and read all of the archives' publications in both Arabic and English.

Other apps offer access to an audio library of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, as well as the diaries of several royal family members, including HH Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the UAE, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, vice president, prime minister and ruler of Dubai. These apps, however, are only available in Arabic language at the moment.

### International outreach

In an effort to expand its reservoir of information, the National Archives established relationships with a number of international archival centres, such as the International Council on Archives and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.

It also partnered with Google Cultural Institute to launch a digital exhibit on the foundation of the UAE, becoming the first Arab country to make parts of its archives available through Google's cultural project.

The exhibit showcases documents,

photos and videos related to the country's unification 43 years ago, including the 1971 signing of the Independence and Declaration of the Union by Sheikh Zayed, as well as the first flag-hoisting and the first collection of stamps.

According to Dr. El Reyes, the hoisting of the flag at the Union House in Dubai on December 2, 1971 is one of the most fascinating historical records within the agency's collection.

He points out that many people are not aware that there was another flag hoisted by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the current president of the UAE, at the same time in Abu Dhabi.

Surely, digitizing archives and placing them online is the fastest way to reach the international community, be it researchers, scholars, or any seekers of knowledge. At the same time, it is one of the most reliable ways to preserve historical evidence, which could have otherwise been lost without record.

- Heba Hashem