

# The American Archivist: The Voice of a Profession<sup>1</sup>

By KARL L. TREVER

*National Archives*

THE founders of the Society of American Archivists believed that they could render "important service through professional publications." Consequently, a quarterly was the first enterprise of the kind decided on; it remains to date the Society's major venture in the field of professional publication. But the founders did not consider the new magazine as merely a house organ of the Society. Governed by the same broad vision that guided them in opening membership in the Society to all "who are or have been engaged in the custody or administration of archives and historical manuscripts or who, because of their special experience or other qualifications, are recognized as competent in archival economy," they christened their quarterly the *American Archivist*, and expressed its editorial policy in these simple words: "to be useful as possible to members of the *profession*."

Your program chairman has asked me to discuss briefly the relationship between the *American Archivist* and the archival profession. Had he asked me for a title descriptive of the remarks I propose to make, I might have replied that I would discuss "The *American Archivist*: The Voice of a Profession." But, on second thought, I probably would have insisted that the title ought to be expressed in the style of Horatio Alger, namely "The *American Archivist*: The Voice of a Profession; or, The Tie That Binds." I have determined to treat this topic, first, by setting forth the opportunities for professional service available to our journal; and, second, by indicating some measures that must be taken if it is to meet these opportunities for service to the fullest extent. In dealing with the latter, it will be necessary to present for your consideration some of the operational problems faced by your editor in publishing our quarterly.

Every profession, including our own, must have some vehicle for

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists held at Annapolis, Maryland, October 15, 1951. Its publication will serve as a substitute for the report of the editor which is normally printed in the April issue.

harmonizing and unifying the various elements of specialization within its confines. Our profession, composed as it is of government archivists, institutional archivists, manuscript curators, records administrators, and experts in the several fields of technology peculiar to the preservation, reproduction, and use of records, is especially in need of such a vehicle. The primary function of the *American Archivist*, it seems to me, is to provide this essential bond of union. It can and should serve as the medium through which the common interests and objectives of the profession can be expressed, reiterated, and clearly called to the attention of every group. It should strive to prevent misinterpretation of those interests and objectives, and should combat separatist tendencies, should they arise, with every means at its disposal. Since certain developments in recent years have tended to increase specialization within our ranks, with resultant emphasis on the differences between us, the responsibility of the *American Archivist* for the maintenance of unity within the profession is particularly heavy.

In meeting its responsibility for maintaining professional unity, the *American Archivist* must first recognize and understand the nature and extent of specialization in our profession. It then must open its pages, in all departments, to every group that merits serious consideration. It must achieve a neat balance of subject content within each year's issues and, as far as possible, within a single issue, for the interests of no group can long be ignored if unity is to be fostered. Parenthetically, I assure you that this is no easy task. To those of you who have felt from time to time that your interests or contributions have been overlooked or slighted, let me say that technical limitations, as well as lack of suitable copy, frequently prevent our obtaining the balanced content for which we so earnestly strive. The situation can be remedied only if the editor receives a sufficient *variety* of articles to enable him to juggle space and subjects successfully, and I cannot refrain from remarking here that some who are loudest in their criticism of our journal's contents are numbered among its most prominent noncontributors!

No profession can long hold its place in modern society if the individuals who compose it lose their faith in the importance of their calling. Faith, like patriotism, must constantly be fortified and intensified. Its maintenance depends not only on the development of honest and effective professional leadership, but also on the availability of a body of basic literature which expresses for the individual the history, traditions, philosophy, standards, and ideals of the profession. It is the peculiar obligation of the *American Ar-*

*chivist* to provide this basic literature to the archival profession, and to keep alive and meaningful for every member of the profession the importance of the archivist and his work in modern society.

Those of us who attended the prewar annual meetings of the Society of American Archivists will well remember the enthusiasm for and faith in our calling that was so evident in those days. Perhaps we were so enthusiastic then because we were young and faced a shining new world of professional activity in which opportunities for personal service seemed almost boundless. But I think our enthusiasm also stemmed from the challenging, thought-provoking messages read at those meetings and later published in the *American Archivist*. One cannot escape the feeling that our enthusiasm has worn off somewhat in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Its revival is important to the well-being of the profession. The *American Archivist* stands ready to play its part in such a revival by rededicating itself to the search for and the publication of literary contributions that will serve to stimulate professional *esprit de corps* and inspire the archivist's appreciation of the significance of his own calling. Your editor particularly urges those who are in positions of leadership in the profession to consider seriously their responsibility for the continued production of inspirational literature of this type.

Society does not always appreciate or understand the nature and significance of the contributions made to its general well-being by individual professions. This is particularly true with respect to the younger professions. The archival profession in the United States is less than a quarter of a century old. Not long ago archives were regarded by government officials and citizens alike merely as musty old papers which, with the exception of a few pretty pieces preserved for sentimental reasons, deserved no special consideration. For the most part, the persons in charge of our archives were poorly paid and possessed neither the knowledge nor the competence to preserve and service them. There was no public realization of the significant role archives might play in the administration of government or in the cultural life of our nation.

From time to time individual citizens, particularly from the scholarly world, protested against this situation and, in some cases, sufficient public sentiment was aroused to lead to the establishment of state archival agencies. But it was not until the historical and library associations, the patriotic societies and other organizations began

<sup>2</sup> The enthusiastic response to the opportunities for professional discussion and contact afforded by the well-attended and carefully planned 1951 Annapolis meeting indicates that the author was unduly pessimistic when these lines were written.

to campaign for the proper care of records that the American public was awakened to the real need for an archival profession. The archival consciousness of the people was greatly stimulated by the establishment of the National Archives and the operations of the Historical Records Survey, and with the formation of the Society of American Archivists at Providence, R. I., on December 29, 1936, the archival profession in the United States came into its own.

The cause of archives in the United States has been advanced tremendously during the past fifteen years of organized professional activity. But many people, even in the fields of administration and scholarship, still lack any real appreciation of our profession and the materials with which it works. Indeed, archivists are occasionally still confused in the public mind with architects and archaeologists, and the word archives is still meaningless to many people! Too many government agencies, particularly at the State and local level, continue to give but haphazard attention to their records, and legislative bodies at times are loathe to approve or finance adequate archival and records management programs. Scholars still do not use archival sources to their greatest advantage.

A never-ending campaign must therefore be conducted to educate and to secure the support of administrators, legislators, scholars, and the public on behalf of the archival profession. The *American Archivist* is one medium through which such a campaign can be conducted. Now largely limited in circulation to members of the Society of American Archivists, its distribution should be expanded to include as subscribers more key government officials, Federal, State, and local. It should be gotten into the hands of graduate students and scholars in the social sciences generally, and should be made available on the shelves of far more historical societies and public libraries. If the *American Archivist* is truly the voice of the profession, then we must not fail to make it heard in those quarters that in large part control our destiny.

This wider distribution cannot be achieved by the efforts of the editor alone. It can be advanced, of course, through the work of the Society's membership committee. But it seems to me that the responsibility for developing and conducting the subscription campaign necessary for achieving it might well be assigned to the editorial board. Propaganda literature specifically directed at each group we wish to reach must be worked out, printed, and distributed on the basis of carefully prepared mailing lists. This literature, along with copies of our Society's membership leaflet, also ought to be placed in the hands of individual members of the Society, so that

each and every one of us will be in a position to advance the cause of the *American Archivist* whenever an opportunity to do so arises.

If a profession is to prosper, it must have the respect and cooperation of its allied professions. In this connection, the archival profession is fortunate indeed, for it was fostered and supported in its youth by the organized efforts of the historians, the political scientists, and the librarians. But I fear that our preoccupation with our own professional problems and techniques has led us to forget, at times, what contributions our colleagues in other fields have made to our success. Indeed, there was a time when it seemed as if we were making a studied effort to alienate our cousins, the librarians. I think we know better, now. We realize that we must actively seek the support of and strengthen our ties with all professions that are concerned with documentation in all its aspects; that we must understand and appreciate the relationship of their disciplines to our own field of activity. Here again the *American Archivist* can serve the profession by recognizing the importance of these relationships, acting as the medium of communication between archivists and their colleagues, and making known the "common denominators" existing between us.

In this age of internationalism it is essential, too, that the professions of one country be aware of the activities of their counterparts in every other country. This is especially true for American archivists, since our profession, especially in Europe, is much older, and much of our basic doctrine was inherited or adapted from European professional practice. We have advanced beyond our European colleagues in certain fields, perhaps, but there still is much that we can learn from them. They, in turn, are anxious to learn about our professional experience and practice. To facilitate the interchange of archival knowledge, an international organization of archivists has been established. Our own Society, representing the American profession, has actively supported it and is cooperating in its efforts to establish an international journal for archivists. But for some time to come our best medium for the international exchange of information about archival activities, practices, and doctrine will be the *American Archivist*. Its articles, book reviews, and news notes afford us an invaluable picture of the profession beyond the seas. On the other hand, an ever-expanding circulation of our journal in foreign lands will carry the story of archival progress in the free world to all who seek it. Truly, the *American Archivist* is the tie that binds us to our foreign colleagues, and any slight sacrifice

that we may have to make financially to give them access to it is, in my opinion, amply justified by the ends achieved.

Having considered the broad professional services, national and international, that should be performed by the *American Archivist*, let us turn our attention now to the services that our journal should render to the individual member of our profession.

As I indicated earlier, the individual must have a genuine pride in his profession. He must feel that he has a vital role to play in it, and that he will have an opportunity to let others know of the contributions he is making to his calling. The *American Archivist* is one answer to his needs; it is one tie that binds him to his profession.

The *American Archivist* should be the medium through which the archivist can be made conscious of and acquire the broad cultural background essential to the practice of his profession. It should provide him with a deep appreciation of the significance of archives to the society in which he lives and works. It should clarify for him the philosophy of his profession, and assist him to understand and put into effect the standards of modern archival practice. It should hold before him the purposes of his calling, and make him ever conscious of his responsibilities to his profession and its allies, to his employer and his employees, to the records in his custody, and to the public he must serve. It should supply him with practical suggestions for use in his daily work. It should keep him informed on new developments in archival economy at home and abroad and in contact with his fellow archivists. It should support his archival program, whenever practicable, helping him to spread the gospel of archives in his own community, so that he may gain adequate financial support, suitable legislation, and trained personnel for its consummation. It should supply him with the literature and training aids necessary to his own education and the training of his subordinates. And finally, it should offer him a forum from which he may express his own ideas, make known his personal contributions to the development of his profession, discuss questions of policy and practice that may be troubling him, and advertise his program, his co-workers, and the research values of the records in his custody.

Your editor is proud of the *American Archivist*. It is a good magazine, and he is deeply grateful to all who have contributed to its success. He realizes, however, that the *American Archivist* is not yet serving all of the purposes just outlined. Furthermore, if existing conditions continue, it cannot hope to meet them adequately.

The first obstacle to the production of a better journal is that the editor simply does not receive enough articles, either in quantity or

variety. Articles are the backbone of any magazine, but articles that are not written cannot be published. Your editor has tried to increase the amount of good copy on hand by soliciting articles on important topics from archivists known to be competent to prepare them. That he has had some success in this effort is evidenced by the fact that 30 of the 44 articles published during the last two years were new materials as distinguished from papers read at annual meetings. Nevertheless, the editor's files are filled with letters from archivists who, for one reason or another, have declined his invitation to prepare an article for the *American Archivist*. His files also contain, I might add, numerous letters from other archivists who, having accepted his invitation to write, thereafter, in spite of repeated reminders, have failed to produce. Paucity of copy forces your editor to use what materials he has at hand. He cannot use any editorial judgment as to what will be published. He cannot develop a periodical balanced as to subject content and, worst of all, he cannot develop a planned policy of publication. The *American Archivist* can continue publication in this catch-as-catch-can fashion but, unless the editorial "ditty bag" is kept filled with a wide selection of good copy, the journal can never hope to fulfill the broad professional purposes it ought to serve.

The second obstacle to the proper development of our journal is that the editor does not receive enough contributions bearing on the practical aspects of archival work. It needs many more short, informative articles, more professional notes, more statements on technical developments, and more short descriptions of how practicing archivists conduct their daily operations. Indeed, in years past, the *American Archivist* has been severely criticised for not publishing enough materials of this sort. Yet, when Miss Norton tried to encourage through her technical committee the publication of such items, the response was so disappointing that eventually the committee was allowed to fade away. Contributions of the type desired seem to be very difficult to get. One wonders why! Is it because the individual archivist thinks that the editor will not publish anything but learned essays or full blown articles? Is it because he is afraid to write about the equipment and methods used by his institution? Is it because he thinks other archivists will not be interested in the details of his operations? Or is it simply because he thinks he is too busy to take the time to tell others about his institution, its equipment, its holdings, and its archival practices? Whatever the answer, one thing is clear: if the *American Archivist* is really to serve the individual member of our profession, it must get

contributions of this sort, for they reflect archival work at the "grass roots."

The third and major obstacle to any expansion of the services of our journal is the present high cost of publication. For example, the Society's 1941 budget carried a total of \$1150 for the publication of the *American Archivist* during the year; the 1951 October issue alone cost the Society \$936.49. Yet the magazine is no larger than it was in 1941. Consultation with an American Council of Learned Societies expert on professional publications convinced us, however, that our printing costs are remarkably low; indeed, our investigation into the possibility of resorting to some other method of publication revealed that the splendid "one package" job we are receiving from our printers, The Torch Press, was so reasonable that it would not be worth while to consider another method of publication at this time. We have cut expenses by changing our paper stock, by eliminating major changes in galley proof, and by holding to a minimum the amount of 8-point type that must be set. But these small savings will probably be offset by the steadily mounting mailing costs.

What are we to do under the circumstances? First, we must push the advertising program, the initial fruits of which you may have noted in recent issues. In this connection, I urge you to write to these advertisers for their literature and, whenever possible, purchase their products or services. In doing so, never fail to refer to their advertising in the *American Archivist*! Above all, when you happen to meet representatives of firms handling equipment or services of interest to archivists, be sure to impress them with the advantages that would accrue to them by advertising in the *American Archivist*.

Our ability to sell advertising is largely determined by our circulation figures. Distribution of 1,000 copies per printing seems to be a *sine qua non* for even a small advertising program. We have increased our circulation considerably this year, thanks to the splendid efforts of our membership committee, but we still have a long way to go. As I have indicated, we must also pursue an aggressive campaign to secure subscriptions from government officials, graduate students, leaders in the social sciences, historical societies, and public libraries. To do so, we must advertise ourselves. At this point, the individual archivist again comes into the picture. If he is sold on the importance of his profession and the Society that represents it, he will lose no opportunity to advance its cause. He will keep copies of the *American Archivist* and the Society's membership leaflets on hand, so that he may show them to office visitors who might be

prospective members or subscribers. He will, as occasion permits, refer to the Society and its journal in his correspondence with business associates, colleagues in government, and friends in the scholarly world. He will participate in the activities of the Society, contribute to its journal, and show his enthusiasm for their well-being, in order that he may convince others that they will be missing something vital if they do not participate with us in our professional program. In short, he will assume full personal responsibility for representing the profession in his own community, to this end, that he may be of ever greater service to that community and to his profession.

Do we want the *American Archivist* to be of greater service to our profession? Would we like to receive a larger, better balanced, more informative, and more attractive journal, replete with illustrations, diagrams, charts, and reproductions? Are we anxious to be proud of our profession, the Society, and the quarterly that represents it? If so, then, it is up to us, each and every one of us, to "get in there and pitch!"

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