

# What Should Bind Us Together

By MORRIS L. RADOFF<sup>1</sup>

*Maryland Hall of Records*

IT has become customary for each succeeding president of this Society to examine the addresses of his predecessors for inspiration when his own time comes to speak before our annual meeting. I say it has become *customary* and I shun the word *traditional* advisedly because, as I hope to make clear shortly, tradition is not yet a significant factor in the field of American archives. It is, however, the *need* for a tradition, for a solid, unifying base, which makes us pore over the words of our past presidents, who can be counted on the fingers of a man's hand, and presidents who have spoken only half that many times. We are seeking there, it seems to me, the elusive something which does, or ought to, bind us together.

And even if it is not there, we shall find it; and that is why the reading of the prophets, even of minor prophets like the presidents of the S. A. A., can be fruitful. If those who oppose this course charge that our messages will become mere commentaries, then I say that there is no doctrine of our civilization, religious, scientific, political, artistic, which has not been amended — or if you like, corrupted — by its commentators; but these same commentators have surely reflected the state or meaning of the doctrine from generation to generation — the pure doctrine, having been enunciated *ab initio*, expressed only an ideal, unattained and unattainable. Now, therefore, having demonstrated the wisdom of this course, I have searched the words of past presidents and chosen a text from the message of my immediate predecessor.

Dr. Grover declared, "It is folly for archivists even to think of parting company, literally or psychologically, from the newly-developed specialists in records management, and no less folly on the records management side than on the archival side. Our numbers are too few; our common interests too important."

So that I shall not alarm some of my auditors, I want to state here and now that in principle I agree with Dr. Grover. I am in favor of allowing all to come in who like our company, and I shall support the amendment to the constitution making that legally

<sup>1</sup>Presidential address read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Nashville, Tennessee, October 10, 1955.

possible. But I do not think his reasons for urging this course are unassailable. First:—"Our numbers are too few" to permit schisms. I deny that contention. When we disassociated ourselves from the American Historical Association our numbers were much fewer, and they and we have profited from the change. We were fewer when the American Association for State and Local History was formed, taking away many of our most valuable members. And, although we lost a great deal there, we were also purified in the sense that we became an association of recordkeepers exclusively, whether we like it or not. If the argument warranted, I could point out that Noah disassociated himself from the unrighteous, and he had only Ham and Shem and Japheth and their wives and his with him. Lot did the same, but perhaps in that case there were *really* too few left.

Now for the second argument: "our common interests [are] too important." I would say the argument misses the point. We do not share *common interests*, we have only *one interest*; namely, the guardianship of records. And surely if we have one interest we belong together, and we should be called by the same name. There is nothing between heaven and earth to prevent an American records management specialist from being called an archivist or *vice versa*. I should myself prefer that we all call ourselves archivists, because the name is universal and meaningful; whereas records management is new, known only in this country, and not altogether understood even here. Therefore, should we ever act on the resolution of our Committee on Professional Standards and Training, providing for fellowships, I should prefer to omit the title "Fellow in Records Management."

Now, why do I say that we have only one interest? First, we all deal in records—archives administration, records management and paperwork management. Together we follow a record from birth—some even speak of the birth control of records—to death on the pyre or in the mangle, or to immortality in our vaults. At a point in this life history we have drawn a line, and we have said that here is the province of records management and there of archives administration, the line normally being drawn at the point where the aging record has acquired historical or potential historical interest and has lost most or all of its administrative value.

And who should make this division? I know how it is done in Europe, but I am interested here solely in what is actually happening in this country. Here the records management specialist calls

in the archivist, or the archivist calls in the records management consultant, depending upon who is in charge of the operation. That is right so far as it goes, but why not go further? Why could not the same man be both archivist and records manager? Is the care of the written word so complex that no man has science enough to master it? Is it so abstruse that it requires the combined efforts of obstetrician, pediatrician, geriatrician? Or is the humble general practitioner all that is needed? Are we, in other words, creating specialists where specialties do not exist; are we thinking too much of the record as a living organism requiring special care at various stages of its life history, when in fact it is inanimate and of the same texture and form from beginning to end? "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?"

The records management specialist ought to know which records will have permanent value, the archivist ought to know, by the same token, what records should be created, and if any one of us does not know these things, then we should not be proud of that fact and we should not adopt titles, new or old, to justify our ignorance. Instead, we should learn what we do not already know. If the American archivist complains, let him remember that he does not for our purposes need to know paleography or diplomatics or ancient languages. Would he want to consider himself a professional and yet shun all learning? And to the records management specialist who will not know history or government I say, "Do you want to be a member of an ancient and respected brotherhood and yet deal only in machines and in systems?" Michelet, one of the first modern archivists, warned such as these: "Woe to him who tries to isolate one department of knowledge from the rest . . ."

Well, how did this specialization come about, this distinction, between records and records, which does not exist? Perhaps it was the fault of the archivist, who closed his eyes to the changing world of records. At the beginning, as you will recall, the archivist was any sort of indigent scholar who needed a government post; then he was mainly a learned lawyer, and then a historian, preferably one interested in documents. We can still find examples of archivists of all these categories, but in this country, at least, they are fast disappearing. The Society of American Archivists was organized almost exclusively by historians. They were interested in the historical document and uninterested in any others; in too many cases, even scornful of the others.

But new records were being created at an unprecedented rate, at such a rate that all of our public buildings bulged with them. The

archivist had his chance to contain or direct this flood, but it frightened him. With few exceptions, he turned his back on the problem. But the problem was still there in spite of being ignored, and in time people rose up who were willing to undertake its solution. And who were these minutemen, these firemen? They were surely not scholars in need of government posts, they were not trained in the law, they were not even historians interested in documents. In a few cases they were converted archivists, but for the most part they were products of recordmaking agencies. They were men who, having served an extended apprenticeship in a Government agency and having superior intelligence and zeal, had risen to the top in their field. They applied the techniques they had learned in one agency to the problems of another, and they went on from there to the records of business and of State and local governments.

They succeeded in some cases in stemming the tide. They did it, however, by the destruction of vast quantities of records, and the choice was made not as the historian would make it: that is, "Can this record be of any possible use in the future?" — but as the records officer of an industry or a government would make it: "Can our agency or our business function as of the present without these records?"

Since records management was fathered by private enterprise rather than by government, it had to be sold at a profit; and to be sold it had to be advertised. The advertising was intended to appeal to businessmen and business-minded men; therefore, there was no sex appeal, no titillation, no snob appeal. What was wanted were facts, and facts were liberally supplied. For example, a certain government has records enough if laid end to end to reach around the equator or, if stacked, to top the topless towers of Ilium, and this mass could be reduced to approximately the length of the main line of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas at a saving of \$8,562,748. You could hold it thereafter at this same level by such attractive means as birth control, valve control, selfcontrol and, if I am not mistaken, even by power brakes. No one is to blame for this. It was an invention of private enterprise, but it spread over into government, as witness the precision with which savings are made in the second Hoover Commission report on paperwork management.

Still, however imperfect, records management stood up and grappled manfully with the problem. The conscientious records management specialist regretted his lack of history; the few archivists who undertook records management regretted their lack of

knowledge of systems and machines. When we worked together we did a fair job by respecting each other; when we worked separately we did badly. Even working together, however, is a make-shift arrangement. Our respect for each other's knowledge and judgment may not always be justified. How many of us, giving an order for the destruction of records on the recommendation of another, can have an easy conscience? It is hazardous enough to destroy records when you have personal knowledge of them. It is very near folly to do so on the word of another.

What can we do about this admittedly unsatisfactory situation? Those of us, records management specialists and archivists alike, who trained ourselves in *our* fields must do what we can to understand the other. The archivist must not continue his stiff-necked aloofness, nor must the records management expert despise the deliberate approach of the archivist. How shall we learn these new things? Those of us who are no longer of an age to go to school must learn a lot by doing, and this is not always the easiest way. Then we have our Society, which fosters by its general meetings and by its committee activities just such a working together as is needed. We also have our magazine, whose purpose is to keep all of us informed of what is being accomplished by the most devoted and the most imaginative in archives and in records management.

But, however valuable all of this is and however necessary for those of us who became archivists or records managers in a simpler age, it is far from being enough for the future.

Therefore, I propose that we take a courageous stand; that we strike out boldly on a new path, wherever it may lead. Let us recognize as truth that a record being made is the same record which a few years later may find its way into our sanctum sanctorum, that in its course from here to there it needs physical care and guidance, and that it is the archivist's field, whole and indivisible, to give it this care and guidance. I realize that this is a revolutionary concept, but the times are ajar and we do not have leisure to come to this end by stages. If we delay we shall be first divided and then overcome by a proliferation of specialties.

The preparation of *new* archivists entering our profession, masters of the whole records field, requires first of all, academic training. As long ago as 1936, our society recognized this need and appointed a committee to study it. Professor Samuel Flagg Bemis, who was chairman, proposed that we prepare archivists of the first class and archivists of the second class. Archivists of the first class would be required to take the Ph. D. degree, with a major

in history and government and a thesis subject requiring the use of archival material. Archivists of the second class ought to have "a two-years' course of training on the level of the Master's Degree . . . erected on an A. B. degree in the social sciences." That the feeling was national rather than local is indicated by the fact that only archivists of the second class were to be given courses in local government.

We are now, 20 years later, taking the first cautious step toward implementation of this proposal. But the course at the American University which was endorsed by the council last March leads to the master's degree only and is designed for only a year of study. In other words, we have not even attempted the full program for archivists of the second class. So far as I know, there is now no thought of going further. We are still filling dignified positions with candidates who have had no specialized education and, in many cases, we are employing individuals who have had little education of any kind. Why has this deplorable state of affairs been allowed to continue — indeed, to worsen? Local archivists have lacked the numbers and the influence with universities to make their needs felt, and the Federal Government has relied almost altogether on inservice training.

Last year our president pointed out that "The few States that have good [archival] programs are those that started their work between the years 1900 and 1935," and again, "I can recall no State or local records program, no archives building, that has come into being as a result of the efforts of this society."

Can it be that we are now, individually and collectively, less esteemed and less weighty in council than we were then? And if we are, can the answer be that in general we are less prepared, less learned, less distinguished than we were then?

If there is any danger that we are, let us reverse this trend at once, and let us do it by respecting our honored profession enough to prepare successors for it. We could, even now, accept part of the Bemis report. Surely if we are to handle the records of our civilization as witnesses of our culture, then we should be cultured enough to understand them as such. Academic discipline is not the cure-all, but profession after profession has learned that at least the bare minimum of preparation can be provided by a proper university education. The barest minimum for any kind of archival position ought to be an academic degree; and nothing less than a specialized master's degree, such as that now offered by the American University, ought to be asked of a candidate for a

supervisory position. And the head of an agency ought perhaps to have a doctorate, as Bemis advised. This doctorate should encompass the whole field of record services from beginning to end, from paperwork management and records management to fire and vault. History and government — local government too, if you please — ought to be included as well as techniques. Each graduate could then, after a short period of orientation, take any archival position and assume every responsibility. If we can accomplish this much we shall have made a fine contribution to the science of records, a typical American contribution, one resulting from a re-examination of the practice of a profession. As of now we have contributed only equipment and techniques. Surely that is not the limit of what we can do.

We must, as Dr. Grover so eloquently urged, increase our strength in numbers, in wealth. We must certainly contrive to have a paid, full-time secretariat, where our activities can be centered. We should strengthen and enlarge our journal. We should encourage our committees and our individual members by the granting of suitable awards and the conferring of honors. We should certainly revitalize our publication program, which was still-born.

But above all, we should strive to give our profession the dignity, the unity, the opportunity for service that can come only from the mastery of a body of learning. And this body of learning should by all means include the whole art and mystery of records. This surely will bind us together.