

The Cataloging of Microfilm

By RICHARD W. HALE, JR.¹

Boston University

DURING the past year the compilers of the projected "Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials in the United States and Canada" have had unusual opportunities to see how microfilms are handled in the United States and Canada. Not only has the editor personally visited many institutions, but still more institutions have sent him, as a form of report to the Guide, photocopies of their catalog cards and other working records. The result has been to build up a body of information about current practices and to show what good practices need to be more widely known. The purpose of this brief article is to spread the knowledge of good practices.

First on the list is the careful recording of whether microfilm is negative or positive. For the difference between these two kinds of microfilm is equal in importance and parallel in kind to that between the plates from which a book is printed and the book itself, since it is from the negative — often called the master negative — that copies are normally made. The Guide is particularly interested in this distinction since its purpose is to give the locations of master negatives.

Next in importance is the recording of the location of the originals of documents. For many documents are far from their logical homes; and, no matter how good the photoreproduction, there are times when only an inspection of the original will serve the purpose of the scholar.

There are several ways of recording this information. Perhaps the best that has come to our attention is the system evolved at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. There, catalog cards for microfilm follow a definite pattern. On the card is printed, in large but faint red letters: MICROFILM. This does not obscure the text of the card, but it differentiates such cards from all others. The information given on the card follows a definite order. First comes a list of the contents of the film, as if it were any other body of manuscripts. Second comes the location of the originals that were

¹ Dr. Hale is editor, for the Committee on Documentary Reproduction of the American Historical Association, of a projected "Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials in the United States and Canada."

copied. Third comes information about the master negative: its length and mm. width and its location, whether at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania or elsewhere. Fourth, in the case of a positive, comes a description of the positive, noting any variations between it and the master negative. The Guide will follow this order of entry.

A typical card, for the imaginary papers of an imaginary person, in the native state of the fictional George F. Babbitt, might run thus:

Smith, Zenas Q. 1799-1898.

Papers, 1762-1903. 6 bundles, 40 bound volumes.

At Winnemac Historical Society, Zenith City.

Master negative at University of Winnemac, Zenith City.

45 reels.

Positive copy, bound volumes only, 42 reels, Winnemac State Archives, film 941.555.66.

This order of entry, it will be noted, brings to light omissions in recording that would not be so evident if a different order were followed. It also allows the same card to be used in more than one institution, for the card used by the holder of the master negative can be used by holders of positives with only a minor addition.

Another point concerning this card may be noted. It presupposes that microfilm reels are arranged by subject classification and not by accession number. For this there appears to be sound reason. If films are arranged by accession number, there is, it is true, economy at the start. No one has to dream up subject classifications. But soon the advantages are outweighed by the disadvantages. The bulk of film held grows, and it is found that material on very different subjects is accessioned together while material on the same subject may be spread far apart. It can even happen that a run of film comes in two or more lots, separated by material that has been accessioned in between. It therefore seems wiser to treat film as one would books or a body of manuscripts that is expected to grow and to be prepared to interfile the newer material. It is not difficult to move reel boxes about in a cabinet, far less so than to move books on shelves.

In the actual preparation of film for reference use, there are two devices that are great timesavers. The first is to make sure that what is recorded about a film is on the top of the reel box, where it can be seen. The best possible method is to paste a sheet of paper over the top and side of a reel box, with the top containing the essential information, abbreviated if necessary, and the side containing additional explanation. Anyone who has pulled out box after box

by the top, to see an identification on its side, will appreciate the importance of this.

Identification on the top of the reel box is not enough, of course. Each reel of film itself should be adequately identified. Of course there should be a target on the film, to act as a table of contents. But targets, when full, can be read only in a reader. There should also be, visible to the naked eye, an indication of what is on each film. This can easily be done; for it is possible, in several ways, to write on the leader of a film. This is done by the Genealogical Society at Salt Lake City and makes their film, even their 16-mm. film, easily identifiable.

These may seem rather trivial suggestions. But any archivist who has wrestled with an extensive body of microfilm will recognize their value as timesavers.