

# Leo Pascal, 1909-1962

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*National Historical Publications Commission*

TO have called him a gentleman and a scholar while he was still around would have been to risk the raucous laugh that sometimes startled new archivists and stray searchers in the snack bar. His schools turned out few such. He had prepped on the streets of industrial Cleveland (at six he sold extras of the *Lusitania* sinking); and that city of the bitter depression years, rather than the Western Reserve University, had been his real alma mater.

He had taught—occasional fill-in jobs in the toughest Cleveland schools. When these would end he would try, if there was a chance, to fill in for the janitor. To dozens of school systems he wrote offering to teach for room and board. None took him up. And, until he came to Washington, he was always on the streets before daylight delivering papers on his *Plain Dealer* route, his one steady job from boyhood.

He suspected most gentlemen-and-scholars. Those whom he considered the real McCoy he respected. But he had an unerring nose for the phoney, the pompous, the self-anointed. He scented them out, particularly in his own profession; and he was too compulsive to keep his mouth shut. For himself, he was satisfied to be called an archivist.

To him an archivist was somebody who took care of the records, who found whatever had to be found, who answered the letters, who recognized and brought in from official attics and cellars the useful and threw out the useless, who described records (those hilarious-pathetic sessions translating his understandable words into jargon!), who boxed and labeled and shelved, who did whatever had to be done. Often he did these things the hard way, sometimes the very hard way. But after the terrible years of the 1930's nothing within the sheltering Civil Service seemed to him hard.

He claimed to be able to carry any load, and he did. He carried more than his share: goldbricks, incompetents, those too

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busy on their way up (or down) to be bothered with drudgery. He was attracted to the lost souls who wandered into archival work; occasionally the part of their load that he shouldered helped make the difference between those who found themselves and became archivists and those who didn't and drifted on to other things.

Once he had been head of a small branch. That was many years ago. For almost two decades he was of that sometimes peculiar, sometimes cantankerous, middle bracket who, with enduring integrity, hold together archival institutions. He wasn't a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists. Rather, he claimed with pride that he was the only professional in the National Archives who had qualified for a laborer's rating.

Before there was a course he trained or helped to train many would-be archivists. It was a sometimes wearing, sometimes infuriating, experience. But most survived it and they emerged with much that was good. Also, they learned that if they asked they would always get from him what help he could give, that in an hour of need this unlikely father-image would be there to take over, to fill in, to cover. He was there when they came in the morning and when they left at night; work went home with him; the night and weekend guard shifts knew him. Each year, almost to the end, he took only the hour or two of sick leave he grudging to the dentist, regularly passed up part of his annual leave.

During the last several years he slackened his pace. Perhaps he began to doubt that another depression really was just around the corner. In the snack bar a new generation listened to this young grandfather's oral history of square pegs in round holes (who can forget the Keystone Kops chase through the stacks?) and took his mountain-railroad tour of the social landscape as seen by a gas-light-era American transplanted to modern suburbia.

Cancer touched him. Not recognizing the killer, he waved him off. "If you can walk you go to work." But the day came when other arms had to help him, the indestructible, out of the stacks, into a cab. It was the last time he saw the building in which he spent most of his working life.

Let's go back to the last few minutes of a better day. The stack doors are locked, the alarm is set, the kidding centers on him, the fall guy. He folds that morning's *Washington Post*, flips it back-hand (the *Plain Dealer*'s best route boy) 30 feet across the room into an outbasket. Out into the evening. From the FBI offices the eternally young girls, and his appraisals thereof. Across the

Avenue to Jake's and the second-hand books. Into Hodges and a toss to see who buys the dark beer. A second glass. Then the rush (spearing, in passing, an olive from the end of the bar) to the bus stop. And there, fidgeting, waiting, he recalls the long years before suburbia, before dependence on buses, when (in his words) he was the Great Pascal, King of the Old Southwest.

Well, Old Leo, the Great Pascal: The Southwest, the Old Southwest, past whose red-brick houses of the Hayes-Garfield-Arthur years you once biked to work, is gone. And you, Old King, with your Duryeas and Stutz Bearcats and Hudson Super Sixes and your readings from McGuffey and your Lincoln's doctor's medical diploma, you're gone. And from those of us who at one time or another steadied ourselves against your stubborn rock-strength and got reassurance from your erratic, generous heart, something too has gone.

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