The Management of Archival Institutions

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OVER the past several years we have all heard considerable talk about the deplorable state of reporting by our archival agencies. There seems to be general agreement that too few institutions develop such reports and that too few of those prepared are printed or otherwise reproduced for distribution.

The annual report of the Archivist of the United States has come in for its share of this discussion. There is no question that something has happened to the National Archives report. From a high of almost 70 pages 25 years ago our annual accounting is now reduced to a 4- or 5-page section of the report to Congress by the Administrator of General Services. We recognize that this accounting is an inadequate report to our profession. It should and will be supplemented; and I, for one, am not unhappy at the prospect of separating our administrative from our professional report.

But tonight I am interested in the question of periodic reporting by our archival agencies only as a pretext for my subject. Since we have not been reporting to you in detail I felt that it would not be amiss if I talked to you about the National Archives. I propose to do so from a somewhat novel point of view—the point of view of the management of an archival institution—a subject, I am sure, that seldom is discussed in any annual report.

Many years ago A. R. Newsome in a presidential address to this Society described the American archivist as "a scholar, an expert technician skilled in the arts of his profession, and a public administrator."[1] Newsome had little to say about the responsibilities of the archivist as a public administrator, and, so far as I know, no one among us has ever spoken on the problems of managing an archival institution as distinct from those of managing archives

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[1] "The Archivist in American Scholarship," in *American Archivist*, 2:223 (Oct. 1939).

or records—and I think I can understand why. Persons of scholarly inclination, as a rule, are prone to look on management as a bit vulgar, to regard it as highly overrated in importance—as something to be endured rather than taken seriously. This is a comfortable way of dismissing the matter, but every archival organization is managed by someone, and every archivist with this responsibility wears two hats—a manager's and an archivist's.

For the National Archives an exaggeration of the feeling that management is beneath the dignity of a scholarly profession would be fatal. The National Archives is big enough to require a considerable amount of managing at several levels. Several years ago Ernst Posner, in speaking of our institution, remarked that we suffered from "the curse of bigness"—the problem, as he put it, of "large-scale archival organization."[2] The National Archives is indeed large as such institutions go. Whatever yardstick is used to measure its size—total holdings, 914,000 cubic feet; annual appropriation, 2½ million dollars; size of staff, 395—it is not a small operation.

I use these statistics only to underline the fact that even if the National Archives were subject to no superior authority a good bit of management and administration would be inevitable. That we are a part of the Federal bureaucracy undoubtedly adds to our administrative burdens. That the National Archives is but one part of a Service that now includes 4 presidential libraries, 16 records centers, 10 regional directors, the Office of the Federal Register, and a staff of records management specialists—activities that raise the total staff of the Service to over 1,800—further complicates the situation.

As I see it, the basic functions of any manager, including managers of archives operations, whether small, medium-sized, or large, are these: (1) defining the purposes and objectives of his organization (within the boundaries, of course, of his statutory or other charter); (2) translating these objectives into plans susceptible of practical accomplishment; (3) selecting competent staff members and organizing them as a work force; (4) checking progress toward established goals and from time to time reevaluating both objectives and programs; and (5) interpreting his organization to a great variety of publics.

This list may sound suspiciously like a number of textbook platitudes, but whether the functions are carried out instinctively with

[2] "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist," in *American Archivist*, 18: 212 (July 1955).

a minimum of managerial formalism and in ignorance of the techniques of sophisticated management, or whether a more conscious effort is applied, these are nevertheless jobs that the competent manager must do, and therefore they are worthy of discussion in relation to archival operations. Planning, for instance, appears to be inordinately difficult for most archival operations. Instinctively, perhaps, the working archivist realizes that a work plan, once accepted, opens the lid of a Pandora's box of management evils: work can be "costed out," performance can be measured, and (even worse) performance standards may be suggested. It may be anathema for the professional archivist to think of his work in terms of the cost of its accomplishment, but the realistic manager must think in these as well as other terms. And at times I feel that the working archivist ought also to submit to this unpleasant discipline.

I shall not, however, attempt to cover all of the manager's functions. One or two of them will be sufficient for my purposes.

Of all the functions on my list the one most often slighted by the archivist-manager is the final one—the task of interpreting his organization to a large variety of publics. These publics range all the way from those that may be presumed to be sympathetic to the purposes of his organization, such as colleagues in his own and related professions and the researchers who receive assistance from his staff, to groups whose feelings are indifferent if not suspicious or hostile. Among the publics of the government archivist are his bureaucratic colleagues and always the political authority from whom the resources of his organization are obtained. The competent manager will know his publics and their legitimate interests and will make a positive effort to present his case to them, for the attitude of these groups will determine in the end the status of his institution.

I mean by "interpreting" more than is usually connoted by "public relations," although good public relations practices are a major part of successful interpretation. But the responsibility of interpretation cannot be fully delegated to a public relations office. The manager himself must play an affirmative role in stimulating an appreciation of archives and, to use Professor Newsome's words, in interpreting "archival work to the public as a necessary factor in an enlightened society." Successful interpretation of an archives organization is not, of course, achieved by the manager singlehanded. It must be grounded on professional competence in his staff and institution, but the manager sets the tone and

direction. Successful interpretation cannot be phony promotion; expediency is no substitute for integrity. Neither does it mean being all things to all people; still less does it imply manipulation of groups involved.

Many managers, archivists included, who reach their positions through careers as program specialists find it difficult to turn away from internal problems far enough to fulfill this outside responsibility. Yet failure in this respect by archivists is detrimental to the whole profession.

Deficiency in this function, however, is only one of the faults chalked up against the program specialist turned manager. A substantial and growing body of opinion in this age of professional management holds that program-oriented administrators remain "specialists in heart and thought," spending their time "firefighting" and interfering in the "nuts and bolts" details of operation to the neglect of the important managerial functions of planning, coordinating, organizing, staffing, directing, reviewing, and interpreting. This may be true in many cases, but I find hard to believe the corollary that a manager trained in the skills and techniques of management and inexperienced in program content would be more successful at the program level. The manager of an archives operation must understand the substance of his program; he must have developed a philosophy about it; he must have the confidence of the professionals in his field; he must, in my opinion, be an archivist. If his own self-appraisal reveals deficiences as a manager, he ought to be honest and take steps to improve himself. Archivists who aspire to be managers or who already have such responsibility should be warned that more and more in the future they will be competing with the professional manager.

When Dr. Posner referred to the "curse of bigness" as a problem of the National Archives he was thinking of problems of internal organization and management. Large-scale organization requires a degree of regimentation, and Dr. Posner, in words so carefully chosen and presented as scarcely to be called critical, expressed concern that the members of our staff were unable "to derive from their chosen occupation the happiness and satisfaction that their European colleagues seem to find in it." He asked whether it was not possible that the archivist was losing his personality amidst a welter of administrative detail.

This gentle criticism from the most competent observer in our Nation deserves attention. First, from a general point of view.

During the past decade, certainly ever since the publication of William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man*, the notion has become popular that large modern organizations and individual opportunity are incompatible. As Herman M. Somers has put it, Whyte's book "popularized the view that large organizations inevitably discourage individual excellence, creativity and distinction in favor of mediocrity, passive conformity, 'group-think' and authoritarianism." Somers indicated that this belief can have serious consequences:

> As a teacher of public administration, I have occasion to discuss with many college students the prospects of a career in the public service. The blocks against such choice are, of course, numerous and varied. But prominent among them I frequently find the fear of becoming an indistinguishable cog in a massive wheel, of becoming "lost" in the vast desert of large organization, of lacking opportunity for individual imagination, creativeness, and leadership, of merely executing routinely decisions made "way up on top."[3]

If the curse of our bigness in the National Archives is that it has not only "shriveled the individual" in the past but now repels the most able of the younger students, we are certainly in a bad way. I don't believe the situation is quite so extreme. For one thing, the National Archives is not so big as all that; for another, I do not believe that the size of the organization bears any critical relationship to individual development. No organization, large or small, has any dynamic of itself. The nature of the organization and the human attitudes that activate it are important, and fortunately these are matters that the manager can do something about.

It is true that in the organizational development of the National Archives the professional archivists to an unnecessary extent have been saddled with administrative burdens. The cause of this situation is rooted in the very nature of American bureaucracy—and I use this term broadly, not just as it applies to the Federal Government. Our bureaucratic institutions are run by a hierarchy, in theory at least, on autocratic principles, with fairly clear lines of authority running from top to bottom. Success in bureaucracy has come to be associated with climbing the hierarchical ladder. The "good" jobs, the jobs that carry prestige (status if you will) and the reward of higher salaries, are those with the power to command—the jobs that revolve around supervision, management, administration. Practically all the culturally accepted success sym-

[3] "Organization—Door to Opportunity," in *Civil Service Journal*, 3:5, 8 (July-Sept. 1962).

bols, including "the name on the door and the rug on the floor," are associated with positions in the hierarchy. In short, an archivist in order to be rewarded for competence as a professional specialist must give up his specialty and enter the administrative field.

This seems to me to be wrong on several counts. In the first place, there are relatively few hierarchical positions and only a few can be selected for them. As someone has said, "the 'success' of one is dependent upon the 'nonsuccess' of another." Those who are not promoted feel unhappy and rejected. In the second place, it does not follow that achievement as a professional archivist in all cases fits one for administration or management. Far be it from me to tell you what the qualifications of a manager are, but it is possible that over the years we have blighted the professional careers of a good many archivists by rewarding them with promotion to positions of administrative responsibility.

I say this while fully realizing that there probably isn't a person in the audience who doesn't feel that he is as good a manager as the next man—or could be if given the chance. But this simply indicates to me how completely the conventional thinking about success has penetrated our profession.

What is needed, obviously, is a change in the values of bureaucratic society, a change in attitude that will recognize and reward the career specialist as a specialist. We are not so arrogant in the National Archives as to believe that any efforts on our part will greatly influence the mores of bureaucratic life, but there are some things that we can do. Last January the National Archives was reorganized. We eliminated almost a dozen branch chief and comparable positions, and this number of senior archivists have been released to use their talents as archivists. More than this, we have created the position of senior archival specialist at a rank and with rewards high enough to be worthy of the ambitions of the most highly qualified professional. These positions—only two at present—are entirely free of administrative distraction. In time a ladder of professional positions will be developed. When this is achieved, the success of an archivist will depend solely upon the cultivation of his professional talents.

It would be an ideal world indeed if every archivist—assuming, of course, able performance and normal growth—could be assured of steady advancement to the top rungs of a professional ladder. With over 150 professional archivists on our staff, the majority of them on the bottom rungs, achievement of this ideal

poses a tough realistic problem. We can easily develop a staffing pattern for professionals of the usual pyramidal form—a few positions at the top, increasing numbers toward the base—with advancement based on competition, on the theory that the cream will rise to the top. I am still enough of an "inner-directed" country boy to see some merit in competition as an incentive to self-development; but the pyramidal pattern is rigid and movement within it is sluggish and uncertain. The manager is constantly harassed on the one side by a feeling that he should stick with the pattern and on the other by demands that he depart from it in order to retain able employees.

The only alternative appears to be a reduction in the number of archivists. And before this choice can be made there must be a clear definition of the functions of the professional archivist. I cannot discuss this question tonight, but it is obvious that not all work performed in an archives establishment necessarily requires the touch of the professional. Much of the work in an archives can be safely relegated to other classes of employees.

Those familiar with the organizational changes in the National Archives of ten months ago may well question whether what happened was not a return to a previously discredited functional basis of organization. It is true that we eliminated the branches based on records of related provenance and established reference branches and archival projects divisions within two Offices, one of Civil Archives, the other of Military Archives. More than this, we set up a separate Office of Records Appraisal. The truth of the matter is, however, that many of the old branches had become 75 to 90 percent reference service branches. Despite the best intentions of all, few individuals could be assigned to description, publication, or other project activities with satisfying results. Our old organization was wasteful of time and talent. And this is said with no denigration of the individuals on the staff of the National Archives. Our staff is loyal and hardworking, devoted to the ideal of service, and withal very patient with its management.

In the National Archives we recognize that a professional archival career precludes specialization by function. Our policy is to provide opportunity for development of the whole archivist by rotating the assignments of the professional staff—assignments of sufficient duration to give scope to creative effort. Without this the organization would become a victim of "task specialization" rather than a vehicle for personal specialization and devel-

opment. The specialization of an archivist should include more than mastery of the science of our profession. As Dr. Grover has warned us, mastery of technique and principles is not enough, lest we become mere technicians "maneuvering empty vessels on a shelf . . ."[4]

No one can deny credit to the archivists of our time for having in less than a generation worked out most of the basic doctrine and methodology for administering the archives of our Nation. This task has consumed a large share of the energy of the National Archives staff, and the job is not yet done. But there is a danger that the science of archives management will come to be regarded as the principal if not the entire content of the professional archivist's specialization. There is more to the profession than this and the addition is found in the field of historical scholarship. The archivist can never cease to be a student of history —he is after all working with historical materials. And his institution must take care not to erode and abrade his scholarly aptitudes by continued assignments that neither require nor challenge his professional skills.

It should be plain that the present organization of the National Archives forces attention to the utilization and development of the individual members of our staff. This is as it should be. Equally important, the organization emphasizes the mutual interdependency of the professional specialist and the administrator. A recognition of this interdependency is the only valid basis for large-scale archival organization.

[4] "The National Archives at Age 20," in *American Archivist*, 17:107 (Apr. 1954).

"I caught hell . . ."

I do not think you will find anything which would be helpful to the Hearst people even if it were desirable to give it to them and I am afraid you will not find much that would be helpful to a biographer. As I think I told you, Mr. Coolidge's desire was to destroy everything in the so-called personal files and there would have been nothing preserved if I had not taken some things out on my own responsibility. Some of the files are trivial and were only preserved in case he might find himself publicly associated with some organization which he did not approve. These are the letters relating to honorary membership accepted from the White House. I cannot remember what the rest of it is but I caught hell for saving anything.

— EDWARD TRACY CLARK, personal secretary to Calvin Coolidge (1921-29), in a letter to Harry E. Ross, Mar. 31, 1933, as quoted in Library of Congress Press Release No. 63-11. The Clark papers in the Library were opened to the public on Oct. 20, 1962.