

The Archivist Meets the Records Creator

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WE have long accepted the principle that archivists should maintain continuous liaison with agency officials and record officers; yet our profession lacks any substantial descriptions of the components of effective liaison. The 1960 handbook, *National Archives Procedures*, for example, states: "It is essential in the appraisal of records, whether for transfer or for disposal, that the [archival] divisions should keep in touch with the agencies allocated to them." T. R. Schellenberg, in his *Modern Archives*, though he makes no specific reference to liaison, refers to the joint responsibility of agency officials and archivists in appraising records. His chapter on "Appraisal Standards" notes that archivists should give primary consideration to basic records concerning organization, function, and policy. Archivists would surely be remiss if they made assumptions about the identification of these basic documents without consulting officials.

Liaison is, then, an important archival responsibility. Although the activity does not lend itself to critical essays or to detailed manuals, nevertheless the profession could benefit from personal accounts of relations with officials.

Few aspects of liaison are more important to archivists than the establishment of good relations during initial conversations with high-ranking officials. A successful interview not only gains the archivist the information he needs at the moment but may win him a valuable friend in the agency and promote good recordkeeping practices. Which methods have proved, by practice, generally to lead to the establishment of "good will"?

Archivists are within their rights in entering officials' offices without notice. Such an approach might save an archivist time, but it is not recommended. Ideally, the person to be interviewed should be at ease and ready to chat for more than half an hour to assure an informative conversation. Experience indicates that the hour

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after lunch is best for an extended interview. It is usually the least productive period, except for good conversation. Whatever the time, be prompt.

You, as interviewer, should be thoroughly prepared to meet the records creator. His place in the organization, the functions and internal procedures of his office, and his relationships with subordinates should be digested and analyzed by you before the meeting. You should be knowledgeable about the functions, programs, and activities of the agency. It is good tactics generally to display this knowledge and interest when the conversation permits.

You are naturally expected to open the conversation. After brief amenities, tell the official about your duties and immediate objectives. The next part of your opening remarks may well be the key to a successful encounter. You must convince the official of the importance of your project to his agency, to himself, and, finally, to scholars.

What value do your activities have to agency officials? (Any archivist can deal with the other areas by reflex oral action.) A major value that will interest him is your role in preserving basic records needed for a smooth transition when there are changes in key personnel. Recall to the official the problems he faced in assuming his current position. Did he readily locate all the records he required to assume his full responsibilities? If a key subordinate (such as his secretary) were to die, could someone replace her without difficulty? I have even risked loss of good will by suggesting that the official is not himself immortal.

My next gambit is to remind the official of the value of records to reveal the origins of basic policies and decisions in order that their continuing relevancy can be reviewed. As these records are rarely readily available, this point is particularly important to you as an archivist. You should feel free to suggest deliberate documentation of discussions about important matters.

To illustrate the importance of records pertaining to the origin of decisions, I usually tell two stories. The first concerns the tradition that before a particular Puccini aria the tenor goes offstage briefly. One tenor, new to the role, found no dramatic reason for the exit. Fortunately, the tenor who had created the role was still alive. To the young tenor's question about the exit, the veteran replied, "This aria is the most difficult in the opera. I went back-stage to spit."

My other anecdote appears in Chancellor Bismarck's memoirs. When he visited St. Petersburg, Bismarck was curious about a

guard standing at attention in the middle of a lawn. In answer to inquiries, he could learn only that a guard had been stationed there for many years. Bismarck, with characteristic persistence, found the origin of this tradition. Catherine the Great had seen a beautiful flower on the lawn. "Protect it," she ordered.

At this point in the interview it might be well to pause, to give time for the official's comments. Usually, he will talk frankly about the state of records in his agency. Some officials begin by talking about their ancestors and discussing the difficulty of genealogical research. Don't discourage a few such irrelevancies provided they relate to archival interests. If, however, the conversation veers too far from the main topic, diplomatically return to it. Take verbatim notes of the official's substantive remarks. From experience, I can state that note-taking does not inhibit free discussion. Officials are flattered that you show interest in everything they say. Without notes, important information may be forgotten soon after the meeting. I transcribe my notes after returning to my office, and they permit a review of my accomplishments. The typed version may be filed for future reference.

When you have softened up the official by discussing your joint interest in significant documentation, you may begin your interrogation. You will find that the quarter- to half-hour spent on preliminaries has been well spent. The official's replies will probably be quite satisfactory, and you will have won an ally in the agency.

No Step But Distorts It

Fix fact fast: truths change by an hour's revolution:

What deed's very doer, unaided, can show

How 't was done a year — month — week — day — minute ago?

At best, he relates it — another reports it —

A third — nay, a thousandth records it: and still

Narration, tradition, no step but distorts it,

As down from truth's height it goes sliding until

At the low level lie-mark it stops — whence no skill

Of the scribe, intervening too tardily, rescues

— Once fallen — lost fact from lie's fate there.

—ROBERT BROWNING, "Fust and His Friends: An Epilogue," in *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day*, p. 179 (Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887).