The Archivist and Public Relations

By DAVID J. DELGADO

Division of Archives and Manuscripts
State Historical Society of Wisconsin

AN ARCHIVIST is a public servant in charge of a cultural and intellectual enterprise. He offers as his services the basic archival functions of collecting, arranging, storing, retrieving, and providing reference service on records and often such advanced activities as publishing scholarly editions of public documents or participating in university graduate instruction. An aggressive program to provide and expand archival services must include an effort to communicate these activities to the public, or rather to the publics: archive users, both professional and amateur, nonuser friends of archival and historical endeavors, and completely indifferent citizens. A well-balanced information program has something to tell all these publics.

American archivists have generally and regrettably failed to acquaint their constituencies with the services they provide. This failure has held back the work of the archival profession. Archivists are handicapped in providing services by low salaries, low budgets, and low status. Too often the archivist is regarded by public officials as an unwelcome meddler, by academic researchers as a librarian rather than a colleague, and by the general public as a dusty curiosity, if the general public is even aware of his existence. This low esteem is reflected in lack of support for the archives and little use of its available services.

A vigorous information program can go a long way toward raising both the prestige and the usefulness of the institution and its personnel. This program can function in two ways that are not entirely separable. The first is communication to the public of the Archives' problems and services, in order to attain such goals as prestige, needed legislation, or increased appropriations. One of the great masters of this approach, Mary Givens Bryan, spent many years explaining, publicizing, and garnering support for her institution; it worked; Georgia's State Archives now has what may be the finest archives building in the world.

Second, an information program can be a direct part of archival

The author is Assistant Archivist of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. This paper was read before the Society of American Archivists at Atlanta, Ga., on Oct. 7, 1966, in a session of the Society's 30th annual meeting.

service. Activities such as the publication of guides, microfilm copies, and edited documents are primarily means of disseminating information about the Archives' holdings. Obviously such a program has a prestige value too; sometimes such prestige may be a major factor in bettering the conditions under which the Archives must operate. For example, in South Carolina, as Charles Lee has pointed out, publication by the South Carolina Archives of a series of fine editions of documents was instrumental in convincing that State's legislature to build a desperately needed new archives building.[1]

What type of public relations activity will be most fruitful? This depends in part on the circumstances of the institution. Budget, staff, holdings, and physical facilities will affect the needs and capabilities of the Archives. Nevertheless, some observations may be made with more or less general validity.

The first point is that it is more rewarding to direct an information program toward certain segments of the public than toward others. My very strong feeling is that in general the most good from the least effort results from a program aimed primarily at the serious researcher; and this usually means the academic researcher.

We live and operate in an education-conscious era. Members of the university community, who have always had influence far out of proportion to their numbers, are now advising governments and private organizations and are active in community affairs to an unprecedented degree. There are interest and funds in education as never before, and the archivist will do well to associate his operations as much as possible with higher education. Nor is it inappropriate to emphasize the association of archives and education. Although archives also exist for the convenience of the state and the protection of the citizen, only utility to the scholarly researcher justifies a large proportion of the archivist's work and the continued existence of most of the records he saves.

And who is the scholarly researcher? He is simply a professional in the use of source materials. He is a member of the only segment of the archivist's public that will be interested in the entire range of the archivist's holdings. He is usually the best qualified to exploit all the possibilities of the sources he uses. And he, like the archivist, is by vocation a member of a cultural and intellectual enterprise; the product of his work, like that of the archivist, is open to all;

[1] Charles E. Lee, "Documentary Reproduction . . . ," in *American Archivist*, 28: 351–365 (July 1965).

his goal is the furtherance of knowledge; his values, then, coincide most closely with those of the archivist.

It is regrettable, but it is also true, that a very large number of scholars are not only unaware of archival records that may help them with specific problems but are hardly aware of archives at all. This is true even of historians, who are the traditional scholarly users of archives. It is far more true of political scientists and sociologists, not to mention architects, engineers, and agricultural researchers, all of whom are likely to find valuable source materials in archives if they can be persuaded to look there. Furthermore, scholars include not only experienced researchers on university faculties but also graduate and even undergraduate students. These students are professionals by instinct and attitude but not, at least initially, by experience. They need an archivist to guide them.

Evidently, then, we first need some sort of campaign designed to acquaint the academic researcher with the existence of the Archives. This campaign will probably move on several fronts. Initiation of personal contacts by the archivist whenever an opportunity presents itself, talks before faculty groups, the printing of news notes and accession lists in scholarly journals, and the distribution to faculty departments of attractively printed brochures explaining in a general way the services and holdings of the Archives—all these activities can be elements of an effort to remind the researcher that archives exist.

Once relations are established with the campus, the one most useful service that the Archives can render to scholars is to publish a general guide to its holdings. A guide will tell the researcher what the Archives has and also what it does not have. We are accustomed to regard a guide as a long and expensive project. It need not be so. Almost any Archives has some sort of record serving as a control over its holdings. Even if this shows for each group of archives only a title, the dates of the records, and some indication of their volume, a brief guide can be compiled from it. All that is necessary is to list each series, giving title, dates, and volume, preferably under record groups corresponding to the structure or function of the creating agencies. The manuscript may be typed, quickly edited for consistency and accuracy of citation, retyped on stencils, and mimeographed. A smaller depository may be able to publish such a guide in as little as two weeks from the guide's inception. This is the quickest, easiest, and cheapest guide the archivist's money can buy. Even this, the barest skeleton of pub-

lished description, will vastly increase the usefulness of a depository for scholars and others, even for the government.

Any guide is infinitely preferable to no guide at all. Naturally, however, the more intensive description a guide contains, the more useful it is. Descriptions may be a paragraph or longer for each series and may be supplemented by lengthy essays on the histories and functions of each record group and subgroup. A well-prepared index can render a longer guide much more useful to the researcher, especially the researcher who is unfamiliar with archival arrangement.

Wisconsin's State Archives has recently published a guide[2] that is a compromise between these two extremes. It lists all State records (but no county and local ones) held by the State Historical Society. Each series, processed or not, is described in a brief entry, which often contains substantially more information on the content and arrangement of the series than would a mere title but which seldom exceeds three or four lines. Sometimes closely related series are described together in one aggregate entry. Entries are arranged by record groups and subgroups; a short essay on the history and functions of the agency is provided for each record group. A very brief introduction explains the basis of the record group system, describes the method of annotation, and contains some information on reference service available. This *Guide* is paperbound and printed by offset. Its compilation took roughly 15 months, about the maximum time that should be spent before issuance of a printed result by a State or local archival institution. Staff time is too valuable and budgets are too uncertain to permit such a major investment to accumulate without a tangible result. The many volumes of the Historical Records Survey remaining unpublished in many States are an object lesson in the dangers of waiting too long before publishing.

For most larger Archives, the time element precludes publication in one effort of a full-scale descriptive guide, with a paragraph or more of description for each entry. There are alternatives, however. One is the topical guide, such as a guide to the records of a State's Territorial period, or to the Archives' genealogical resources, or to Civil War records. These topical guides give intensive description for records in the fields of greatest interest without the investment of time required to compile a full guide. But topical guides are not an adequate substitute for a general guide, for one of

[2] David J. Delgado, comp., *Guide to Wisconsin State Archives* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1967).

the long-range goals of any archivist should be to publish descriptions of all the records in the Archives, and no plan for topical guides will attain this goal. Any records worth saving should be of interest to some researcher some day, and records not worth publicizing are probably not worth saving.

A better alternative to the topical guide may be to issue a pamphlet-sized guide fully describing every series in a single record group. Naturally the most interesting record group is a logical first choice—perhaps the records of the Governor's Office. This alternative has the advantage that it can be the first of many, which will ultimately form a complete, intensive guide to the entire holdings of the State Archives.

There remains the question of money. Our *Guide* was compiled with a great deal of first-rate assistance from two University of Wisconsin doctoral candidates, one in history, one in journalism. Each was hired as an editorial assistant under the work-study program; the Federal Government paid 90 percent of their salaries. Grants for guide preparation may become available from the National Historical Publications Commission. Sometimes interested private societies such as the D.A.R. or the United Daughters of the Confederacy and sometimes other agencies of the State government, such as the university or a centennial commission, may be sources of funds for a well-planned and persuasively explained guide project.

Accession lists form a useful supplement to a published guide. Sent at regular intervals to any national or regional scholarly journals that will print them, and perhaps also to interested faculty members, other individuals, historical societies, and similar institutions, they help to keep scholars acquainted with an Archives' major acquisitions. These lists need not be complete; they may mention only those new holdings that the archivist believes to be of considerable research interest. Along with brief news notes and staff information, they can further help the archivist to keep in touch with the scholarly community.

When an Archives is located reasonably near a campus, it has a unique opportunity to contribute to and profit from its academic association. It can contribute in several ways.

The archivist can offer valuable counseling to graduate students, by guiding them to areas of research where his holdings are strong. The service he renders to scholarship by so doing should not be underestimated. At the University of Wisconsin last year, 12 masters' theses dealing with Wisconsin history were completed.

Most of these grew out of visits by their writers to the State Historical Society's Research Division. The division's research staff, collaborating closely with the archivists and manuscripts curators, spent from half an hour to an hour with each visitor, discussing his interests, asking questions, and making suggestions. The Archives and Manuscripts office provided further briefing on the content and usefulness of sources that interested the researcher.

Discussion with faculty members can lead to preparation by the archivist of short lists of pertinent archival materials for use by seminars. These lists can be reproduced and distributed to seminar members. They are easy to prepare; initially, at least, the main effort will be to find out from professors in advance what fields their seminars will cover.

The archivist can also make a direct contribution to the curriculum by participating in a course or seminar. He may, for instance, conduct or participate in a course in research methods for beginning graduate students. On several campuses undergraduate seminars in which each member of the seminar does research in original sources on related topics have proved useful for teaching research methods. The archivist can function as a helpful consultant in such a program and should work in cooperation with the professor giving the course.

An Archives distant from a campus can still provide it with certain archival services, by arranging to make archival materials available by deposit or loan. A system of regional depositories may provide similar services for several campuses in different parts of a State, as does Wisconsin's system of eight area research centers. Permanent collections of county and local archives may be maintained at such centers; other materials may be lent to them on request. Unquestionably the regional depository works better when it can tap a large manuscript collection than it would with a strictly archival institution. But where it is feasible to establish regional centers the benefit derived may well be worth the costs.

An Archives can also profit from association with a university or college in several ways. The first profit accrues from the ready availability of highly qualified personnel. Part-time help of the highest caliber can be had at low rates, and, when the Archives can hire students under the Federal work-study program, the archivist is getting the greatest bargain in American archival history, at least since the Historical Records Survey. During the spring semester of 1967 the Wisconsin State Archives employed 12 university students as part-time assistants; of these 5 were graduate students,

including one Ph. D. candidate. A corps of past and present student employees also provides a pool of experienced possible candidates for permanent employment. Furthermore, association with an academic community enhances the attractiveness of archival employment to just the sort of qualified and capable applicant that the Archives most needs.

Other advantages also accrue from association with academic researchers. Sometimes the archivist needs expert assistance in evaluating and processing a record series. A university faculty is just such a pool of experts in all fields as the archivist may find it useful to call upon.

Finally, university faculty members provide persuasive, informed, and influential backing when the archivist needs something from his government. A new public records law, an expanded budget, or a new building—the professor can help with all of these; and, if his voice is not always heeded, it will at least be heard.

I hope that in stressing the importance and techniques of an archivist's relations with the academic world I have not suggested that this should be his only public relations activity. I do believe, however, that publicity activities aimed at the serious researcher, because they have so much to do with *use* of archives, have great relevance also to other groups. Genealogists will find a guide useful; local historians can and will make use of a regional depository in their corner of the State.

Nonetheless, the archivist should direct part of his informational campaign to other groups.

The talk is a most effective means of promoting understanding and support for an Archives' operation. It usually is mentioned in the newspaper, and it often reaches individuals who can be reached in no other way. As a case in point, 2 years ago the Wisconsin State Archivist spoke to an association of county and municipal officials on the Archives' services to local government. A number of the officers who attended the meeting subsequently came to our office for help with their records problems; but several confessed that previously they had been quite unaware of the State's public records law.

Printed annual or biennial reports can be valuable in communicating what the Archives is doing and why it is doing it. Especially useful in communicating ideas, values, and solutions for common problems to other archivists, they are also useful in informing the interested public of the Archives' operations and in generally enhancing the prestige of the Archives. Of course they double as

presentation documents and may be of some use in justifying budgets.

Cultivation of good press relations cannot harm and may help the Archives. Newspaper stories about archival operations help to gain support both directly, by coming to the attention of legislators and officials, and indirectly, by creating a climate of public consciousness of the Archives.

Press releases should be issued concerning important and interesting accessions, talks given in a locality, and other noteworthy activities. For instance, a field trip to inventory and collect courthouse records dating from the beginnings of a county may be of considerable local interest. The press should be notified in time to take some pictures. Some archivists prefer also to maintain and nourish contacts with newspaper men. This may, however, consume more energy than the results justify.

Whether the archivist's public relations are conducted primarily to acquaint his public with his holdings or to obtain needed support in some form, the basic goal is to improve his service to his publics. Service is the archivist's product and his *raison d'être*. Public relations are one of his most powerful tools. And an archivist who does not use every means within his power to expand and improve the service he provides is not doing his job.