

Informing the Government About Its Archives

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I HAVE a somewhat prosaic subject under an inflammatory program title. "The Archivist as Adman" and "public relations" may attract the eye, but "informing the government about its archives" dulls the senses. We all know that archives are of paramount importance, but few of us plan to "inform" our State governments about them. We may justify a budget, make a pitch for a new position or present a program or building plan, but we don't want to inform government. We avoid informing because we know government doesn't want and can't use information about the archives. The government will take credit, accept responsibility, or provide a service, but it doesn't need more information.

Those who have chosen this session to discover how one sells a hoped-for budget to busy administrators and remote legislators will find no magic formula in my remarks. In fact, my personal qualifications are primarily in the area of records management. I had some experience in "evaluating the effectiveness of records management programs," and for a few years I informed a State government about its records program. I am not now, and never have been, responsible for informing any government, State or Federal, about its archives. I have, however, observed some archival operations and have come to a few conclusions about them. I shall discuss these conclusions with some temerity.

ARCHIVAL GOALS

As an employee of a government, the archivist provides a professional service for which he asks and expects the financial support of his employer. We know the traditional setting and the cast—the underpaid archivist, who is on our afternoon agenda; the promoter, who salvages travel money so that he can attend annual meetings and describe a program that doesn't exist; the axe-wielding budget analyst; the patriotic lobby; the patronage problem; the defensive bureaucrat; the parochial representatives whom we elect to the

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legislature every odd year; and the last-minute horsetrading in which the archives is a line in a budget. The archival vote is small. To many, the major benefits of archival appropriations appear to be musty inanimate objects. The chief supporters of the archives are the notoriously fickle worshippers of the past. This doleful picture, however, will not satisfy; so I shall go outside our present bureaucratic establishment to discuss the goals of a mythical Archives.

The first and most important goal of our mythical archives is the documentation of change. The executive and legislative authorities not only have accepted change as the order of life but have been convinced that development is the vital force in society. The endemic fear of change in our present social order has given way to generous support of research and development programs exploring the changing patterns of government activity. The archivist might even be mistaken for an activist as his old supporters—genealogists, bureaucrats, patriots, and politicians—have faded away. As the servant of truth and change, the archivist is no longer expected to be an anonymous public servant. He has one obligation: to lay the documentary foundations for humanistic and scientific research that will lead to a deeper understanding of man.

The second goal of our new archivist is use. He not only accepts users but is a zealous seeker and director of scholarly and administrative users of archival resources. The archivist and his government have realized that programs are justified not by the number of users who pass through the turnstiles and into statistical reports but by the quality of the research produced. The information scientist and the information specialist have mechanized the retrieval of facts—not in the archives but in the office of origin. The archivist's searchroom serves more team projects. Government officers, academicians, and the public use archives to obtain a complete picture of an activity from publications, office files, and personal papers.

A third goal is savings in staff, space, and equipment. Once known as records management, this attempt to reduce the cost of documentation and improve its quality has its most important influence on the archivist's daily operating routines. He is a documentation expert, not a retriever. He advises on and designs systems for the creation and safeguarding of vital documentation.

The new archivist was not an instant creation. One of the most

significant influences in his development was a new attitude on the part of administrators and the public. They no longer lumped him with librarians, curators, custodians, and antiquarians. The administrators were the first to realize that of all the key men in the rapidly growing governmental structure only the archivist had both a complete picture of the administrative system and the researcher's scholarly perspective. The archivist had remained a generalist by refusing to become enslaved by specialized crafts and technologies. He knew the government's organizational structure and its functions, systems, and procedures. Once the administrators realized the archivist's splendid qualities, they told the legislators. When the archivist's budget was presented, the legislators no longer slept through a recital of dry statistics. They heard a statement of the position of the government with respect to its past and its future, a statement comprehensive in scope and clear in style. The archivist's program budget was measured in completed or planned works of scholarship rather than in documents laminated or frames microfilmed.

The new archivist recalled that his predecessors once secured staff by accepting patronage appointees. Later, when a civil service system was begun, they produced a set of position descriptions that downgraded most of the archivist's work to the point where it could be handled by clerical employees. File clerks, microfilm camera operators, reference desk attendants, and local records drummers were classified as senior and junior archival assistants I, II, III, and IV. These techniques secured the largest archival staff in the region. Their success in personnel matters was the envy of other archivists, who had to wait until their huge memorial buildings were completed before they could obtain similar staffing. They followed the standard formula which dictated that buildings begat budgets and staff. The monumental structures that housed the archives were notorious plums for the construction industry, even though they lacked the beauty of the metal statuary of the previous generation.

This all changed when the new archivist began to evaluate his own image in the methodical way in which he had learned to evaluate his records. He began to plan his program and establish his goals in terms of society's needs rather than the past tradition, the availability of mechanical equipment, and the current desires of administrators and users. He began to realize that life is too interesting and too short to deacidify the past or miniaturize the future.

ATTITUDES TOWARD ARCHIVES

The basic question of administrators outside the Archives is, "What will the archival program do for me?" To the extent that you, the archivist, can persuade them that it will reduce their problems, protect the constitutional, statutory, and regulatory interests that they are sworn to uphold, and relieve them of responsibility for the preservation of noncurrent records, you will receive their cooperation. If you can convince them that your services can improve the quality of recordmaking and recordkeeping operations, produce savings in salaries, space, and equipment, and provide a skilled professional appraisal of records systems and procedures, you will enlist their active support. Threatening them with a future judgment day at the hands of an unknown historian can accomplish nothing.

Perhaps one of the few qualifications I have to discuss this topic is the experience of working in a State budget bureau for 4 years. In this capacity I was a daily observer of the "exact" science of budget analysis. The business of pouring governmental programs into financial molds was instructive, but it did not reveal any way to guarantee success with administrators. Certain broad policies were enthusiasms of the executive office, and certain budget items were red flags to legislators. The archival appropriation was in neither category. It was a minor item in the budget of a minor agency, whose budget was reviewed along with budgets of other minor agencies early in the budget season. The biennial request for another archivist or two was weighed on the basis of fund balances and overall personnel policy. There may be States wherein the archival budget hearing is the high spot of the year, but we hear more about these occasions at such a meeting as this than in the State capitals.

As for the attitudes of State legislators—representing the interests in a geographical area, responding to the pressures of constituents, and bringing a rich variety of personal experiences to the task—the legislators have counterparts on county boards and in Congress. They can be depended upon to raise certain issues—to complain of the number of government publications, to defend the flag and veterans, to oppose tax increases, to favor new programs or agencies that they have sponsored, to vote for capital expenditures in their districts, and to endorse successful athletic teams.

Most legislative enthusiasms do not affect the State archival program. Two exceptions are worthy of note. A sizable bloc in any legislative body will trample each other to support the flag.

With prompting and careful cultivation, the archival administrator can cause them to associate the flag with history and even with the archival-historical agency's appropriation, after such worthy expenditures as a socialistic small loan or insurance business for veterans and the home for widows and orphans of veterans of the Philippine Insurrection. The director of a sister organization recently suggested that antiwar demonstrations could be prevented by increased "understanding of our heritage."

A second possibility for the enterprising historical administrator is tourism. With the growth of the nonarchival leisure class, many areas of our country rely on tourist enterprises for an important share of their income. Frequently over-represented in State and Federal legislative bodies, these areas prize historic sites and markers, public commemorative ceremonies, and other marketable attention to past glories. A fellow archivist recently went so far as to say that the increased emphasis on tourism by historical agencies has transferred to universities the primary obligation for preserving manuscript and archival source material for scholarly research.

Administrators and representatives of the public may, of course, develop an enthusiasm for history, and the archivist should encourage them to do so. Such enthusiasms, however, do not represent understanding. Archivists are seldom elected to legislatures or chosen for top administrative positions. We cannot expect support for archival programs on the basis of professional commitment. The best way to win the support of the civil servants and their advisors is to convince them that the archival function is necessary to basic research and the effective operation of government. Without original sources, we cannot learn why we are doing something and how to do it better. Archives are not only the memory of society but the key to its improvement.

The greatest obstacle in informing the government about its archives is the attitude of the archivist himself. His concept of archival practice is the key to his success. Too often he writes and defines himself into the position of an antiquarian, an exhibitor, a custodian, a "dead file clerk," a "keeper of the records," a division head in the bureaucracy, or a reference clerk for researchers. He can, however, establish himself as an indispensable authority on documentation who evaluates the work of thousands of his fellow men and selects the significant material needed for future administrative use and scholarly research. The archivist's concept of his profession may be established by a general liberal education, close

contact with administrative problems, personal experience in research, continuing study of the problems and solutions of fellow archivists, and an unending desire to improve his operations.

POLITICS AND THE MASS MEDIA

Politics and the mass media are problems for the archivist who seeks to inform his government about his activities. The constantly changing political scene is characteristic of American life, but political change usually affects the Archives indirectly. A damaging document is seldom photocopied. The archival budget seldom affords enough room for large-scale patronage appointments or the profitable solicitation of campaign funds and testimonial dinner contributions. The greatest political threat to the Archives is a stalemate, when legislative and administrative forces become locked in power struggles. In the newspaper blood-letting and the caucus budget-cutting that ensue, the archival budget may suffer. Politicians know that old documents can wait another 2 years, while servicemen, school children, and hospital patients must have first priority.

The mass media occasionally raise problems for the archivist. Seeking to reach large numbers with easily understood information of general interest, they oversimplify and overdramatize. We are familiar with the enterprising reporter who picked up an ancient piece of documentary trivia from a paper baler and composed a feature on the destruction of our historic documents. I recall the time when *our* mass media stated that I had saved the State \$856,000 and *their* mass media said that it was all a hoax. Such occurrences can distract any archivist. He should remember that reporters seldom understand what they are writing about and that their delight in manipulating facts and words is exceeded only by their desire to exploit the unusual at the expense of the significant. Lest this judgment appear too harsh, I suggest that you continue to use press releases, but forget the last several paragraphs and rearrange your material like a jigsaw puzzle to see the result.

ARCHIVAL REPORTING

The report is the archivist's most important means of communicating with administrative officers in government. It provides an opportunity for reviewing accomplishments and problems, measuring both against plans, and stating archival objectives for the next reporting period. A clear literary style is imperative, and I cannot overemphasize the importance of measurement. Acces-

sions, processing, and use should be measured, compared with those of the past, and evaluated in terms intelligible to the readers of the report. The archivist's report should keep the idea of research prominent. Sound scholarly research projects and important administrative uses are the positive results of a good archival program. Staff salaries, building plans, and the number of documents microfilmed or laminated are usually more important to the archivist than to the readers of his report. It is proper to talk about losses of documents and the danger of losses, but it is best not to overdo the scare technique. Each of us must mix his own blend of acknowledgments, statistics, noteworthy acquisitions, significant uses, professional promotion, and ground-breaking. The only advice I have is to seek a blend with a little bite but avoid one that is too aromatic.

The format of the report is not a crucial issue. A report printed and illustrated on slick paper may give the impression of a costly attempt at promotion. A report poorly typed or reproduced may seem to imply haste and indifference. The report should not omit any significant phase of the archival program, nor should it dwell at length on any one particular area. In a records management agency I submitted monthly 8-page typed reports to the bureau director and summarized these in a few pages for the department's annual printed report. In a university I now prepare an annual 18-page mimeographed report, which is used as a means of communication with administrative officers, an advisory committee, new staff, prospective donors, archivists in other institutions, and participants in archival institutes and conferences. Writing for a variety of readers is more challenging and helps the writer avoid special pleading. The archivist's report is his best opportunity to show the results of his work to the sources of his support.

PUBLICITY

Most of you are at least as familiar as I am with the standard means of publicizing an archival agency. An attractive announcement brochure or leaflet can call a new program to the attention of governmental offices. If your government has an administrative practices manual or administrative code regulations, these publications may enable you to reach administrators. It is a good practice to send general memoranda, circular letters, and descriptive issuances to agency heads and liaison personnel. When we began a statewide records inventory in Wisconsin, I prepared two letters, one from the Governor to agency heads, outlining the objectives, and one from our department head to other agency heads, giving

the date of our first meeting with agency liaison officers. The archivist should cultivate administrative liaison officers who can attend occasional meetings on the records program and can present his views to agency heads and at departmental staff meetings. A tactful sharing or division of responsibilities will result in a multiplication of results.

News notes sections in professional or trade journals will run releases on special programs. This is a particularly effective way of reaching local government officers. Exhibits in lobbies or public places also make the government aware of its archival program. Public speaking engagements offer a means of reaching government officials with information about the archives.

Another way of publicizing archives is through informal contacts with government officials. The archivist should join the local chapters of the American Society for Public Administration and the Systems and Procedures Association and should frequent the watering places of the bureaucrat. At these places he can learn how the public relations function is handled by a special government office, by a staff member in his agency, or by reporters covering government activities. He should be cautious in dealing with public relations men, but he should remember that, although a newspaper account can garble or twist a story, a legislative reporter's byline is usually a better beginning than a press release starting "Bureaucrat X or Politician Y says . . ."

The archivist should realize that public relations begin with himself. He should help his fellow administrators by being courteous, prompt, well organized, and well informed. He may have inadequate funds and facilities and insufficient and poorly trained personnel, but he must be *positive*, *persuasive*, and *persistent*. The archivist should cultivate the acquaintance of the budget officer, the personnel officer, and the space officer, for these men can help him with the archival program and provide useful information on agency operations. Many administrators will never realize that the archivist is both a specialist or technician in the arts of preservation and a generalist or professional in the collection and evaluation of documentation. In seeking financial support in the budget or by special requests, the archivist should emphasize the value of research and the savings achieved by prompt transfer of significant records to archival custody. He should avoid the images of the indiscriminate collector and the empire builder. He should be cautious in claiming actual, real, anticipated, or potential savings.

There is really no magic formula for cultivating governmental support. The fierce competition for appropriations among governmental agencies has few parallels in business and industry. The only way to succeed in this struggle to get a larger proportion of the tax dollar is to outthink and outwork your competitors. There are no intrinsic merits in archives or in archivists that, when known, will open a door to the treasury. You will succeed in proportion to your ability to define your objective, enlist support, and carry out your program.

THE ARCHIVAL IMAGE

My remarks have touched upon a number of archival images. You may have heard that sometimes the archivist is confused with the anarchist and the architect. Neither of these confusions is completely unflattering. Like the anarchist we should be distrustful of the government and governmental forms. Knowing the processes of government, we accept them as man-made attempts to solve social problems rather than unchanging God-given forms for the ordering of humanity. Like the architect, we build the documentary resources to accommodate present and future needs. Form should follow function on the archivist's shelves as closely as on the architect's drawing board.

I can add only one image to those of the anarchist and the architect. That is one from my campus experience—the activist. The one primary distinguishing characteristic of the successful modern archivist should be his active participation in the world he is documenting. Involvement is not a diversion or a distraction but an opportunity to gain new appreciation of the actors and activities whose documentation is preserved and used in the archives.

Perhaps the archival image can be studied by a comparison. Page 169 of the January 1966 issue of the *American Archivist* carried position openings for State archivists in three of our larger States, at beginning salaries of \$8,664, \$8,038 and \$6,600. The July 22, 1966, issue of *Time* referred to "a self-effacing, \$25,025-a-year civil servant who supervises the files, mail, and other administrative functions" in a Federal executive office. I realize that self-effacement for an extra \$16,000 a year has its appeal. I remind you, however, that if we efface something of ourselves we are not only destroying part of a priceless creation but are demeaning a most important position—one charged with the responsibility for preserving the means of communicating with the future and the past.