

# The Archivist and Service

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IN THE April 1968 number of the *American Archivist*, our Dr. Jones remarked that his greatest professional satisfaction came from seeing his work used by historians. Most of us would agree with him. Charged with the awesome responsibility of deciding which records of our age are to be available to the historians of the next, we need this encouragement. By and large the archivists and the custodians of manuscripts in North America have done superbly well. If one may judge by the reviews in the quarterlies, the historians of North America publish more history than all of the rest of the world combined. I have heard European historians marvel at the productivity of their American colleagues; the explanation, of course, is that the European archives and research libraries simply cannot produce the material as fast as the historians can use it. Some of the American scholars who were working in Europe last summer came home dejected, their tasks unfinished, because of the slowness of the service which they encountered.

Like most problems, this one has two sides. At the Madrid congress last month, some of the European archivists were saying that they could no longer cope with the swarms of American scholars calling for service, and they seriously proposed requiring an international card of introduction which would guarantee that the visitor could make good use of the service which he requested—a sort of international driver's license. In private we discussed the problem of examining the candidates to determine their fitness for such a research permit.

The problem of the swarms of visitors would long ago have swamped us all had it not been for the rapidly growing substitution of mail orders asking for microfilm or other machine duplicates. Many a modern historian, sitting at home and ordering microfilm, has in a few years written a book which would have required a lifetime when these services were not available. And the archives has experienced the great advantage of being able to process these orders at its convenience.

Although these services which we now afford have absolutely revolutionized the writing of history, they in one way remind me of the old coal-burning locomotives, which were said to operate at about five percent efficiency. The photoduplication departments of the archives and of the university and research libraries of the Western World by their

Presidential address, given on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 1968, at the 32d annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, held in Ottawa, Canada, Sept. 30–Oct. 2. Dr. Shipton, Custodian of the Harvard University Archives, was elected Fellow of the Society in 1958 and has been the editor of the Sibley Publications of the Massachusetts Historical Society since 1930. From 1959–67 he was the Director of the American Antiquarian Society.

inefficiency waste about a third of their time and materials, and of those of the scholars whom they seek to serve. One-third of the thousands of rolls of microfilm made for me over the past 40 years by these institutions has had to go into the wastebasket as useless for my purposes.

Let me explain this experience. Over the past 40 years I have sought out the manuscripts of some 2,000 individuals and have had them microfilmed where possible. Over the last dozen years I have had microfilmed for the purpose of making microprints the full text of every book, pamphlet, and broadside published in the area of the present United States between 1640 and 1806—every proclamation, every printing of a legislative bill, every encyclopedia. Over 50,000 printed pieces were involved; no count was kept of the manuscripts.

The demands of these two projects have been an appalling burden on an entire generation of archivists and librarians, a burden assumed with unfailing cheerfulness and helpfulness. Of the 500 institutions which I have called upon for help, only 3 have declined. In one of these, a national library not on this continent, a helpful director could not compel his photoduplication department to do my work; and in another, a board of trustees set impossible conditions. A few small institutions without a professional staff do not answer their mail, but that is understandable. The cooperation has been so nearly universal that whenever I think of the shelf of volumes and the many shelves of boxes of microprints which bear my name as author or editor, a feeling of awe and utter humility comes over me. These works for which I obtain credit are really the cooperative output of a generation of the profession.

Yet there are so many flaws in the machinery which is operated with such good will, that of the 500 cooperating archives and libraries, only 2, the Public Archives of Canada and the Connecticut Historical Society, have the record of never making an error which required extra correspondence with my office. The two institutions for which I have been responsible have, despite my awareness of the problem and my harassing of the photoduplication departments, compiled pretty poor service records, involving mistakes quite as frustrating to me as those made by other institutions when I was the customer.

A certain degree of error is inevitable. Not long ago there came to my desk a request for a microfilm of a newspaper. To be sure that there was no error in filling the order, I made out the form myself, but when at the card catalog I flipped over two cards instead of one, copied off the wrong data, and made a great deal of trouble for everyone involved. Indeed, if Jove himself were running a photoduplication department on Mount Olympus, he would not only nod occasionally, but from time to time fall flat on his face.

Of course the institutions are not entirely to blame for the poor quality of the service which they afford. Frequently the orders which come in to us from the historians are vague or call for service which no institution could afford. At Madrid we discussed with several foreign archivists

the problem of instructing American scholars how to write a clear microfilm order, and what kind of service is possible. In my teaching days I used to enjoy giving to professors and graduate students a lecture which made them blush by its examples of stupid microfilm orders and utterly unreasonable demands for service.

Careful ordering helps, but it does not solve the problem. In requesting film of the manuscripts of an individual, I gave his dates, his place of residence, and his profession when relevant. With each order for a microfilm of printed material went an introductory letter addressed to the department head personally, explaining the project and our reason for wanting the material. A few of you here tonight who over the years have received 50 copies of that letter may have noticed that it was revised time and again in the interest of clarity. With it went an instruction sheet intended to go with the books to the camera operator, and for each piece to be filmed went a target card describing the item so that it would seem that a mistake in identifying it was impossible.

But such mistakes were common. A typical example was the Boston printing of the first map of New Hampshire, the one recorded copy of which is credited to a major institution. When the film came, it was of the London edition. I underlined the word "Boston" on the target and returned it with the next order and the form letter explaining why I wanted the American edition. Back came another filming of the London edition. Taking the target in hand, I went to see the librarian, who explained that he had no Boston printing, so he had filmed the next best. Indeed, as it turned out, the Boston edition was a ghost. It was only by such circuitous operations that hundreds of ghosts were laid. Law librarians, always helpful, had a way of filming not the original edition of a statute or legislative journal which I ordered, but the "best" modern printing. Their camera operators, with a false sense of economy, usually omitted the title pages. They were less irritating, however, than the operators who when asked to film a pamphlet from a tract volume, filmed the entire collection. One State archive, when asked to film a government document which it possessed, insisted on sending me films of the description of the item in the standard bibliography and could not be brought to understand that I wanted the original.

I fear that one mistake had unfortunate consequences for a well-meaning archivist. A country behind the Iron Curtain is credited with having in its archives a document which I needed; so I ordered it in the usual way. Six months later the film came, obviously having been smuggled into the United States by a well-known American Communist and mailed to me from Vermont. But when I put the film on the reader, I found that it was not the document which I had requested but a periodical which could be bought on any American newsstand. I returned the film with an explanation to the archivist, but I never heard from him again. I fear that he was sacked for dealing with the enemy.

Much of the useless film was the product of simple carelessness on the

part of the camera operators; some of it was the product of obstinacy. Printed material we had to have in position B, but some photoduplication departments would make film for us only in position A. Frequently operators worked with the camera head reversed, so that the text ran from right to left, like a Hebrew book, and the sequence of the pages was 2-1, 4-3, etc. Such film could not be used for making microprints. One operator, in a national institution not on this continent, reached up and turned his camera head after every exposure. The same institution filmed a large collection of manuscripts for me with two fat cords obscuring two lines of text on every page.

When ordering film of manuscripts I specified that I wanted only autograph letters by, say, Judge John Smith of Boston, such and such dates. But certain institutions filmed every reference to that name in their collections; indeed one of them filmed material covering a span of three centuries. For this reason I have given up in the effort to obtain film of manuscripts from one of the major research institutions on this continent.

In part this problem could be met by selecting the items I wanted from an electrotpe print of the catalog cards, but this, when possible, only complicated the serious problem of delay. In all of my work I allowed 12 months between the placing of the order and the receipt of the film. Two of the greatest institutions in our field were at one stage 4 years behind in filling my orders. When film did not arrive 12 months after the order, I wrote asking about it. Usually the answer was that no such order had been received; so I made out another, which involved having all of the target cards retyped. One important institution regularly required three such orders for each lot. When sending in the second set of targets I always begged that the first be destroyed if it turned up; but in all too many cases, years after the second order had been filled and the microprints issued, the first set of targets turned up, and the material was again filmed for me. Even at \$50 a roll there is nothing to do in such cases but take the loss and say nothing, for if there is any complaint, there is no more service from that institution.

These complaints of mine are but typical of those which you will hear in the offices of any of the great editorial projects. What can you and I as archivists do to enable our institutions to afford better service? Nothing that will make it more costly. For every historical project there is a small amount of source material which the historian must have, a large amount which would be very useful if he had it, and a vast amount which he could profitably search if he had access to it; but with microfilm costing 10 cents a frame, the historian cannot afford to film files in which to search. He can afford to film only material which he knows exists and can describe.

If we were to employ a knowing person to check the film which we make for the historian, it would make most of the film which he now orders prohibitively expensive. A good deal can be done, however, if we take the time to convince the camera operator that he is not sorting

potatoes but is handling material which has meaning. If folios and signatures are explained to him, he will find that the monotony of his job is eased by keeping an eye out for missing pages or misbound signatures. Time and again, I have blessed the camera operators of the Library of Congress who drop in a warning target whenever they discover such a break. In my own institutions I have been blessed with operators who made a game of finding flaws in the material which they were filming and took great pleasure in calling it to my attention if the material did not correspond with the target which I had made out.

Many errors are avoided if instead of forwarding the historian's order for film direct to the reference department and the camera, it is translated onto a standard and familiar order form. If a duplicate of the form is kept with the letter in a pending file in the office, further queries from the historian can be handled quickly and accurately. If the film has not come through when the inquiry for it comes in, the office copy of the form can be taken to the photoduplication department to locate the material; if the film has been mailed out, the historian can be told from the data on the form that it was sent on such a day to such an address, and was paid for by a check on such a day.

This inquiry into the quality of the service which we are affording is not dictated entirely by a solicitude for the historian. Most of us are complacent when the other fellow makes an occasional error; it is to be expected. But when I, for one, make a stupid mistake, I am furious about it. No doubt most archivists feel the same way. So this, my tale of woe, has been told with the idea that it might help my fellows as well as our customers.

**SAA THIRTY-THIRD ANNUAL MEETING**

October 8-10, 1969

- ***Madison, Wisconsin***
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