

The Society of American Archivists at the Crossroads

By PHILIP P. MASON

LIKE MANY presidents before me, I have given a great deal of thought in recent months to the subject of my presidential address. I have read again the presidential addresses given over the past 20 years. One of these, Herman Kahn's address of last year, "Some Comments on the Archival Vocation," helped me to decide on my topic. In his closing remarks Mr. Kahn recalled that the Society's application for membership in the Council of Learned Societies had been turned down about 20 years ago because archivists were then considered to be part of a "custodial profession." I share with Mr. Kahn the view that we have now reached a critical stage in our development and that the decisions we make within the next year or two will determine whether "we are going to take the step that will lead us down the road toward becoming a learned profession."

My personal view of the Society and my concern for its future are based, of course, largely on my involvement with it since I became a member in 1954. The Society has changed radically since then, especially during the past 10 years. These changes have been accompanied by many accomplishments of which our members should feel proud.

One of the noticeable changes is the sharp rise in membership, which has more than doubled in the past decade. Many of these individuals have come from the scores of new archival programs that have sprung up as well as from the expanded programs of existing archival agencies. All indications point to a similar growth in membership during the next 10 years. The increase in mem-

Presidential address, given on Thursday, October 14, 1971, at the 35th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, held in San Francisco, Calif., October 12-15, 1971. Dr. Mason is professor of history and Director of the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. Before assuming his duties at Wayne State in 1958, he was Archivist of the State of Michigan. He is a Fellow of the Society, and from 1963 to 1968 he served as its secretary. Elected to the vice presidency in 1969, he succeeded to the presidency in 1970.

bership and the increased revenue from dues and subscriptions have made possible the hiring of an administrative staff to carry out many of the Society's programs. Ten years ago there was no budget for personnel; today the Society has full-time paid employees: an administrative assistant to the secretary, a typist-secretary, and part-time office assistance. This staff has enabled the secretary to expand the programs of the Society substantially.

The committee system of the Society is far more responsive, efficient, and productive than it was 10 or 15 years ago. Until a very few years ago it was usually after the first of January or as late as February before committees had formed and started their work. Then too, the only assignment for most committees was to plan a workshop session for the annual meeting. Now most committees are appointed before October 1st and have an opportunity to meet to discuss future plans at the annual meeting. A luncheon meeting of committee chairmen was held for the first time last year at the annual meeting, and it provided a means for better coordination of committee business. Some committees have been able to schedule additional meetings during the year, vastly improving their productivity. The committee preference questionnaire, by which members can indicate their committee preference, has resulted in much broader participation in Society affairs. Admittedly it is difficult for much productive committee work to be accomplished solely by correspondence or by occasional telephone calls, but through these media some progress has been made by aggressive and imaginative chairmen. Additional financial resources would allow the committees to meet several times during the year and would enable the officers and Council also to meet periodically to review the committee structure and the objectives of each committee.

One needs only to review the annual meeting programs to see the dramatic changes in Society activity. For example, the 1961 meeting, held in Kansas City, Mo., consisted of five sessions and four workshops, of which almost half were devoted to records management subjects. This year, by contrast, there are 20 sessions, plus a full day of committee meetings. Ten years ago 33 persons participated in the annual meeting program; this year there are 94, and most of them are taking part for the first time in an annual meeting. This trend is an extremely healthy one, not only because it has improved the quality and balance of the program but because it provides an opportunity for members, particularly our younger and newer members, to share directly in Society activities. Reflecting the increase in membership, the attendance at annual meetings has also doubled during the past decade.

Other achievements stand out as one recalls Society activities

during the past 10 years. Ernst Posner's Society-sponsored study of State archival programs, which resulted in the book, *American State Archives*, filled a great void in archival literature, as did Victor Gondos' *Archives and Record Center Buildings*. The publication of tastefully designed brochures describing the Society's program, career opportunities, and the *American Archivist* have been well received by members and have stimulated outside interest in the Society. The comprehensive salary survey of the archival profession conducted by the Society in cooperation with the American Association for State and Local History in 1966 and the establishment of an active placement program have contributed to upgrading archival positions and facilitated appointment of qualified archivists.

Closely related to the placement service has been the development of training programs for archivists. In 1956 there were only 2 credit programs available to aspiring archivists; today there are 16 credit courses and a wide variety of institutes and symposia. Several other universities are making plans to establish similar credit programs in the coming year. It is quite likely that this trend will continue. Although none of the credit courses is SAA sponsored, all the programs have been inaugurated and taught by active Society members.

These are but a few of the positive accomplishments of the Society over the past decade. If time, not to mention your patience, permitted, I could cite others. But I think those described give one a perspective on at least some of the significant progress of the Society and on its position in 1971.

Despite these gains, and perhaps because of them, the Society cannot sit back and rest on its laurels. It is crystal clear from a variety of sources—the responses of members to the questionnaire distributed in the spring of 1971 and personal discussions with informed archivists from the United States and Canada—that our members are demanding greater services, new and innovative programs, and more opportunity for meaningful involvement in the work of the Society. The attitudes and aspirations of archivists are not substantially different from those of historians, librarians, and other related groups. In these professions, as in the SAA, individuals are increasingly transferring their primary loyalty and identification from the institution that employs them to the profession itself. Thus they seek a more active role in the professional organization and the decisionmaking process within it. One needs only to attend the meetings or read the proceedings of meetings of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Library Association, for example,

to see the depths of this internal ferment. Herman Kahn, our former president, recognized this situation and the need for the Society to develop long range goals. With the support of the Council, he applied for a grant from the Council of Library Resources, Inc., to underwrite the meeting expenses for a committee representative of the archival profession. The grant was approved and the committee presented its interim report to the membership at a general session of this annual meeting on October 13th. I do not intend to review the committee's findings and recommendations at this point; every member has a copy of the report, and many members attended the session. I should like, however, to cite several issues from the report that relate to the archival profession and the future directions of the Society.

One of the immediate tasks of the Society is to take an inventory of archival resources in the United States and Canada and to determine where the gaps are in the collecting areas, both in the public and private sectors.¹ Many archivists and historians have already voiced concern that archivists are not more active in collecting records relating to contemporary America, particularly the records of militant organizations that have been active in both the United States and Canada.² Many of these organizations are reluctant to transfer their records to an archives or to preserve them at all, but ways must be found to overcome this resistance. The papers that document the civil rights movement must be more systematically collected and preserved.

The preservation of contemporary public records also deserves the Society's attention. As Sam Bass Warner of the University of Michigan stated this morning in his provocative paper "The Shame of Cities: Public Records of the Metropolis," there is an urgent need to save urban records. Most cities in the United States have no program whatsoever to preserve public records of enduring value. Even in those communities where the State archival agency has responsibility for local public records, too often valuable materials are lost. This is indeed a tragedy because such records are essential to understand the turbulent years of the mid-20th century. Historians who are studying the contemporary field have increasingly voiced their concern about this problem.

How do we as archivists meet these glaring needs? What should be the role of the Society on this matter? Should the Society

¹ At the last meeting of the SAA Committee for the 1970's, Frank Evans recommended that the Society apply for a grant to conduct such a survey.

² Prof. Howard Zinn of Boston University took this position in his paper "The Activist Archivist," read at a Sept. 30, 1970, session on "The Archivist and the New Left" during the 34th annual meeting of the Society in Washington, D.C.

undertake an independent campaign or should it solicit the support of other historical organizations? Professor Warner has recommended one solution—the development of specialized archives to concentrate records on such topics as labor, housing, education, health, and related fields. Under this plan, an archives in a particular city might specialize in public transportation; an archives in another city might concentrate on public housing; and so on. Professor Warner's proposal presents an interesting solution and deserves the consideration of our profession, although its use would produce inherent difficulties relating to archival theory and practice.

My recommendation is that the Society undertake an active, coordinated campaign to encourage the establishment of local, and especially urban, public archives. As the SAA Committee on State and Local Records has seldom, if ever, concerned itself with local records, it would be necessary to create a new committee devoted exclusively to local records. At the same time, the SAA should invite the support of the various historical organizations in its new efforts. The results of a concerted effort by archivists and historians would be twofold: more effective programs would develop because of the increased energy and manpower; and the joint effort might ease the growing tension between the two groups.

Many archivists have voiced concern in recent years about the "image" of the archivist, particularly as seen by historians and librarians. I believe that an even more serious problem is the image of the Society of American Archivists as reflected in the attitude of its own members. I have noticed over the past decade an increasing disenchantment of members with the Society. This attitude was strikingly shown in the responses of the members who answered the SAA questionnaire in the Spring of 1971. The common complaint was that the Society did not meet the professional needs of its members; that its programs were aimed at the larger archival institutions; that the Society's publication program was inadequate; and that the functions of the governing body of the Society, notably the designation of awards recipients, Fellows, and many committee assignments, were controlled by a small clique of members representing only the larger archival institutions.

Whether or not these complaints are accurate—and I must confess I have come to share some of them—the important consideration is that our members in increasing numbers believe them to be valid. The Committee for the 1970's received a number of suggestions to correct this problem. One proposal recommended amending the constitution to provide a Council whose members were chosen to create a balance, according to age, geographical area, sex, and ethnic background. Others suggested that "working"

archivists, and not just administrators, be included on the Council. Other ideas for change were aired at the open session earlier this week. The Committee for the 1970's plans to consider all the recommendations in its final deliberations. Again, Society members are not unique in demanding a more representative and responsive governing body; most related professional organizations are presently experiencing similar self-analyses and change.

The last three secretaries of the Society have repeatedly urged that the highest priority be given to hiring a full-time paid executive director. The Committee for the 1970's in its study of future program needs agreed *unanimously* that this recommendation should receive the most urgent attention of the membership. The simple fact of the matter is that we can no longer run this Society on a volunteer basis. One needs only to review the workload of the secretary's office to understand this situation. The sheer volume of the daily work has become staggering for a part-time secretary. The routine correspondence with members, subscription agencies, and other organizations takes several hours a week. The more important tasks of committee coordination, membership development, placement service, publications, relations with other professional groups, State and Federal archival legislation, and international archival affairs demand many more hours of time and effort. At certain times of the year the secretary is swamped with urgent business that requires his full-time attention. This is especially true several weeks before and after each Council meeting and particularly during the period preceding and following each annual meeting.

I do not mean to give the impression that the secretary's work is routine or unimportant; on the contrary, it is vital to the smooth functioning of the Society. As new demands are placed upon the Society and as its activities extend into broader areas, even greater pressure will be placed on the secretary's office. Consequently, he or she will have less and less and less time to devote to other important tasks, such as long range planning, developing new programs, improving the Society's publications, securing grants and financial aid, coordinating the work of committees and regional archival organizations, and working with other professional organizations. I firmly believe that the Society has reached the point where it can no longer operate effectively with a volunteer secretary.

There are some of our members who disagree with my assessment of the situation, maintaining that our present program and organizational structure is adequate and that there is no need for a full-time paid secretary. Some of them have suggested that the secretarial office be placed permanently in one of the larger archival

institutions, either the National Archives and Records Service or the Public Archives of Canada. Others have recommended that the secretarial duties be divided among the officers and Council Members. Presented often over the years is the proposal that the Society hire a retired archivist—a university professor, for example—who would be willing to work part-time in order to supplement his retirement pension.

I am strongly opposed to these alternatives; each of them is a recipe for weakness and decline. The time has come to centralize overlapping functions in a single office, rather than divide and fragment them further. We need only to regard our sister organization, the American Association for State and Local History, to see how far they have come with a full-time director.

A volunteer secretaryship suffers from other problems, which have been recognized for some time. He is forced to divide his loyalty between the institution that pays his salary and the SAA, which demands more and more of his time and energy. He is often forced to postpone urgent Society business, and thereby he jeopardizes its program.

The recommendation to get one of the larger archival institutions, like the National Archives or the Public Archives of Canada, to assume the permanent responsibility for providing a capable staff member to work full-time as secretary of the SAA would not, in my opinion, serve the best interests of the Society. There are many issues that come before the Society directly relating to the Federal Government—the Loewenheim Case, for example. In such matters the Society must be able to adopt policies that serve the best interests of the archival profession at large, completely free of political or partisan pressure. I am not questioning the ethics of the Archivist of the United States or the Archivist of Canada; both are men of great personal integrity. Nevertheless, the possibility of partisan pressure would exist in a situation where one of their institutions employs and pays the SAA secretary.

For these reasons, I believe that it is imperative that the membership of the Society give utmost priority to finding the necessary funds to hire a full-time paid executive director and to expand the programs of the Society. For those who may say, "But can we afford to make these changes?" my rejoinder is simply, "Can we afford not to?"