Persons, Places, and Papers: The Joys of Being an Archivist

By CHARLES E. LEE

HAVING STRUGGLED more than two years, along with many of my colleagues in the Society, for a solution to the problems raised in the report of the Committee for the 1970's, and having worked manfully during the past year with representatives of our own and kindred societies toward the realization of the proposed National Historic Records Program, and wishing to give you some respite from your own hard labors of thinking and drinking, panel discussions, workshops, business meetings, committee meetings, and receptions, I should like to remind you and myself that the life of an archivist is not entirely trouble and toil. Indeed, it carries with it many fringe benefits, many satisfactions. So I want to talk to you about some of these tonight, using as my title, "Persons, Places, and Papers: The Joys of Being an Archivist."

One of my children once described his father's profession as "messing around with old papers." At the time I thought it an accurate description. Thus it comes as something of a surprise to me that when I start thinking about what it means to be an archivist, persons rather than papers take preeminence. And first among these persons are you, my colleagues. What a joy you have been to me, and continue to be; and how true this has been from the very first! When unexpectedly, almost twelve years ago, out of a background of college teaching and book publishing, I was appointed Director of the South Carolina Archives Department, everyone in the Society of American Archivists gave me a far better welcome than I deserved; but four of its members made me their special charge. First and foremost among these was Philip Hamer. Perhaps because he was a fellow South Carolinian, perhaps because of his friendship with R.

This presidential address was delivered in Columbus, Ohio, on Thursday evening, Nov. 2, 1972, at the 36th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists. Mr. Lee, a Fellow of the Society since 1966, is Director of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

L. Meriwether, his college mate and my teacher, but more likely simply because he was the kind of man he was, Phil Hamer sought me out at my temporary residence in Washington and took me to luncheon at the Cosmos Club with Oliver Holmes and Robert Bahmer. Later that year, in the fall of 1961 during the meeting of the Society at Kansas City, Phil invited me to a special party in his room and introduced me to other great men of the profession, to my unending pride, by the title I like best: "Archivist of South Carolina." It made me feel like a battleship. Of course, I did not really merit the title then, if indeed I do even now; but Phil always reposed in me and in others greater confidence than we deserved. He thus led us to accomplish more than we thought we could; we could not bear to disappoint his great expectations for us. My great disappointment is that he cannot be here in person tonight.

At that same meeting in Kansas City I met the most unlikely archivist of them all, in most unlikely circumstances. During a panel discussion of the archival facilities of the trans-Mississippi West, a merry-faced, slightly dumpy little woman wearing (in Kansas City of all places) an Hawaiian lei draped around her neck, walked into the room and took her seat on the front row. "Steamboat Bill" Petersen, speaker of the moment, leaned down from the podium and exclaimed, "How are you, Mary darling?" And that was my introduction to Mary Givens Bryan, archivist of Georgia. Mary Bryan taught me that the archivist must be a politician. It was difficult to get her to leave the state of Georgia when its legislature was in session; I soon learned from her the significance of "Mr. Ben" in the Georgia power structure. She herself had her own constituency—all of the people in all of Georgia's 159 counties, but especially the county officials and amateur genealogists. Mary believed that with them on her side anything was possible. The Georgia archives building is testimony to the effectiveness of her methods. But Mary was a true archivist and—what is now becoming rare among archivists—a real craftsman. During my Navy days I had a skipper who used to proclaim, "Gentlemen, you have to be able to do everything aboard ship." Mary Bryan could do anything on board an archives. Now that she is gone, I am not sure that there is any other archival administrator, with the exception of my own Deputy, William L. McDowell, who can do everything that has to be done in an archives, from operating a Barrow laminator to the editing of a documentary publication.

My third mentor came from a little bit north of South Carolina. Shortly after I began work at my desk in Columbia, a packet of materials arrived from Raleigh describing the program of the North

Carolina Department of Archives and History. I was amazed and dismayed to find out all the things our sister state was doing. The packet which H. G. Jones had sent me outlined a program for us to envy, strive for, and perhaps match at some time in the distant future. H. G., together with his colleagues in North Carolina's state records and local records programs, Thornton Mitchell and Admiral Patterson, were most generous in sharing with us the techniques which had made them so successful.

H. G. and his staff at Raleigh knew *most* of the answers. The remaining answers, I soon learned, could be given by A. K. Johnson, Jr., and his people of the regional office of the National Archives and Records Service at Atlanta and East Point, Georgia. I cannot remember now just when I first met A. K. After our close association during the past decade, it seems that I have known him always and that he has always been there when I have needed guidance and advice. A superb representative of the National Archives in the Southeast, he has done more, I think, than any other person to set high standards of performance in archives and records management in that area. As founding father of the South Atlantic Archives and Records Conference, he was the originator of the idea of regional organization which has become so popular in the last several years. If a week or so goes by without my seeing or writing A. K., the phone will ring; and, in unmistakable Arkansas twang, will come the question: "What you doing over there?" He's that kind of friend—and not only to me. These four—Philip Hamer, Mary Bryan, H. G. Jones, and A. K. Johnson—were the ones to take me in charge and to raise me by hand. How good they were to do so, and what a satisfaction it is for me to be able to thank them for it.

Three Archivists of the United States have also given me their friendship and support. I remember Wayne Grover with affection for two special little acts of courtesy. At a barbeque supper given at Walter Prescott Webb's ranch house during the Austin meeting he walked past his familiar cronies to sit beside me, a relative newcomer sitting alone; several months later at a reception at the White House he took me by the arm and gave me a personal introduction to Mrs. Johnson. His successor, Bob Bahmer, presented me my Fellowship at the Atlanta meeting, giving me the feeling that it gave him personal pleasure to do so. My debt to the present Archivist is beyond measure. As Deputy Archivist of the United States he came to Columbia to address a meeting of our Governor and state officials and helped us get started on our state records management program. As Archivist of the United States, he has impressed me by his professional skill and the unusual blend of forbearance and firmness with

which he handles his talented but prima donna staff. As member of Council he is usually the one who in harried moments keeps the rest of us from dealing too quickly with matters of principle. Our collaboration has become frequent by long-distance telephone, and I think that he is at least in part responsible for the tombstone and epitaph which my staff recently designed for me. The monument is to be in the shape of a telephone, and the message will read, "He finally hung up."

Two other members of the National Archives family who came to Columbia to help us should have special mention. Ernst Posner visited us, as he did every other state in preparation for his book, *American State Archives.* I can see him now standing in our second stack as I solicited his advice on how to deal with a badly scrambled group of records. He gave me a simple solution and a principle on working with archives which I have never forgotten: "Economy of effort is a rule which must always be remembered, Charlie; with so very much to do you cannot afford to waste energy." Oliver Holmes visited us several times to consult with Ed Hemphill, George Rogers, and me on the progress of the Calhoun and Laurens papers, both of which have received National Historical Publications Commission grants; but my most joyful memory of Oliver Holmes will be of his joy during our trip up the Danube from Budapest to Vienna last summer. For a picture of pure bliss imagine Oliver Holmes, map in hand, accompanied by fellow-archivists, exploring one of the great trade routes of the world—the practical and scholarly subject he knows so much about. Oliver Holmes and Ernst Posner—surely two of our profession's most gentle gentlemen. What a privilege it has been for all of us to know them!

And how can I give due credit to all the other men and women of NARS who have traveled with us along the way and helped us? To Herb, to Ev, to Al, to Meyer, to Vic, to Jim, to Harold, to Ken, to Mary Jane, to Dorothy, to Morris, to Ned, to Frank, and to Frank? I can't, except to say that to some people NARS may mean an imposing structure on Pennsylvania Avenue; to others it may mean a far-flung empire of record centers and presidential libraries; to me it is a fellowship of colleagues, friends, and neighbors.

Others who, like me, work in other parts of the forest beyond the NARS preserve are just as dear. I hope that they will forgive me if often I remember them most vividly in non-archival activities: Carroll Hart screaming bloody murder at the umpire for a bum decision against the Atlanta Braves. Delores Renz miraculously fishing from her suitcase in the Hotel Washington a portable heat massager to relieve the painful neuritis in my arm. Augie Suelflow bustling about

on errands of necessity and mercy at every annual meeting I can remember. Phil Mason worrying up Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Roger Smith Hotel. Skeptical Herb Finch whose healthy "show-me" attitude would qualify him for Missouri residence anytime he wants to leave New York. Bob Williams passing round a platter of broiled red-snapper throats at a great seafood restaurant on the gulf coast of Florida. Dave Duniway out-puffing me up a hill in Santa Fe. Dick Hale mixing me a gin-and-tonic in his home at Chestnut Hill. Jerry Ham and Herman Kahn, both of whom seem to think better with their shoes off, walking and orating in their stocking feet during a long session of the Committee for the 1970's. Milo Howard, thin as his gold-headed cane, both shivering elegantly in a snowbound bus outside Denver. Dorman Winfrey at the Boston Symphony. Betty Hamer on the Sausalito ferry, bravely headed into the breeze, crowned by the distant lights of San Francisco. Jean Stephenson, talking away beside me, on a tour bus outside San Antonio. Bob Warner, turning away from his distinguished guests after the groundbreaking for his new building, to listen carefully to an importunate query from his small daughter. Archivists are human, too.

They are also international. And this is another joy—to belong to a profession which surmounts boundaries. Kaye Lamb, Wilfred Smith, and their countrymen are so much part of us that we should be willing, at least on alternate years, to call ourselves the Society of Canadian Archivists, explaining (for the benefit of Howard Applegate) that the adjective covers residents of the United States as well as our neighbors to the north.

Most of us are less intimately connected with the archivists from countries other than Canada, but each of us has his favorites. Mine are Rubio Mañe, whom I revere from afar, mainly for a fascinating lecture I once heard him give, on a cold evening in St. Augustine, on Florida-Yucatan relations; John Pascoe of New Zealand, my walking companion at the Extraordinary Congress in Washington in 1966 and at the World Congress on Records at Salt Lake City in 1969; Jeffrey Ede, Keeper of the British Public Record Office, for his many favors both in and from London; and, most recently, Richard Blas, Archivist of Austria, for the warm reception which he gave us in Vienna and for his sympathetic handshake when I was introduced to him as President of the Society of American Archivists: "And I am President of the Society of Austrian Archivists."

C. S. Lewis, the English Christian philosopher and novelist, entitled his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. A joy which surprised me has been to grow older, to think of retirement a few years ahead,

and to discover that there are younger colleagues, men and women, quite capable of taking over, perhaps even better qualified than we oldsters ourselves. For fine examples I need look no further than this head table and signal out for your admiration a female member of Council and of the Committee for the 1970's, the young editor of the *American Archivist,* your young program chairman, and the equally young chairman of your Local Arrangements Committee. If I start looking through the audience, we'll stay here all night. I may be permitted, however, to point to my own staff which, as it has grown larger, has become younger, more energetic, and remarkably better looking—as I have grown older, tireder, and homelier. What a joy it is to know that the work which you have loved will be continued by persons just as dedicated and just as competent as you are.

So far I have been talking about persons who are colleagues in the profession, but to be an archivist is to have exciting and interesting colleagues of another sort too. As archivist of a state, I have had the privilege of knowing and working with four governors, scores of men and women in our state legislature, hundreds of people in other state and federal agencies, congressmen and senators. More often than not I have been listened to with courtesy and understanding; frequently a small project which has started out as mine has grown into a far more exciting and important project which could be called ours. It is a joy to find out that things *can* be done by government.

I have been blessed by an intelligent and supporting governing commission, chaired by two vigorous but different men: the first a courtly former state senator of the old school; the second a professor of history, who more than any other historian of my acquaintance knows what archives are all about—he is a member of SAA and attends these meetings. Ninety percent of the time, my commission agrees with me and gives me my head; the other ten percent of the time they make me justify policies and practices; on occasion they have directed me in ways I did not wish to go at the time but came to recognize as good ways later. It is a quiet joy to me that I am not left entirely on my own—that there are persons responsible for looking after me and checking up on me.

I am also at the beck and call of several thousand members of local historical societies and commissions; they call upon me and my staff for help, and we call upon them. Like Mary Bryan, like all of you, I have my constituency. When I stop to consider, I am amazed and delighted that the job of being an archivist involves me with so many colleagues, in government and out, professional and nonprofessional. And to each of them I can say the words of Katherine Hepburn in

The Philadelphia Story: "I am most beholden to you, Mike, most beholden."

The persons for whom we put on the whole show are, of course, the group which we in South Carolina Archives call "our customers." Surely this is one of the greatest joys of an archivist—to help other people find information that they need: the state's attorney general attempting to establish the state's right to control development of the tidal marshlands; a young scholar writing a book which will win him the Beveridge Award; an outstanding architect studying the plans for an eighteenth-century building which he has been commissioned to restore; a visitor from Oklahoma seeking and finding the names of an immigrant ancestor, the country of his origin, and the ship of his passage eight generations ago. Each of us remembers with pleasure satisfied customers of this sort. My two favorites are the middle-aged black woman who was able to prove title to her small acreage by searching the records of the Reconstruction-period South Carolina Land Commission and the young girl graduate student who came bursting into my office one day with the question, "Is this where they give you ideas for exciting topics for masters' theses?"

Thinking of the variety of living persons with whom an archivist is concerned, I marvel that ours is considered a cloistered, dry-as-dust profession; but part of our joy certainly is getting to know persons no longer living, by perusal of the documents—dry but not dusty, I hope—in our care. Again each one of us has his favorites from his own archives. Here are some of mine: Nicholas Trott, Chief Justice of South Carolina in the early 1700's, who complained to the Archbishop of Canterbury about how hard it was to work on his exegesis of the Hebrew version of the Old Testament without anyone who could appreciate his labors "in this remote and obscure corner of the world." His wife Sarah, quite a woman, flexible enough to be married to such a scholar during the latter part of her life, after having been married first to William Rhett, merchant, pirate-hunter, and half-pirate himself, brawler and fighter of duels with other prominent men on Charleston's streets. In a letter to Jamaica he boasts of having wounded Gov. Robert Daniell "in the left pap." William Bull II, many times acting governor and far better man than the succession of Royal appointees who periodically replaced him—a man who could have been the leader of South Carolina in the American Revolution, but who chose loyalty to the Crown which he had served all his life, thereby losing country, friends, and fortune. Henry Laurens, who went the other way, conservative merchant though he was—an eternal scribbler who left us more than

fifty letter books recounting the goings-on about him—from the seduction of his niece to the deliberations of the Continental Congress.

These were well-known people. The obscure Judes are often more appealing. I have a kindred feeling for Henty Webb, partisan soldier in the Revolution who, in a fracas with the Tories, lost his "rifel gun and hit not even paid for yet." I honor the black fugitive listed in the *South Carolina Gazette* in 1773: "He is a saucy fellow, and if you find him you may whip him to within an inch of his life; for, although he is my property, he says he belongs to no one but himself and will be slave to no man." My heart goes out to Anna Long, the little Palatine girl hauled before His Majesty's Council in 1744. She speaks no English and they speak no German; her parents died on the voyage over, and she must earn her keep as an indentured servant. Council stares at her, ponders, decides that she is about twelve years old, and binds her out for the next six years. What a joy to find her a decade or so later married to a prosperous Dutch Fork farmer, with family of her own again!

One of the most fascinating is a Cherokee Indian named Osteneca, known to the English as "Judd's Friend." Young Thomas Jefferson saw him in Williamsburg on his way to visit King George III and, although Jefferson understood not a word he said, thought that he must be a great orator from the rapt attention given him by his fellow Cherokees. Jefferson was right; Osteneca was unable to make the most of his appearance before royalty because of the death of his interpreter, but he said on his return through Charleston that what he had wanted to say was that he "revered both God and the King, and neither should perish without the other." A few years later he made the most of his opportunity to speak before a lesser notable, Governor Tryon of North Carolina. Before running the boundary line between the Cherokees and the English, Judd's Friend exclaimed, "What does the Indian get for the land? A gun, a match-cloak, which lasts only a little while; but the land lasts forever." What a candidate Osteneca would make in 1972!

Persons last but a little while, but the land—if we can learn to take care of it as well as the Cherokee—lasts forever. The plats and maps on which men have recorded their discovery of the land and their uses of it are surely among the greatest joys of an archivist; the maps and plats of the South Carolina Archives are certainly an endless source of delight to me. The plat of the boundary which Judd's Friend and Governor Tryon drew in 1767 is lost—not to be found in Charleston, Columbia, Raleigh, or London. But a similar 1766 boundary still exists, both in parchment copies in Columbia and in London and as an actual line between several South Carolina

counties today. From my speeding car I always salute it when I pass from Laurens to Greenville counties; the Cherokees wanted white men to know when they were entering "Indian Land." When the boundary was just surveyed, they blazed the trees for two hundred feet on either side so there would be no mistake. The recognition of such places years later, from maps and plats made decades before, gives one a sense of the fullness of time, extends one's life back far beyond the allotted measure of three score years and ten. What an efficient time-machine paper is for traveling. Here's where he lived; here's where they fought; here's where they crossed the river. I visited on maps and plats the spot where the famous Cherokee Path crosses the headwaters of the Savannah River scores of times before I visited the place in actuality. Hundreds of packhorse men, Indian war parties, two British military expeditions, several American ones during the Revolution, Thomas Sumter, Francis Marion, and William Bartram crossed the place called Earle's Ford—before I did, fly-rod in hand, catching no fish, but thrilled at being where so much history had been before me. Archives are generated from places and are concerned with places, and the archivist worth his salt visits the places with which his records are concerned. If he fails to do so, he misses much instruction and much enjoyment.

Archives are places too, and part of the fun of being an archivist is visiting other peoples' shops. I recall with pleasure the dramatic mural in the foyer of the Texas State Library; the great mail-routing and filing system at the United Nations; the fine map and photograph storage of the Public Archives of Canada; the lovely little auditorium in Atlanta, where the new Georgia Archives and the old Rhodes Building become one; and more recently the fantastic exhibit of documents covering more than a thousand years in the Austrian Archives in Vienna. How good it is to go to other archives, to see other people doing the things you do, to feel smug when you think you are doing things better, to resolve to do better when you think you are being surpassed. You will visit an exciting and beautiful archives tomorrow. Next spring and summer, if plans of the Committee on International Affairs are carried through, you will have the chance to visit archives abroad—as some of us did this past summer: perhaps Greece; perhaps East Africa.

I have talked much of persons and places and only little about papers, which are what archivists usually talk about; but surely I don't have to do more than remind you of the calm joy which lies at the very center of our craft—essentially, I think, the satisfaction which comes of bringing order out of chaos, intelligibility out of confusion. At our most humble—perhaps at our best—we are sim-

ply good housekeepers, carrying out the trash, tidying up the kitchen, inventorying the silver, labeling the jellyjars, dusting and straightening up the bookshelves, sewing name tags on the children's clothes, and storing them in proper closets and drawers so that they can be found again when needed. We are really the Marthas of the scholarly world, "busy about many things," with no time for auditing the seminar sessions of peripatetic professors.

Our panel discussions at this convention and especially our workshops tomorrow are evidence of our concern with our Martha-like tasks and of our fondness for them (we wouldn't be doing them if we didn't love them!). You can read your programs for yourselves. On occasion a few of us may take time to theorize—to indulge in pondering over *why* we do what we do. In my own way, that is what I've been doing tonight. Most of the time most of us keep busy simply doing the work laid out before us: accessioning, dusting, fumigating, fogging, restoring, describing, packing, stowing, fetching and carrying, taping and punching, filming, inspecting, transcribing, proofreading, publishing. If we have any time left over from these mundane tasks, we think less about why we are doing them, and more about *how* we might do them better, easier, with greater "economy of effort," as Ernst Posner says. Not all of these tasks have to do with paper any more, but most of them still do—and if not with paper itself then with its latter-day descendants—microfilm, audio, visual, magnetic tapes, discs, or what have you. All of them still have to do with capturing the word, with making it permanent if it has been a word worth saying, of making it fit into intelligible patterns with other words, so that different men in different eras and places may speak together and live together in a meaningful manner across the barriers of time and space.

When all's said and done, to have the privilege of working thus is to find significance, to find a kind of meaning for oneself. And that is the joy of being an archivist!