

Women in Archives: Documenting the History of Women in America

By EVA MOSELEY

THE HISTORY of women in America is a relatively new field of study, and documenting it entails difficulties akin to those encountered in documenting the histories of other neglected groups. The year that the sixth and last volume of *The History of Woman Suffrage* was published, 1922, was the same year Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., criticized his fellow historians for tacitly assuming that "one-half of our population have been negligible factors in our country's history."¹ Professor Schlesinger's accusation can stand as a comment on the reception accorded *The History of Woman Suffrage*. And yet, when historians noticed women at all, it was the suffrage movement they mentioned. So it is all the more noteworthy that during the last decade women's history has begun to emerge as a legitimate field of study. With women figuring so peripherally in most existing history books,² most research in this area—not only to be original, but to be done at all—requires manuscript sources.

Neglect of women has not only meant little or no space given to them in historical writings, but it has also meant little or no space given to women's papers in manuscript repositories and little or no effort to acquire these materials. Women themselves have often considered their papers trivia and treated them accordingly. Many papers have been lost forever, while others exist only as spotty or scattered bits and pieces. In addition, since the great woman stands

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¹ Schlesinger, "The Role of Women in American History," in *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), p. 126. *The History of Woman Suffrage* (New York and Rochester: 1881–1922) was edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joselyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper.

² See Joanna Schneider Zangrando's paper in this series, "Women in Archives: An Historian's View on the Liberation of Clio," for a discussion of textbook space given to women in history.

behind the great man, her thoughts and efforts have often been concealed in his (not always her husband's) accomplishments.

Also, historians, and archivists with them, have shown a bias both toward *who* makes history and toward *what* activities are historically significant. Elizabeth I, Marie Curie, and Rosa Luxemburg are not ignored, nor does anyone pretend they were men. But, such exceptions aside, women have been "faceless," even more so than the masses of laboring men who themselves have been noticed mainly when they organized peasant uprisings or formed labor unions. If one asks *why* women did not do the kinds of things historians appreciate, the answers at least partly will have to do with the great number of tasks women performed in the home. With nineteenth-century industrialization and medical discoveries, women began to emerge from the home, to declare—and to learn to believe—that they could do things men do. It is not surprising that historians and archivists did not immediately or happily begin to record the new ideas and activities of women.

It was Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and another man, W. K. Jordan, president of Radcliffe, who saw the need to correct this neglect. In 1943 Mrs. Maud Wood Park, Radcliffe alumna, leading suffragist, and first president of the national League of Women Voters, gave to Radcliffe the Woman's Rights Collection of correspondence and other papers on the woman's rights movement as well as photographs, posters, books, and furniture (including Alice Stone Blackwell's desk). Rather than leaving this library-archives-museum as a static memorial to the suffrage movement, Jordan, Schlesinger, and various friends embarked on an acquisitions program that rapidly increased the holdings of these Women's Archives, especially in the areas of suffrage, reform, medicine, politics and government service, and volunteer organizations. Less emphasis was given to the arts and literature because women in these fields were well represented in other repositories at Harvard. In 1967 the Women's Archives was renamed the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.

The Schlesinger Library today includes—besides books, periodicals, audiotapes, microfilms, photographs, posters, and memorabilia—over two hundred manuscript collections. About thirty-five of them are from organizations and the rest are individual or family papers, some dating from the eighteenth century; collections increase in number and size from the middle of the nineteenth century. Potential acquisitions are judged individually but with some general guidelines. Collecting is confined to American women, and inevitably there is something of a New England emphasis, although many

important collections are from other parts of the country. International organizations and women in other countries appear but are never the principal collections or writers.

Many women whose personal and public papers are in the Schlesinger Library were pioneers in their fields: Elizabeth Blackwell and Alice Hamilton in medicine, Antoinette Brown Blackwell in the ministry, Leonora O'Reilly in the labor movement, Catherine Beecher in women's education, Julia Lathrop as the first head of the Children's Bureau, Jesse Hodder and Miriam Van Waters in prison reform and administration. Two women whose collections reveal significant enterprise were Lydia Pinkham, whose famous Vegetable Compound was originally a "home brew," which she gave away to indisposed friends and neighbors in Lynn, Massachusetts, but which soon became the staple of a giant business with a world-wide market; and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a writer, lecturer, and social philosopher—the intellectual leader of the women's movement from the 1890's to the 1920's—who single-handedly wrote and published from 1909 to 1916 the monthly magazine, *The Forerunner*.

Family collections in the Schlesinger Library can be divided into two general types. First are those of families whose women were active and prominent in their own right: the Beecher-Stowe family, the Blackwells, the Somerville-Howorth family of the Mississippi Delta, whose five generations of active women included Mississippi's first woman legislator. Second are those (for example, the Cabot, Dana, and Loring families) whose women, though not themselves prominent, provide in their letters and diaries an illuminating view of contemporary affairs or of family and social life, the sort of elusive information that makes history human. (Two special book collections also give insight into family and home life: etiquette books and cookbooks, the latter including works on "domestic science.")

Among organizational collections in the Schlesinger Library are those of such women's groups as the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, the National Women's Trade Union League, the Massachusetts League of Women Voters, and the Advertising Women of New York. Also included are the records of groups in which women played a prominent part: the Consumers' League (of Massachusetts and of Connecticut), the Friends of the Framingham Reformatory, the Birth Control League of Massachusetts, and, most recently, the Bynum collection, given by Caroline W. Bynum, co-chairman of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, which deals with the work of this and related committees from 1969 to 1971.

The other archives of comparable size and specializing in women's

records is the Sophia Smith Collection, begun in 1942 by the Friends of the Smith College Library and housed in that library. Outstanding among its holdings are the papers of the Garrison and Hale families; of Blanche Ames Ames, champion of women's rights and birth control; of Elizabeth Cutter Morrow, educator and philanthropist; of the New England Hospital; of Margaret Sanger and her secretary Florence Rose; and of Florence Rena Sabin, public health specialist and histologist. The Smith Collection differs from the Schlesinger in its greater interest in women active internationally (for example, the International Congress of Working Women, Canadian-American Women's Association, and an English suffrage collection) and in the arts (Agnes B. de Mille, Nancy Cushman, Risë Stevens); it features open stacks for manuscripts.

Some private organizations also maintain archives in their particular fields. For instance, Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization in New York, has a considerable collection of the papers of its founder, Henrietta Szold; and the Association for Childhood Education International, Washington, D.C., has papers of Winifred E. Bain and Mary E. Leeper.

In addition, a variety of general and special repositories are becoming increasingly aware of the need both to collect women's records and to make known their holdings. The Library of Congress has papers of Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, the Blackwell and Hanna-McCormick families, the League of Women Voters of the U.S., the National Woman's Party, and the National Consumers' League. The University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, has papers of both Jane Addams and Hull-House and is making this collection complete by adding microfilm or Xerox copies of papers located elsewhere. The Social Welfare History Archives in Minneapolis includes papers of the Association of Junior Leagues of America, the National Florence Crittenton Mission, and other groups in which women were active or from which they benefited. The Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University devoted the Summer 1972 issue of its newsletter to a descriptive list of its women's collections (Mary Heaton Vorse, Katherine Pollack Ellickson, and others). The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, has papers of jurist Florence E. Allen and several on women's missionary, temperance, antislavery and charitable work. The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, has papers of Mary Austin and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and several collections on the suffrage movement.

The Women's History Research Center in Berkeley is not strictly archival, but for the past four years, under the leadership of Laura

X, the center has been collecting material of the current women's movement: periodicals, pamphlets, flyers, clippings, tapes, and other documentation. Bell and Howell has microfilmed some three hundred of the Women's Center journals, newspapers, and newsletters and plans to add to this series annually.

The records of the current movement are also being collected elsewhere. For example, the Boston office of NOW (National Organization for Women) keeps a very extensive clipping file; the Sophia Smith Collection subscribes to several underground newspapers and women's periodicals; the Alverno College Research Center on Women, Milwaukee, is collecting current materials; and the Schlesinger Library subscribes to about twenty periodicals, maintains both clipping and vertical files, has been the official repository for NOW, both the national office and local chapters, since the fall of 1971, and it has been, and will be, receiving the papers of Betty Friedan.

Like others oriented to action rather than to research, many participants in the women's movement are not aware of the value of keeping papers. And, as has been more or less true for the last half-century, much important work is carried on by telephone, producing no written records. But probably the main reasons that these collections are often inadequate in quantity and/or quality are, first, that many records are still in use and, second, that the difference in historical value between duplicated material (newsletters, leaflets, and so on) and original records (correspondence, minutes, membership lists, reports) is not always understood. It is possible, however, to contact women in the movement, as well as women active in earlier decades but still alive, and to urge them to save and to deposit records no longer in use where they will be safe and available to interested readers.

Of course this action takes time and money, but it is important to collect papers being produced now as soon as they can be spared. A combined acquisitions, research, and publishing project to record women's history of the 1960's and 1970's has been proposed by the Schlesinger Library. The foundation support now being sought for this project would go both toward locating and acquiring manuscript sources and toward producing monographs, tapes, films, guides, and so on, which would become part of the Schlesinger collection.

Now that the three-volume *Notable American Women*, which drew on the resources of Radcliffe and the Schlesinger Library, has been published,³ another project is pending in which the Schlesinger

³ Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American*

Library would sponsor the publication, with the help of the National Historical Publications Commission, of unpublished documents from both its and other collections. Funds for this project have yet to be approved by Congress.

While the current history project will include tape recordings, the Schlesinger Library is also carrying on a small-scale oral history program of its own. The first is an interview by New York lawyer Eleanor Jackson Piel of Harriet Pilpel, long active in the movement to legalize abortion. On a small scale too, the Library is receiving tapes and transcripts of term projects in women's studies courses in which students interview older female family members, some of whom are immigrants. In California the Oral History Office of Berkeley's Bancroft Library has applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for money to interview the dozen or so suffragists who are still alive, while Bancroft and the College of the Immaculate Heart in Los Angeles have a joint program to interview women active today in politics. The college has transcribed, edited, and indexed its tapes; Bancroft will do so in the future.

Along with more energetic acquisitions and publications programs, there is a need for improved finding aids, not so much within repositories as among them. Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the U.S.* lists some collections under Women's Suffrage, and the *National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections* has a few subject headings under "Women." But these guides are most useful to researchers who know specific names to look up.

Besides Hamer's *Guide* and *NUCMUC*, there is the Sophia Smith Collection's selective and descriptive booklet on its manuscript collections;⁴ the Schlesinger Library's card catalog (for books, manuscripts, and photographs) and its inventories will be published in the fall of 1973. Very useful are two guides prepared for a workshop, at the OAH meeting in April 1972, on archival resources in women's history. One is *Archival and Manuscript Resources for the Study of Women's History: A Beginning*, compiled by Andrea Hinding and Rosemary Richardson;⁵ this guide incorporates a section on West Coast resources compiled by Joan Hoff Wilson. The other list is *Women in American History, 1896-1920:*

Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁴ Available from the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library, Northampton, Mass.

⁵ Compiled and mimeographed in forty-two pages at the Social Welfare History Archives Center, University of Minnesota Libraries (April 1972).

Their Manuscripts in the Library of Congress, by Roy R. Thomas, Bowie State College.⁶

Useful as such guides and catalogs are, there is still a need for a union listing specifically on women, covering holdings in as many libraries as possible. At least two proposals for such a catalog await funding from private or government sources. One of them, which grew out of the workshop at the 1972 OAH meeting, would be sponsored by the AHA, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and have its own professional staff. The other would be headed by Andrea Hinding and Clarke Chambers of the Social Welfare History Archives Center at the University of Minnesota. It is hoped that by the time this paper appears, one or both will be a reality.

A separate listing of women's manuscript collections implies the wish to keep women's records either physically separate or easily distinguishable from those of men. But should women's repositories exist at all? If they should, what should they collect? Should all women's papers go to women's repositories?

It seems clear that, because of traditional neglect of women's contributions, separate libraries about women are needed *now*; perhaps the day will come—but it has not yet—when Antoinette Blackwell's papers will be housed in a theological collection and Alice Hamilton's in a medical library—and when Blackwell will be referred to simply as a minister (not a woman minister) and Hamilton as a physician. I might mention here the Library of Congress subject heading groups: "Women as . . ." and "Women in. . . ." They *are* chauvinist, for there is no heading for "Men as artists" or "Men in public life," and the titles do not make sense in a library like the Schlesinger where virtually everything is on women. And yet, if a student goes to any general college library or to a special subject library to find material on female violinists or female botanists or orators, is it not useful to have those chauvinist "Women as . . ." and "Women in. . ." cards in the catalog? Perhaps some day the sex of a violinist or botanist will be of no interest because a specialist or artist will as likely be female as male. But for the time being, we must consider the existence of women's repositories and the proposed unified listing of women's records as desirable steps forward, despite their "discriminatory" overtones.

But are women's repositories enough? A by-product of my work at the Schlesinger Library has been a degree of "consciousness-raising," mainly through reading manuscripts for cataloging, and

⁶ Bowie, Md. 20715 (1972), 8 pp., mimeographed.

also through talking to colleagues and researchers. Surely a shift in both men's and women's attitudes toward women is one of the primary aims of documenting women's history, past and present. To this end, any and every means should be used to collect and make available the records of women's lives and activities. Libraries like the Schlesinger and the Sophia Smith Collection are fine for those who are working specifically in women's history; in many cases the results of their research—in the form of courses on women, magazine articles, children's books, radio and TV programs—reach others not in the field. But there are many more people who will never appear at a women's library, so it is important that other libraries and archives increase and make known their holdings on women. Even this one panel at the SAA convention (though it has had to deal with two subjects: women's records and women as archivists) has surely been one way of encouraging archivists to reconsider the importance of this aspect of history.

What goes to a women's repository? It is clear that the records of the women's rights movement and of women's organizations belong there. In the case of women specialists, the decision is not so clear. If the main point of the papers is that this was a *woman* specializing in a certain field or pioneering in it as a woman, they should probably be in a women's history repository. If, on the other hand, the point is that this was a *specialist*, who happened to be a woman but whose contributions to the field were of more significance than that fact, the papers might be more useful in the appropriate subject collection. Whatever the decision—and it will most often be made by the donor—let us hope that the time has now come when no archivist, and no woman, will say: these papers are worthless; they're only the papers of a woman.