

Broad Horizons: Opportunities for Archivists

WILFRED I. SMITH

LIKE ALL MY PREDECESSORS, I suppose, I have reviewed the history of our Society as revealed in the *American Archivist*. And I have been struck by the frequency with which the same subjects recur. As the French say, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." New officers and Council members try to be original, but very often what they propose has been thought of or tried or done before, sometimes several times before. Let us take, for example, some of the subjects with which it has been my fortune to be associated.

The attempt to establish the position of executive director has been a major goal and the subject of several special attempts going back to the early days of the Society. The attempt to develop a comprehensive publications program has been advocated several times in the past. The membership development committee has had a number of predecessors. The realization that municipal archives is an area requiring special attention has come periodically to the attention of the Society. Even regional associations are not entirely new. There were regional groups of members in Washington and on the Pacific coast as early as the 1930's. We frequently discover that committees are not as active and productive as they might be, a recurring theme in the annual reports of our secretaries. Try as we do for originality in the programs of our annual meetings, we nevertheless find that the same subjects recur year after year. Even the attitude of most of our members seems to change little with the passage of time. As long ago as 1941 the secretary observed that most members seemed to feel that the Society existed to have annual meetings and publish a journal. The next year he continued, "The Society has always been able to find a Council to lead it and an Editor competent

This presidential address was delivered in St. Louis, Missouri, on Thursday evening, September 27, 1973, at the thirty-seventh annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists. Mr. Smith, a Fellow of the Society since 1970 and elected to the SAA Council in 1968, is the Dominion Archivist of Canada.

to produce a good journal. The assumption that all the remaining members of the Society need to do is pay their dues more or less regularly is the best possible assurance that they will not get their money's worth." I think this situation has improved. Although only 6 percent of our members returned nomination forms for officers and Council members this year, nearly 50 percent voted for those who were nominated. But participation by members is a matter of perennial concern. Ever since the first meeting of this Society, we have been wondering if we have a real profession, and we are told periodically that wishing won't make it so.

What conclusions can we draw from this repetition? That we have reached the limits of our professional and institutional efforts; that we have attained our objectives or admitted that they are unattainable; that there is nothing new for us to do? Is ours a static occupation which is reflected by a static Society?

I say that it is not true. There is a great deal to do. I realize that the word "challenge" is overworked. Perhaps "opportunity" is more appropriate. Ours is a noble calling—the preservation of the original records of human experience—and it requires the full extent of our individual and collective resources and efforts if we are to fulfill our important responsibilities to past, present, and future generations. The archival world not only is challenging, but also is dynamic. There is constant change in materials, techniques, technology, and relationships and there is an increasing acceleration of change which requires all our efforts and adaptability to improve our knowledge and skills. Most of you realize this, but it might be worth while for a few moments to look at some of the areas in which there are opportunities or challenges, new horizons to which we should cast our eyes and direct our attention. I have called this talk "Broad Horizons: Opportunities for Archivists."

One area in which an opportunity is apparent is the membership of this Society. Some of you will recall the debate on the nature of the membership: whether it should be restricted to those who could be called professional archivists or whether it should include *all* those who are concerned with the preservation and use of archival materials. A decision was made in favor of a broad membership, and I believe that it was a wise decision which subsequent experience has justified. There has never been any danger of nonarchivists controlling this Society, and the presence of nonprofessionals has not hampered in any way the development of a profession or a professional association. The absence of compartments has made it possible for specialists in the very wide range of archival activities to cooperate to the great advantage of all, while the support of histo-

rians, librarians, and others who subscribe to our policies and goals has added valuable strength to a national Society. There has been from time to time a difference of opinion concerning the size of the Society. Just a year ago a distinguished member suggested that it was getting too big and that membership should be limited. I believe that when the advantages and disadvantages are weighed, most of us will support the view that it is our duty to extend membership to all those who come within our broad definition of members. Therein lies the opportunity. Our membership has increased from 125 individuals and 3 institutions in 1936 to 1,498 individuals and 1,297 institutions at the present time. But there are many, perhaps thousands, who are engaged or interested in archival work on this continent but who are not members, and there are indications that many would join if they were aware of the advantages of membership. One of the first results of the formation of state and regional associations was a considerable increase in new memberships for the Society of American Archivists because of contacts at the state and regional level. I believe that it would be particularly desirable to attract more young members. But our membership is not limited to the United States. I am one of 130 Canadian members, and there are members in approximately sixty other countries. Recently the government of Italy took out more than one hundred subscriptions for archival institutions in that country. This is but one indication of the international need for an effective professional archival association and a good professional journal. I do not advocate a worldwide, high-pressure membership campaign, but I think we should be aware of the broad horizons to which our influence and contributions can extend if we demonstrate the advantages of a broadly based Society with sound policies and a progressive program dedicated to improvement in the care and use of archives throughout the world.

Another horizon which stretches before us relates to the increasing range of archival media or materials. Very early in the history of this Society, it was recognized that the word "archives" was not limited to public records but that it also embraced the private papers of individuals, institutions, and corporate bodies and that archival principles and procedures should be applied to the whole range of such materials. The use of microfilm has added a new dimension to the utilization of archives, permitting the use of archival material at some distance from the originals, the production of multiple copies by microfilm publication, and in some cases the conservation of originals. We must now include, as a normal archival medium, machine-readable records, of which I shall say more in a moment. These are all textual records which are limited to the written word

in some form. There has been a tendency to neglect other and equally valid records. Examples of such records are maps, plans, and architectural drawings. At the last Congress in Moscow of the International Council on Archives, there was a session on architectural archives, and later the Congress approved a resolution urging greater attention to architectural drawings and similar material by archivists. More important are media encompassed by the term audiovisual records, including photographs, film, and sound recordings. I am particularly conscious of these media because of the emphasis placed on them in my own institution. The staff responsible for photographs, for example, is as large as that which looks after public records, and its clientele is more extensive. We have responsibility also for paintings, water colours, prints, and drawings, which are primarily of historical rather than artistic value. For example, it is recognized that it is the national archives in Canada rather than the National Gallery which has responsibility for a national portrait collection. A major responsibility assumed recently is a national film archives which includes film, sound tapes, and videotape, the product of national and private film makers and radio and television networks.

I realize that all archives and most archivists do not have responsibilities for all these media. I believe that it is important, however, that as a professional Society we recognize that our concern should include all archival material regardless of form. These media will undoubtedly increase in range, volume, and utilization and it would be unfortunate if they were to do so beyond the scope and ken and influence of archival associations. Distinct procedures for acquisition, preservation, cataloguing, and reference are being developed, and it is important that they bear the archival stamp of approval. It would give me a great deal of personal satisfaction if, one day, the custodians of audiovisual and other specialized materials who are called curators or other such names could be called simply archivists. In the meantime I hope that we will regard such materials as worthy of our legitimate concern, for our stature, influence, and effectiveness as archivists will be diminished if our attention is limited to what has been called "massaging paper," vital as textual records are to our profession.

A challenge of which we are all aware is provided by the recent and continuing advances in technology. Since most archivists are not technicians and since the initiative for most technological developments occurs in a commercial or at least in a nonarchival context, there is a tendency for archivists, individually and collectively, to play a passive role. I believe that we should be more active and try

to exert a positive influence on technological developments in the interests of archives and the users of archives. Let us take microfilm as an example. It was fortuitous that the developers of microfilm aimed at a relatively long life for their product, and it has been generally satisfactory for archival purposes. But I doubt if archivists were consulted at the development stage. Recently the Society of American Archivists has been involved in the development of microfilm standards, and this is a trend which should be followed in other cases. I believe that archivists should also be involved in the development of equipment. For example, all of us have listened sympathetically to complaints about microfilm readers, but individually we could do nothing about it. As a professional society, however, representing thousands of archivists who serve many thousands of microfilm users, particularly if we act in concert with librarians, who have been more active in this respect, we should be able to exert a decisive influence on the design of readers and other equipment.

Another area of technology in which our Society has been involved to some extent is conservation, particularly concerning the permanence of paper. The importance of preventing deterioration of the material on which is recorded so much information which will be required by future generations is obvious. It is most appropriate that as a professional society we be involved in the establishment of minimum standards, that we keep our members informed of developments in this field, and that we exert a collective influence on paper manufacturers in the interests of future users of archives. Our limited experience in regard to microfilm and paper research should be extended to a much wider range of products of technological change in regard to archival media and equipment.

The most prominent challenge in this area today is provided by the computer. At one time it was thought that computer-generated information worthy of permanent retention could be preserved in the form of printouts on paper. We have advanced beyond that stage, however, and it is apparent that machine-readable records have become a normal archival medium. This poses major problems for archivists. One is the selection of the relatively small proportion of EDP records archival in nature. This means that the archivist must be involved at the programming stage in the development of EDP systems. Another problem is in the techniques for re-use of the selected tapes for research purposes, and a third problem is conservation, since tape presently has a relatively short period of usefulness. As a society of archivists we have an interest in ensuring that the need to identify and preserve machine-readable records of an archival nature is recognized, that procedures are adopted which will ensure the

transfer and preservation of information in this form, and that the search for a stable medium (possibly microfilm) is accelerated.

I have been shocked by reports which indicate that many archivists have abdicated their responsibilities in this field because of unfamiliarity with the technology. The result is that valuable information is being erased and public records are being alienated, absorbed by university data centres, for example, without basic archival controls. Automation also provides an example of technological advances which can provide useful tools for archivists. In the production of finding aids it has been demonstrated that the ability of the computer to manipulate information can produce significant improvements in making archives accessible for research. Technological change imposes several responsibilities on the archivist: to keep aware of changes which have an archival impact, to attempt to influence development in the interests of archives, and to adapt our procedures in confident utilization of new tools and information.

It is difficult to decide which of the many areas of concern to archivists is the most important. But a strong case can be made for utilization—the actual use of archival material which has been selected, acquired, arranged, described, and preserved. We are all aware of significant recent changes in regard to utilization which are almost revolutionary in nature and extent. There are several aspects to this “revolution.” One is *liberalization* of access to archival materials, particularly public records. Although the right of the public to have access to public records was recognized as long ago as the French Revolution, in practice this right was restricted to government officials, to a relatively small number of scholars, and to material that was relatively old. Even now several countries permit access only to public records that are at least fifty years old. In the movement for liberalization of access to public records, the United States has not only set an example by such measures as the Freedom of Information Act and the recent declassification program of the federal government but has also actively promoted liberalization internationally. The most prominent results of this movement are a greatly increased volume of records available for research and a distinct shift of emphasis in research to recent times. Although the beneficiaries of more liberal access are researchers, archivists have tended to support them, often presenting arguments on their behalf. Archivists should, I believe, advocate the most liberal access that is consistent with legitimate restrictions designed to protect interests of the community and personal privacy. In this respect they will not always be able to support extreme demands of researchers, but must firmly and fairly apply regulations and conditions imposed by donors.

Another aspect of increasing use is the marked extension in the

range of *users*. No longer is "researcher" synonymous with political, military, or economic historian, or even with historians at all. More and more economists, sociologists, geographers, scientists and those of many other disciplines are discovering the value of research in original sources. Among the questions which this extended and more varied use of archival materials raises is the validity of limiting the selection of archivists to those with a historical background. I have referred only to conventional academic use of archives. There is also the greatly increased demand for archival material, particularly of an audiovisual nature, for television, film, and radio, and this demand is largely nonacademic in nature.

But even more significant is the demand for the use of archival material at all levels of education. This is undoubtedly one of the most important problems which archivists face today. Some archives continue to hold the line by admitting only adult researchers and postgraduate students, others are making local arrangements for the admission of selected undergraduates, and a few are engaged in experimenting with the use of selected archival materials for primary and secondary grades. We can say that our search rooms will not hold even selected undergraduates; we can say that our duty to preserve original material will not permit such extensive and unselective handling. But I think we must be sympathetic to a massive interest in archival materials and to the possibility of revitalizing the teaching of history by the use of materials that we ourselves find exciting. However, while we may be justified in relaxing to some extent our search-room regulations, most of the new demands must be met by means of copies.

That leads to another aspect of increased use which can be called *diffusion*. Already a great deal has been accomplished in this respect by documentary publication, particularly in microfilm. It is significant that the International Council on Archives study of liberalization of access was coupled with a study on microfilm, which was recognized as an important method of dissemination. Another method of diffusion is decentralization of originals or microfilm copies, of which the outstanding example is the archival program in the regional centres of the National Archives and Records Service. A similar program in Canada is based on the deposit of microfilm copies in all provincial archives. The results are much improved access and greater use of archival materials. A major diffusion program in Canada includes production of copies of documents, maps, photographs, and audiovisual materials, including facsimiles and slides, as well as cooperation with public or private agencies in the copying of archival material for use in schools.

There is a final aspect of increased use which can be called *popu-*

larization and which aims at providing access by the general public to selected archival material of all types. The major elements in such a program are publications of a popular nature, an extensive program of travelling exhibitions, and increased use of archival materials by television, film, and radio. The Public Archives of Canada, in addition to extensive publication and exhibition programs, contributes to television programs, chiefly photographic material, and to radio programs from its collection of sound recordings. The results are most rewarding and reveal a latent popular interest in archives.

Increased utilization creates several problems. One concerns staff, which tends not to increase as rapidly as acquisition and use of materials. Another concerns the increased need for security and protection of original materials. Another is the requirement for more detailed finding aids and rapid rates of retrieval. These and other problems, though, are a small price to pay for the rewards in meeting the challenge of sharing our treasures with a larger proportion of the public, the total utilization of archives.

I think you will agree that as a professional association we cannot rest until all significant archival material is preserved and properly cared for. We are far from reaching that stage. It is safe to say that federal government records are well looked after. That cannot be said generally for the records of other levels of government, although there are many good state archives establishments and a few good municipal archives. Certain types of private papers are generally preserved. The outstanding cases, of course, are the presidential papers and those of governors and other prominent politicians. On the whole, however, there are far more underdeveloped types of archives than there are those which are looked after in a manner of which this Society would approve. These areas of neglect constitute a major challenge or opportunity for archivists. They include municipal archives, archives of science, business archives, urban and labour archives, artistic and cultural archives, and the "non-elite" archives—records of ethnic groups, of average rather than distinguished individuals and of so-called anti-establishment groups and activities. What is required, of course, is a national comprehensive program, and one of the most promising developments for decades is the proposed National Historic Records legislation. A first step should be a national inventory, which has been proposed, and which should include all types of archival material. A second stage should be an active, comprehensive, and systematic acquisition program by every archives to ensure that a more complete record of human experience is preserved than has been done in the past.

A consistent theme in the history of this Society has been the interest, perhaps even obsession, with the idea of professionalization. This is, of course, a natural concern for a professional association. I do not propose to discuss the matter in detail but merely to point out that we still do not have answers to most of the questions that have been asked in the last three decades. We are still not sure what a professional archivist is or what makes him so, or how he is distinct from a nonprofessional or unprofessional archivist. We will never settle such matters by academic discussion, and in fact the matter will not be resolved until we have reached the stage where we no longer need to discuss it. We will reach that stage when we have advanced considerably farther than we have at present in a number of aspects of the development of professionalization of archivists. One area, obviously, is professional training. The Committee for the 1970's reached the conclusion that we are not able to give or withhold accreditation to schools giving archival courses. I accept that as a present fact. This year the Committee on Education and Training prepared minimum guidelines for archival training curricula, and I hope these will be accepted as having the approval of this Society. This is an important step which recognizes the value of a clear definition of the basic content of formal archival training, which, if successfully acquired, will designate a professional archivist. I hope that very soon a distinct degree or diploma in archives administration will be available.

There are other standards in regard to professional principles, techniques, and procedures which can be adopted by this Society. One on access and reference is now being considered by the Professional Standards Committee, and more can and probably will be produced by the relevant committees, for formal adoption. These need not be rigidly enforced and should allow for flexibility and adaptation, but it seems to me that standardization is an important aspect of the development of a true profession. Another area in which we, as a profession, have not been successful is in the production of professional literature. Since I have referred to this elsewhere I shall not elaborate on it now. There are good reasons for the sparse publication record of archivists. It is possible that our hopes or expectations are not realistic. However, I am hopeful that the Ad Hoc Committee on Publications, in cooperation with the Editorial Board and with the assistance of grants from foundations, will be able to generate a comprehensive and fairly extensive program of archival publications.

A final professional aspect is our relationship with other professions. I believe that we should aim for fruitful liaison and coopera-

tion, accompanied by recognition of equal status and a clear sense of professional identity. The joint committee with the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians has been very successful in this respect and the joint committee with the American Library Association is developing fruitful areas of cooperation. Perhaps similar cooperation with records management associations should be initiated. Our relationship with information science should be explored. For many years we have emphasized how we are different from historians, librarians, and other related professions. I think we have made our point, and in the process we have become isolated and are aware of the slight impact on legislators and the general public, the result of a small constituency. We must now emphasize cooperation as a means of maximizing our influence, gaining the support of as many allies as we can find among professions which have similar interests and goals in the service of the community.

I have referred earlier to the international influence of this Society. While the Society of American Archivists is primarily that (a national society for American archivists), it is much more. I have referred to the strong international element in our membership, nearly 20 percent of our members and subscribers. This is a recognition of the contributions which we are making and can make on a world-wide scale. It is not generally known that it was the Society of American Archivists which provided the initiative for the formation of the International Council on Archives. I understand that the proposal for an international body of archivists came from our Committee on International Relations. This Society also raised funds to assist the ICA in getting established. This early interest was not maintained, and it has only recently been revived by the Committee on International Archival Affairs. Publication projects are designed to supplement the program of *Archivum*, and the *American Archivist* contains news from the national reporters for *Archivum*. More can be done. I would like to see a representative of the SAA attend the annual meetings of the Table Ronde of the ICA, and I am convinced that the products of a publication program of this Society will find an international market. The SAA will be joint host with the National Archives and Records Service for the next International Congress, in Washington in 1976. I hope that on that occasion the SAA will exert a strong influence. I believe that we should be aware of the benefits of a continued broadening of horizons without detracting from our efforts as a national Society.

A final challenge to which I would like to refer is the area of public relations. This field has not been entirely neglected—for example, many of us have attended sessions on public relations at annual meet-

ings—but I believe that we could obtain great benefits if we could overcome our modesty and possible aversion to publicity and devote more attention to it. There are several aspects of public relations. One concerns relations with our budgetary authorities, those who decide which portion of a total appropriation will be devoted to an archives program. I believe that we can be more effective in salesmanship, in the production of relevant statistics, in demonstrating the profitability of our work. I am particularly conscious of this because the recent experience in my own institution of doubling its staff and appropriation in a three-year period was largely the result of improved public relations. In this category we could also include legislative lobbying. Another aspect of public relations concerns the clientele whom we serve. My impression is that there is often room for improvement in the information, if not in the service, which we provide. Finally, there is the important relationship with the general public. Archives have tended to be restrictive in their scope, seeking to serve only a small segment of the public and directing information only to that small group. I believe that we must be more ambitious and try to promote among the general public a deeper appreciation of archives and a realization of their essential role in a civilized world. We can be encouraged by the increasing evidence of a latent public interest in the preservation and in the contents of archival materials. Those who have been involved with associations of “friends of archives” realize the benefits of such a relationship. I believe that well-directed publicity can expand these benefits while showing that archivists do not operate in a vacuum but play an essential role in the community, a role which deserves greater public support. We deal with a precious commodity—information—and we must move towards integration with the main stream of society, instead of occupying an isolated position on its periphery.

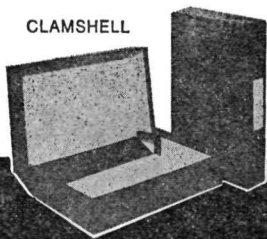
This review of horizons which have not been reached, goals which have not been attained, tasks which remain to be done, is not intended as a denunciation of archivists for neglect. I am speaking of the future rather than the past. Regardless of what individuals may be able to do I believe that this Society, as the focus of professional activity on a national scale, must continually adjust to changing conditions and try to serve the best interests of its members and the archival profession. In that task it has been generally successful. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the healthy criticism it receives, it is probably the most active and most effective archives association in the world, and I am confident that it will continue to improve in the performance of its important role. The concern that I have expressed however, is directed more at the individual attitudes of archivists

who are living now in a period of perpetual and increasing change. We cannot be complacent or become too attached to the status quo. "Standpatism" is intolerable in a dynamic situation. If we are to continue to be effective in the present and future, we must be alert, informed, and adaptable, for we can expect major and accelerating change to be a normal aspect of our professional lives. Each of us, in the great variety of institutions which we represent, should face the future with confidence and a determination to use all available means to extend the influence, area of service, and role in society of archives, to an extent that has not even been contemplated in the past. As the Washington taxi driver said, when asked to explain the inscription, "What is Past is Prologue," on the National Archives building: "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

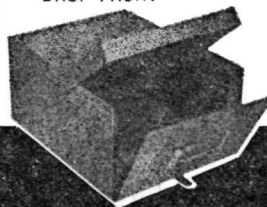
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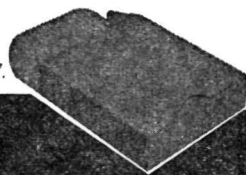
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