The Archival Edge

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OUR MOST IMPORTANT and intellectually demanding task as archivists is to make an informed selection of information that will provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time. But why must we do it so badly? Is there any other field of information gathering that has such a broad mandate with a selection process so random, so fragmented, so uncoordinated, and even so often accidental? Some archivists will admit the process is a bit out of kilter. They say a simple formula of more cooperation, less competition, increased governmental largess, and bigger and better records surveys—a logistical device we often mistake for an acquisitions strategy—should be sufficient to produce a national mosaic that will bequeath to the future an eminently useable past.

A handful of critics, however, have suggested that something is fundamentally wrong: our methods are inadequate to achieve our objective, and our passivity and perceptions produce a biased and distorted archival record. In 1970, Howard Zinn told an SAA audience that the archival record in the United States is biased towards the rich and powerful elements in our society—government, business, and the military—while the poor and the impotent remain in archival obscurity. To correct this, the chief spokesman for history's new Left urged archivists "to compile a whole new world of documentary material about the lives, desires and needs of ordinary people."[1] How this task was to be done he shrewdly left to the archivists. In 1971 Sam Bass Warner, a noted historian of urban life, urged us to make our archives more useful. Like Zinn, Warner subscribed to Carl Becker's notion that history should help people to understand the world they live in. To do this Warner asked archivists "so far as it is humanly possible" to "abandon the pursuit of the classic subjects of American history" and turn instead to the collection of data that would yield a

This presidential address was delivered in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Thursday evening, October 3, 1974, at the thirty-eighth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists. Mr. Ham, a Fellow of the Society since 1969, elected to the SAA Council in 1966, and Secretary of the Society (1968–71), is the State Archivist and head of the Division of Archives and Manuscripts, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

[1] Howard Zinn, "The Archivist and Radical Reform," unpublished manuscript, pp. 12–13, 18.

"historical explanation of the major issues of our own time."[2] Warner had specific notions of how this should be done which were dismissed as the half-baked product of an archivally uninformed mind.

Even earlier there were rumblings in Columbus, Ohio, where a young and untamed archivist suggested that his colleagues' concern with quantity and competition inhibited discussion of advantages of quality and cooperation; that many, if not most, archival institutions operated "as introspective units justifying their existence solely on their own accomplishments rather than in terms of their role in the overall historical collection process"; and if this "egocentric attitude" was not abandoned competing archival programs would become so proliferated that the possibility of inter-institutional cooperation would be jeopardized.[3]

But the most sweeping indictment in what was emerging as a radical critique of the way archivists go about documenting history and culture came from the Cornell University historian and archivist, Gould P. Colman. Colman, in the *American Archivist* "Forum," charged that lack of concern about acquisition guidelines had produced possibly "the most serious problem facing archivists . . .; the politicalization of our profession," politicalization in the sense of "skewing the study of culture by the studied preservation of unrepresentative indicators of that culture." For example governments, particularly the one in Washington, preserved documents out of all proportion to government's impact on culture while other important institutions, such as the family, are poorly documented. Shouldn't archivists, Colman asked, have a responsibility to redress this balance? Documentation was biased further by our propensity to collect what is most easily accessible and by limiting oral history resources primarily to those relatively well-documented aspects of culture which could pay the expensive oral history piper.[4]

The empirical evidence—from published accession notes, from NUCMC, from recently issued guides, from anywhere an archivist keeps a record of what he collects—validates these charges. But the evidence reveals more than a biased record; it reveals incredible gaps in the documentation of even traditional concerns. Take the case of a midwestern state known both for its production and consumption of fermented beverages. Neither brewing nor the brewing industry is mentioned in any of the state's archival finding aids. It is possible that 1000 years from now some researcher will conclude that in a city known as Milwaukee the brewers art was unknown. The evidence also showed that many archivists waste time and space preserving random bits and pieces, as well as large accessions, of the most dubious value.

[2] Sam Bass Warner, "The Shame of the Cities: Public Records of the Metropolis," unpublished manuscript, 1971, pp. 2, 3.

[3] David R. Larson, "The Ohio Network of American History Research Centers," *Ohio History* (Winter 1970): 62.

[4] "The Forum: Communications From Members," *American Archivist* 35 (July/October 1972): 483–85.

But the real cause for concern is that there doesn't seem to be any concern. With a few notable exceptions, there is no realization that our present data gathering methods are inadequate or that our fundamental problem is the lack of imaginative acquisition guidelines or comprehensive collecting strategies at all levels of archival activity. You search archival literature in vain to find something more helpful than a "how we did it here" article on a particular collecting program or an essentially "nuts and bolts" piece on the mechanics of collecting. Equally barren are the annual reports of the SAA committees dealing with identification and acquisition of archives. Further, an examination of the works on historical methodology and social science research indicate that our clients do not think the matter deserves much attention either.[5] For the archivist, the area of acquisition strategies remains a vacuum.

These criticisms, even if correct, are irrelevant for some archivists. To them the archival endeavor is primarily a custodial one. And the so-called dean of Canadian bookmen, Bernard Amtmann, would agree with them. In the May issue of the *Canadian Archivist* he stated, "archivists are by definition custodians of the material in their possession and their professional training and qualifications do not exactly encompass the . . . historical evaluation of material." This evaluation, he said, "must surely be the responsibility of the historian."[6] Whether it was arrogance or ignorance, Bernard Amtmann was only echoing archivists. In 1969 as reported in the New York *Times* the archivist of New York City was asked what he saved. "Aside from the mayors' papers," he answered, "we try to keep only things which will protect the city against a suit or help it to document a suit against somebody else." He went on to suggest that "some of the historical societies" might be interested in examining the records he was destroying. "You never can tell," he said, "when you're going to come across something valuable."[7] And, in an uninformed way, he was only practicing what Hilary Jenkinson and others have preached.

Small wonder the custodial image is still widely held by our allies in the research community. Indeed, the persistence of the custodial tradition has not only been a major factor in the archivist's failure to deal with acquisition policy on a coherent and comprehensive basis, but has resulted in an obsession—with the "nuts and bolts" or craft aspects of our work.

Reinforcing the custodial tradition is a parallel tradition, that of the researcher as data gatherer. We all know that many of the great

[5] Examples of the historian's superficial approach to acquisition problems are the "Report of Ad Hoc Committee on Manuscripts Set Up by the American Historical Assoc. in December 1948," *American Archivist* 14 (July 1951): 233; and more recently, Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 104–07.

[6] An abbreviated version of this article by Amtmann, "Historical Manuscripts at Auction," was widely circulated in the United States in the July 22, 1974, issue of the *Antiquarian Bookman,* pp. 356–57.

[7] New York *Times,* November 23, 1969.

manuscript collections—those of Belknap, Draper, and H. H. Bancroft come easily to mind—were brought together in this fashion. The American Historical Association through its committees on source material perpetuated this tradition and even today there are archival programs where the history faculty are the collectors while the archivists are the "keepers of the past."[8]

This tradition, of course, leaves the archivist too closely tied to the vogue of the academic marketplace. For example, only after historians rediscovered the importance of the city in American history did a few so-called urban archives come into existence. Similar efforts, often initiated by the action of concerned historians, were developed to meet the needs for documentation on the black community; on ethnic groups and immigrants; on social welfare; on architecture; on popular culture; the history of science; and so forth. These responses to changing patterns in the pursuit of history, and to the increase of other studies once considered outside the proper use of archives, are a temporary corrective. There is a dilemma here. Most researchers are caught in their own concerns and do not worry about all the history that needs to be written; yet in terms of documentary preservation this is precisely what the archivist must do. Small wonder, then, that archival holdings too often reflected narrow research interests rather than the broad spectrum of human experience. If we cannot transcend these obstacles, then the archivist will remain at best nothing more than a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography.

Turning from those traditions which have prevented the archivist from developing a larger acquisition design, let's consider five interrelated developments that are forcing him into a more active and perhaps more creative role.

The first is structural change in society. The process of institutionalizing and nationalizing decision-making, for example, has had a profound impact on documentation, making the archives of associations, pressure groups, protest organizations, and institutions of all sorts relatively more important than the papers of individuals and families. Accession data in the *American Archivist* reflects this change. Thirty years ago personal and family archives accounted for 38 percent of all reported accessions; but they account for only 14 percent today. In this same period, records of labor, of social and political protest, and of social welfare increased from less than 1 percent to nearly one-fourth of all accessions. Unlike famlily papers these archives usually do not fall unsolicited into the hands of a waiting archivist, and their percentage rise on the accession charts is partly the result of the sensitivity and hard work of many archivists. Further, as the government has become the primary instrument of social and economic policy the records of its dealings, especially with non-elite

[8] See William F. Birdsall, "The American Archivist's Search for Professional Identity, 1909–1936" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1973), particularly ch. 5.

population groups, have become more important. But archival holdings do not reflect this change. One reason is the disorganization of state, county, and municipal records; another is the narrow appraisal criteria used by many public record archivists. The result has been the destruction of vast quantities of important social and economic data.

Closely related to institutionalized decision-making and increased governmental activity, is a second and more prosaic factor: bulk. With records increasing at an exponential rate, it is utopian to believe that society could ever afford the resources for us to preserve everything of possible value; for it to do so would be irresponsible. We must realize that when we preserve one body of data it probably means that something else won't be preserved. But I do not think we have adequate methodological tools to make these critical choices. In fact, we might be better off if we forget what we have been taught. It is irresponsible and unrealistic to argue for the integrity of a file of gubernatorial papers that fills up 1500 document cases of which 80 percent is either duplicate or of marginal worth.

If the volume of documentation has greatly increased, the quality of the information has greatly decreased. Arthur Schlesinger, commenting in the *Atlantic Monthly* on this third problem—missing data—wrote: "In the last three quarters of a century, the rise of the typewriter [and to this we should add modern quick copy machines of all sorts] has vastly increased the flow of paper, while the rise of the telephone has vastly reduced its importance. . . . If a contemporary statesman has something of significance to communicate, if speed and secrecy are of the essence, he will confide his message, not to a letter, but to the telephone."[9] An examination of files similar to the gubernatorial papers above is proof that there is much more bulk of much less usefulness.

If the archivist is going to fill in the gaps he will have to become, as Warner suggests, "a historical reporter for his own time." He can use any of several techniques: he can create oral history, he can generate a photographic record, and he can collect survey data. As a reporter he can produce oral history, not as a painstakingly edited source for written texts about the Presidents and their men, but rather as documentation of the day to day decisions of lower echelon leaders and of the activities and attitudes of ordinary men and women. He can use photography to supplement the written record and make it more meaningful. But today, though most archival institutions collect photographs, virtually none has an active field program. And he could, if he has the courage and energy, do as one archivist suggests and create his own mail questionnaires and use other survey techniques to establish a base line of social and economic data.

A fourth factor in the making of the active archivist is that of vulnerable records or what we might call "instant archives." It is

[9] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "On the Writing of Contemporary History," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1967), p. 71.

documentation that has little chance of aging into vintage archives, that is destroyed nearly as fast as it is created, and which must be quickly gathered before it is lost or scattered. At my own institution, for instance, the collections which deal with the major 1960's movements on the left—civil rights, student activism, and the anti-Vietnam War protest—probably would not exist today if we had not initiated contacts before many of the organizations quietly dissolved.

Technology is a fifth development. We are all aware that electronic impulses easily and rapidly disappear from magnetic tape, that photographic images often fade beyond recognition, that files with quick copy documents are literally self-destructing, and that the program documentation to important EDP data sets often disappears long before the archivist is aware the set was ever created. Because of its short life-cycle, we must collect this material on a current basis or not at all.

Taken together, these five factors—institutionalization, bulk, missing data, vulnerable records, and technology—have expanded the universe of potential archival data, have given a contemporaneous character to archival acquisition, and have permanently altered the job of the archivist, forcing him to make choices that he never had to make before. I see three developments on the archival landscape which, in part, are responses to these conditions—the specialized archives, the state archival networks, and an emerging model for urban documentation.

The specialized archives, particularly those built around a subject area—the Archives of Social Welfare at the University of Minnesota is an example—have great appeal. They offer the possibility of well-defined parameters, and exhaustive documentation. They also allow the development of real staff expertise and may be easier to fund. The apotheosis of this type of program was the recent Eugene McCarthy Historical Project, described by its director as the most systematic attempt ever undertaken "to collect and organize all retrievable material of a political campaign for the presidential nomination." The records are voluminous and the project was expensive and the institutional competition for this prize was keen.[10]

But these archives, expecially those centered around the life and times of an individual, do not come to grips with acquisition problems. They side-step them. They contribute to the problem without adding to the solution. But they can contribute to the solution by plugging into larger conceptual frameworks, they can build the kind of inter-institutional linkages and coordination they now lack.

The need to link specialization with coordination was stressed by Sam Bass Warner. Speaking of the urban scene he argued that there is insufficient variation among American cities to justify the repetition everywhere of the same sort of collection. He urged historians and

[10] Werner Peters, "The McCarthy History Project," *American Archivist* 33 (April 1970): 155.

archivists to get together and divide up the archival turf. "San Francisco," he suggested, "might establish a business archive, Detroit, a labor archive, Los Angeles, a housing archive, . . . and so forth."[11] These specialized archives, in turn, would be *linked* with existing local, state, and federal programs. This was Warner's half-baked product that was dismissed out of hand.

But the concept of linkage is a key to the new state archival networks such as those in Ohio, Minnesota, Texas, and Wisconsin. The best of these have a coordinated acquisition program which seeks to be representative in subject coverage, inclusive in informational formats, and statewide in competence.[12] In these regards the Ohio network is one of the most advanced, conceptually if not operationally. The eight centers, most of which are part of a university, function as an integrated archives-library program for their assigned geographic area. Overall collection administration is provided by the Ohio Historical Society which supplies field service assistance in both the public and private sector and assumes responsibility for collections of statewide scope. Furthermore, interconnection assures that the activities of the centers are coordinative rather than competitive.[13] The network concept and structure offer not only a means to document society more systematically, but also to utilize better the limited resources of participating archival units.

In a similar fashion the Houston Metropolitan Archives Center hopes to do for one urban area what the networks have done for their states. Not only is the center the most ambitious urban archives program ever launched, it is also the most handsomely funded—a quarter of a million dollar grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project is backed by a consortium of the three major urban universities and the Houston Public Library. In affiliation with the new statewide Regional Historical Research Depositories system, it serves as the public records depository for Houston and Harris County. Manuscript records, printed and non-text material, and oral history are part of its collecting program; and it will provide a fully automated bibliographic control system for all resources regardless of their location in Houston. And two historians—not archivists—using traditional archives-library components, created this comprehensive model for documenting urban life.[14] These approaches can be a beginning. But we must do much more.

[11] Warner, "Shame of the Cities," p. 4.

[12] Richard A. Erney and F. Gerald Ham, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Libraries* (February 1972): 135–40; James E. Fogerty, "Minnesota Regional Research Centers," *Minnesota History* (Spring 1974): 30–32; Marilyn von Kohl, "New Program Focuses Attention on Local Records," *Texas Libraries* (Summer 1972): 90–93.

[13] The Ohio Network of American History Research Centers: Charter; Agreement Number One, Administration of Local Ohio Government Records; Agreement Number Two, Ohio Newspapers; and Agreement Number Three, Ohio Manuscripts. Xerox copies.

[14] Proposal, "Houston Metropolitan Archives Center," National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Research Grants.

First. We must change old habits and attitudes. The view, held by many in our profession that, in collecting, cooperation is synonymous with abdication, must become an anachronism. Given our limited resources, the competition which produces fragmentation and the idiosyncratic proprietary view of archives must yield to integrated cooperative programs which have easily available information on the location of their resources.

Second. We must commit a far greater proportion of our intellectual resources to developing guidelines and strategies for a nationwide system of archival data collecting. And let me say that I am talking about concepts and flexible programs, not rigid structures or uniform procedures. Let me suggest some beginnings. Our subject area committees must give as much attention to appraisal and acquisition criteria and methods as they do to the preparation of technical manuals and directories. Conceptualization must precede collection and, while this methodology is equally applicable to all subject areas, church archives provide a finely drawn example of how this process can be applied. Why couldn't archivists determine the documentation needed to study contemporary religious life, thought, and change and then advise denominations and congregations on how their records selection can contribute to this objective?

We must also develop empirical studies on data selection. For example, why don't college and university archivists compare the documentation produced by institutions of higher learning with the records universities usually preserve, to discover biases and distortions in the selection process and to provide an informed analysis on how archivists should document education and its institutions?

We need more seminars similar to the recent Midwest Archives Conference seminar on state networks to deal with collecting plans and strategies. One on labor documentation would be especially timely. The goal of that seminar might be a consortium of labor archives. Such a cooperative effort would conserve and amplify rather than waste limited resources. Researchers would be better served if the consortium determined weaknesses in labor documentation and then did something about it. And the individual labor archival institutions *might* even find some workable way to decide who should knock on whose door.

We need to develop methodologies to cope with the important but vast time-series now produced by public and private agencies. Series such as case files of all sorts are so massive that wholesale preservation even on microfilm is impossible. The sample techniques of the various social sciences may offer a solution to the construction of a "representative" sample and suggest the limits and advantages of using one approach rather than another. Similarly, the conceptualization that went into the development of first economic and later social indicators may be transferrable to archival documentation. And the models built by anthropology, economics, sociology, and psychology may give clues to the direction of future research as well as a vision of what constitutes

social relevance. The uneasy partnership of the archivist and the historian must be strengthened and expanded to include other students of society.

If our literature is an index to our profession's development, then we need a new body of writings because our old catechisms are either inadequate or irrelevant when they deal with contemporary archives and the theory and practice related to their acquisition. And without needed conceptual and empirical studies, archivists must continue to make their critical choices in intellectual solitary confinement.

Third. We need to reallocate our limited resources for collecting. The critics also present a strong case that far too much effort and money go to document the well documented. In addition, we need archival revenue sharing that will enable the states and localities to meet their archival responsibilities better. The passage of the National Historical Publications and Records Act would be a modest beginning by encouraging statewide planning and providing funds to implement these programs.

Finally, the archivist must realize that he can no longer abdicate his role in this demanding intellectual process of documenting culture. By his training and by his continuing intellectual growth, he must become the research community's Renaissance man. He must know that the scope, quality, and direction of research in an open-ended future depends upon the soundness of his judgment and the keenness of his perceptions about scholarly inquiry. But if he is passive, uninformed, with a limited view of what constitutes the archival record, the collections that he acquires will never hold up a mirror for mankind. And if we are not holding up that mirror, if we are not helping people understand the world they live in, and if this is not what archives is all about, then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important.

As archivists we must be in a more exposed position than we have been in the past, one that is more vulnerable. We might well heed the advice of one of Kurt Vonnegut's minor characters, Ed Finnerty, "a chronically malcontent boozer" and the real hero of the novel *Player Piano.* When someone suggested he should see a psychiatrist, Ed replied: "He'd pull me back into the center, and I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center. . . . Big, undreamed-of things—the people on the edge see them first."[15]

[15] Tim Hildenbrand, "Two or Three Things I know About Kurt Vonnegut's Imagination," in The *Vonnegut Statement,* Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (eds.) (New York: Delacorte, 1973), p. 121.