Documenting American Cultures Through Three Generations: Change and Continuity

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The three papers which follow are somewhat abbreviated versions of those given at the opening plenary session of the 38th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Toronto, on October 2, 1974. To enunciate the theme, "Documenting American Culture," for the entire meeting, three representatives of the last three generations of American archivists—one who entered the profession in the 1930s, one who entered in the 1950s, and one who entered in the late 1960s—were asked to explore "through autobiographical considerations, . . . the history, goals, values, and cultural context of American archivists . . . , and to seek the perspective of the whole on the process and emerging possibilities of documenting humanity in society and culture." Herman Kahn, who joined the National Archives staff in 1936 and who retired from federal service in 1968 as assistant archivist for Presidential Libraries, is currently associate librarian for manuscripts at Yale University Library. Frank B. Evans, who was Pennsylvania State Archivist before coming to the National Archives in 1963, is currently regional commissioner, Region 3, National Archives and Records Service. Andrea Hinding was named curator of the Social Welfare History Archives of the University of Minnesota in 1967.

The First Generation: The Autodidact

by HERMAN KAHN

SOME YEARS AGO, speaking at an annual meeting of this Society, Waldo Gifford Leland began his remarks somewhat as follows: "In 1920 Woodrow Wilson was President of the United States, Lloyd George was British Prime Minister, Lenin and Trotsky ruled in Russia, Victor Emmanuel was King of Italy, and I was President of my high school graduating class. Of all that illustrious company, only I survive."

Well, in 1935 and 1936 there came onto the staff of the newly established National Archives not only Robert Digges Wimberly Connor and Solon Justus Buck, but a group of men known as deputy examiners and special examiners. This group included Oliver Wendell Holmes, Robert H. Bahmer, Wayne C. Grover, Philip Hamer, Philip Brooks, Theodore Roosevelt Schellenberg, Paul Lewinson, Dallas Irvine, Neil Franklin, Ed Leahy, Herb Angel, Ev Alldredge, Fred Shipman, some others, and myself. Of all that illustrious company only I still go each day to an 8:30 to 5:00 job as a working archivist. I suppose that it is for that reason that I have been asked to speak here today as the representative of the greybeards in this Society.

You have perhaps noticed from the program that I have chosen to designate the generation of archivists who began their careers in this country forty years ago as the self-taught generation. For the fact is that unlike most of you, not one of the people whom I have just mentioned had ever taken a course in archival science or even attended a two-week institute. In fact, very few had made a conscious decision to spend their lives as working archivists and, except for three or four in that group, all had only the vaguest notion of the scope, nature, and import of archival work. Except for Solon Justus Buck and Waldo Leland, there were few to instruct them. The only book on the subject that we were told about was Hilary Jenkinson's. At the commencement of our employment, we were apprenticed to no one and began work immediately. So our first years were spent in learning, and it is instructive now to look back and try to establish what it was that we did learn in our first four or five years on those new jobs.

The early learning process for that generation of archivists consisted to a considerable extent of unlearning the few preconceptions about archival work which we had brought to the job with us. Most of us had been trained as historians, but among the first things that we learned was that although our work would indeed be of value and interest to historians it would be possibly of even greater value and interest to the governmental agencies with whose records we were concerned. At that time and for long afterward those agencies had, for good reason, more interest in the development of the National Archives and its policies than did most historians. In fact I think that it is fair to say that not until twenty or twenty-five years after the establishment of the National Archives did the historians who had worked so long and hard for its creation begin to show a real interest in its program, policies, and work.

Having been trained as historians, we had thought that the primary if not the only purpose of archival work was to preserve papers that would be used by scholars in writing history. It had occurred to almost none of us that we would be spending most of our time in the next few decades talking and working with government officials and comparatively little of our time working with historians. Eventually, of course, that situation changed somewhat, but in the long interval before scholars began to make extensive use of the National Archives some of the first generation of archivists became discouraged and disillusioned.

One of the first important lessons we learned was that the biggest and most difficult aspect of preserving valuable papers for scholarly, legal, and administrative use is in making decisions about what *not* to keep. We learned that it is far easier to keep everything than it is to have the courage to throw things out. We learned that there are literally no records or papers which do not have some conceivable potential research, administrative, or legal value, and it gradually became clear that what we had to decide was not what materials were valueless, but which records did not have *sufficient* possible potential value to warrant the expense of their preservation. I may say that this lesson was learned very slowly and painfully, and it is a lesson that the more timid among us are still unwilling to face up to. Many stack areas in archival institutions in this country are still jammed with papers that are being held for no other reason than that conceivably someday someone may ask for one of them. Many archivists, curators, and librarians have not yet learned the lesson that to say one has thrown out a large group of papers which might have been used for a trivial reason once every twenty-five or thirty years is not an admission of a mistake, but proof of an exercise of sound judgment.

Some of us learned with relief and others with disappointment that another prevalent error was the belief that the nature of archival work is such as to destine archivists for a quiet, secluded, and scholarly life. We learned that persons who prefer to be alone are *not* ideal candidates for successful archival work, because such work is usually carried on in concert with others. We learned, in fact, that, as is the case with almost every other profession, people who cannot work well with others do not work well as archivists.

As I look back I am impressed, too, by how much time we spent worrying about the fact that others did not know what an archivist is or what he is supposed to do. Ours is a culture in which our neighbors, our friends, our children, and our relatives judge our worth by the nature of our vocation. Despite the fact that this republic had existed for one hundred and fifty years without archivists and had not collapsed, most of us came within a short time to believe that ours was a vitally important calling. But things being as they are, it became important to most of us that we should not only ourselves feel that our profession was important, but that the world at large should also understand what it was that we were trying to do, and that the world at large should believe that ours was an important and a professional activity. But how did one go about persuading the rest of the world of our importance and educating it as to our activity? In general, there were two schools of thought about this matter. Those were the days of the birth of what we now call the PR profession, and I suppose the majority of us thought that we ought to go out for a big public relations campaign to establish in the public mind respect and acceptance for ourselves and for our work. But a minority believed that this respect and acceptance would come only with the passing of time and only if we earned them by making ourselves and our work indispensable to others and by demonstrating our professional quality over a long

period of time. In other words, some of us believed that attention, respect, and understanding could not be gained by advertising or by demanding or requesting them. They had to be earned, and we would receive attention, respect, and understanding precisely to the extent that we earned them. I confess that I belonged to the latter school of thought, and I still believe that whatever respect and acceptance we have today is owing to the quality of our work and not to the number of times that we get our names and faces into the newspapers and on television. The world still beats a path to the door of those who have something good to offer, and in the long run there is no substitute for the quality of one's work.

Again, as I look back, I am impressed by the fact that in teaching ourselves about archives we, like most newcomers in any field or new converts to any religion, became somewhat too rigid and dogmatic in our views of what constitutes the proper sphere to which an archivist should confine his attention. We were constantly wringing our hands at the frequent misuse of the word archives, and we frequently rebuked those whom we thought had used it wrongly. In my own lifetime, I have gradually been forced by experience to acknowledge that if the archivist is going to be of maximum use to society, the word "archives" must be broadened to include any unique record of human experience or thought, regardless of its origins, provenance, or physical characteristics. In other words, reluctantly and uncomfortably one has been forced to accept the fact that if archivists are not to wither on the vine they must learn to embrace within their discipline all unique materials which contain a valuable record of human experience, even though such materials are not the by-product of organized institutional activities. That is why so many of us now are quite properly concerned with personal papers and literary manuscripts, with still pictures, motion pictures, video tape, audio tape and disks, as well as with what within living memory has come to be called records management.

I said a moment ago that it is proper to call the first generation of archivists in this country the self-taught generation because none of us had had formal academic courses or on-the-job training in archival work. As one looks back on it now, that was in some ways a piece of good fortune. It would have been an excellent thing, of course, to have had an introduction to the history of archival work in the rest of the world—an historical treatment of the sort that the incomparable Ernst Posner has given to later generations of archivists in this country. But to have been trained in the actual techniques of the art as it was at that time practiced abroad or in certain manuscript and archival depositories in this country would have been of small help and might even have done us harm. One of the surprising things about the archival vocation in this country is that, although ours is an ancient profession, except for one or two basic principles practically the entire content of the courses in archival science as it is now taught in this country today is derived from archival experience in this country during the past thirty-five or forty years. In other words, if you look

at what students in our archives courses are now being told about methods of arrangement and description, about archival appraisal, about access policies and research and reference use, and about architectural design and physical equipment, one realizes that what is being taught today is almost entirely merely a distillation of what we have learned from doing these things in this country in the past forty years. In that sense, we are all self-taught.

We do not have too much cause for self-congratulation, but one of the things that should hearten us and lead us to believe that we must be doing some things right is the fact that it is now the United States to which archivists from all the newly-created countries come to learn how to do their work properly. It bears repeating that what we tell them about how to perform their archival functions properly is what we have taught ourselves about archival work in the last three generations in this country.

The Second Generation: The Teachers and the Taught

by FRANK B. EVANS

[In his opening remarks the author described how, as a graduate student working on his doctoral dissertation in 1958, he had accidently discovered the Pennsylvania State Archives, had been offered a position because he had been willing to climb ladders and work with dirty records, and had accepted because the salary was significantly more than the teaching salary on which he was attempting to support a family of five. He paid tribute for the excellent on-the-job training provided him by Henry Howard Eddy, Martha L. Simonetti, and William H. Work; and the support of Sanford W. Higgenbotham, Donald H. Kent, and the late S. K. Stevens. In 1960 he had taken an Archives Institute in Washington directed by Ernst Posner and Theodore R. Schellenberg, had returned to Harrisburg and reorganized the agency, and, following a visit by Ernst Posner in connection with the research for his study of *American State Archives,* had been invited in 1963 to join the staff of the National Archives and Records Service. Since that date he had directed in-service archival training for NARS, had served as director of the annual archives institutes, and had succeeded to Ernst Posner's courses in archives administration at the American University. This was the frame of reference, the "value structure and the limitations," in terms of which he made the following observations on change and continuity in the archival profession during the past two decades.—ED.]

THE MOST BASIC CHANGE, in my judgement, has been the change in the very concept of archives. Less than two decades ago the term was