

Family History: New Opportunities for Archivists

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AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS have shared with their professional colleagues who do research and write about American history the awakening realization that the picture of America which they together have produced has been limited, episodic, and, frankly, elitist. Traditionally, archivists have diligently sought to preserve and make available the previously created records of organizations and outstanding individuals. The archives of government, business, unions, churches, civic groups, and the like, and the manuscripts of prominent persons—in other words, the sources articulated by the upper classes—were tacitly assumed to contain the significant information necessary for historical reconstruction. Archivists simply reflected and served historians who for their part chose to focus upon leading institutions, thinkers, and actors in portraying the past. During the past decade or so, however, various social, political, and intellectual developments made archivists and historians aware that they had been hard at work chronicling only a portion of American life: the efforts of executives rather than workers, social problems from the experience of reformers rather than victims, war from the viewpoint of generals rather than privates, and above all, the lives of “great white men” rather than ordinary people, especially if they were black, women, or children.¹ Calls began to be heard for “history from the bottom up,” for an historical synthesis which reflected the experiences of inarticulate groups as well as the upper classes and the common dimensions of human experience as well as the notable, the dramatic, and the unusual. As historians and archivists have undertaken a broader exploration of American history they have recognized the inadequacy of traditional documentary resources for this task and have begun to consider ways of dealing with the problem.

The author, a member of the history faculty and director of the American History Research Center, University of Akron, read this paper at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, on October 3, 1974, in Toronto.

¹ Of the many expressions of this view, perhaps none was more telling as far as archivists were concerned than Jesse Lemisch, “The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Papers of Great White Men,” *AHA Newsletter* 9 (November 1971):7–21.

One area where scholarly interest has grown rapidly and excitingly during the past few years has been the field of family history. The examination of family units in terms of marriages; births; deaths; cohesiveness; decision-making; social, economic, and geographical mobility; educational and religious practice; definition of sex roles; and other characteristics which change over time has already provided new insights into the nature and social influence of this fundamental but hitherto little-studied institution.² Furthermore, the study of the family is gaining recognition as one avenue for exploring other aspects of life in the society, such as the role of women; the nature of childhood; the relative strengths of community and individuality; the varieties of immigrant experience; the impact of reform movements and other events; the expression of conflict; and the political, social, and cultural attitudes of the American people.³ As with any emerging field of scholarship, archivists should familiarize themselves with the range and nature of family history research in order to be able to respond insofar as possible to requests for useful documentary material.⁴

Were family history methodologically identical to more traditional historical inquiry, it would perhaps be sufficient for archivists to be aware of the topical field, the kinds of questions being raised, and the types of records being examined. However, since family history reflects both a new emphasis on the use of social science methodologies and the examination of previously neglected aspects of American history, it demands a good deal more of archivists.⁵ Family history is a field which offers exciting new opportunities for archivists seeking to further knowledge, presents them with new problems as well, and requires that they move beyond traditional conceptions of their professional responsibilities. It is much too early to know all the answers or

² Prior to the last decade, works by Arthur W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family from Colonial Times to the Present*, 3 volumes (Cleveland, 1917-1919), and Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (Boston, 1944), stood practically alone as historical analyses of the American family. Recently monographs, articles, and even anthologies have reflected the growing interest in the family. Among the best are: John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970); Bernard Farber, *Guardians of Virtue: Salem Families in 1800* (New York, 1972); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970); Richard Sennett, *Families Against the City: Middle Class Homes of Industrial Chicago, 1872-1890* (Cambridge, 1964); Stephen Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, 1973); Tamara K. Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1971); Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York, 1973); and Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg, *The Family in History: Interdisciplinary Essays* (New York, 1973).

³ In addition to several of the works already cited, Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970) impressively relates the study of the family to larger historical questions.

⁴ The newsletter *The Family in Historical Perspective* as well as the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* and *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* are especially useful for keeping abreast of developments in the field.

⁵ Tamara K. Hareven, "The History of the Family as an Interdisciplinary Field," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (Autumn 1971):399-414.

even all the questions which archivists must contend with in dealing with this rapidly developing field. What follows is intended as suggestive rather than prescriptive and merely seeks to direct archivists' attention to some of the special possibilities presented by the family history movement.

Historical research on the American family is taking two directions: the use of available records in new ways to illuminate family life, and the collection of non-traditional materials, especially family biographies or autobiographies, for the same purpose. The former approach presents no real surprises nor unusual problems for archivists. Historians interested in the American family during the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries have gleaned information of value from tax and probate records, Puritan literature, diaries, parish registers, genealogies, travelers' accounts, newspapers, city directories, and, perhaps most frequently, census records. These are types of material with which archivists are familiar and which they have normally regarded as worth preserving. Archivists need to continue so doing with heightened awareness of the value of such records for studying the family. Also, family historians have found useful, or would so find, madhouse and poorhouse files, divorce dockets, illegitimacy records, and the private papers of doctors, materials which have often been overlooked or avoided because of the particular problems they present in respect to privacy.⁶ Archival accession policies can be adjusted without great difficulty to insure that such material is preserved and, as will be discussed below, the confidential aspects of such records can be protected. Yet all of the above-mentioned kinds of evidence, mostly statistical or involving quite limited observations, provide at best a rather static and incomplete view of life within the family unit. Such records reveal little about the attitudes and culture of family life in which many historians are interested. Furthermore, even with archivists' appraisal standards more attuned to the methods and needs of historians interested in the pre-1900 family, it seems unlikely that any striking new types of material for this period will be uncovered. At best the volume of available traditional material may be increased so that the emerging picture of colonial and national family life prior to the modern era can be amplified and refined.

For the twentieth century, the prospects for research in traditional materials may be somewhat better, at least in the long run. One of the bittersweet aspects of the growth of governmental activity and involvement in the affairs of citizens has, of course, been an expansion of governmental information gathering and recordkeeping. The case files of social welfare agencies in particular offer a rich supply of family-related data, much of which previously went unrecorded. Although most records of this type remain closed to research because of legitimate concern for preserving individual privacy, in some instances arrangements have been made for aggregate use under conditions

⁶ I am indebted to John Modell for this observation.

which protect the anonymity of individual files.⁷ Archivists ought to seek ways of preserving and making use of modern public and private records regarding family life while at the same time defending the confidential aspects of such records. Research in some varieties of twentieth-century records may face a long wait despite the best efforts of archivists and historians, but if archivists are diligent now in seeing that they are maintained, eventually such records should contribute to scholarship.

The other trend in family history, the collection of family biographies, offers a more immediate prospect of a greatly increased fund of available information about the relatively recent family. Family biographies are or at least can be much more than genealogies. At their best they illuminate family behavior and attitudes far more fully than traditional records of practically any type. Of course, their coverage and reliability is usually limited to the twentieth century. To archivists, family biography presents new and unusual possibilities and problems. Thus it seems fitting to direct this discussion principally to this unique resource for the study of family history.

At colleges and universities throughout the United States, an increasing number of professors are giving their students the opportunity to write histories or biographies of their own families. Furthermore, the practice seems to be spreading to junior colleges, high schools, and beyond. The origins of the practice are obscure, but it received great encouragement in 1970 with the founding by Richard D. Brown, Tamara Hareven, and John Modell of the Anonymous Families History Project which offered a guide to writing a family history and sought to collect completed papers. Articles on student family-history projects in *The History Teacher* by David Culbert in November 1973 and Kirk Jeffrey in May 1974 both reflected and further stimulated the growing trend.⁸ The appearance of a slick commercial publication, *Generations: Your Family in Modern American History*,⁹ by Jim Watts and Allen F. Davis, will likely lead to more activity still. The number of projects now underway is uncertain, but in Ohio, for instance, family biographies were being written under at least eight professors in four universities in 1974-75.¹⁰ Family biographies vary enormously in

⁷ Virginia R. Stewart, "Problems of Confidentiality in the Administration of Personal Case Records," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974):387-98, provides valuable suggestions on the use of such records. For instance, Lucas and Summit Counties, Ohio, welfare department closed case files for much of the twentieth century are being computerized with names and addresses coded to preserve anonymity. This is an expensive process, but one which will permit varied use of a large amount of recent data with little risk to confidentiality.

⁸ David H. Culbert, "Undergraduates as Historians: Family History Projects Add Meaning to an Introductory Survey," *The History Teacher* 7 (November 1973):7-17; Kirk Jeffrey, "Write a History of Your Own Family: Further Observations and Suggestions for Instructors," *ibid.* (May 1974):365-73. The Culbert article is now available in *The History Teacher* reprint series.

⁹ New York, 1974.

¹⁰ David E. Kyvig, "Family History Movement Gains Foothold in Ohio," *Ohio Archivist* 5 (Spring 1974):8-9, describes three early projects in the state.

quality; in focus (some stress economic relationships, some social life, some simply genealogy); in degree of documentation (some use interviews, photographs, private letters, and memorabilia as well as public records and newspapers, while others betray scanty evidence); in scope (some contain only a few pages while others are lengthy and extremely detailed, some deal with only one generation while others span several); and in sophistication (some are produced by beginning students in introductory survey courses, others are senior projects or masters theses). Some of these family biographies are already being collected for archival deposit; but many, perhaps most, are seen only by the author and his or her professor.

Archivists need to come to terms with the family biography phenomenon, for it is likely to grow as instructors recognize its value as a device for stirring student interest and teaching historical methodology. Properly handled, it may produce valuable collections of exceptionally useful information. Yet it poses problems that archivists need to be aware of. Foremost, the family biography movement requires that archivists abandon their usual view of themselves as passive receivers of documents, skilled caretakers who acquire material created for other purposes but eventually judged to have value as historical records. If family biography is to have lasting utility, archivists need to involve themselves not only in its collection but in its creation as well, confronting the situation early on so as to maximize the informational value of individual projects, insure the taking of a significant sample, and protect the rights of the author. While active participation in the creation of historical records may seem unorthodox to many archivists, such participation will certainly be required if the potential of the family biography movement is to be fully exploited. Oral history, another system for gathering information about the past, a system wherein archivists have often helped create the records which they maintain, has won considerable acceptance. To encourage archivists to take up the collecting of family biographies, it is perhaps sufficient to note that such a project is far less expensive than oral history.

Clearly, family biography offers several attractions for archivists. First, it promises at least a partial solution for those archivists struggling to find relevant material for historians endeavoring to study the twentieth-century family. The quality of family biographies written by students is, of course, uneven; but insights into the characteristics of individual family units are often provided, sometimes unintentionally. Even the least analytical family biographies may provide, when gathered together, useful quantifiable data. The steadily widening range of socio-economic backgrounds of persons attending college increases the probability that a university-based family biography collection would reflect a relatively full spectrum of the population. Certainly this is the case at my university where many students, including several who have written family biographies, are the first in their families ever to attend college. In any case, whatever information is produced is likely to be otherwise unavailable. Archivists have devoted

countless hours to the care of letters, diaries, oral or written memoirs, and other documentary materials, knowing full well that much of what they acquire, arrange, describe, and make available is of questionable importance or accuracy. The assumption that a portion of such material may prove valuable for research, either anticipated or unforeseen, and that the final judge must be the researcher, not the archivist, should apply equally to the collection and preservation of family biographies.

Participation in family history projects can have beneficial side-effects for archivists as well. It is not unusual for a student engaged in research on his family to come across valuable records and—alerted to the existence of an archives by participation in a family history project—to donate materials. Whether business records of a Louisiana tenant farmer or photographs of living conditions among Akron rubber workers in the 1930s, a family attic may produce materials which the archivist would otherwise have no way of discovering, much less acquiring. Furthermore, the process of research for a family biography and the prospect of the completed paper being deposited in an archives may well stimulate a student's interest in history, particularly the investigation of primary sources, and may lead him or her back to the archives again and again, an attractive possibility.

Nevertheless, projects to collect family biographies and make them available for research raise problems which archivists must recognize and confront. The first has to do with the quality of material being gathered. If the archivist is to step beyond his traditional role of simply receiving material to one of actively encouraging its creation in order to fill an informational gap, he ought to foster the production of the best possible material. Specifically, he should seek to anticipate the range of uses to which a collection of family biographies might be put and endeavor to have them contain as much useful information as possible. Instructors who offer family history projects to their students, with the intent of depositing completed papers in an archives, may well have a limited objective in mind, say a description of family experiences in the Depression or World War II, or they may wish to have a student pursue a particular theme, perhaps occupational patterns and "the response to industrialization." Archivists need to encourage students (and obviously their instructors as well) to seek inclusion of as wide as possible a range of data, and therefore should indicate the variety of information that may prove to be of value. The long-range utility of family biographies will be a function of their comprehensiveness.

As well as encouraging the incorporation of useful information in family biographies, the archivist should give some thought to its retrieval. Many of the biographical papers involve lengthy narratives. In my own experience with undergraduates, fifty or even seventy-page typescripts are not uncommon (which says something about student enthusiasm for the projects). Extracting basic data from such papers can be extremely time consuming for the researcher if the

collection is merely filed by name or order of accession. A measure of control over the collection can be inexpensively achieved by a system of self-indexing whereby the author indicates on one or more forms such basic information as the birth, marriage, and death dates; occupations; residences; religious affiliations; ethnic backgrounds; and political affinities of persons discussed in the individual family history. As a collection grows, such a device can often speed retrieval of particular information for those researchers who are not interested in reading every family history in its entirety.

The quality of family biography collections is related also to the nature of the sample being gathered. The more consolidated the sample, the greater its potential research value. Except in unusual circumstances, only a small percentage of a community would probably be represented in a family biography collection. Yet a collection drawing on one distinct geographical or socio-economic community is likely to have greater research value than a thoroughly diffuse collection.¹¹ Whatever its other values for participants, a collection undertaken at a small liberal arts college which draws its students from across the nation is unlikely to attract much research interest on its own. On the other hand, a collection developed at an institution with a very localized constituency may have a much higher order of statistical value. At the University of Akron, where 63 percent of the student body comes from Summit County, Ohio, and represents a broad social spectrum, the growing Family History Collection may indeed provide a valid reflection of family life in one twentieth-century, urban, industrial community. Archivists at colleges and universities where family biography collections are contemplated or underway may wish to step beyond the boundaries of their institutions to encourage local high school students, historical or genealogical society members, and possibly others to undertake family biographies. When placed in the hands of an enthusiast, a well-drafted guide such as Culbert's in *The History Teacher* or that of the Anonymous Families History Project, indicating the sorts of information sought and ways of going about obtaining it, can often produce very worthwhile results and expand the size of the local sample. The manner in which archivists assemble family biographies—whether through intensified efforts to generate more projects in a particular area or among a particular group, or whether through combining individual collections in a regional or national repository—will affect their ease of use and value to scholars, among other considerations. Archivists should consider the implications of their collecting plans very carefully.

The creation and subsequent collection for scholarly use of family biographies raises some fundamental and difficult questions about privacy—the freedom from unreasonable intrusion, the seclusion from public view—which our society continues to regard as an essential individual right. The problem of confidentiality is one frequently

¹¹ Hareven, "History of the Family as an Interdisciplinary Field," p. 412.

faced by archivists, but seldom does it become as thorny as in this instance. As previously indicated, most family biographies which make their way into archival collections are undertaken as college class projects, usually on an optional basis. Yet when a professor, a figure of some authority and occasionally even esteem, suggests the option of writing a family biography and in so doing very likely indicates a considerable interest in receiving such projects, students, ever seeking to please the professor in their quest for good grades and other rewards, may feel that they are somewhat less than free agents in choosing whether or not to avail themselves of this opportunity. Rightly or not, students may in fact feel considerable compulsion to produce a family history. As others have done, I have stressed in my classes that writing a family biography is a matter of free choice and that thereafter contributing it to a collection is at the student's discretion as well. But there is no way of knowing what pressure to comply is felt by individual students, particularly once the paper has been written and the decision becomes whether or not to deposit it in an archives. The fact is that the overwhelming majority of the papers completed at Akron are turned over to the Family History Collection, and I suspect the same is true elsewhere. It may be possible, and it certainly merits thoughtful consideration, that collecting detailed family information through the device of the faculty-student relationship causes the authors of family biographies to reveal names, relationships, activities, and other matters which they would otherwise be reluctant to divulge, thus infringing to a degree upon their right to privacy.

Furthermore, energetic students will naturally uncover and discuss subjects that involve other members of the family, including matters which those members might prefer not to have made public. Sometimes this takes place with the relatives' knowledge and cooperation, sometimes not. Many of us engaged in family history projects have received papers telling of alcoholism, marital infidelity, or other sensitive topics. A student of mine, exploring the deaths of her maternal grandparents, was told contradictory stories by her mother and an aunt. This led her to delve further into the matter and to consult the 1928 files of a local newspaper for an obituary. To her great surprise, she discovered that her grandmother had caused her grandfather to be sent to the county workhouse for thirty days for non-support. Upon his release, he stormed home and, in front of their two daughters, murdered his wife with a shotgun, then turned the weapon on himself. The daughters resolved that their own children should never know about this tragedy. My student, who had reached her early thirties, was the first of her generation to discover the truth. The episode, in my estimation, said as much about family solidarity in responding to an unhappy event as it did about family conflict and violence, but nevertheless it exposed a situation which family members had long since determined not to publicize. Certainly family biographers voluntarily relinquish a degree of privacy in contributing their histories, but this should not mean that they must necessarily sacrifice every scrap of

protection from public scrutiny and have their names and activities publicly paraded. The fine balance between the social benefits of scholarship and the individual right of privacy must be maintained. Any responsible archivist considering the sensitive nature of family history material and the manner in which it has been gathered will recognize the need for extreme care in dealing with it so as to protect the legitimate interests of persons identified therein.

If archivists are going to collect family biographies and make them available for research, and good reasons exist for doing so, then they have a solemn responsibility to the authors. This duty is as great as to any donors or subjects of records in their custody. Family biographers are often unlikely to be aware of the implications of placing their papers in an archives. They should be advised. Archivists and instructors have, first of all, an obligation to explain openly to potential family biographers the uses to which their papers may be put. Clearly most scholars who would read the family biographies are interested in them in the aggregate rather than individually. Scholars are concerned with the trend, not the incident; the pattern, not the isolated case. For the most part they will wish to quantify information from family biographies rather than name names. The anonymity of an individual family can, therefore, for the most part be preserved. Nevertheless, biographies in a collection are much more valuable for research if they contain full and correct names so that the information therein can possibly be correlated with other sources. Coding or obliterating names is not only bothersome and costly, it substantially reduces the potential usefulness of the material. However, to protect the donor's interests, archivists must make clear to researchers their duty not to abuse the partial relinquishment of privacy. Archivists must screen research applications with extreme care, allow only legitimate scholarly use, and educate researchers as to their responsibilities. It will cause no hardship for most scholars to refrain from using names or other identifying information about individuals or to use pseudonyms in discussing or publishing their findings, but in the rare case where use of names seems important to the scholar, his obligation to obtain the permission of an individual or an heir must be insisted upon. The archivist cannot prevent every abuse, but it is his duty to the donor to impress upon researchers to the fullest possible extent their ethical and legal duty to respect privacy.

Once the conditions for use of family biographies are explained, our experience at the University of Akron suggests that most authors remain quite willing to donate their papers. Many in fact seem to regard it as something of an honor to have their family's history placed in an archives. Nevertheless, the deposit of a family biography must be treated with as much care as any other archival donation. This means explaining the institution's reference policies and executing a formal instrument of gift. The instrument need not be complicated to impress upon the potential donor the significance of surrendering his family biography and to acknowledge the repository's rights and re-

sponsibilities. At Akron the instrument states simply: "I hereby donate this family history, along with all literary and administrative rights thereto, to The University of Akron American History Research Center." Some students are unwilling to sign an instrument of gift, and their choice must be respected. Under no circumstances should a family biography be included in a collection to be made available to researchers without the author's specific consent. To do otherwise, just as to abuse the privacy of those who do deposit biographies, will surely cause the flow of family histories to dwindle and will expose the archivist to possible legal penalties.

The decision as to where to locate family biography collections is a difficult one and relates to the aforementioned considerations of gathering a wide range of worthwhile information in an individual paper, collecting a useful sample, and protecting the rights to privacy of the donor and his family so that cooperation with the project can be secured. The Anonymous Families History Project seeks to gather in a central location family biographies from throughout the nation, thus assembling a large, though inevitably uneven, sample. The scholarly competence of its coordinators and the helpful suggestions of their guide to preparing family biographies raises the hope that not only current users but scholars far in the future will find the material collected suitable to their needs. On the other hand, potential authors of family biographies may well be more inclined to participate in a project with a more limited focus, may feel that a nearby archivist would be more likely to respect and defend confidentiality, and may therefore be willing to provide more frank and detailed biographies for local collections. It is probably too early to know for certain how best to proceed, and it may therefore be wise to pursue two courses for the time being. Institutions drawing upon a widely-scattered constituency might participate in the Anonymous Families History Project, national in scope. Meanwhile, other institutions which have a more confined base and the possibility of gathering a large number of family biographies therefrom might seek to develop local collections. This should eventually make possible a determination of which approach generates the best and most usable data. The localized approach probably does not preclude an eventual deposit of biographies in the Anonymous Families History Project or some alternative, if equivalent respect of privacy can be demonstrated to the donor. Exploration of alternative approaches to collecting family biographies does seem wise at this point, if their research potential is to be maximized.

The challenges presented by the family history movement are many, but certainly they are not beyond the capacity of archivists. The question of how best to collect family biographies—in one or more national repositories, on a regional or state basis, such as through the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers, or on a purely local scale—will require careful thought, but can undoubtedly be satisfactorily resolved. Protecting donors and their families in their continuing rights to privacy requires circumspection, but this is nothing

new to conscientious archivists. Gathering a valid sample of useful information requires that archivists become familiar with the range of questions being asked in the field of family history and then seek to acquire relevant records and stimulate the writing of as many thorough and accurate family biographies as possible. Assisting researchers requires developing some intellectual control over the family history materials in a repository and cautioning users about their obligations to respect privacy. Archivists ought to make it clear that family biographies are probably no better and no worse than other sorts of materials in their custody, in terms of reliability. A researcher ought to exercise the same caution he would in judging a memoir, a letter, a deposition, or a diary. All can be self-serving, just as all can be revealing. It is for the researcher to make the final assessment of the merit of any document, but if archivists will seize the opportunity and involve themselves in the collection of family biographies in a responsible manner, then scholars will at least have far more resources available to them than they currently possess as they attempt to reach some conclusions about that important yet elusive social institution—the family.