Collecting Policies of Special-Subject Repositories

LINDA J. HENRY

IN A SPEECH to the 1974 SAA annual meeting, F. Gerald Ham issued the following challenge:

> 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.[1]

The weathervane analogy is especially appropriate to special-subject repositories, particularly those institutions that focus on groups defined by sex, race, or ethnic origin.[2] Such repositories suffered in the past from invisibility, but their subjects are now very much in vogue. Do they risk becoming weathervanes of shifting interest in the future? How can they proceed beyond rotating in the wind, to gaining control of their own direction?

The past acquisitions policies of special-subject repositories mirrored those of general repositories and resulted mainly in collections of the papers of the prominent and notable. Reflecting the prevailing bias among historians toward writing histories of the powerful, these policies followed also the advice of the archival literature which stressed collecting papers of distinguished families and outstanding leaders.

In the late 1960s new trends in historical research emerged, provoking new interest in formerly forgotten groups; and special-subject repositories enjoyed remarkable increases in the number of researchers. The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, for example, registered six researchers in 1949; during 1977-78 the institution recorded 3,900 researcher

[1] F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 8.

[2] The term *special-subject repositories* encompasses many other types, ranging from presidential libraries to those that document subjects like physics. This article focuses on those repositories devoted to documenting the history of formerly ignored groups of people, like women and Blacks, and on those institutions which were in existence before their subjects aroused considerable research interest in the late 1960s. The arguments should raise questions applicable to other types of special-subject repositories as well as general repositories.

signatures, and that was a 20 percent increase over the previous year.[3] Registrants at New York's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture quadrupled between 1960 and 1972. The current popularity of the subjects of many special-subject repositories should challenge special subject archivists to reassess and reevaluate their collecting policies. They must also anticipate a dynamic and unpredictable future in historical research interests. How should they shape the acquisition policies of the future?

The best guide is that criticism of archival collecting policies that has been leveled at the archival profession since 1970 by historians and archivists. Repositories, it has been said, have preserved a biased representation of American culture. Concerned with documenting the activities of the elite and powerful, white and male, archivists ignored women, minorities, working people, and the poor. Archival collecting policies should instead sample the records of the whole society; they should be comprehensive and should document the spectrum of American culture.[4]

The archival critics urged members of the profession to become "activist archivists," to stand on "the archival edge." Archivists ought to identify the themes of American culture and the activities of its people, both in the past and in the present. The activist archivist can then design a collection strategy that, in effect, delineates a "universe of documentation." To preserve a representative sample of that universe is the archivist's responsibility. The activist archivist contrasts with the passive one who too narrowly defines the universe, who waits for chance donors of papers, or merely follows current historical research interests. The activist makes a fundamentally different assumption: that research follows the records.[5]

Although deemphasizing the papers of the elite frees archival resources to sample the larger universe, special-subject repositories will undoubtedly continue to collect them. The prominent and distinguished represent, after all, a part of a nation's culture; and for all repositories, collecting their papers is the easiest task. But archivists should seriously reconsider the priority assigned to collecting these papers.

In addition, it is imperative that this traditional kind of collecting be linked to what is now the highest priority: broad coverage. Of particular concern should be those papers that serve a dual purpose, providing not only biographical information about a prominent person, but also broader coverage of the field in which the person attained fame. For example, the papers of Miriam Van Waters, at the Schlesinger Library, not only document her life as a noted penologist; they contain also hundreds of letters from former prisoners revealing the experiences of an almost forgotten group of women. Similarly, the papers of Robert Weaver, at the Schomburg Center, document problems of minority housing as well as the life of a black cabinet-member.

The most critical problem is the lack

[3] *Report of the Schlesinger Library*, 1976-78, p. 1; Susan E. Davis, "Special-Subject Repositories: Rationale and Dilemma" (paper presented at SAA annual meeting, Nashville, 5 October 1978), p. 11.

[4] Ham, "Archival Edge," pp. 5-13; Patrick M. Quinn, "The Archivist as Activist," *Georgia Archive* 5 (Winter 1977): 25-35; David E. Horn, "Today's Activist Archivists: A Moderate View," ibid., pp. 15-24.

[5] The activist-archivist concept encompasses more than collecting policies, particularly access. I am focusing on that part of the argument that pertains to acquisitions.

of representative documentation for the entire range of socioeconomic classes. Critics charged the profession with failure to gather documentation for histories of women, minorities, working people, and the poor. Some special-subject archivists heard only the first two categories and assumed that the criticism did not apply to them. Just that their repositories focused on forgotten groups did not mean that they had gathered documentation on the range of people in those groups. Especially because special-subject repositories collected with a sense of urgency to prevent the contributions of a race or sex from being overlooked, the repositories frequently sought the papers of the first person to receive a medical degree, serve in Congress, or otherwise achieve distinction. While understandable and defensible in the historical context, such collection policies nevertheless resulted in holdings of the papers of the great, even among those repositories devoted to overlooked groups of people.[6] How are the lives of ordinary people being documented by archivists *within* a repository devoted to the records of groups defined by race or sex? Special-subject repositories did not, and still do not, address that question. Most of them define their collecting as comprehensive,[7] but an examination of holdings often belies that claim.

Locating records to document the lives of the anonymous is difficult; and many archivists turn first to oral history to fill gaps in the archival record. Since there are few written records of anonymous individuals and of the groups to which they belonged, oral interviews promise alternative documentation. Oral history projects involving ordinary persons should, therefore, receive high priority.

Oral history presents problems, however. Not only has its reliability as historical evidence been questioned,[8] but the expense of projects generated by a repository is an even greater obstacle. Estimates of costs per hour of processed tape range from $300 to $700.[9] Do the results justify this enormous expense? For example, using the $700 figure, twenty hours of tape—interviews with perhaps only four or five subjects—could cost $14,000. Alternatively, a repository could spend that money by hiring a full-time field worker to pursue aggressively other documentation for the history of the anonymous.

Oral histories created by students and scholars offer a less expensive alternative. For example, archivists have new opportunities to chronicle history from the bottom up by collecting family biographies created by students in family history classes.[10] Repositories could also collect the records of inter-

[6] Davis, "Special-Subject Repositories: Rationale and Present Dilemma," pp. 6-9. Her paper contains a thorough explanation of the historical content in which special-subject repositories operated, and the subsequent changes.

[7] See their acquisitions statements in U.S. National Historical Publications and Records Commission, *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories* (Washington, D.C.: NHPRC, 1978).

[8] For a good example of the problems, see Joan Hoff Wilson, "'Peace is a women's job. . . .'—Jeannette Rankin's Foreign Policy," in *Montanans and Foreign Policy,* Jeffrey Stafford, ed. (Missoula: University of Montana Press, forthcoming, 1979), pp. 3-4 of typescript.

[9] Institutions are reluctant to give estimates. See Nancy H. Marshall, "What Price Oral History?" *Georgia Archive* 3 (Winter 1975): 53-63. Marshall's estimates ranged from $162 to $243 per hour of processed tape. Higher figures were derived from conversations with other archivists and from grant proposals.

[10] David E. Kyvig, "Family History: New Opportunities for Archivists," *American Archivist* 38 (October 1975): 509-19. The author also outlines procedures to oversee quality and to protect privacy.

views conducted by scholars. Such cooperation of students and researchers could offer additional benefits, such as introductions to potential donors and wider use of archives.

Surveys are often the first step in preserving a representative sample of the universe of documentation.[11] The Women's History Sources Survey at the University of Minnesota provides the model for a survey of records needed for all formerly ignored groups. Furthermore, "the striking thing about this survey is that it revealed substantial information on records outside women's history, a boon which was not anticipated."[12]

Surveys of records not in archival custody are also necessary. Surveys not only enable archivists to identify research sources and to develop acquisition strategies; they also "force archivists to reexamine their collections and collecting policies."[13] Gaining a broader knowledge of the kinds of material available should call attention to previously unrecognized deficiencies in coverage.

The cooperation required in conducting surveys could lead to further collaboration among repositories in acquisition efforts. Although everyone agrees in theory on the importance of cooperation, most archivists avoid its practice. Effective cooperation depends on planning, on clearly perceiving needs, and on identifying goals.[14] The difficulty repositories experience in identifying collecting goals perhaps explains the paucity of cooperative acquisition efforts. The Columbus Jewish History Project offers an exception and a significant step toward the goals of identifying and preserving, as well as creating, materials about a special subject. The project was a unique partnership of the Ohio Historical Society, the Ohio State University, and the Columbus Jewish History Federation. The project collected personal, organization, and institutional papers and employed oral history, surveys, and questionnaires. It sought to be comprehensive, attempting to find documentation for anonymous lives as well as for lives of prominent persons, and searching for records of families and women as well as records of rabbinical thought and of business.[15] This project provides a model of cooperation in documenting minority history.

Cooperation with other repositories may take the form of informing repositories specializing in other geographic and subject areas of the location of archival materials on their subject, and encouraging the deposit of such materials in those repositories. This cooperation obviously requires submerging the competitive spirit. It also requires that special-subject repositories assume responsibility beyond collection, to a responsibility for the subject. This "would include development of comprehensive collecting strategies, coordination of field-work efforts, sharing

[11] John A. Fleckner, "Reaching Out: The Place of Records Surveys in Archival Practice," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 1 (1977): 17.

[12] Francis X. Blouin, Jr., Mary Pearson, Andrea Hinding, and John A. Fleckner, "Surveys of Historical Records," *American Archivist* 40 (July 1977): 306; see also *Archives & Manuscripts: Surveys,* by John A. Fleckner.

[13] Blouin et al., "Surveys," p. 301.

[14] John A. Fleckner, "Cooperation as a Strategy for Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 39 (October 1976): 455-57.

[15] Marc Lee Raphael, "The Genesis of a Communal History: The Columbus Jewish History Project," *American Jewish Archives* 29 (April 1977): 53-69.

information on collection progress, and development and sharing of compatible finding aids."[16] Cooperation remains a relatively unexplored option, one that could allow repositories to collect more broadly with limited resources.

Finding documentation for the past universe will be difficult enough, but archival responsibility includes becoming also "aggressive collectors of current as well as past materials."[17] If the activist archivist in a special-subject repository for women casts an eye on American society today and attempts to identify the activities of large numbers of women, what does she see?[18] More than 50 percent of American women are in the labor force and by far the largest number, 34.8 percent, are clerical workers.[19] The trend among women toward office work spans most of this century. Where is the documentation for this enormous group, for the past seventy years as well as for the present?

In the 1930s Boston clerical workers organized for a brief period; their union records appear to be lost. But archivists can better provide for future researchers. In Boston today a group called *9 to 5* actively promotes the rights of women office workers. On a field trip to the organization in June 1978, I found that, despite its short existence, the organization had saved few of its early records, except newsclippings. It retained only official correspondence, defined as that with state officials who presumably keep such letters in their files anyway. The group is action oriented—tomorrow's raises understandably merit much more attention than yesterday's letters. Yet the papers they generate document working conditions in offices in Boston, organizational strategy and actions, the impact of those actions, and policy changes which may reflect the tenor of the early 1970s in contrast to that of the late 1970s.[20]

While *9 to 5* agreed to begin to save their records, I had less success with a shelter for battered women. This organization greatly fears government regulation, and consequently they destroy everything not urgently needed for day-to-day operations. The threat of lawsuits deters the group from even applying for grants which require any record keeping. Perhaps it is not possible to document the lives of battered women in a more direct way than through hospital and court records. Yet increasing evidence indicates that the problem of violence against women is even more pervasive than previously suspected, affecting every socioeconomic class.

These examples illustrate the need to make a conscious effort to identify organizations and institutions whose papers can reflect at least part of the activity or concerns of large numbers of women in American society today.

State and local government archives

---

[16] Fleckner, "Cooperation," p. 459.

[17] Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "The Shame of the Cities: Public Records of the Metropolis," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 39.

[18] The examples presented are based on the author's experience at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

[19] U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "Women in the Labor Force, September 1977-1978" (October 1978), 2 pp.

[20] When it began in 1972, *9 to 5* dealt with many topics of interest to women, for example, abortion and the war in Vietnam. They focus today on specific economic issues: raises and equal pay, and sex discrimination in offices.

have jurisdiction over many records documenting the lives of the poor, the forgotten, and the neglected; and, to a certain extent, public records fill the gaps that exist in special-subject repositories. Many other records document the lives of the anonymous.

Voluntary organizations abound. The first report from the Ms. Foundation lists thirty-three organizations that it supported in 1977, such as the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Women Migrant Workers, and the Custody Action for Lesbian Mothers.[21] Special-subject repositories should view organizational records as one means of providing information about individual as well as collective experiences. The bulk of organizational records sometimes deters repositories from exploring this option. But few repositories would reject on the grounds of size alone the papers of a congresswoman, and the same volume of records of an organization could provide more information on the experience of a greater number of women.

Many associations, pressure groups, protest organizations, or alternative institutions will have short lives. They may go out of business, be absorbed by state agencies, change their focus, or just disappear. As Ellen Brinton observed over twenty-seven years ago, organizations of these kinds exist for action, not for their roles in history. Their records are often in the home files of the most active members.[22] Repositories need to create "instant archives" for records of organizations vulnerable to instant dissolution. The Social Action Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin serves as a fine example of such collecting.[23]

As historians of our own time, our responsibilities as archivists include contacting those groups, now, while they are generating records; urging them to save their records; maintaining continual contact; and making repositories available to take those records, even on short notice. Identify, contact, educate, and preserve. Archivists have traditionally performed those functions with outstanding individuals; why not with contemporary groups whose activities reflect a broader spectrum?

The priority that special-subject repositories should adopt—documenting the range of their particular culture—brings some advantages. The focus of such a repository is still narrower than that of a general repository, and the staff continually acquires more subject expertise. They also have "built-in-constituencies," such as ethnic and racial groups, and social and action-oriented clubs and organizaions that offer opportunities for cooperation in both acquisitions and outreach, or the wider use of archives. The potential of outreach programs for collection development should not be overlooked. Special-subject repositories have ideal opportunities to gain the interest of clubs and organizations, thereby developing contacts that may lead to valuable acquisitions.[24] The Women's Records Project of Georgia offers an imaginative model for

[21] *Ms. Foundation for Women, 1977*, report, pp. 6-25.

[22] Ellen Starr Brinton, "Archives of Causes and Movements: Difficulties and Some Solutions as Illustrated By the Swarthmore College Peace Collection," *American Archivist* (April 1951): 148.

[23] Ham, "The Archival Edge," pp. 9-10.

[24] Howard L. Applegate, Richard H. Brown, and Elsie F. Freivogel, "Wider Use of Historical Records," *American Archivist* 40 (July 1977): 331, 333; Ann E. Pederson, "Archival Outreach: SAA's 1976 Survey," *American Archivist* 41 (April 1978): 161.

bringing organizations and institutions together. Organized in 1975, the Women's Records Project helps women's volunteer organizations survey and identify records; and it assists them in depositing those materials in a research archives or library. Among other services, the project provides archival manuals and sponsors lectures and workshops.[25]

Also, special-subject repositories must take a wider view of what constitues documentary evidence. Non-print materials, such as music and oral traditions, are important communicators of culture. William A. Wilson urges archivists actively to collect folk material: the stories people tell, often in many versions; the songs people sing; and the rhymes that children chant. Such material "serves as a kind of barometer, giving us better understanding than we can get from other sources of a group's dominant values and concerns, its anxieties and stresses."[26] Similarly, repositories should collect ephemera: leaflets, broadsides, programs, one chance (or last chance) newspapers, and newsletters. "What is new in collecting ephemera," which archivists have often done, "is the philosophy of collecting it as a serious attempt to better document a movement, a time or a place."[27] These examples reveal the need to be more sensitive to and imaginative about the types of materials that document the history of American culture.

How can archivists do all of this? How can they overcome the major obstacle of lack of resources: time, staff, and money? First, collecting policies must be reoriented and priorities set for acquisitions. Furthermore, it is essential that repositories place at the top of the list filling in gaps and assuring broad coverage. To do that, archivists can study models of oral history, survey and outreach projects, collect records of contemporary organizations, redefine documentary evidence, and cooperate within and outside the profession. If repositories carefully define collecting goals and seriously examine ways to reach those goals, then it will be possible to determine whether lack of resources is an obstacle—or an excuse.

Special-subject repositories have not come to grips with the problems of setting acquisitions policies. They have *defined* them too broadly: anything and everything to do with their subject. But they have *collected* too narrowly: their vaults still bulge with papers of the elite.

Rich possibilities exist for special-subject repositories, opportunities through which they can document their universe actively, cooperatively, and imaginatively. Special-subject repositories are not exempt from responsibility for the universe of documentation just because they are special.

[25] Women's Records Project of Georgia, Inc., promotional materials, sent to author 8 August, 1978.

[26] William A. Wilson, "Utah Folklore and the Utah Librarian," *Utah Libraries* 20 (Spring 1977): 28.

[27] David B. Gracy II, "Peanut Butter and Spilt Milk: A New Look at Collecting," *Georgia Archive* 3 (Winter 1975): 24.

LINDA J. HENRY, formerly archivist at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, is archivist of the National Archives for Black Women's History, which is a project of the National Council of Negro Women. She presented an abbreviated version of the above article at the SAA annual meeting, in Nashville, 5 October 1978.