

## Shorter Features

MARK S. STEINITZ, *Editor*

The Shorter Features department provides a forum for topics that may not require full-length articles but which relate to the management and use of archives. Articles for this section of the journal must range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and should contain no annotation. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in the fields of archives are encouraged to submit such papers for consideration. Papers should be addressed to Michael J. Sullivan, Department Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives Building, Washington, DC 20408. Mark S. Steinitz, who skillfully guided this department through its initial development, has taken a position with the Department of Justice.

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### Researcher Evaluation of Reference Services

CARL M. BRAUER

IN 1977, the Society of American Archivists published Sue E. Holbert's manual, *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference and Access*, which presented, for the first time, certain standards for archival reference service. As a historian who has researched many archival collections, I have, however, infrequently encountered reference archivists who consistently met SAA's high standards. The opportunity to evaluate and criticize archival reference services has proven even more rare. The observations and recommendations that follow are offered, without identification of individuals or institutions, as a stimulus to improving reference services.

Two recent experiences suggest to

me that the larger an archives' budget, the less efficient its reference services. An under-funded archives I visited was located in an old, renovated, telephone company building. The staff was small; I had to retrieve my own boxes and do my own photocopying. The archivist apologized about working conditions and the lack of service, yet from my perspective it was an excellent research experience.

I worked faster than usual, and got my photocopying at a lower cost than usual without filling out a lot of time-consuming forms. Moreover, the room I worked in, though austere, was comfortable and well lighted. The guide to manuscripts was accurate, if not as fully

descriptive as I would have liked, and the two staff members who assisted me were helpful and candid.

In the other case, I worked in a well-funded repository which had a large staff, an attractive facility, a richly appointed research room, and even a lounge for researchers. Despite the comparative wealth of the institution, it provided no typewriters for researchers, though during my stay the several machines at staff desks around the room were rarely used. Researchers were permitted to have only one manuscript box at a time, and the staff assistant could bring only two manuscript boxes per researcher into the room at the same time. It is doubtful that these restrictions were necessary as security measures; the room was under constant television surveillance, and bags, briefcases, and purses were checked.

My research involves recent political history; many collections in this area consist largely of public opinion mail, case files, and the like, which are of little use to me. Consequently, I can usually examine large collections quickly, especially when finding aids do not help separate the wheat from the chaff, which was true here and in the preceding case. This particular box rule, therefore, slowed down my work considerably, which was not only annoying but expensive, since the archives was located in a distant city. The unfortunate staff aid was run ragged fetching my boxes individually. I imagine he wished, as much as I did, that he could have brought me a cartful of boxes.

To make matters worse, I was not permitted to have photocopies of restricted materials to which I had been granted access by the donors. I challenged this across-the-board rule, which seemed to have been drawn up by the archives and not by the numer-

ous donors. After refuting the contention that copyright law did not cover these restricted collections, I was informed that the rule in question was designed to prevent researchers from placing photocopies of the restricted documents in other repositories.

In vain, I argued that a researcher could easily subvert the intent of the rule by disseminating verbatim transcripts, and that a more reasonable policy would prohibit anyone from copying entire collections or would limit the number of photocopies permitted.

No reference service is more important than providing necessary information to a researcher in advance of his or her visit, as four examples from my own recent experience illustrate. In the first, I was considering flying hundreds of miles to a seemingly important new archives. I telephoned in advance and spoke to the chief archivist, who doubted that a visit would be worth my while. He sent me copies of the relevant pages of an unusually comprehensive finding aid, enabling me to order photocopies of the relatively few pertinent documents in his collection. From my perspective, the archivist had rendered outstanding service.

Unfortunately that was not the case in three other instances. In one, I wrote to an archives about my interest in one of its collections. An archivist responded that the collection was huge and would provide relevant documentation. He did not, however, enclose copies of the finding aid. My examination of it when I arrived at the archives revealed that though the papers "should" have provided relevant documentation for my purposes, they did not.

Examining finding aids in advance of a trip can be extremely helpful to

the researcher, yet many archivists are reluctant to make them available or refuse to do so. An archives might not want to incur the costs of duplication, but why not let the researcher pay the costs? Better yet, why not make finding aids available through inter-library loans?

On another occasion, I was planning to visit a distant city to attend a scholarly meeting and wrote in advance to an archives at a prestigious university about my interest in using some of its papers on a particular day. An archivist sent me information about the papers, but failed to notify me that the archives would be closed on the day of my visit. Finally, in one large, well-funded archives, I arrived only to be told for the first time that the donor's permission was required for use of one collection about which I had inquired in advance.

Although the SAA manual recommends that archivists conduct entrance and exit interviews with researchers, I have seldom been adequately interviewed at the start of a visit and rarely have been interviewed at the end of one. The lack of exit interviews is particularly unfortunate because they can provide archives with helpful information regarding their holdings. A good exit interview might reveal, for example, that though a particular collection might have offered little for one researcher's immediate purpose, it did contain rich documentation on some other topic.

Not only should exit interviews become standard procedure, but they

should be accompanied by written evaluations of reference services. Evaluation by researchers should become as common a practice as teacher and course critiques by students. Evaluations could help archivists provide better reference services and evaluations should become a factor in personnel assignments and in promotions and pay increases for archivists.

It would also be useful to establish the practice of letting prospective donors examine evaluations, for this would give archives with a great thirst for acquisitions an incentive for providing adequate reference services as well. In addition, evaluations could be used as evidence of merit when archives sought grant assistance or increased funding. Thus, in a variety of ways, researcher evaluation could prove beneficial.

Two final specific measures might improve reference services. More archives should extend their hours to evenings and week-ends. Small archives sometimes prove very flexible and accommodating in this regard, while some large ones adhere strictly to eight-hour days and forty-hour weeks. The very best large archives, it should be pointed out, do have extended hours, usually with understandably reduced services. In their training, archivists should themselves have to do research in archives, including several at a distance from their homes. Nothing could better teach archivists about reference services than to make them consumers of such services.

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