



Case Western Reserve University Photograph

RUTH W. HELMUTH

President, Society of American Archivists, 1980-81

Archivist at Case Western Reserve University since 1967 and at Western Reserve University for three years before, Ruth W. Helmuth has been an adjunct professor in the school of Library Science since 1969, director of the archival training programs in the Department of History, and director of the Workshop on College and University Archives at Case Western Reserve since 1970. She received her A.B. from Radcliffe College and her M.A. from Smith College. She became a member of the Society of American Archivists in 1965 and was elected a Fellow in 1974. She has served the Society as chairman of the College and University Archives Committee, and of the Nominating Committee. She has served on the Council, the Editorial Board, and the Education and Professional Development Committee. Mrs. Helmuth is a founding member of the Society of Ohio Archivists and serves on the Ohio Historical Records Preservation Advisory Board. She was a member of the panel for the Review of Candidates for the Position of Archivist of the United States and was also a member of the Qualifications Review Panel for the Director, Gerald R. Ford Library.

Three Pious Hopes

RUTH W. HELMUTH

IN CHICAGO, MAYNARD STARTED OFF the year with seven sinful thoughts. I am less ambitious; I have three pious hopes. The first concerns relationships between the members of the Society and their elected officers. I hope that you will believe me when I say to you that in my years in Council and as an officer, I have never observed that the experience of being elected to office in the Society of American Archivists has made any individual more intelligent, more perceptive, more responsible, or more trustworthy. On the other hand, I have never observed that this experience has made any individual any less trustworthy, less responsible, or more ambitious. The only change that I have noticed in these people is that they have been a little sobered, perhaps, by the responsibility, and a little surprised to find that things are not as simple, and the business at hand is a great deal less exciting, than one might wish. The routine process of decision-making in this Society is carried on by persons of good intent—they should be; you elected them—operating with limited time, information, and resources. But you need to know that there are times when the Council and officers are no happier with a given decision or course of action than you are. There are often situations confronting the Society which we do not have appropriate resources or mechanisms for dealing with. I hope you will consider this possibility before you mutter under your breath, “They never get anything right in Chicago.” There is no way that everyone in the Society, representing such a variety of diverse interests, will be equally well pleased with all decisions. And again, if you have strong feelings in a given matter, perhaps you never got around to communicating them. We are a small Society; we need all of the wisdom we can muster. It really helps to hear from you.

My second hope is that this year we can think constructively about the roles of the professional staff and the elected officers. Every organization of our kind, where there is both a volunteer and a paid leadership group, has problems of coordination—greater or lesser problems. In our case I think we are fortunate that ours are less worrisome than in some other societies. But everything we do is made more difficult by our geographical problem. It is just existential; it is part of our situation in life. And also, we have not had as an organization very long experience in dealing with this kind of coordination. And we have been operating in this situation during some very exciting years when the Society has been growing so fast and when we have been working so hard just to keep ahead of breaking ice that we have not really had time to stop and think philosophically about how we can make the Society work better.

That is one reason why I’m very pleased that we are embarking on a revision of the constitution at this moment. My own feeling—and I can say this quite cheerfully because whatever happens I’m going to be out of it by that time—is that the Society does not

make very good use of its elected officers. A one-year term is not very long. By the time you know what you should be doing, you're done. It seems that the staff is forever breaking in new officers and the officers are always subject to the "What am I not doing that I should be doing" syndrome. The officers, I suspect, are not always aware of the kinds of support the professional staff needs. I think that the committee working on the constitution should consider some responsibilities for immediate past presidents—not this one, but the next one. A three-year term for the treasurer makes especially good sense. We need to achieve more continuity in elected officers to facilitate integrating their responsibilities with those of a stable professional staff. I also would suggest that the Executive Committee should meet regularly between Council meetings, providing closer coordination between the elected officers and the staff. Long-distance phone is not quite the same thing as being there. We need to achieve the most efficient possible use of our personnel resources in order to serve all of the membership of the Society as well as we can.

My third pious hope has to do with our great visions of the meeting in Berkeley. My first annual meeting was in 1965 in New York. To many of you that is a date far in the past, but it does not seem such a long time to me. At that point, the possibility that I would be up here in 1980 would have seemed too remote to consider. The fact that I am here proves to me that there has been considerable mobility within the Society in my time. There have been opportunities to work with other people and to make friends. I'm not sure that our current structures present as many changes—size itself is a problem. Certainly one of the great attractions of the regionals is that they do offer more of that kind of pleasant, easy sociability, as well as the sort of shared hard work that makes good friends.

Now Berkeley is going to be an annual meeting such as none of us has ever experienced; we are embarking on a great adventure. We have done very well with the professional aspects of the annual meeting in recent years. But we have not done so well, it seems to me, in providing the equally important opportunities to see old friends and to make new ones. This new setting may change all that. It may turn out to be the greatest thing since encapsulation. I hope you are all able to come to Berkeley and we'll find out together.

Above is the greeting of the incoming president to the Society of American Archivists at their forty-fourth annual meeting, on 3 October 1980, at the Netherland Hilton Hotel, Cincinnati, Ohio.