

Archives in the Seventies: Promises and Fulfillment

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IT IS MOST APPROPRIATE that we, as archivists, with a deep commitment to the preservation of the historical record, should continually look to the past to get a sense of where we have been, to review our achievements and failures, and thus chart our course for the future.

It is fitting also to take the year 1970 as a starting point in this retrospective analysis of the profession. Not only did this year witness the establishment of the Committee for the 70s, a special task force, to take stock of the archival profession and to establish priorities for the coming decade; but in another sense it marked the end of an era or, at the very least, a turning point.

Three areas merit attention: the origins and work of the Committee for the 70s, the implementation of the recommendations of that committee, and unfinished business. Although most SAA members have heard of the Committee for the 70s, very few of them were active in the profession in 1970. Approximately 90 percent of our present membership have joined the SAA

since 1970, and an estimated 60 to 70 percent since 1975.¹

Our profession was changing dramatically as the seventies began. The founding generation of archivists, so described by Herman Kahn before a plenary session in 1974, were retiring from the National Archives, state archives, and other archival institutions.² Hundreds of new archival institutions representing colleges and universities, churches, professional associations, business firms, and special programs devoted to subject themes such as women, immigrants, industrial America, social welfare, and labor, were enjoying their first decade of existence and providing the archival profession with a new generation of potential leaders. In a single decade, 1960 to 1970, the membership in SAA increased from 1,272 to about 2,500.³

As Andrea Hinding lucidly described in her paper in 1974, the 1960s had given us also our "third generation" of archivists, a group who lived through one of the most critical decades of the century.⁴ The war in

¹ Analysis of a 1978 membership survey revealed that 80 percent had joined since 1970 and 50 percent since 1975. The figures cited here represent an estimate of growth between 1978 and 1980. Ann Morgan Campbell to Philip P. Mason, 19 Sept. 1980.

² Herman Kahn, "The First Generation: The Autodidact," *American Archivist* 38 (April 1975): 147-51.

³ The gain in new members during this period was much larger than the difference reveals because of the large number of members dropped from the rolls due to retirement and more rigid enforcement of dues payment.

⁴ Andrea Hinding, "The Third Generation: War, Choice, and Chance," *American Archivist* 38 (April 1975) 155-58.

southeast Asia, the rise of student unrest, the hypocrisy of some national leaders, and the recognition of widespread injustice against minorities and women, led to radical changes in the value systems of archivists.

It is little wonder that the demand for change within the archival profession, as in other related disciplines, was beginning to surface as the 1960s ended. Specifically, there were calls for more involvement in all aspects of the archival profession, for changes in the operation of the SAA, and for the SAA to be more responsive to social concerns within society as a whole.

Fortunately, the leadership of the SAA was quick to respond. They had witnessed similar developments in other professional organizations, like the American Library Association, the American Historical Association, and the Organization of American Historians, and were aware of the dissension and disruption that resulted when professional organizations refused to adjust to, or even listen to, the demands for change.

In August 1970, SAA President Herman Kahn, one of the truly great leaders of our profession, called a special meeting of the SAA Executive Committee to consider the future of the Society. He urged the establishment of a special task force to review the strengths and weaknesses of the SAA, to make the organization more responsive and relevant to the membership, and to provide greater opportunities for involvement of members in the affairs of the Society.⁵

With the approval of Council, the Committee for the 70s was established and the following appointed: Frank Evans, Willie Harriford, Herman Kahn, David Larson, Mary Lynn McCree, and Hugh Taylor. Gerald Ham and Charles Lee served as *ex*

officio members of the committee and I was appointed chair. With the assistance of a grant from the Council on Library Resources, the committee met six times between December 1970 and February 1972. Its findings and recommendations were promulgated to the membership in 1971, approved subsequently by Council, and adopted unanimously by the membership at the annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio, in November 1972.⁶

To evaluate the work of the committee, let me review a few of the highlights.

The need for stronger ties with other professional organizations, especially the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, was crystallized from a single incident, the attack by a Rice University assistant professor of history, Francis Loewenheim, against the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, NARS, the Harvard University Press, and, later, the AHA and OAH.

As the initial charges were altered and expanded as the case went on, Loewenheim not only attacked the staff of the Roosevelt Library but alleged that the incident "was part of a larger scandal involving other archival institutions." These sweeping charges alone justified attention by the Committee for the 70s, but more serious was the reaction of historians to Loewenheim's charges. On 2 September 1969, twenty historians officially supported Loewenheim's charges and called for a "Congressional investigation into the conduct of the nation's presidential libraries."⁷ The explanation of several supporters, who later admitted they knew nothing about the merits of the case, was that archivists needed to be "jacked up" every now and then. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., entered the dispute when he wrote to the *New York Times*, 19 October 1969:

⁵ "Minutes of the Council . . . Sept. 29, 1970," *American Archivist* 34 (January 1971): 89, 99–100.

⁶ "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970's," *American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 193–217; "Business meeting, November 1, 1972," *ibid.*, 36 (April 1973): 310–13.

⁷ The charges were first filed in the *New York Times Book Review*, 7 September 1969. See also the *Washington Post*, 2 September 1969, p. A2. A complete report of the investigation was published as *Final Report of the Joint AHA-OAH Ad Hoc Committee to Investigate the Charges Against the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Related Matters*, 1970.

It is extraordinary that professional historians should have signed Professor Loewenheim's letter without bothering to get the archives' side of the story, and indeed, without subjecting the latter to the elementary critical scrutiny they presumably apply every day in the exercise of the historical discipline.⁸

The refusal of the AHA and the OAH to allow archivists to serve on the committee investigating the charges of improper conduct of archivists was a more serious matter. The historians not only overlooked professional archivists but claimed that "to have included a member of the archival profession on the committee would have tended to weight it unduly," and that historians were more likely to accept the committee's findings if no archivists were included.⁹

As a result of the Loewenheim case, so vivid in the minds of the members of the Committee for the 70s, the committee proposed to establish joint committees with other professional organizations to investigate cases involving serious charges against or by archivists. The committee also recommended procedures to deal with intra-institutional archival disputes. Finally, the committee encouraged "joint regional meetings of historians and archivists to emphasize the need for adequate training of graduate students in the proper use of archival and other manuscript material,"¹⁰ and the involvement of trained archivists in archival educational programs in colleges.

In reviewing these recommendations ten years later, one might conclude that the members of the Committee for the 70s were incredibly naive in hoping for close involvement with the academic historians. A touch of naiveté did dominate our deliberations, but so did hope and optimism.

The committee system of the Society also came under the scrutiny of the committee.

The basic problem was how to include in committee work the increasing number of members who wished some serious involvement in the affairs and activities of the Society. We recommended a complete review of the committee structure, the avoidance of multiple committee appointments, longer terms for chairs, staggered terms for members, frequent committee meetings, more cooperation between the various committees, and closer coordination of committees by Council.

An analysis of approximately 1,060 individual members in February 1971, and their attitudes toward the profession and the Society, guided the committee in its study of membership needs. We recommended a variety of new services, the establishment of a new committee to recruit and represent minorities, and an active membership recruitment campaign. The committee also advocated that the "SAA should be actively committed to the social goal of racial justice, equal employment, and reasonable access to research materials. . . . To this end, the SAA has a moral obligation to take official positions in those contemporary public issues, however controversial, which affect the archival profession."

It was this issue, the involvement of the Society in continuing social concerns, that attracted the most controversy both at the time of the initial consideration and in the years that followed.

The education and training of archivists had been high on the list of concerns and priorities since 1937, and it was given major attention by the committee. It was evident in 1970, as it is today, that the Society must take a stronger leadership role in developing, monitoring, and even accrediting archival educational programs. It was obvious to the committee, most of whom were involved in archival education, that the Society had little, if any, influence over existing credit programs, institutes, or workshops, or the inauguration of new ones, or

⁸ *New York Times Book Review*, 19 October 1969, p. 48.

⁹ David E. Miller, Executive Secretary, OAH, to F. Gerald Ham, SAA, 27 Jan. 1970. SAA Archives.

¹⁰ Phillip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 70's," *American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 201.

the establishment of standards for course contents or faculty.

The committee recommended sweeping changes in archival educational programs, including the formulation of guidelines for programs, qualifications of instructors, curriculum, and instructional materials. A comprehensive program of accreditation was urged as a major priority of the seventies.

Implicit in the recommendations of the committee, or the *sine qua non*, was the hiring of a full-time, paid, executive director. Volunteers had served the Society well in previous decades in this capacity, but the demands of the profession in the seventies required a full-time commitment.¹¹ Changes were also recommended for nominating and electing procedures to assure greater democracy and involvement of members.

These, then, were the major recommendations of the Committee for the 70s, recommendations that required a major reorganization of the Society and the establishment of a new series of priorities. Based upon the limits of time and resources, and our perception of the forces that would shape the seventies decade, we produced guidelines and alternatives and hoped, at that time, that we had created a sense of urgency in their implementation.

On the basis of this retrospective analysis of the proposals of the Committee for the 70s, one can now evaluate the achievements of the seventies as well as the unfinished business for the eighties.

As a profession, I believe we can be proud of the successes and achievements of the past decade, for they were significant and have enhanced the professionalism of archives work and the effectiveness of the SAA. Already, in fact, in a few short years, the rationale for change and, indeed, the changes themselves, are taken for granted by many.

The appointment in 1974 of Ann Morgan Campbell as executive director was a

major ingredient of our plan; and she has succeeded admirably in implementing the recommendations of the committee. Under her direction we established a headquarters for the Society, first at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, and more recently at another location in downtown Chicago. She has brought together a talented staff to direct the varied activities and new programs of the Society. With increased membership in all categories, and a series of foundation grants, we became more visible as a professional organization. Our director has been invited to serve on important committees, including the National Study Committee on Records and Documents of Federal Officials. The archival profession has benefited from her tireless efforts on behalf of the Society.

Reforms in the procedures for electing our Council and officers have been implemented, as recommended by the Committee for the 70s. The mail ballot has allowed more members to participate in the election process. It is difficult to determine whether we have become wiser, better informed, and more competent leaders today than we were then or twenty years ago; and since only a handful of members (5 percent) have been involved for twenty years, it serves no purpose even to conjecture.

Already, perhaps predictably, the recommendations of the committee are under criticism. For example, some members now feel that the pairing of nominees for office and Council is not desirable. The argument against pairing is based upon the seeming difficulty in obtaining two candidates to run, and the fear of rejection that might beset the defeated candidate. Curiously, this line of reasoning was discounted by the Committee for the 70s and many activist groups within the Society. The process of pairing candidates was introduced to enhance democratic reform within the Society. It has given the membership a choice and also provided a system whereby

¹¹ Not all of the SAA leadership supported the constitutional provision to authorize the hiring of a full-time, paid executive director. Some were concerned about funds for such a position; one even maintained that the Committee for the 70s had not demonstrated the need for a full-time director and that volunteers could continue to provide the necessary leadership.

minority candidates can run and be elected.¹²

The committee system continues to be the backbone of the Society, just as it has been for the past thirty to forty years. It provides the vehicle for the exchange of ideas, debate, and resolution of problems. It also provides the opportunity for hundreds of our members to participate and get involved in the affairs of the Society and the profession. Despite the slow functioning of committees, the difficulty of holding meetings, and the inherent weakness of committees *per se* in dealing with problems that require decisive action, some of the impressive gains of the seventies have been made by such groups. The development of professional standards, the establishment of criteria for the accreditation of archival institutions and archival educational programs, and the resolution of controversial issues such as replevin and security represent only a few of the contributions of committees.

It is perhaps too soon to evaluate the recent reorganization of the Society's committee system into Professional Affinity Groups (PAGs) based upon functions and institutional affiliations. What is clear is that many members question the new system and many more are totally confused by it.

Another positive development during the seventies has been the influx into the profession of a cadre of well-trained, competent, and highly motivated archivists. For the first time in the history of the Society, a significant number of persons who have joined the archival ranks have been trained in archival programs, and have selected an archival career as a first choice. They are not waiting for the teaching job market to improve, they are not looking for temporary jobs, nor do they believe that their mere presence in the profession will uplift it. Furthermore, one need only review the quality of existing archival pro-

grams in the United States and Canada, especially the ones started since 1960, and the leadership and contributions given by younger members to the SAA and the regional organizations, to recognize the validity of this assessment. It may take many years before this new generation of archivists can achieve its maximum input into the profession; it will also require the present leadership of the SAA to make certain that programs of the Society are relevant to these archivists-by-choice.

Despite the implementation of the recommendations of the Committee for the 70s and the significant progress made, there is still some unfinished business, promises to be kept, and issues to be resolved.

The Society's involvement in social concerns is one of the most controversial issues before us as an organization. A decade ago there was strong support for an active Society role in such matters. In clear and precise language the Committee for the 70s adopted, and the membership at the annual meeting in 1972 approved, the following:

Social Relevance. The SAA should be actively committed to the social goals of racial justice, equal employment, and reasonable access to research materials. Among the areas of concern are over-classification of Federal records in the name of security; overrestriction of manuscripts and archival material; unwarranted violations of the confidentiality of records for political or other unworthy purposes; and elitism in manuscript collecting. To this end, the SAA has a moral obligation to take official positions on those contemporary public issues, however controversial, which affect the archival profession.¹³

Yet, in 1980, there appears to be a change in membership attitude toward the desirability of the Society's involvement in

¹² For a statement of the two views, see Trudy Peterson, "Single Candidate for Vice President," *SAA Newsletter* (July 1980): 8; and Leonard Rapport, "Comments on Constitutional Revision Proposals," *ibid.* (September 1980): 4.

¹³ Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 70's," p. 205.

social concerns. The advisory poll of the membership, published in the September 1980 *Newsletter* (page 8), suggests that a majority of members responding to the advisory poll opposed such involvement of the SAA, especially as regards the ratification of ERA. Some have argued that the results of this poll are misleading, that concentration on the ERA issue prejudiced the outcome. Regardless of the weight given to the poll, it is obvious that other, more reliable means must be found to evaluate this issue.

The recruitment of minorities into the archival profession and encouragement of their professional advancement needs prompt attention. Although the Committee for the 70s recommended the appointment of a standing committee to pursue these objectives, action was not taken until 1978 when Robert M. Warner formulated plans for a joint committee representing the SAA, the American Association for State and Local History, and the American Association of Museums. Because of limited funds for committee expenses, little has been accomplished up to this time, except for the preparation of a grant proposal to underwrite the expenses of a recruiting campaign. Judging from the criticism mounted by minority groups against the American Association for State and Local History during the past year, we cannot afford to delay any longer.

The accreditation of archival institutions and archival education programs is still not a reality, nor will success cap the Society's efforts in this area in the near future. Given the limitations of assigning such tasks to committees that can meet only once or twice a year, the progress made is laudable. If we hope to adopt effective accreditation systems in the twentieth century, we must give higher priority to them. We must also be willing to commit substantial financial resources to administering an accreditation program.

An expanded publication program was another recommendation of the Committee for the 70s and the results are impressive. The *American Archivist* is a more at-

tractive journal; the *Newsletter* is providing our members with current information about the profession; and the directories, manuals, and other publications are well received. Still needed are publications that can be used effectively in archival education courses.

The archival preservation of public records of local units of government also ranks high on the list of unfinished projects. Except for a few sessions on the subject at annual meetings, and lip service by some archivists, no concerted effort has been made to resolve this issue. We have devoted resources to the papers of presidents, legislators, judges, and to the question of ownership and access to such records, but have almost completely overlooked the records of our cities, records which must be preserved if we are ever to understand fully the closing decades of this century. It is possible that the challenge is too great for the Society to meet effectively, or perhaps it may be found to be less important than other programs. Unless our profession tackles the problem and marshals the support of other interested groups, we deserve to be held accountable for what has been described as a great national scandal. The recommendations of the Committee for the 70s, that a special task force be established to develop a plan of action, still has great merit.

The improvement of relations with other professional groups and organizations was a subject to which the Committee of the 70s gave a great deal of attention. Recognizing, in part, our weak public image as a profession, the committee recommended an active campaign to improve relations with other professional groups, and that, indeed, the SAA "take the initiative in entering into such activities that will build good relationships with others."¹⁴

At that time we were especially concerned with our relations with the historical profession, especially in view of our role in the Loewenheim Affair and the dramatic increase in new courses in archival administration adopted unilaterally by departments of history in universities. We

¹⁴Ibid., p. 200.

were pleased to be invited to join the AHA-OAH Joint Committee on the Historian and Federal Government Relations, which had recently investigated the Loewenheim charges.¹⁵ Encouraged by the invitation to join, SAA involvement in the committee has proved helpful. It has given archivists an opportunity to explain SAA programs and priorities, and the archival profession itself. We became equal members on the committee, hold the chair on a rotating basis, and host the semi-annual meetings of the joint committee. We also acclaimed the change in name to Historian and Archives, and finally to Historians and Archivists.

Despite this acceptance by our sister professional organizations, it has been obvious that the archival profession has not always been understood or respected. At one meeting in March 1977, the SAA members proposed a resolution stating:

The Joint Committee recognizes the need to recruit well-trained archivists and welcomes the introduction of carefully prepared programs in archival administration. The committee resolves that such education and training programs should be given by qualified persons, who have experience in archival work and education with emphasis on the discipline of history.¹⁶

This motion, watered down from the original one planned, was soundly rejected by our colleagues from the AHA. Nor did the SAA, OAH, AHA Joint Conference on Access to the Papers of Recent Public Figures, in 1977, in New Harmony, Indiana, give us any reason for elation. The meeting, referred to by many who attended as the "Disharmony Conference," was marked by vitriolic attacks on archival institutions in general and archivists in particular.¹⁷ Other examples could be cited to demonstrate our failure in establishing sound and equal relationships with other

professional historical groups. We are all familiar with these examples, especially archivists who are a part of college or university communities.

In a real sense, we must all share the responsibility for this situation. As long as we accept the historian's stereotype of archivists, we will continue to endure second class citizenship. Not only must we develop self-reliance as a profession, but it behooves us to establish closer ties with organizations that also find themselves in a similar position on the periphery—the American Association for State and Local History and the American Association of Museums, for example, with whom we have so much in common.

Finally, the splintering of the archival profession, accelerated in the seventies, deserves our concerted attention. The records managers began deserting our ranks in the 1960s and did so in increasing numbers in the seventies, forming their own professional organizations. This development is a great loss to both groups, for our work and objectives are closely intertwined.

The separation of oral historians into the Oral History Association, and the decision of state archivists and administrators to form a new organization, the National Association of State Archivists and Records Administrators, has also weakened the Society and the archival profession, and should lead to an investigation of how we have failed these important segments of the profession. Furthermore, the potential desertion of other groups, such as conservators, photographic archivists, and even college and university archivists, should not be discounted. Nor should we take the regional archival organizations for granted. Many such groups are already as large as the SAA was thirty years ago, with the talent and potential resources to attract an independent following. They publish journals and newsletters, hold meetings, elect officers and council, and in many respects

¹⁵ *American Archivist* 34 (January 1971): 92; and *ibid.*, 35 (January 1972): 96–97.

¹⁶ A copy of the resolution prepared by Edward Weldon and submitted to the Joint Committee on 9 March 1977, as well as the minutes of the meeting, are in the SAA Archives.

¹⁷ The proceedings of this session were published by the AHA, OAH, and SAA in 1977: *Access to the Papers of Recent Public Figures: The New Harmony Conference*, edited by Alonzo L. Hamby and Edward Weldon.

mirror our national organization. We need these regional organizations, but we also need a strong central organization to represent us nationally and internationally.

There is another factor that may arise as a major challenge to the SAA in the coming decade. As a result of social movements of the sixties many younger archivists have adopted values and priorities differing markedly from those of archivists who entered the profession earlier. Traditional attitudes toward work itself have changed, and institutional or employer loyalty has been replaced by loyalty to one's profession. This change is not limited to archivists; indeed academics and other professionals have embraced this same change of values in the world of work.

The change in traditional work values, as described by Daniel Yankelovich in his provocative article, "Work, Values, and the New Breed,"¹⁸ is quite likely to affect the manner in which archivists view the Society of American Archivists and the type of services they expect from that organization. We have already witnessed sharply increased and vocal demands for accreditation of archival institutions, archival training programs, and archivists. Members are turning to the SAA for an approved statement of archival ethics and other stan-

dards. Given this trend, it is quite likely that the Society will be under increasing pressure to police the profession and to serve as an arbitrator of disputes between archivists and employers and between archival institutions. The expansion of the SAA into a leadership role in these areas will tax its resources dramatically.

Conclusion

To return to my opening statement, I believe that a review of the profession in the seventies, especially its response to the task force created ten years ago, is profitable and gives us a clearer picture of the problems that lie ahead. I have chosen not to dwell upon some of the broader problems facing the profession: the proliferation of paper, the problems of retrieval, the administration of machine readable and new types of records, the need for better coordinated programs to replace the useless competition between institutions today. These issues will be covered later.

If we are to succeed, our profession must continually establish new procedures and mechanisms to resolve these problems. The seventies gave us new directions, a timetable, and a sense of urgency—fulfillment also—but many promises to keep.

¹⁸ Clark Kerr and Jerome M. Rosow, eds., *Work in America: The Decade Ahead* (New York: Van Nostrand and Reinhold Co., 1979), pp. 3–25.

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