

## Shorter Features

CHRISTOPHER BEAM, *Editor*

The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require a full-length article. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NLN), Washington, DC 20408.

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### Federal Funds for Archives: A View From NEH

MARGARET S. CHILD

OTHER PARTICIPANTS AT THIS CONFERENCE have discussed the general impact of the Reagan administration on funding for libraries and archives. I would like to offer the view of a line administrator who must adjust a specific program to a new economic and political climate.

I am in charge of the Research Resources Program in the Division of Research Programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Our primary mission is to help institutions make documentary sources for

scholarly research in the humanities more available. Since the program budget has been reduced from \$4.4 million in fiscal year 1981 to \$3 million in fiscal year 1982, our staff has been forced to reappraise the goals of our program and the ways in which they may be achieved.

Before discussing the specific impact of the budget cuts, I should point out that neither the administration nor the Office of Management and Budget ordered NEH to curtail any particular program. The specific apportionment of

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the cuts was left to the agency's chairman, Joseph Duffy, as was the allocation of funds when the agency's appropriation was ultimately passed at \$130.5 million.

Although I did not participate in the agency's basic budget decisions, I suspect that the overriding concern of NEH administrators was damage control. As a result, scholarly research and the training of humanists assumed priority over outreach programs to bring the humanities to the public at large.

My program, Research Resources, was cut more heavily than the other two programs in the division because it was thought that local institutions should be responsible for many activities that NEH had funded in the past. There has thus been a subtle but definite shift in the way our office will be looking at requests for support. Because of the cuts, we will be seeking to determine where a project falls within an institution's ongoing responsibilities and how it relates to that institution's goals. For example, the preparation of guides to research materials for topics that range over a locality, a region, or the country as a whole are usually not the responsibility of a single institution or organization; thus an infusion of funds from the outside is justified. Bibliographies that provide access to the monographic or periodical literature of an entire field or subfield in the humanities are also projects that most institutions would not be able to handle on their own. Proposals for the development of standards of archival practice where none now exist and for the development and testing of new techniques and methods will have priority because through them a limited amount of money can have a major impact on the way the archival profession develops and repositories handle their holdings. The focus in the future therefore will be on those programs that cannot be termed an institutional

responsibility and that would not be undertaken if outside funds were not available. Increasingly, federal funds will be seen as only one of several sources of support, with additional monies to come from the institution itself and from private sources.

Having just undergone the process of programmatic reexamination, I urge you all to look at your own programs more critically. Diminishing funds suggest that the administrators of repositories should reexamine their goals and redefine them more precisely. In particular, they must look at their functions as a continuum, from the formulation of a collection policy through acquisition, processing, reference, and preservation, and calculate the total costs before accepting a collection. In other words, any decision to collect should be closely tied to a commitment to process and preserve those portions of a collection that have been selected by precise appraisal standards.

On my cynical days, I sometimes think that the archives and libraries of this country have assumed that more is better. We are now realizing that our rising expectations are coming to an abrupt halt. In many ways the current funding crunch will be a blessing if it makes us aware that there is not enough space in our institutions, not enough professional staff, and, most importantly, no coherent intellectual system to determine what documents to retain from the mass generated by our society. Like the mountaineer who takes on a peak because it is there, many repositories, it seems, have collected materials simply because they are available.

As an administrator, I am well aware that one of the most successful ways to justify requests for additional funding is to play the numbers game: so many linear feet acquired; so many linear feet processed; so many researchers served; and even, if your recordkeeping is good,

so many monographs published on the basis of sources in the repository. But where is the qualitative assessment in these calculations? Were these materials worth collecting in the first place? Have they been placed in the appropriate repository? What portion is worth retaining and preserving and for how long? Are the researchers finding what they need to know in the documentation available, or are harder questions going unanswered because the kinds of sources traditionally collected do not speak to new research interests and methodologies? Are the finding aids organized to point to the kind of information demanded? Will the sheer bulk of material collected bury the significant in the mass?

I am particularly concerned with what appears to be a tendency to over-document certain areas and neglect others. One of the benefits of the NHPRC Directory Project should be to draw a profile of the collecting policies of archival and manuscript repositories throughout the nation, even if only in outline. For example, in the first edition of the directory, there are 97 entries under the general heading "Indians" and 40 more under specific tribal or Indian subject headings, whereas there is only one under "Irish-Americans." There are 22 entries under "Spain, Colonies," and only three under "Space Exploration." I have been at NEH only seven years, but in that time I have seen several collecting

trends sweep the country. While I believe that materials on ethnic groups, women, blacks, and Indians are valuable, not every repository should be collecting them. For example, if the historical society of a state has a strong collection of materials on voluntary organizations, does the university of a neighboring state need to collect in that area?

Because of budgetary pressures, resource sharing has become a common practice among libraries. I think archival repositories too should define their programs to encompass more than just the needs and pressures of their own institutions or organizations, their own localities, or their own states. We have to think at least on the regional level and even on the national level if we are to stretch the available resources to cover all the aspects of our society that deserve to have documentation collected, preserved, and made available.

I hope that my remarks will not leave you with a negative impression because I do see positive results coming from the current budgetary constraints. Our funding cup is still more than two-thirds full, and we plan to use those funds to help support the most worthwhile projects we can find. We are still very interested in seeing applications for well-planned and methodically sound programs. So do not write off the federal government, because we still want to hear from you.

## The Dallas Mayors Oral History and Records Project: A Program of Institutional Cooperation

ALAN S. MASON *and* GERALD D. SAXON

HISTORY FOR MANY IS OFTEN only a series of dramatic events such as battles and presidential campaigns. This perception is understandable since chroniclers in the past, like those in the present, recorded only what they deemed important. Unfortunately, the ordinary but historically significant occurrences of daily life usually go unrecorded and hence are lost to posterity. Local history in particular has suffered from this neglect. In an effort to make up for this shortcoming, the James G. Gee Library of East Texas State University (ETSU) and the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division of the Dallas Public Library launched the Dallas Mayors Oral History and Records Program, or mayors project, to trace the political history of the city of Dallas in this century. The planning and cooperation that went into the mayors project may serve as a model for institutions undertaking similar ventures.

The purpose of the project was to use oral history techniques to recall the events, personalities, and decisions that led to Dallas's development as the seventh largest city in the nation and the largest city in the world with a city manager-city council form of government. The inspiration for the study stemmed from the desire of the organizers to discover why Dallas enjoyed a reputation as one of the few large cities in the nation that seemed to work. After preliminary study and in-

itial discussions with leading citizens of the area, the project staff decided to begin their study with Dallas's present and former political leaders. After all, it was the mayors, city council members, city managers, and civic leaders who guided the city's development, laid the groundwork for orderly growth, and cajoled the public into accepting their policies. Moreover, their story of the growth of the city had never been told nor had the issues in the political battles fought during this growth been well defined.

Oral history was a desirable format for a number of reasons. First, oral interviews can be used to fill in the gaps in the written record. City council minutes, newspaper accounts, administrative memoranda, and personal papers may outline the issues before the city government but rarely reveal the thinking or motives of elected officials. Oral history interviews can fill this void. Second, oral history techniques can easily cover most topics of study. Interviews with city officials and local politicians can focus on subjects as narrow as a particular bond issue or as broad as city zoning policies. Third, both libraries have active oral history programs and substantial expertise in the required procedures. The two institutions decided that through joint participation more people could be interviewed, more tapes and transcripts could be processed, and Dallas history

could be explored in greater depth.

When the libraries had agreed upon the project in principle, the oral history staffs of the two institutions met to discuss its implementation. The combined staff consisted of two oral historians and five support members. From June to October 1979 representatives of ETSU and the Dallas Public Library outlined a memorandum of understanding, which stated each institution's responsibilities as follows:

- ETSU Library would hire a full-time coordinator to conduct the project in cooperation with the oral historian at the Dallas Public Library;

- interviewing for the project would take place over the next year and a half;

- the institutions would divide interviewing responsibilities by mayoral administration;

- the oral historians would conduct their own research but would meet regularly to discuss common problems and share information;

- each library staff would compile a separate list of potential interviewees but would meet to draw up the final list;

- the Dallas Public Library would grant ready access to the restricted material in its Dallas Collection;

- the ETSU Library would transcribe and bind the interviews;

- each interviewer would edit and deliver the transcripts to the interviewees;

- both institutions would hold and make available to researchers copies of the interview tapes and bound and indexed copies of all transcripts;

- both institutions would publicize the project; and

- after the project came to a close, the Dallas Public Library would continue to interview Dallas politicians as part of its ongoing oral history program.

Funding for the project came from the operating budgets of both libraries. Since both institutions already operated oral history programs, each library simply shifted the emphasis of its program to the mayors study.

After the organizational meeting, interviewers began to compile names of possible interviewees from written sources and from discussions with local politicians. The mayors themselves were the logical starting point. After they were contacted, the interviewers queried them about additional interviewees. Close relatives of deceased mayors, former city council members, and key city staff members were added to the list. Dallas political observers, influential citizens, and leaders of factions opposing the political establishment were likewise considered. After some discussion the two historians pared the master interviewee list of more than 200 names to approximately 85.

The staffs of the two institutions then outlined the general topics for the interviewees. Among the subjects were:

- the interviewee's background and initial involvement in Dallas politics;

- the decision-making process at City Hall;

- the major issues during the interviewee's participation in local government;

- the responsiveness of the city government to minority groups and political factions;

- the reaction of local government to social and economic changes;

- the effectiveness of the manager-council form of government for a city as large as Dallas;

- the factors that contributed to the smooth operation of the city government over the last 50 years; and

- the leadership styles of Dallas

mayors.

Although specific questions depended upon the interviewee's level of participation in government and his years of service, the outline served as a guide for the interviewer and provided a list of subjects to pursue if the opportunity arose.

Shortly before the interviewing began on 2 June 1980, the project organizers, joined by Mayor Robert S. Folsom, hosted a reception at the Dallas City Hall for the potential interviewees, their friends, and their families. The reception proved to be an inexpensive yet effective way to introduce the project to both the numerous participants and the community at large. Newspaper coverage produced considerable publicity for the project.

From July 1980 to August 1981 the oral historians interviewed 50 of 85 people on the interviewee list. Although time constraints, schedule conflicts, and untimely deaths limited the number of interviewees, the two staffs are confident that the information in the completed interviews will benefit researchers in Dallas public policy. Although the

combined oral history staffs could devote only 50 percent of their time to the mayors study, the project still produced approximately 120 hours of tape and more than 2,000 pages of transcripts. This body of records will be the nucleus of an ever expanding collection, since the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division will routinely interview all retiring city council members and mayors and the leaders of emerging political groups.

The mayors project brought a number of benefits to both ETSU and the Dallas Public Library. Generous media coverage helped foster community good will for both institutions. The undertaking provided a rare opportunity for their staffs to combine their talents to turn out a product of lasting historical significance. With the successful completion of the mayors project, East Texas State University and the Dallas Public Library took the first step in the preservation of Dallas's political history and at the same time created a program that other institutions may want to emulate.