Shorter Features

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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 (NNFD), Washington, DC 20408.

The Presidential Library and the White House Liaison Office

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THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN ELEMENT of spontaneity in the development of a presidential library. To the shame of managers, practice and felt necessity rather than reflection and wise planning have usually been the engines of change. The president, of course, has been to the presidential library that unpredictable element, that sudden entrant in the decision-making process whose whims and desires push nearly all else aside and often create precedent. Once the president has entered the scene, the world in which the archivist must work is changed forever.

One important change occurred during the Johnson administration when a White House staff member was transferred to the National Archives payroll and began preparing for a Lyndon B. Johnson Library. This action in itself seemed unremarkable, but it had far-reaching consequences for the development of the presidential library. The staff member took several important steps toward the beginning of the Johnson Library: she transferred Johnson's congressional papers from the files of the Senate and House of Representatives to the National Ar-

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chives, established a file of presidential handwriting, compiled information about and memorabilia from the president's travels in a trip file, logged and arranged position papers and memoranda that the president read after hours into a night reading file, indexed White House photographs, and kept a daily diary of presidential visitors and conversations.

The National Archives' unsought and tentative partnership with the White House was further strengthened by the assignment there of three present or former archives personnel. A former archivist of the United States, who was working as a consultant advising the University of Texas on the establishment of the Johnson Library on its campus, had an office in the White House. A senior archives employee was detailed to the White House to prepare administrative histories for eventual use in the Johnson Library. And a young archivist who had been drafted into the army out of an archives training program was assigned to the White House Communications Agency, a Signal Corps operation, and placed in the office that was preparing the library. The liaison, as it came to be called, between the White House and the National Archives was fixed by these rather disjointed missions and assignments.

The emergence of the liaison function was something archives officials had not foreseen. This is not to say that earlier presidents had not made preparations for their libraries. All the presidents from Roosevelt to Kennedy had either selected or considered sites before leaving office, and private corporations or foundations were working on behalf of the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower libraries before their respective presidents ended their terms. The building for the Roosevelt Library was deeded to the government four and a half years before the president's death, and work on the Eisenhower Library building began more than a year before Eisenhower left office.

Despite a concern with site and physical plant, presidents before Johnson had given little attention to preparing their papers and other historical materials for deposit in their libraries. Roosevelt, after all the fanfare raised over his plans for a library and the dedication of the building, neglected to make a proper donation of his presidential materials to the government. As a result, litigation prevented the library from acquiring the entire body of papers until 1947. Truman and Eisenhower withheld significant portions of their White House files for their private use until they died.

Johnson's attempt while in office to prepare his papers for his library and to provide ongoing documentation of his presidency was clearly a pioneering effort. It marked the maturing of the idea of the presidential library to the point where a sitting president had become sufficiently aware of this appendage to his administration to develop a custodial pride in and concern for all its operations. In Johnson's case this interest may have stemmed from a desire to improve as well as enrich the historical record, but the record and the library were enriched nonetheless.

During the next administration the White House acted on the Johnson precedent. President Richard Nixon's transition staff was undoubtedly impressed by the planning by the small liaison office in the Johnson White House, and an official requested that the National Archives set up a similar office. By the end of January 1969 a small Office of Presidential Papers and Archives (OPPA) had been opened in the Old Executive Office Building, just across the street from the White House. The staff had little to do in its first week, until the President's appointments secretary, Alexander P. Butterfield,

called a meeting and asked that the office develop a daily diary of the President's meetings, telephone conversations, and movements based on the format of the previous administration.

The preparation of the daily diary consumed almost all of the liaison office's time. The other functions that Johnson's office had performed fell into desuetude. Officials of the National Archives were distressed at this assignment of staff time because preparation of the daily diary seemed to be a duty of the White House staff and the time it required prevented work on a Nixon Library. The archives tried without success to reintroduce archival functions into the duties of the liaison office.

In early 1971 the White House decided to increase the staff and responsibilities of the OPPA. A college professor was recruited to head the expanded office and was placed on the White House staff immediately under the staff secretary to the President. The liaison staff grew until by early 1972 it reached about a dozen members, the level at which it remained until Nixon's resignation in 1974.

During this period the OPPA initiated new programs and expanded its functions. Many of its activities still centered on the preparation of the daily diary. The office received copies of the switchboard operating logs, which registered all the president's telephone calls; the White House usher's log, which noted all the president's activities from breakfast until his retirement to the family residence; the Secret Service movement log; and several other logs that listed the president's movements and guests. The daily diary was thus a truly superb document, as became evident when the Watergate special prosecutor's office used it to subpoena tape recordings of presidential meetings and telephone calls.

The liaison staff added other duties as well. They identified every major and many minor figures in photographs taken by the White House photographer. They expanded the presidential contacts file, essentially an index to the daily diary, to include collective categories such as congressmen, diplomats, and subcabinet officers. This file proved especially useful to the White House staff because the liaison staff often received calls asking how many times the president met with various officials. The staff conducted exit interviews with departing administration officials to provide a basis for the longer oral history interviews that would presumably be conducted by the staff of the future Nixon Library. Finally, a librarian was brought in to begin assembling a book collection for the library.

The experience of the Office of Presidential Papers and Archives indicated both the promise and the dangers inherent in a liaison office. The promise lies primarily in the invaluable preparatory tasks that such an office could undertake for the future presidential library. A liaison office acts as a representative of posterity in the White House complex, overseeing the preservation of important materials and creating indexes, oral histories, and a book collection as glosses to the historical record. The dangers inherent in a liaison office grow from the unequal and incomparable stature and powers of the partners in the liaison. The National Archives and Records Service is a small agency with limited powers of enforcement and persuasion; the White House is a giant with enormous power. If a liaison office is to be effective, it must draw on this power; it must have, in one way or another, the personal support of the president. But in drawing from the president's power, the liaison office risks falling further into his world, with all its

exigencies and demands for team play and loyal service. This is exactly what happened to the Nixon liaison office; because of its production of the daily diary, which became a matter of contention in the document war between the White House and the Watergate special prosecutor, the National Archives was drawn much further into the Watergate controversy than it should have been or wanted to be.

But one bad experience should not overshadow the benefits of a White House liaison office. The Nixon materials in the custody of the National Archives are richer as a result of the work of the liaison office, and if the administration had completed its term, the holdings would have been a model of completeness. The liaison staff's close working relationship with members of the administration would probably have been transferred to the Nixon Library and have enriched its holdings and programs.

The National Archives offered to provide liaison service to both Presidents Ford and Carter. Ford declined but Carter accepted, and in December 1977 a small staff—much smaller than the Nixon liaison staff—set up its office on the fourth floor of the Old Executive Office Building. Through its work, the National Archives groped toward an enduring liaison structure. While the Carter office did not maintain a daily diary, it acted as the historian's conscience to the White House. It located Carter's prepresidential papers, assembled a book collection and a clipping file on the Carter presidency, helped pack and store White House gifts, surveyed records in White House offices, and conducted exit interviews with White House staff and oral history interviews with members of the president's family. In addition, it worked with the White House staff toward the goal of good record-keeping practice, took control of, arranged, preserved, and made available for research the records of selected presidential commissions and boards, and prepared briefing materials concerning the steps required for site selection for and the establishment of a future Carter Library.

Assuring the full documentation of a presidency is the proper mission of a White House liaison office. While the effect of the Presidential Records Act of 1978 on the liaison function is not yet clear, the success the liaison offices have had in preserving and augmenting the historical record of the Johnson, Nixon, and Carter administrations probably assures that their work will be carried on.

Subject Indexing a Large Photograph Collection

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THE SUBJECT INDEXING OF A SINGLE PHOTOGRAPH can be quite difficult, and the difficulties are only multiplied in cases of large photograph collections with thousands of images. The sheer size of some collections seems to demand some form of computerized retrieval; yet, such a technique demands careful planning.

In 1976 the Dupre Library of the University of Southwestern Louisiana acquired a rapidly decomposing collec-

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tion of 42,000 negatives from a defunct photography studio in Crowley, Louisiana. The holdings of the Barnett Studio Collection were quickly acknowledged as a valuable source on the lives and ideals of the residents of a rural Southern community from 1909 to 1972. With the assistance of a major grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the advice of Eugene Ostroff, Smithsonian Institution photography curator, the library staff began preserving and identifying the negatives. The collection was placed in an air-conditioned room, and each individual plate was dusted and cleaned with an alcohol solution. In addition, plates were numbered and eventually were filmed into positive images on microfilm.

To facilitate retrieval, information about each image was recorded on a computer form for entry into the university's Multics System. The data was entered into fixed fields and included the date, number of subjects, condition of plate, setting (scene, portrait, or action), and size and type of negative as well as a rudimentary subject classification scheme. Under this scheme the coder selected the most essential element within the photograph from a list of five-digit, mnenomic descriptors; for example, SEFEM indicated a seated female, while HUNTD suggested a hunting dog.

These codes quickly proved inadequate for a number of reasons. In essence, though, the classification plan had not been systematically developed and instead was augmented as the need arose. The result was a rather confusing and often overlapping list of 80 characteristics and a coding rate of only 500 negatives a week from two coders.

On arriving at the institution after the project had begun, I was able to work with the staff to rectify some of these problems. Because a large number of photographs had already been processed, we needed to build an effective subject index within the established format. Our objective was to create a simple system that could be easily learned, fit with the existing five-place field, absorb some 4,000 earlier entries, and yet provide a higher degree of description.

We eventually devised a system with three subfields to replace the previous descriptors within the same five-place field. Because the majority of the photographs were portraits, the initial field used a single alphabet character to describe the type of people in the picture: A stood for adult group of both sexes, C for child, E for elderly, F for female, I for infant, M for male, V for varied group of adults and children, and O for other or scenic shot. This field was followed by two two-place fields, which were coded from a list of 10 broad categories. The first position in the two-place code indicated the category:

A—animals,
C—clothing or accessories,
D—documentation (for example, disasters or medical studies),
E—ethnic or racial group,
F—family group,
P—position or posture of the portrait subjects,
O—occupation,
R—realia or props,
S—social situation or event, and
V—views of buildings or scenes.

The second position was used to elaborate each category. The coders could select, for instance, PK (position/kneeling), PP (position/prone), PS (position/seated), or PT (position/standing). Coders were instructed to choose one or two outstanding characteristics within the negative from a list of these categories and subcategories.

To aid in the indexing, the staff insured that the letters in the codes related directly to the characteristic being described and that no category contained more than ten possibilities. Each category was headed by a general default —or Z code as it was called—to call attention to a detail that was not on the list. The result was a compact five-place descriptor of the image: for example, CEBRA would read as a child (C), black (EB), in or near an automobile (RA), or a black child in or near an automobile; MPSOF indicated a male (M), seated (PS), fisherman (OF); and VSMVB showed a group of adults and children (V) at a wedding (SM) along a bayou (VB).

The coders rapidly became familiar with the categories and subcategories. They were able to increase their production to more than 2,000 images a week. More importantly, the new system allowed for studies of the frequency of the appearance of characteristics and also permitted cross tabulations between categories. Although such a system has its limitations, it provides a useful model for handling large photograph collections in other repositories and a useful tool for scholars studying the cultural signs of a community over time.