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 (NNFD), Washington, DC 20408.

Processing as Reconstruction: The Philip A. Hart Senatorial Collection

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PROCESSING MAY OFTEN BECOME a matter of reconstruction, especially with record groups or manuscript collections that have been moved about. In such cases, the original order, that is, the order intended by the creators of the records, gives way to a somewhat different arrangement: the "order as received" or, more aptly, the "order as disrupted." With a collection of just a few feet, the archivist can either rearrange the records into the most usable scheme, or he or she can try to reconstruct the collection as it was maintained by the record creator.

With large collections, however, the archivist, especially one in a small or medium-sized institution, usually does not have this alternative. Because costs are high and because researchers demand almost immediate access to new collections, the archivist must find the most expeditious means to reconstruct the order of a disrupted collection. After examining the records themselves and whatever inventories came with them, the processor must try to visualize the original order of the record group and then transform the "order as received" into some semblance of that original order.

The accessioning of several hundred feet of disrupted records can be an unnerving experience even to the most practiced archivist. When in 1976 the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan received the

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senatorial papers of Philip A. Hart, the two processing archivists were confronted with a good example of a collection whose intended order had been disrupted. Most of this 800-foot collection had come from Washington Federal Records Center (FRC), where the senator's staff had deposited it. Between 1966 and 1976, members of Hart's staff had sent more than 30 separate accessions to the FRC. Many of these deposits appeared to have been made at random and without consideration of their place in the overall collection. Subgroups of records were found scattered among different accessions, and some alphabetical series had been broken up. Although the records had once been r ıaintained in proper order, portions of the collection were now jumbled.

Archivists who must work with the large collections of prominent politicians usually do not have the resources to process in the way they would like. They have neither the staff nor the time to appraise each folder, remove staples and paperclips, or refolder the entire collection in acid-free folders. While the archivists who worked with the Hart papers were forced to take some shortcuts in matters of preservation, they never questioned the principles of provenance and original order and, in any event, had little choice but to work with the order originally established for the files. For them to establish effective preliminary control over the collection meant working with its original order. The problem was to discover what that order had been.

In processing disordered collections that are smaller than the Hart papers, an archivist may employ a staging area where the boxes can be laid out and their contents identified. Here the archivist can try to visualize the relationship among seemingly disordered file sequences. Preliminary processing of this sort is much like matching pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When using a staging area, the processor must be careful not to mix disordered materials solely on the basis of outward similarities such as color-coded labels or folders. The purpose of this stage of processing, instead, is to understand the activity that led to the creation of a given set of records. The archivist should note the dates of the files, gaps in file sequences, and the location of obviously misfiled or disrupted series. Following this analysis the archivist can then begin to move the pieces of the disordered collection around. Experience and common sense are obviously important ingredients in effectively using a staging area.

The Hart collection, unfortunately, was too large to be laid out in this manner. The archivists in charge of the project instead were required to do most of the preliminary work from a study of the 33 inventories that accompanied the collection. One of the processing archivists who did most of this work began making notes about the subgroups and series within the collection. He went to the stacks if he had to verify the contents of boxes or if it was not clear from the inventories what records were contained within particular accessions. Gradually, he began to discover the original subgroups and series within the Hart collection and to prepare location sheets for them. After he had reviewed the inventories, he began sifting the information he had gathered until he was confident that he could reconstruct the original order of the papers. Up to this point, no material had actually been shifted. The archivist thus had achieved a basic level of control over the subgroups and series in the collection almost without leaving his desk.

Next came the physical task of reboxing the collection and at the same time reconstructing its original order. Working with one major subgroup or series at a time, the processing staff of two professionals and two student assistants started to put the collection into a logical order. They began first with the control file, then the departmental file, and then other files, until they had gone through each of the collection's principal divisions. Using the location sheets that the archivist had prepared, the processing team brought together the sequences of files for each subgroup or series. These were then reboxed in their reconstructed order. As they continued along in this manner, they also compiled a new inventory for the collection. This list of the rearranged contents eventually came to replace the inventories from Hart's office and the location sheets as the principal finding aid for the collection.

During reboxing the archivists also made some of the easier appraisal decisions. They weeded out government documents and routine printed materials, duplicate press releases and newsletters, boxes of thank-you messages and invitations, and some administrative files. Because of researcher demand on other collections, the staff decided to delay more sophisticated appraisal decisions until a later date.

Altogether reconstruction took a staff of four less than a month of part-time labor. Processing of the collection has in no way been completed, but at least the archivists established basic control over a very large and very disorganized collection. Most of the collection still needs to be sorted to the folder level, and there are various subgroups that could be reduced through more intensive appraisal. However, faced with shrinking resources and other bulky accessions, the archivists also know that further processing of the Hart collection, like any other large collection, will be an ongoing project dependent upon the time available and the further interest of researchers in the files.

Bibliography and Reference for the Archivist

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REFERENCE IS A MAJOR FUNCTION of archival administration and a recurring subject of professional literature. While archival literature has become increasingly theoretical, discussions of reference have remained pragmatic. The oft-repeated rule of reference is, quite simply, that the archivist must assist the researcher in any way that is necessary and appropriate to make full use of the records. The purpose of this essay is to describe yet another practical method by which the archivist can improve reference service to the researcher.

Most repositories are heavily stocked with reference works. In many reading rooms, the visitor will find not only guides to the repository's records but biographical dictionaries, encyclopedias, bibliographies, guides to the holdings of other archives (most commonly the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*), and general histories. Generally, the more specialized the holdings of the archives, the more specialized are the supporting reference works.

There are two reasons for the existence of such reference libraries. The archivists themselves use these works to appraise, arrange, and describe their records. The reference works are also

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there to assist the researcher. Archivists traditionally have relied upon researchers to know as many names, organizations, events, and other facts as possible related to their search. The ill-prepared researcher often may be directed to the reference shelves before consulting the finding aids to the records. This is done not to hinder or prevent examination of the original sources but to make such work more efficient and profitable. Although this approach has been criticized, the retrieval of information from an archives is difficult in any case, and a library of supplementary references can help satisfy the demands of some researchers.

An archivist usually becomes a specialist in the subjects covered by his repository's holdings and therefore becomes thoroughly acquainted with the secondary literature on these subjects. This knowledge can be particularly helpful, for a researcher often is not ready for a time-consuming search or is searching only for a single fact or some general information that the archivist knows can readily be obtained from a secondary source. Most archives require some kind of entrance interview. Thus, if an archivist can refer a researcher to a handy secondary source for information, the researcher might still find the trip to the repository worthwhile, and the archivist can concentrate upon researchers who are ready to work with the original records.

If the archivist has gained considerable knowledge about the secondary literature, then he should find a way to make this information available to the researcher in a more systematic manner. Rather than scatter such information in various unpublished guides and in the inaccessible notes that were created during the preparation of the finding aids, the archivist may compile and make available bibliographies on commonly researched subjects. The best method of providing such bibliographical information is to incorporate it into published guides to the records. Although guides to the holdings of repositories have proliferated in recent decades, it may surprise many to know how few cite appropriate secondary literature. This is especially surprising when the benefits of doing so are considerable. The researcher can gain a better understanding of the nature of the institution or individual creating the records and the value of the materials in the repository. This understanding can in turn spur researchers to make better use of the records. Bibliographies also can be helpful in guides to commonly researched subjects, especially those requiring the use of records in more than one repository or of the records, such as pictorial materials, that may be difficult to use. In both cases, the guides are often directed toward individuals with limited research experience, and an inclusion of references to the secondary literature may be very informative.

It may be argued that the time required to compile a bibliography will distract the archivist from the primary task of preserving and preparing the records for research. This is a good point in this day of shrinking budgets and greater pressure for more careful expenditure of the funds that are available. Of course, some archivists will readily admit that much of the bibliographical research is performed as a matter of course during the preparation of an inventory or finding aid.

Systematic bibliographical work by an archivist can be an important tool in measuring current use of the holdings and in predicting research trends. Most archives maintain some record of research use of their holdings to help in making decisions about appraisal work, arrangement and description procedures, the preparation and publication of finding aids, public relations efforts, and collecting policies. Another important measure, however, would come from a systematic search of the secondary literature based on the holdings of the repository. Perhaps a body of records that seems to be used often but is rarely cited should be reevaluated for a misleading description. In some cases, it may even be a candidate for disposal. Just as importantly, an archivist who regularly reads the appropriate literature will become sensitive to research trends and can make appropriate decisions regarding the publicity of processed material or the acquisition of new records. Members of the profession have long urged their colleagues to play a more aggressive role in opening new research areas, but such a role depends upon a thorough knowledge of current developments and methodologies.

It may also be argued that such a concentration on bibliography is superfluous because the experienced and more sophisticated researchers will require no such assistance. Most researchers do not fall into this category, however, and even professional researchers can use whatever assistance is available. Margaret F. Stieg in the November 1981 issue of *College & Research Libraries* has shown that even professional historians do not effectively utilize the wide range of standard bibliographical aids. If professional historians require such basic assistance, the need for additional research aids is undoubtedly greater for other researchers.

A final, if secondary, purpose of the archivist's use of bibliographies is related to his perception of his profession and especially to the controversy over demands on the archivist to publish scholarly articles and monographs. One writer recently advocated that the archivist make use of the records under his administrative control for personal research and publication. Another prominent archivist sees this kind of activity as unethical. One way out of the dilemma that would avoid even the appearance of impropriety would be for the archivist to write and publish bibliographical and historiographical essays and guides. This work would provide an outlet for scholarly proclivities and at the same time make an important contribution to servicing the materials within the archivist's purview.