



DAVID B. GRACY II
President, Society of American Archivists
1983-84

David B. Gracy II has been state archivist of Texas since 1977. He is also senior lecturer on archives and manuscripts in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Texas at Austin. From 1971-1977 he was the archivist for the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University, and prior to that he served as archivist of the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University. Gracy received his Ph.D. in history from Texas Tech in 1971. He served on SAA's Council from 1976-1980 and on the Executive Committee from 1979-1980. He was elected a Fellow of the Society in 1979. Gracy has been active on numerous SAA committees and served as a member of the Editorial Board of the *American Archivist* from 1976-1979. He has been active in regional archival organizations as well, serving as president of both the Austin Archivists and the Society of Georgia Archivists. Gracy is the author of *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description* and *An Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts*. He is a member of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and is the United States' representative to the Archives Committee of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History.

Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution

DAVID B. GRACY II

What are the best stories you know on archivists and archival work? Did you read about the sign on the scoreboard in Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium a couple of years ago that greeted the Society of Ohio Archivists with the words: "Welcome, Society of Ohio Activists"? Have you heard of the time Charles Lee of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History was introduced as the "State Archivisor"? Did you know that the first checkbook of the Council of Intermountain Archivists showed the name of the account holder as the "Council of Intermountain Orchidvists"? Have you heard the reply John Kinney, then of the Texas State Archives, received after explaining to a curious visitor that an archivist obtains, preserves, and makes available the priceless documentary heritage of our society? "My," the person replied with wonder in his voice and looking John squarely in the eye, "you must have to get up awfully early to do that." What about the piece of mail that arrived at a young, but nevertheless firmly estab-

lished, repository of permanently valuable records, addressed: "Georgia State University Archives, or Occupant." My favorite, though, is the story of the grade-school daughter of a well-known archivist. Unable for a second time to explain to her classmates what in heaven's name her father did, she got past the predicament by blurting out: "He's dead!"

We always laugh at these stories. And we should. We have to be able to laugh at ourselves, to be sure. But more and more, the laughter I am hearing is nervous, unsettled, uncomfortable. Collectively, these stories and all the others like them that each and every one of us can tell from our own personal experience reflect ignorance and failure: ignorance by the public of the nature and purpose of archival work, ignorance of the benefits society enjoys as a result of our labors, and failure on our part to eradicate that ignorance.

If the problem were only minor incidents like these stories, we would have little concern. But in fact these incidents

The author is state archivist of Texas and incoming president of the Society of American Archivists. This article is adapted from his greeting to the membership at SAA's 47th annual meeting, 8 October 1983, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

represent a much more serious problem: the misshapen image / concept / stereotype—call it what you will—of the archivist and archival work in the mind of the non-archivist. Some, who have a modest appreciation of our contributions to society, portray us with a real, but shabby, grandeur. Others see archivists as permanently humped, moleish, aged creatures who shuffle musty documents in dust-filled stacks for a purpose uncertain. But the majority, I suspect, like the person with whom John Kinney talked, has no image of us at all.

How long can we continue to bury this public ignorance in laughter? The misconception by our publics and by those with the power to allocate resources to our repositories strikes at the heart of our existence and ability to function. With diminished resources, every activity of archives suffers. We lack people to arrange and describe holdings; we lack space to receive and maintain holdings; we lack resources for preservation work. Every one of us feels the effects.

Ah, the typical leader, some will sigh. He is setting up a straw man to knock down. But am I? The legislatures of Maine and West Virginia did not consider abolishing their state archives, in 1973 and 1979 respectively, because they thought archives essential. The attacks over the last few years on the budgets and the organization of the National Archives and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission demonstrate in chilling fashion that the present administration in Washington thinks these institutions anything but basic to our national survival and self-interest.

If you wanted to think these only isolated incidents, read in the September 1983 issue of *Annotation* (the newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission) the synopses of the statements by the persons who

analyzed the reports from the first round of State Needs Assessment Grants. Bill Joyce of the New York Public Library, after studying what nearly two dozen states submitted on conditions in their historical manuscripts repositories, wrote:

Lack of public understanding and regard leads to underfunding of historical records repositories and underutilization of their holdings. This process has a circular effect in that low use perpetuates low funding which prevents repositories from upgrading the management of their collections which might in turn increase their use [which, of course, could raise public understanding and appreciation, and thereby funding].

Ed Bridges of the Alabama Department of Archives and History found an all too similar situation with state archives:

The assessment reports [he wrote] show little evidence that we have clearly defined the products of our work or have convincingly demonstrated their value to our states. . . . The picture of the public records programs shows inadequate resources which prevent us from mounting effective programs which in turn renders us vulnerable to the disregard of departmental administrators and state budget officials.

As if the present is not bad enough, the future is ominous. Ask yourself what use moleish, humped, retiring paper shufflers will be in the computer age? If that is all we are perceived to be, it takes no crystal ball to divine the answer. And is it only coincidence that records management for the federal government has been pulled away from the National Archives and Records Service and placed under a data processing function?

The threat to our programs and our profession resulting from our un-

satisfactory image is real, and it is here now.

To come to grips with the non-archivists' uninformed and distorted image of the archivist, we need first, of course, to be confident of the image we have of ourselves. The long and useful work toward guidelines and standards, in which we have been engaged for the past several years, reflects a proud, dedicated, and concerned profession. We have created a new code of ethics, a program for institutional evaluation, and guidelines for the content of academic courses in archival administration. We have adopted standards for college and university archives. Most recently, Council called on a group to prepare a definition of the archivist, soon to be published in the *SAA Newsletter* for critique, and agreement on which will be basic to work on our image.

For some years individual repositories have devoted energy to outreach, those activities undertaken to expand public awareness of archives. Fruits of their good work have been on view this week in the screening of eleven examples of media productions by and about repositories and programs. The concern for outreach is paying off in both numbers and sophistication of the products.

Having all these foundations to build on, Council, at my request, has taken the next step and launched a program to tackle, on the national level, the problem of our image in the public mind. In June 1983 Council created a Task Force on Archives and Society and gave it four charges:

First, to draft a statement, that all of us can use, on the importance of archives to and in society;

Second, to propose ways and means that we—as individuals, as professionals in our societies, and

as employees of our institutions—can use to raise public awareness, appreciation, understanding, and support of archival work;

Third, to list the two or three highest priority national projects for the SAA to undertake over the next few years; and

Fourth, to serve as a clearinghouse of information and ideas.

The six-person Task Force, chaired by Frank H. Mackaman of the Dirksen Congressional Research Center, and consisting of Faye Phillips, Troup County (Georgia) Archives; Bruce Dearstyne, New York State Archives; Linda Henry, American Psychiatric Association; James A. Nelson, State Librarian and Commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives; and Kevin Flood, National Archives Trust Fund, already has met twice. You will be hearing of it soon.

But no group of six people can possibly do all that needs to be done. Consequently, I have asked every PAG—henceforth to be Section—and every regional association to join in the effort: to study and work on the problem in its field or area, to consider what groups in the public need to be reached and in what priority, to suggest means that will be most effective, and who should do the work in each case, and, finally, as they study, to establish committees or other bodies to begin the work and to maintain a focus on the issue of Archives and Society.

John Adams, the second president of the United States and a shrewd observer of his times, when once asked about the American Revolution, inquired, in reply, what the questioner meant by the Revolution. The war, Adams said, was not the real revolution. The real revolution, the first American Revolution, was in the minds and hearts of the people in deciding that the situation with which

they were confronted demanded change.

Unless I mistake what I hear, we are entering now the first archival revolution. We are recognizing *the cause* of our inability to provide adequate care for the permanently valuable papers and records of our society. More importantly, we are deciding that we—we—must take the bull by the horns. There was no quick fix in 1776; there is none now. Bringing change will require grassroots involvement and work by all of us. But by pooling our ideas, by working within our Sections, our regional associations, and our repositories, we will create in the public mind an understanding of and support for archival care of our irreplaceable documentary heritage. We must begin somewhere; let it be here. We must begin sometime; let it be now. I do not want to spend the rest of my life as an “orchidvist” or dead. Do you?