

The President's Page

The Call from the Grassroots: Rise and Shine

DAVID B. GRACY II

A couple of months ago I received a copy of a college newspaper reporting awards given on campus for innovative research at and distinguished service to the institution. There on the front page, adjacent to an article entitled "Quest for Excellence," the university archivist was cited for contributions to the institution and was quoted both at length and well on the nature, value, and importance of the holdings under his custody. I was proud and pleased for the archivist and the profession, until I focused on the incongruous, disgusting headline of the piece: "Archivist Surfaces to Accept Award."

Surfaces, really! Are archivists subterranean creatures; is the work we do worth no more than all the stories of basements and closets and dust and mold so commonly associated with us? Attention to the image of archivists in the minds of non-archivists (the *raison d'être* of the Task Force on Archives and Society) is long overdue.

Cruel evidence of the misunderstanding by our publics—administrators, colleagues in allied professions, users of ar-

chives, and the community at large—of the ways archives serve society piles up as we become more conscious of it. More than fifty archivists echoed the fact in responding to my letter of last December, in which I identified the mistaken and unsatisfactory image under which we labor as the greatest problem of our profession today. Because of it, we are denied the resources required to provide the archival service society needs and deserves.

The archivists who responded pointed to two primary causes for our unacceptable image. One is outside of us, namely, the under- or unappreciation of history. As archives are connected in the public mind with historical interests, the value of archives to society at large rises and falls in concert with the perceived value of history. The appreciation of history—and consequently of archives as well—is at low ebb in 1984. "We have to start at the very root of the problem," one person wrote, "the appreciation and understanding of history by the individual."

The place to begin here is in defining the "publics" with which we are work-

ing. Many archivists pointed to employers and upper-level administrators as the "public" on which our efforts would be spent the most profitably. The Task Force on Archives and Society, at its spring meeting, strongly agreed and has set about to conduct a survey, utilizing a marketing research organization, to identify the perceptions and stereotypes held by administrators two or three rungs above archivists on the organizational ladder. These persons, usually lacking intimate knowledge of archival service, often hold the purse strings and make major decisions affecting our ability to provide that service. To broaden and deepen (and in some cases to correct) their perception, we must first know what it is.

The other cause of our disturbing image is we ourselves. A common theme among the letters was that archivists' low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and confusion about professional identity are foundations of, or at least obstacles to, changing our poor public image. "Since we archivists so often put on a Rodney Dangerfield I-don't-get-no-respect act, we have to admit quite simply that we are often our own worst enemies by not taking pride in our work and not doing it well," the author of one letter declared.

To bring change to the way others look at us, we must revise how we look at ourselves and our profession. In suggesting ways to get started, more than half of the writers felt that it is up to each of us to market—to represent—the archival profession. We must become more assertive in promoting both ourselves as archivists and our archival programs. Some suggested that "outreach archivist" become a standard staff position, and one ar-

chives already is working to establish the job. Others believe that the time has come to institute a process of certification of individual archivists. Establishing standards by which both we and those around us can measure our abilities and accomplishments, these writers argue, would advance the profession and improve the image of archivists more effectively and speedily than any other activity.

It is clear from the responses to my letter that archivists have been, and are now, concerned about their image and the serious detrimental affect that the public's inaccurate conception of archival work has on our ability to preserve the permanently valuable records and papers of our time, our region, our society, indeed, of humanity.

If you have not yet written the Task Force and me concerning your own experiences in facing our unsatisfactory image and with your ideas for combating the misperceptions, do it! In addition, come to the open house of the Task Force on Archives and Society during the SAA's annual meeting in September. The Task Force will consider all your suggestions in formulating its recommendations for actions that can be taken by the SAA on a national scale, by regional organizations in their areas, by repositories with their clienteles, and by us as individuals. Participate in the discussion of ways and means of improving the image of archives.

Who more than archivists must work to insure that, in this age of information, archival service is not, from ignorance, casually abandoned as if obsolete? It is time for archivists to surface once and for all.