

Commentary

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As Mae West once said, “Whenever I’m confronted with a choice between two evils, I kinda like to go for the one I never tried before.”¹ The two evils that archivists face in today’s world are the neglect of adequate documentation of society to the detriment of future researchers, versus documentation so extensive that no one will be able to wade through all of it in two or three lifetimes. Archivists seem to have tried the first evil over the past century or so, and now it is being proposed that they lean towards the other one for a change.

In their usual thorough manner, Helen Samuels and Richard Cox have addressed the question of the archivist’s first responsibility and have brought forth all of the possible reasoned arguments on the subject; they provided a most sensible case for the need of an agenda for archivists to follow in pursuit of the elusive historical documentation on almost every aspect of twentieth-century American life, from family sociology to the mysteries of outer space. If we, as archivists, follow their plan, it will not be our fault if future generations do not understand what this generation did, how and why we did it, and what great contributions we made to civilization as a whole.

If this sounds either cynical or implicitly critical of Cox and Samuels and their thesis, it is not. What it is cynical about and critical of is the perception that modern society has of itself, and the somewhat unnatural desire to project that perception into

the future by documenting every aspect of today’s life “for the record.” How many of us are guilty of traveling past a spectacular scenic overlook, stopping the car, jumping out, taking two or three photos with our Nikon, then jumping back in the car and looking forward to savoring the pictures later? How many would leave the camera in the car, step out, sit on a rock, contemplate the immutable order of the universe before us, philosophize on the glories of nature, and then carry that image in our own photographic memory for the rest of our lives, but have it die with us?

The question here is one of ultimate use. Archivists do not gather or retain records just to fill up their stacks—although sometimes I wonder. The thrust of the Cox/Samuels article is on appraisal, an activity that should help archivists select the wheat from the chaff and, if the stacks do fill up, dictate that it is only with “good stuff.” But I wonder about that, too. The documentation strategies Cox and Samuels propose seem to concentrate on what archivists, librarians, museum curators, and other curatorial types believe should be kept, when in fact there is no good indication of what gaps currently exist in national holdings, or what the user may want, or even who the user might be. It gives one pause to realize that of the 200,000 research visits to the nation’s largest archives, where the material is so unique it is not duplicated in any other institution in the world—a natural magnet for serious researchers—70 or

¹Quoted (by memory) from the film “My Little Chickadee.”

About the author: Frank G. Burke has been a practicing archivist since 1962 when he was Assistant Curator for Archives and Manuscripts at the University of Chicago, a position he held while working for the Ph.D. in history. In 1964 he joined the staff of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, and in 1967 moved to the National Archives as information retrieval specialist. He has since been Director of Educational Programs, Executive Director of the NHPRC, and for thirty-two months was Acting Archivist of the United States. His publications are mostly concerned with archival automation, but in recent years he has emphasized the development of archival theory and the expansion of formalized academic education for archivists.

80 percent of these researchers are genealogists. So for whom are archivists saving these documents?

One of the paper's faults is that it proposes that archival retention practices be studied by archivists and manuscript curators. It may be true that archivists lead the historians—that is, what we save is what they discover—on the premise that if there are no documents there can be no history. But that tradition comes essentially out of the duty of archivists to determine what is the shear line in the course of human events; where is the critical change, who is the new pacesetter, what is happening to establish the new pattern? The archivist's ability to recognize the important transitional documents in society benefits historians, who either set their mind to studying changes in history or who are led to study such changes because the documentation has been preserved and is available.

But to make plans for analyzing everything being created, including published materials, in order to partition off the world of knowledge and keep everything important seems to be beyond the archivist's ken, or indeed, may be far beyond historical necessity. The Cox/Samuels essay talks about the previous lack of resources in the archival community to do such work, but then praises the infusion of funds for that purpose from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the Mellon Foundation. The reasoning is faulty. The outside funds generally go to working archivists who, as the paper notes, then take released time from their "normal" duties to meet with colleagues, establish standards, and devise strategies. What, however, is happening to their own collections when they are gone? The backlog builds, records remain unprocessed, finding aids remain unwritten, and one wonders if the

research world has gained very much as a result of all of the planning and negotiating instead of dealing with the problems of the moment.

The Cox/Samuels agenda lays all of these duties of planning, designing, structuring, and documenting on the practicing archivist, entrusting the laboratory work, so to speak, to the clinician. It certainly seems better and more reasonable for this research and planning and evaluation of assembled data to be in the hands of those whose life-role is to do such things—that is, the academic archivist.

But, it could truly be said, there are only a few academic archivists. And that, of course, is just the point. Archivists' strategy should be to create a body of academic archivists who can attack these problems on real, not borrowed, time. It is a call that I have made before,² but one that cannot be responded to until archivists build up the professionalism of the archival community by establishing an academic base from which all can profit.

I am concerned, however, that we as archivists are basing our perceptions of what should be done on an archival perspective. It is the user question that bothers me. Have we missed something, or are we not perceiving that researchers, and especially historians, have changed their *modus operandi* in regards to documentary sources? There is evidence of this in the reduced sales of documentary editions, and the elimination of academic courses in historical method and the use of documentary sources. There appear to be fewer visits to the documentary search rooms of repositories. Instead of studying how much and what kind of documentation should be saved, perhaps archivists should study what research methodology is being employed, what the historians are doing for sources, and then whether it is appropriate, in spite of their

²Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40–46.

methods, to continue to retain or search out certain documentation. A Canadian study of 1985 might be a good model to examine.³

I often think that archivists are in a kind of time-warp, and have become stuck with "history as we know it," or as we learned it years ago in college. Have we been keeping up with trends in historical research? Is what we are saving relevant to the kind of research being done? One reads Michael Kammen and Hazel Hertzberg and comes away wondering if documentalists are really dinosaurs.⁴ We still consider historicism as the basis for historical studies—analyzing the past through its remains, especially documentary remains, in order to understand it. But the textbook and popular history writers emphasize the "living history approach." As Hertzberg has stated: "Methodologies and materials [in the 1970s] included films, filmstrips, television, audio and video tapes, role playing, simulation, games, computer-assisted instruction, and team teaching."⁵ Something—documentation—is missing. But Michael Kammen explains: "As vast amounts of primary and secondary source materials accumulate, as new monographs crowd the . . . shelves, we realize that familiar explanatory frames of reference have broken down and cease to explain the past adequately."⁶

As for the increase in genealogical research, Samuel P. Hays in 1975 suggested genealogical and community research by stu-

dents in order to tie historical phenomena to individual experiences, and Robert M. Taylor and Ralph J. Crandall have recently produced a work entitled *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History*.⁷ What we obviously are witnessing is that great coming together of the two opposites of historical research—universalism and particularism—to make history from the ground up, if not ground-up history.

Where do masses of archives have a role in all of this? Should archivists reevaluate retention and collecting policies based, not on what we think we need, but on what we feel researchers will use? Maybe that is part of any strategy, but it doesn't sound like the Cox/Samuels one to me.

Another question relates to cooperation and coverage. Although I concur in and have written about general archival cooperation in technical and other areas,⁸ I have never been a proponent of collecting cooperation—for two reasons. The corporate archivist automatically owns the corporate records and is not "collecting" in a cooperative environment. For the manuscript curator, competition is the lifeblood of the profession. In the case of a university graduate who became governor, then senator, then United States president, I cannot imagine either the university's special collections, the state historical society, the Library of Congress, or one of the presidential libraries forswearing all rights to the collection so that one of the other institutions

³Public Archives of Canada, *Major Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Researcher and Public Service Component Evaluation Study*, 2 vols. (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, November 1985). This study, conducted for the PAC by the firm of Currie, Coopers & Lybrand, resulted from a comprehensive survey made of the researcher services, public outreach, exhibitions, and professional activity of the Public (now the National) Archives of Canada.

⁴Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), esp. "Introduction: The Historian's Vocation and the State of the Discipline in the United States," 19–48; Hazel Whitman Hertzberg, "The Teaching of History," in Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us*, 474–504.

⁵Hertzberg, "Teaching of History," 500.

⁶Kammen, *Past Before Us*, 34.

⁷Samuel P. Hays, "History and the Changing University Curriculum," *History Teacher* 13 (1975): 64–72; Robert M. Taylor and Ralph J. Crandall, eds., *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986).

⁸Frank G. Burke, "Archival Cooperation," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983): 293–305.

might benefit from its acquisition. Should it be broken up, and parts sent to all four places?

Of course, that's not what Cox/Samuels are saying. They are saying that archivists have to determine what parts of society have not yet been covered and then systematically go after that documentation. But how does one know what has not been covered, except in the obvious areas that the report covers, such as government contractors? In an unpublished paper delivered a few years ago at a professional meeting, Robert Rosenthal, Curator of Special Collections at the University of Chicago, devised a strategy for evaluating coverage of documentary sources in the United States.⁹ With the computer it will be even easier to do so. He suggested the first step was to analyze the 54,000+ collections now listed in the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) and hold them up against a model of what there should be. Also now available is the new edition of the NHPRC *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*, which lists over 4,000 repositories and their collection policies and holdings.¹⁰ The computerized Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) could also be searched. It appears that archivists have enough resources to determine the areas of need before establishing strategies to "correct" inadequacies. The Cox/Samuels paper, not taking account of what went on before, is a form of archival creationism. I, myself, am an evolutionist.

My major points are that I am not sure for whom archivists are collecting, or that what they are collecting is really wanted or needed. I do not think that collecting co-operation is viable in the real world, given the human bent towards healthy competi-

tion. I am not sure that archivists know what the collecting gaps are, even though there is plenty of opportunity to plot out repository holdings; they seem not to want to undertake the drudge work of analyzing the data.

In addition, I believe that resources are being squandered when working archivists take time out from their patrons in order to plan strategies, study patterns, and devise appropriate remedies. Such theoretical work should be in the hands of the research archivist—as soon as there is a body of research archivists placed in an appropriate setting. That, I believe, is our *first* responsibility. Although thoughtful and perceptive, the Cox/Samuels article is addressed to the wrong audience. For the most part the working archivist, even in the setting of a professional organization, has neither the time nor the resources to undertake their charge. In this case, grant funds merely sidetrack the working archivists from their real responsibilities, and there are not enough consulting archivists around to do the legwork and heavy thinking for the rest of the profession. There is a small research and evaluation staff at the National Archives; its work is good but, by traditional archival standards, very expensive. The solution is to create a body of thinking, planning, and experimenting archivists, in an academic setting, where parts of each problem can be parceled out to graduate student investigators, and the problem as a whole can be studied, theorized over, modeled, tested, and the results disseminated through the professional literature. Some archivists employed in academic archives can get away with such things for a while, but most others are subject to the accusation that inter-institutional theorizing and planning are not in the terms of their employment. There

⁹Robert Rosenthal, "The Minotaur Among the Manuscripts" (Unpublished paper read at annual meeting, Society of American Archivists, San Francisco, 14 October 1971), 5.

¹⁰National Historical Publications and Records Commission, *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1988).

will be a true archival profession only when archivists recognize that some segment of the profession is responsible for intellectualizing archival processes.

Other than these points, I agree with the thrust of the Cox/Samuels article and com-

mend them for their stimulating ideas. What they are proposing, however, is that instead of picking up the pieces from the societal terminal moraine, archivists attempt to control the glacier. A formidable task!

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