

Commentary

JACQUELINE GOGGIN

Continuing attention to use and users in recent archival literature and sessions at professional meetings indicates that archivists are increasingly more concerned with use and users. It is time, therefore, to move beyond consciousness-raising to implementation of archival practices based on existing knowledge. Although it is difficult to disagree with Lawrence Dowler's call for more research on users, it should be noted that there have been a number of studies on users that thus far have had little discernible effect on archival theory or practice.¹ Dowler points out, for example, that archivists know that most of their users are genealogists, that archives staff are the major users in some repositories, that archival holdings have a vast potential for research by a variety of users, and that scholarly users most often find out about archival holdings through informal researcher networks and footnotes in published sources. Despite this knowledge, archival administrative practices related to use and users have changed very little. Archivists can continue researching various aspects of use and users and collect moun-

tains of data, but unless information resulting from these studies is implemented to change archival practices as well as archivists' attitudes toward users, these efforts will continue to be in vain.

Archivists must be blamed for the underutilization of archives because they have not traditionally viewed their most important mission to be educating the public—potential users—about archives. To ensure the successful implementation of much of Dowler's proposal for a research agenda on the use of records, archivists' attitudes towards users must change. Dowler originally entitled his essay, "The Professional Archivist: Researcher or Storekeeper," a title which accurately captured the current state of affairs in the archival community. Without a dramatic shift in attitude towards use and users, archivists will remain "storekeepers," rather than "researchers." The following remarks will concentrate on Dowler's discussion of mediation and of the perceptions and attitudes of archival staff and their impact on use, since, in my view, these areas are the ones needing the greatest attention. The public will

¹Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "An Agenda for the Appraisal of Business Records," in *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance*, ed. Nancy Peace (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1984), 61–79; Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (Summer 1986): 35–56; Clark A. Elliott, "Citation Patterns and Documentation for the History of Science: Some Methodological Considerations," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143–50; Jacqueline Goggin, "The Indirect Approach: A Study of Scholarly Users of Black and Women's Organizational Records in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (Summer 1986): 57–67; William J. Maher, "The Use of User Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (Summer 1986): 15–26; Fredric Miller, "Use, Appraisal, and Research: A Case Study of Social History," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 371–92; Leonard Rapport, "In the Valley of Decision: What To Do about the Multitude of Files of Quasi Cases," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 173–89; and Margaret Steig, "The Information of [sic] Needs of Historians," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981): 544–60. Also see Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393–407; Bruce W. Dearstyne, "What is the Use of Archives? A Challenge for the Profession," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 76–87; Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111–23; William L. Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 124–33; and Roy C. Turnbaugh, "Archival Mission and Use Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (Summer 1986): 27–33.

never use, or even appreciate, archives as long as archivists' attitudes do not change.

That the public will use historical records when given the opportunity was evident in the response to several presentations I witnessed in the fall of 1986, when I attended a meeting of amateur historians, genealogists, school teachers, and community leaders, sponsored by the Maryland Commission on Afro-American History and Culture. Although only one archivist attended, and it is unlikely that others took the initiative to discover that the group was meeting or to inquire about the ways that archival materials could be used to educate the audience, librarians were well represented at the meeting. One gave a presentation on sources for research and an oral history program in her community. Another presentation was made by an English professor from St. Mary's College, who had acquired copies of photographs of blacks taken in St. Mary's County during the New Deal era. She identified individuals in the old photographs, took new ones, and collected oral histories of these individuals' experiences since the 1930s. Calling her effort the "Saint Mary's County Documentation Project," she apparently was aware of the newest archival "buzz word," but did not consult an archivist and did not make plans for the disposition of the materials she had collected. I mention these incidents only as examples of the many opportunities archivists have to expand public knowledge—and therefore use—of historical records.

Recent studies of users of historical records, as Dowler indicates, have proved what archivists have always suspected—that scholars are not the major users, even though many archivists concede that they would rather be serving scholars. Providing scholars with reference service has been viewed as the ultimate reward for all other archival

activities. Since changing careers and, as a documentary editor, moving to the other side of the reference desk, I have become much more aware of researchers' needs and less sympathetic to the problems of reference archivists. I am struck by the poor quality of reference service in too many of the nation's repositories. The quality of service has little to do with geographical region, type of repository, or the resources of the facility. Rather, it depends on the training and personality of the person providing reference service. Many reference archivists do not view their jobs as rewarding, and some are not "user-friendly," even to scholarly researchers. I found this to be the case in more than a dozen of the fifty repositories to which I traveled to collect materials on J. Franklin Jameson.

Although I usually wrote in advance of my visit, like genealogist Mary N. Speakman, author of the article "The User Talks Back,"² I still found archivists who acted surprised and annoyed when I walked through their doors. As a former reference archivist, I could understand why security, access policies, and rules and regulations were enforced, but many archivists spent more time explaining these and other procedures than in providing reference service. Some archivists acted totally uninterested in my research. Many were merely interested in the collections I wanted to use, not in what I intended to do with them. Staff at some repositories seemed to prefer that their collections not be used at all. If you doubt this, I suggest that you visit several repositories chosen at random; do not give them advance notice of your visit or inform them that you are an archivist. Obviously, one could not expect the best service if the reference staff were unprepared for your visit. Yet, if use is the primary mission of an archives, which is what archivists would like to think, the ref-

²Mary N. Speakman, "The User Talks Back," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 164-71. Also see the letters from archivists and Speakman's reply, "The Forum," *American Archivist* 47 (Fall 1984): 352-53.

erence staff should do their best to assist you. Most, of course, will; too many, however, will not.

Much of the difficulty archivists have in providing reference service stems from lack of training. Unlike librarians, archivists are not formally trained to provide reference service, unless they went to library school. The training that does exist emphasizes rules and procedures rather than how to listen, ask questions, or teach researchers to make the best use of a repository. As Dowler points out, very little has been written on archival reference service or on methods of teaching reference skills. Most archivists learn on the job, sometimes at the researcher's expense. Even when archivists do listen, ask questions, and teach users about the repository, few conduct follow-up and exit interviews with researchers, or systematically collect information from them that could be used to improve finding aids to holdings.

Publishing guides to holdings and reporting holdings to the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* or RLIN certainly improves access, but more important is the service provided in the repository once the researcher arrives to examine those holdings. As Paul Conway demonstrates in his study of users of presidential libraries, personal service is valued more than good finding aids.³

The desire for personal service, of course, extends beyond the archival realm. In February 1987 *Time* magazine devoted an issue to the decline in the service economy. While service industries are the fastest growing sectors of this country's economy, the quality of personal service continues to de-

cline every year. *Time's* writers asserted that the major problems are competition, low pay, and lack of training. Several of their conclusions are particularly applicable to archives: "Businesses in general spend too little time training and motivating their front-line employees, whom they treat as the lowest workers on the ladder. . . . Too much of the training tends to dwell on handling the machinery of a job rather than the feelings of the customers."⁴ Some businesses are trying to correct the situation, and "quality of service" has become a new "buzz word" in the corporate world. In Miami, for example, all cab drivers must now take a three-hour course in courtesy called "Miami Nice" before they can obtain a license. Perhaps a similar course is in order for archivists.

Archivists can improve the quality of reference service to scholarly users by asking scholars directly how their research needs can be better met. Recently, the Organization of American Historians' newsletter devoted two pages to an article on the National Archives by historian Robert Ferrell. Ferrell, whose remarks might be discounted as those of an angry scholar whose research trip was unsuccessful, asserted: "NARA should be at least as concerned with reaching out to the research community as it apparently is with 'outreaching' to the general public."⁵ Yet, if archivists want scholars to use their holdings, they cannot continue to assume that it is the scholar's responsibility to find out about these holdings.

There are signs, however, that archivists are beginning to take steps in the right direction. Several archivists have prepared for

³Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (Summer 1986): 35-56.

⁴*Time*, 2 February 1987, 51-52.

⁵Robert Ferrell, "The National Archives," *OAH Newsletter* 15 (May 1987): 9-10. Much of the article quotes from Robert Wolfe's 1982 testimony before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations. Like Ferrell, Wolfe, a senior supervisory archivist at NARA, believes that too much time and excessive resources are spent on public programs and exhibits. The article was particularly damaging to the National Archives and deserves a response from National Archives officials. The August 1987 and subsequent issues of the *OAH Newsletter*, however, carried no response.

publication in scholarly journals articles on archival sources in their custody.⁶ Both the *Journal of American History* (JAH) and the *American Historical Review* recently published articles on archives.⁷ Unfortunately, the JAH editors did not think enough of archivists to ask them to write the articles on resources for black history in the June 1987 issue.⁸ Surely archivists would have done a better job. More archivists are attending meetings of historians and even presenting papers on archival issues. At the 1985 OAH meeting in Minneapolis, for example, Francis Blouin, Helen Samuels, and Ruth Simmons discussed appraisal. More than a dozen archivists were present at the Philadelphia meeting of the OAH in 1987. These are small but significant steps that will help the scholarly user not only become more aware of archival issues, but also see that archivists are more than mere custodians.

According to F. Gerald Ham, archivists had entered a "post-custodial" era by 1981 that required them to change their behavior and their administrative practices.⁹ Although Ham's focus in this seminal article was not on reference or the use of archives, many of his ideas were extended to the use

of archives in *Planning for the Archival Profession*, the report produced by the Task Force on Goals and Priorities that Ham chaired.¹⁰ The report called for increased research on users and their use of archives, and, as Dowler argues, it is clear that studies of archival users provide valuable information that archivists can implement to improve administration of archival materials. To obtain broad support for archival programs from a more diverse constituency, archivists will have to develop more and better outreach activities and public programs. A key element, if not the major one, of the current campaign of the Society of American Archivists Committee on Goals and Priorities (CGAP) and the Task Force on Archives and Society is to make the public aware of who archivists are and what they do. Only when the public understands what archivists do and what archival institutions are all about will it use archives and support archival programs. While both CGAP and the task force have made many good suggestions, individual archivists in repositories across the country will have to implement these suggestions. There is much work to be done.

⁶Ann Schofield, "Mother Jones in Kansas: An Archival Note," *Labor History* 27 (Summer 1986): 431-32; and Spencer Crew and John Fleckner, "Archival Sources for Business History," *Business History Review* 60 (Autumn 1986): 474-86.

⁷Michael Les Benedict, "Historians and the Continuing Controversy over Fair Use of Unpublished Manuscript Materials," *American Historical Review* 91 (October 1986): 859-81; and Dale Reed and Michael Jakobson, "Trotsky Papers at the Hoover Institution: One Chapter of an Archival Mystery Story," *American Historical Review* 92 (April 1987): 363-75.

⁸While Zangrando's article was thorough in its coverage of source materials for the history of the civil rights movement, White's article was very inadequate. In both cases, however, I believe, archivists would have written more comprehensive essays. See Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 237-42; and Robert L. Zangrando, "Manuscript Sources for Twentieth-Century Civil Rights Research," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 243-51.

⁹F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207-16.

¹⁰*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986).