

Perspectives

Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep

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Abstract: The value of archives (records) to society defines the value of archival enterprise. When a columnist compares archivists to a fictional person who takes ultimate professional delight in studying feces, it is time to look at the ways that archivists describe the material with which they work. The author criticizes the current glossary definition of *archives* and offers significantly different definitions, both formal and informal, that archivists can use to improve the public's perception of the value of archives.

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THE TIME WAS JANUARY 1987. The place, Eureka Springs in the magnificent, snow-covered Ozark Mountains of northwestern Arkansas. Townspeople call that time of year “the secret season.” The tourists have deserted the place for warmer climes, and it is so quiet around town that, one resident observed, “you [can]. . . roll a ball down Spring Street and not hit a soul. . . .” It is a time, too, when natives turn inward. So it was that January with Crescent Dragonwagon and Ned.

Ms. Dragonwagon is a writer; that is how I know these events.¹ This particular January, after a prolonged cold period, after looking for days on end through the barren branches of the dormant trees and seeing nothing but houses clinging “so impossibly to hillsides and ravines they appear held in place by will,” cabin fever, she wrote, took hold of Ms. Dragonwagon and Ned. They had to get out, to escape to the big city. And they knew exactly where they wanted to go.

Fayetteville, Arkansas, is not just any big city, it is the seat of the University of Arkansas. More particularly, the Special Collections Department of the University library holds the Dragonwagon Papers. Ms. Dragonwagon must have smiled to herself as she thought about the trip. For a person whose livelihood rests solely on her own industry, a visit to Special Collections could justify the trip. Enough drafts of manuscripts had accumulated that she could make a gift. “Special Collections at the University of Arkansas library is always happy when I clean up,” she mused.

The image of the archives as a place to deposit cast-off papers lodged firmly, however playfully, in both of their minds. When a friend they chanced to meet in Fayette-

ville on their way to Special Collections asked what brought them to the city, Crescent answered unhesitatingly: cabin fever and Special Collections. “Yeah,” Ned elaborated, “it was Special Collections or R&D Hauling.” R&D, Crescent explained, “is our trash service.”

At Special Collections, Crescent and Ned met Director Mike Dabrishus, for several years head of reference services at the Texas State Archives during my tenure as State Archivist, a former president of the Society of Southwest Archivists, and as fine an archivist as our profession has. Mike, Crescent recalled, “was ecstatic with my offerings.” I can picture that; Mike can make anyone feel at home anywhere. Indeed, Crescent was so impressed that she wanted to, nay, felt obligated to, report to all the world through her column in *Arkansas Times* just what archivists are like. “Archivists are easy to please,” she wrote in the January 1988 issue. “Like the genius-scientist-magus character in [Robertson Davies’s] *The Rebel Angels*, who studies excrement, they find value beyond reckoning in what others discard.”²

For Crescent and Ned, the day in Fayetteville had been a success; for archival enterprise, a disaster. For having done nothing more than work to define and preserve for continuing use the manuscripts and other papers of one writer, archives were publicly branded as depositories for the results of cleaning up and hauling trash, and archivists as, at best, keepers of trash and, at worst, revelers in the ultimate refuse.

Well, if you have become satisfied that the work of the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) Task Force on Archives and Society that led to the seminal Levy Report, which in turn introduced the term “resource allocator” into our vocabulary

¹The following relation is taken from Crescent Dragonwagon, “A Journal of a Winter Journey During Eureka’s Secret Season,” in “I Speak Arkansas,” *Arkansas Times* 14, no. 5, (January 1988): 24–25.

²*Ibid.*, 25. The book is Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (New York: Viking Press, 1982).

and pointed out that we archivists are accorded a prestige of virtue but a place of little importance, this story should make you uncomfortable. If you have turned your attention to other vital issues because the focus on Archives and Society is in somebody else's hands, thanks to the positive action of the SAA Council in establishing a Committee on Public Information to succeed the Task Force and in focusing its charge on activities the SAA can take to improve the archival image, this story should make you think twice. If you have become complacent over the need for attention to the archival image, this disgusting story should set you afire.³

Archives (meaning "records," not an agency or a building) are the core, the heart, the essence of our work. We as archivists are defined by them as the keepers of archives. Our best image, as well as our basic point of departure in responding to Ms. Dragonwagon, then, must be rooted in our definition of archives (records).

Archives, we tell the world in the glossary adopted by the Council of the SAA a decade and a half ago as the position of the profession, are "the noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because of their continuing value."⁴ Stop and think about that definition.

"The *noncurrent* records. . ." Crescent may have a point; that certainly sounds like trash to me. We begin with a word that

says "old," "stagnant," "out of date," "unimportant," and "of little moment." In a culture built from its beginnings nearly four centuries ago on the importance of what is happening in the present, on shaking off the past, and on marshalling forces to work on the future, a culture in which history, to be worthy of broad attention, must serve a utilitarian purpose, we are bold to state that archives are not current and to permit the inescapable inference that they are, as well, not in the forefront of matters.

"Noncurrent records. . .," hogwash. Archives are very current records—current, that is, from the perspective of their user, and since use is the purpose for which archives are kept, this is the perspective that matters. The researchers who visited the Provincial Archives of Manitoba not many years ago to study the logs of sailing vessels that entered Hudson Bay carrying goods for the Hudson's Bay Company were pursuing a very then-immediate problem—the feasibility of moving oil from Alaska to the lower United States via a water route. The question was whether, over a period of more than a century, the characteristic icing patterns were such as to rule out a year-round water passage on Hudson Bay.⁵ The answer was affirmative. In another instance, the attorney general of Texas, who used in the Texas State Archives maps, records of boundary claims, and other documents of Spanish, Mexican, Republic, and State governmental administrations to make the case that Texas owned the submerged lands in the Gulf of Mexico, not three miles offshore (as was the English tradition adopted by the United States) but three leagues (10.35 miles, the Spanish tradition), was working on a then-critically current, and still important, source of revenue for its owner, oil in the submerged lands in the Gulf of Mexico. Texas won. The

³The tragic irony is that Ms. Dragonwagon meant by the piece to praise archivists, not bury us. For those who hunt down a copy of the Davies book (and such a search actually provided a second motivation for Ms. Dragonwagon's trip to Fayetteville), the reward is discovering that the genius-scientist-magus character to whom she compares archivists is, in fact, a hero figure. Misunderstood by the broader public, this figure conducts meaningful work for the greater good of society. Regrettably, no reader of the Dragonwagon article not already familiar with the Davies book would suspect it.

⁴Frank B. Evans, et al., "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 417.

⁵Peter Bower to David B. Gracy II, interview, Winnipeg, 2 June 1986.

records utilized in the investigations in both Canada and Texas no longer were being used by their creators for the purposes for which the records had been produced, but they were far from “noncurrent records” in the use made of them. Watch a genealogist’s face light up upon discovery among the records of an ancestor and you witness joy in a new acquaintance, not a sense of out-datedness. No, each user has a current interest to pursue or need to satisfy in coming to an archival repository, and those archives—records—at which they look are very timely in the life and work of the user.

If the negative sound and connotation of the word *noncurrent* is not enough to give you second thoughts about our uninhibited use of it, consider that it is not even accurate. Some records appropriately considered archives are written to convey information to the future and, thus, no matter their age, always are current in the sense that, when consulted, they are performing the explicit purpose for which they were created. Reminiscences and memoirs are two records produced specifically to provide to any and every reader at any time in history information on a former activity of their creator. The same may be said of many diaries. Minutes are kept both to document the present and to serve in the indefinite future as official documentation of the actions they record. Whenever reference is made to them, minutes are fulfilling a purpose for which they were created. These are current records for all time, no matter the date of their writing.

For accuracy of definition, as well as for the image we present of archives, it is high time the word *noncurrent* was banished from our vocabulary.

“. . . records of an organization or institution. . . ,” the glossary definition continues. This phrase clearly fails to account for the archives-like materials of continuing value produced by individuals and families. It would count as archives the records of an office and count out the personal

papers of each occupant of that office, a meaning honored more in the breach than in practice, because it is frightfully arbitrary and ill-fitting. Curiously, the phrase does not even cover well what the Greeks meant when they coined the word *archives*. The ancient Greeks denoted by the term those documents of private individuals brought into a public repository and registered for public notice, similar to land or marriage records that contemporaries file in the offices of county recorders.⁶ These are not the records of an institution or organization in the same way that the records of a firm’s chief executive are the records of the organization. Though land and marriage records, properly filed, become the records of an organization—namely, county government—the change of title from private to organizational does not strip the records of their original private character. Instead, it broadens and elaborates that character.

“. . . preserved because of their continuing value,” the definition concludes. It goes without saying that the value in archives is the information they contain. Information, however, has worth only so long as it is accessible. Information unknown is ignorance. The physical presence of information-bearing records is not the same as intellectual access to those records. To be known, information in records requires the patient, skilled attention of an archivist arranging and describing the records to unlock the information in them by providing a way to it. The present definition is oddly silent on this vital point, namely, the role of archivists in the archival process. By the glossary definition, any pile of old records stashed in a damp basement, blistering attic, or insect-infested outbuilding, because they were affected with value by no more purposeful act than that of not being thrown

⁶Ernst Posner, *Archives of the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 91–95.

away, could be hallowed as *archives*. Archivists and the work we perform to make the information in records accessible, by our own glossary definition, are superfluous to archives. This brings us, once again, perilously close to Crescent Dragonwagon's synonym for *archives*—trash.

To my mind, and to the minds of the students who joined me in the spring of 1987 in launching the first Seminar in Archival Enterprise offered as part of our archival curriculum at the University of Texas at Austin, no amount of tinkering with the old definition could save it.⁷ We concluded that a new statement was imperative and spent a semester shaping it, as we followed the rise and development of archival enterprise from the beginning of writing to our own times. What we settled on is this:

ARCHIVES are

the records, organically related, of an entity,

[That is, they are the documentary production of a creator—the records of organizations and the papers of individuals, as distinguished from artificial collections of documents grouped around a subject interest, such as a gathering of otherwise unrelated items whose bond is simply that they bear the signature of individuals belonging to a special group—say framers of the Texas Declaration of Independence.]

systematically maintained

[Archival enterprise is required to expose the rich informational content to the prospective user.]

(normally after they have fulfilled the purpose for which they were created),

[Most records, but certainly not all, have served the purpose for which

they were produced and have entered their second—research—life, as T. R. Schellenberg defined it.] because they contain information of continuing value.

[Archives are not old records; they are permanently valuable information in records.]

No service profession, as ours is, can long exist in this age of empire building and takeover without being able to define the essence of its being in an accurate, succinct, formal statement. Clearly the one we presently quote is overdue for replacement.

As important—vitally important—as it is to have an accurate, expressive, informative full-dress definition of the material at the heart of our existence, it is equally true that more people will know us too tangentially to see that definition. Crescent Dragonwagon conjuring up the images of trash and feces presents a frightening example of what we can expect if we leave the crafting of popular, easy-to-remember informal definitions to the well-meaning but dangerously under-informed.

Informal definitions plant an image in the mind with a minimum of concrete data to engage thought about the implications of the image evoked. To anticipate areas in which informal definitions can be crafted, we need only look for those things that contemporaries value.

One thing precious to us is money. The editors of the *New York Times* know this. In a 30 March 1987 article announcing acquisition by the New York Public Library of the Arturo Toscanini Archives, the headline writer punctuated the article with a statement in large type: "Recordings, letters and other items are valued at \$2 million."⁸ The records are not for sale, of course. But clearly, archives are worth

⁷I express thanks to these students: Deborah Bryson, Laura Adams, Larry Landis, Gwyneth Cannon, Ron Stone, Jr., Fred Burchsted, Helen Stepp, and Emma Molina Widener.

⁸Will Crutchfield, "New York Library Obtains Toscanini Archive," *New York Times*, 30 March 1987.

money; money represents investment; and few responsible people will not appreciate the acquisition and preservation of an impressive investment. Indeed, money is so important that headline writers will refer to it even when no figure can be presented. A December 1987 *Wall Street Journal* article on the decline of corporate archives carried in bold letters the ominous statement: "In many cases, 'it's very hard to measure the contribution of an archive to the bottom line of a company,' says the manager of one corporate archive."⁹ "Hard" is not "impossible." If through no other action than appraisal, which permits systematic determination of which records lack value and therefore can be disposed of safely to save storage space (the value of which is readily quantifiable), there is always a way. We must be attentive in our own repositories to examples similar to those cited earlier of the use of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba and the Texas State Archives if we are to present an image that will promote archival work. Herbert White could not have said it more clearly when he wrote in *Library Journal* two years ago: "We will change the perception when we . . . concentrate on economic issues just as other professions do."¹⁰

A second value is usefulness. Mike Stovall, a painter and a resident of Thousand Oaks, California, needs to be told. He was quoted in a story in the *Austin (Texas) American-Statesman* as saying about the soon-to-be Ronald Reagan presidential archives: "To be honest with you, I kind of get the feeling it would be better to build a hospital in his name than a library housing things that people aren't going to care about. As far as society is concerned, I don't

think it [the presidential archives and library] will be of any value unless there's an exhibit to show his mistakes."¹¹ As bad as it is for Stovall to be blind to the fact that information in archives is used by countless researchers to pursue topics far beyond the life of their creator and in his ignorance to tar archives with the same brush he uses on their creator, Jon Anderson's view of archives as sentimental, if not idle, curiosities is worse. Anderson titled an article describing Boston University's archivist, Howard Gotlieb, this way: "The Archivist: A keeper of words and doodles who dreams of the ultimate attic."¹² Doodles? We have much to do to promote usefulness of archives outside the narrow circle of serious archives users.

A third value is *moment*, that is, utility in the present. It is our contemporaries, after all, who pay the bills to maintain the archival service, not persons of the past who created the records or those of the future who may use them. The public relations firm of Bozell, Jacobs, Kenyon, and Eckhardt, after looking at the perception of archives in society for the SAA, summed up the matter succinctly. The public has not been provided with answers to the questions "Who are archivists?", "What are archives?", and "Why archives?" Those are *the* questions, the firm's report stated.

Traditionally, archivists point to the inscription on the National Archives building—"What is Past is Prologue"—as [their] *raison d'être* . . . That's no longer sufficient. That hoary reference has very little relevance to today, the here and now. Archivists must communicate specific values, particular benefits to make

⁹Frederick Rose, "In Wake of Cost Cuts, Many Firms Sweep Their History Out the Door," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 December 1987.

¹⁰Herbert S. White, "Why Don't We Get Paid More?" *Library Journal*, 1 March 1986, 70.

¹¹Richard L. Berke, "Suburb is Divided on Library," *Austin American-Statesman*, 18 December 1987.

¹²Jon Anderson, "The Archivist: A keeper of words and doodles who dreams of the ultimate attic," (Photocopy from unidentified journal).

their records live—in short, provide information about archives that has a direct relevance to the lives of the American public.¹³

A fourth value of importance to contemporaries is a personal connection with history. One headline writer recognized it when he drew attention to an article on the National Archives of the United States with the eye-catching statement: “To read original documents from the Archives is to bring to life the drums and gunfire of a thousand battles, the laughter and exaltation of a million immigrants.”¹⁴ What draws genealogists into archives in such numbers that they constitute the largest single body of archives users if not a personal connection with their past? The concept of the importance of a personal connection with history should not take us by surprise. The SAA, as part of the Archives and Society initiative, published a flier that many archives used to introduce and explain archives. It was titled: “There is an ‘I’ in Archives—You are the ‘I’.”

A fifth value is the inescapable, fundamental character of archives as the documentary engine of mankind. César Gutiérrez Muñoz, former chief of the national archives of Peru, minced no words and set a bold example when he printed this statement inside his 1987 Christmas card:

Without a before, now did not exist and even less tomorrow. The archives, whose groups document the various aspects of the passing of humanity, give meaning to this inescapable continuity. Consequently, their preservation, organization, and use is a thing of transcendent importance, or said in other words, something of life or death.¹⁵

On the envelope he extended the message with the stamped line: “Care of the documentary patrimony of the nation is the obligation of all Peruvians.”

A sixth, and somewhat different, value is the modernity of the package—the way the message is presented. In this day, a medium involving pictures is as important as, if not more important than, straight text. The state archives of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, recognized this by publishing an explanatory brochure in a comic book format.¹⁶ The story begins with young Betín playing ball in front of the archives building. He wonders what goes on inside those walls and soon meets a helpful, outgoing archivist (what other kind is there?) eager to enlighten him. Betín checks his ball at the front desk and is taken on a superb Cook’s tour of the facility.

Colleagues, one of the most fundamental, recurring, and easily seen messages of and lessons in history is that where one is not moving forward, one is moving backward. Complacency is not moving forward. The society in which we live and which we serve is uncertain of the need for, value of, and use of archives. Crescent Dragonwagon (archives are trash, and the archivist is like one who studies feces), Mike Stovall (archives are things people aren’t going to care about), and Jon Anderson (archives are doodles in the ultimate attic)—these authors in their several ways are delivering not only to us, but, worse, also to the society that supports archival endeavor, that message of uncertainty. We cannot let it go unchallenged. Instead, we must confront it at its most basic level by revising the ways we define—formally and informally—the material with which we work. There is no refuge in complacency, because, archivists, you are what people think you keep.

¹³Society of American Archivists Task Force on Archives and Society, “Final Report,” 1987.

¹⁴David Kahn, “The Nation’s Memory Bank: Almost Anything You Want to Know About the United States Can be Found in the National Archives,” *The Review*, July 1985, 47–54.

¹⁵Copy in possession of the author.

¹⁶Archivo General del Estado, *Qué es el Archivo General del Estado* (Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado, 1987).