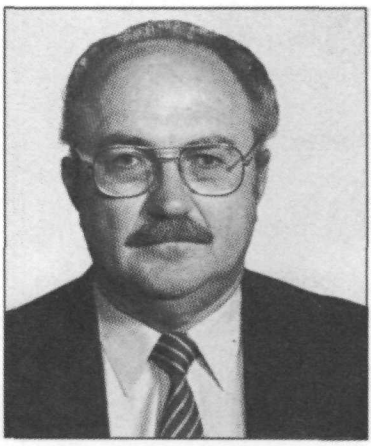
Presidential Address

American Archives, 1959-89: A Personal Perspective

FRANK B. EVANS



Frank B. Evans gave this presidential address at the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in St. Louis on 26 October 1989. Maynard Brichford, University of Illinois, introduced him on that occasion with these words: *Dr. Frank B. Evans served in the United States Navy during World War II and earned academic degrees in history at Pennsylvania State University in 1949, the University of Pennsylvania in 1950, and Pennsylvania State University in 1962. He taught history at Penn State from 1949 to 1958, joined the Pennsylvania State Archives in 1958, became state archivist in 1961, and joined the National Archives staff in 1963. In the past twenty-six years, he has held eleven administrative and staff positions at the National Archives, and is currently deputy assistant archivist for the Office of Records Administration. From 1963 to 1976, he directed the professional archival training program at the National Archives and taught as a lecturer and adjunct professor in the History Department of American University. He has taught archival administration and records management courses in the United States and around the world. From 1976 to 1984, he served with UNESCO in Paris as programme specialist and senior officer responsible for the development and implementation of a worldwide program of archival development. He is the author of more than sixty articles, our preeminent compiler of bibliographies, and editor of more than sixty UNESCO studies. He has been a speaker at numerous state, regional, national, and international meetings. He is a fellow of the Society of American Archivists and has been an active leader in the committee work of archival organizations at all levels.*

Like Chaucer's clerk of six centuries ago, Frank Evans has gladly learned and gladly taught. He has taught in Harrisburg, Washington, Paris, Khartoum, and Singapore. He represented an archival generation at our Toronto meeting in 1974. He has spoken for the archivists of the United States and for the international archival community.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, AFTER teaching history for nearly a decade and serving for a year on the staff of a State Archives, I decided to make archives my career and joined the Society of American Archivists. I should like to use this personal anniversary as a point of departure—to look back at the world of archives and its national organization as they existed thirty years ago; to compare them with our current situation; and to share with you some of my thoughts for the future.

Since this is a personal perspective, I feel obligated to acknowledge, to the extent that I am aware of them, possible predispositions, assumptions, and other limitations that may have influenced my perception and understanding. Much of my career has been concerned with government records at the local, state, national, and international levels, although I have also had significant experience with personal papers and other historical manuscripts, as well as with the records of private institutions. Early and continuing experience with records management, audio-visual records, and automated techniques have also helped shape my views, but my two major continuing activities and interests have been the education and training of archivists and international archival development. If these be transgressions, and if in my experience there be omissions, I admit culpability, but I say in all candor that I feel no remorse and I certainly have no regrets!

Once I had decided to make archives my career, I learned that the most highly-regarded education and training available was a four-week Institute on the Preservation and Administration of Archives, annually offered by the National Archives and cosponsored by the American University, the Library of Congress, and the Maryland Hall of Records. The institute had been established by Ernst Posner some twelve years earlier to help meet the serious need for post-appointment archival training; at that time virtually no one had pre-appointment training. The co-directors in 1960 were Posner and Theodore R. Schellenberg, and one of the major guest speakers was Oliver W. Holmes. I have since likened the experience of that institute to studying history under Herodotus and Thucydides, with occasional interventions by Polybius.

It was that institute, supported by selected readings from the *American Archivist* and a scattering of other journals, that largely defined the world of archives and archival theory and practice for many of my generation. A very intensive learning experience, the institute emphasized the antiquity and the evolution of the concept of archives and of the archival profession. It traced our origins back to the dawn of civilization, to the invention of writing, the use of records, and the practice of record-keeping. It emphasized the role of records in the development of institutions, and the role of institutions in transforming individual action into collective action. The records of institutions, we were taught, enabled them to function despite changes in personnel; the records provided an identity, served as a collective memory, and greatly facilitated the transmission of information and knowledge and culture across space and time.

Furthermore, of all the institutions devised by man, the most historically significant and usually the most pervasive had been government. Since the records of a government document the collective experience of a people, they thus are essential to their national identity and history. Of the highest importance, we were told, was the use and value of government records throughout history in establishing, protecting, and promoting the rights and interests of the sovereign. Over the centuries the forms and functions of institutions had changed and many had been greatly expanded, but to a greater extent than the records of any other institution, government records still document the collective experience of a people. And they still establish,

protect, and promote the rights and interests of the sovereign—who, in theory if not everywhere in practice, are now the people. In modern democratic societies, adequate recordkeeping and the preservation of archives are thus essential to ensure responsive and responsible government, apart from the memorial, cultural, research, and reference value of the records.

The concept of archives prevailing at that time was thus essentially limited to the noncurrent records of institutions and organizations, both public and private. As documentation created or received and maintained in conducting the business of corporate bodies, records, it was emphasized, had an official character and a legal status lacking in personal papers and other types of documents generally referred to as manuscripts.

The emphasis upon institutional records accounts for the importance that was attached to the evidential as well as the informational values of organic bodies of material. It helps explain the importance of administrative history and of organization and function in identifying records, in providing the context within which records should be arranged and described, in serving as indicators of the subject content of records, and in enabling the researcher to determine the authenticity of the records and the relevance and accuracy of their informational content. The emphasis upon institutional records also accounts for the importance accorded the principle of provenance and its corollary, the preservation of the original order of records, and of the need to preserve the integrity of archives.

This concept of archives was based primarily upon our European archival inheritance. But that inheritance had had to be adapted to deal effectively with American realities and to meet American needs. That task had been undertaken principally by the staff of the National Archives, which since its establishment twenty-five years earlier, had made remarkable progress in the work of adaptation. Forced to be selective in its accessioning policy because of the staggering volume of modern government records, the National Archives had developed a general theory of collective appraisal. It had also begun to accession records as soon as they were no longer needed for current business, some of them only a few years old, which was a distinct break with European practice. To better ensure the preservation of records it had pioneered vacuum fumigation, deacidification, thermoplastic lamination, temperature and humidity control, acid neutral folders and containers, smoke detection devices, and sprinkler systems.

Faced with the need to establish both administrative and intellectual control over masses of decentralized agency records, the National Archives had formulated a general hierarchy of levels of arrangement from the repository level down to the individual document level, and had developed techniques of collective arrangement and description based upon the record series. It had prepared and published preliminary inventories, a succession of general guides, a wide range of subject guides, and other finding aids to its holdings. Contrary to still prevailing European practices, it had not limited the number of documents it would make available at any one time to a researcher; and it had not only permitted but encouraged use of its holdings by virtually everyone. The French Revolution had proclaimed the right of public access to government archives, but public access had not become a reality until the National Archives opened its doors. It had also pioneered the use of microfilm, both for reference service and as a publications medium; and it had introduced modern exhibit techniques for historical documents. Finally, to assist the government to better manage its records, as well as to facilitate their timely and appropriate disposition, the National Archives had formulated the life cycle of

records concept and developed the policies and practices that had become known as records management.

It was this experience that constituted the basis of what had become known as modern archives administration, and which was the major focus of the institute. The range and sequence of archival functions to which we were introduced was essentially based upon a work process model. Thus we proceeded from scheduling and collectively appraising records to accessioning, preservation and restoration, collective arrangement and description, reference services, exhibits and publications, and archival applications of micrographics. Some attention was given to cartographic records, but unfortunately very little to audiovisual records. A one-day visit to the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress introduced us to the collecting of personal papers and other manuscripts, to their processing, the preparation of registers, and the value and uses of this type of documentation. A one-day field trip to the Maryland Hall of Records helped familiarize us with the operations of a small archival repository, and primarily with meeting the needs of genealogists. Finally, two of the four weeks were devoted to the selection and completion of a limited arrangement and description project under the supervision of an experienced National Archives staff member.

Following this introduction to the world of archives as then conceived, we were encouraged to join the Society of American Archivists and sent forth to apply what we had learned and to continue our archival education by reading all available literature and by participating in the work of the society's committees and in its annual meetings.

Perhaps I should add that my recollections of that 1960 institute are based upon more than an old set of notes. Three years later I was invited to join the staff of the National Archives as director of the institute, to succeed Schellenberg as director of staff training, and to succeed Posner in teaching the program he had developed at the American University on the history and administration of archives. Although fully aware that I could succeed Posner and Schellenberg but that I was not capable of replacing either of them, I had accepted. During the next decade and a half it was from Washington that I participated in and viewed the changing archival scene, and where I attempted to reflect the changes that were occurring through revisions in the curriculum of the education and training programs for which I was responsible.

But to return to 1959: the world of archives thirty years ago was a much smaller and more coherent world than the current one. How much smaller is difficult to determine. Despite our concern with documentation, we have not adequately documented our own profession and organization. There was no interest at that time in determining, for example, the total number of archivists in the United States. In 1961 a guide published by the then National Historical Publications Commission listed some 1,300 repositories with unpublished documentary holdings ranging from the National Archives to local historical societies. In compiling that guide, however, no effort was made to determine how many staff members of these repositories were archivists. As for the Society of American Archivists, its secretaries at that time did not keep or report membership statistics on an annual basis. From the available evidence we may conclude that the society in 1959 had a total of some 1,200 individual and institutional members.[1]

Much more significant than our total

[1]Information on the number of repositories was provided by Dr. Nancy Sahli during a telephone conversation, 25 August 1989. The figures on SAA membership in 1959 were provided in a 25 August 1989 memorandum to the author from the Society's Archivist, Dr. J. Frank Cook.

numbers, however, was our view of ourselves and of our chosen field of endeavor. Quite simply, at that time we regarded the administration of archives as a profession and ourselves as professionals. Our objectives, our values, and our views were based largely upon the concept of archives that I have already summarized. That concept was reflected in the structure of our organization, in the programs of our annual meetings, and in the pages of our journal. Government archivists, both federal and state, occupied a central role in our profession and the society, so much so that one of the society's early secretaries, Lester J. Cappon, had reported that "some . . . pure archivists" even "looked askance at curators of historical manuscripts" who had chosen to join.[2]

The interests and concerns of the society in 1959 were to some degree reflected by its committee structure. In addition to the usual administrative and technical advisory committees, there were committees on business records, labor union records, church records, college and university records, and a single committee on manuscripts. Although broadened beyond government, the society's emphasis was still upon institutional archives.

A full analysis of the society's changing committee structure and activities over the years, and a comparison of these with both the subject range of sessions offered and proposed at our annual meetings, and of articles published and rejected by our journal, should result in a number of useful and interesting studies and insights about our profession, our professional organization, and ourselves. This task, however, I leave for possible consideration by students enrolled in our university archival education courses. Using only committee structure as one indication of the scope and direction of changing interests, the society during the next decade and a half created committees on the archives of science, on urban archives, oral history, machine-readable records, reference and access, techniques for the control and description of archives and manuscripts, and on the status of women in the profession.

The SAA, like most other organizations, has paused at intervals to take stock of where it had been and where it seemed to be going. Coincidently, and fortunately for my purposes, one such occasion was the society's annual meeting in Toronto in 1974, which happens to have been the halfway point in my personal odyssey. That meeting featured a plenary session on "Documenting American Cultures Through Three Generations: Change and Continuity." Representing the first generation was Herman Kahn, who discussed American archival development since the establishment of the National Archives and concluded that "except for one or two principles practically the entire content" of our archival courses were derived from American archival experience. In that sense, he observed, we were all self-taught. Kahn also addressed the continuing problem of how archivists could establish in the public mind respect and acceptance for themselves and their work. Rejecting the idea that these could be gained by requesting or demanding them, or through advertising and a public relations campaign, he advised that to be enduring, public attention, respect, and understanding must be earned by demonstrating the professional quality of our work and by making ourselves and our work indispensible to others.[3]

Representing the third generation in that session was Andrea Hinding, who eloquently described the values and attitudes of archivists who grew up in the 1940s and

[2]*American Archivist* 14 (1951): 65-66.

[3]Herman Kahn, "The First Generation: The Autodidact," in "Documenting American Cultures Through Three Generations," *American Archivist* 38 (1975): 149-51.

1950s and who had faced, "while still in their formative years, the 'ordeal of the human spirit' which was the 1960s." Implicit in her remarks was the changing attitude toward government and the role of government in society.[4]

It was my task at that session to represent the second or middle generation, and to summarize some of the basic changes that had occurred since I had entered the profession. The most basic change I noted was in the concept of archives. Recalling that less than two decades before, that term was generally understood to mean noncurrent institutional records of continuing value, I added that archival agencies, at least according to Schellenberg, were supposed to be essentially "receiving" rather than "collecting" agencies. But by 1974 there were very few "pure" archival agencies, in the sense of receiving only transfers of records from a parent institution. I observed that "just as most of us choose to call ourselves archivists, so have we all become collectors to some degree." Basic to this development were the activities of multifunction state historical agencies, the development of the presidential libraries, and particularly the rapid growth in the number of college and university archival agencies with extensive manuscript collecting programs.

I also noted that important changes were occurring in the traditional functions and activities of archival agencies. Archival agencies were "no longer willing or, indeed, able to compete effectively for necessary resources by maintaining an essentially passive program centered on preserving and making available to qualified visitors the materials in their custody." New services and programs were being developed, many of them based upon the conviction that "archives and manuscripts should not only be accessible, but that archival agencies should promote actively, in whatever way possible, the most effective utilization of these research resources by as many persons and groups as can benefit from them."

The final area on which I commented was education and training. Compared with the time I had entered the profession, there were more institutes, workshops, and regular academic courses on archives and manuscripts. But education and training had not kept pace with the rapid growth of the profession, and fewer than fifty percent of directors, unit heads, and upper grade professionals in archival and manuscript repositories had had any kind of formal training. Also, thirty-five years after the first formal archival course was offered in this country, we were still offering only introductory courses and institutes, generally taught by archivists who held full-time nonteaching positions. Finally, I noted that many of the newly-established academic courses in library schools and history departments were being taught by faculty members who had neither training nor experience in administering archives and manuscripts. In conclusion, I observed that "we may well find it desirable in the future to adopt minimum certification standards, with appropriate grandfather clauses; and to promote the adoption of training requirements and qualifications for all professional positions."[5]

The three changes I highlighted in 1974 were by no means the only ones transforming our profession and its society. Records managers, necessarily oriented toward current records and economy and efficiency rather than archives and manuscripts, had already created their own national organization. Then, as an ever-increasing number of manuscript curators and special collec-

[4]Andrea Hinding, "The Third Generation: War, Choice and Chance," ibid., 135-58.

[5]Frank B. Evans, "The Second Generation: The Teachers and the Taught," ibid., 151-55.

tion librarians joined the society, the coalition of federal and state archivists that had provided much of the leadership of the profession and the society in its first two decades broke down. At the same time many of these newer members were challenging the society to provide a wide range of services tailored to their particular needs and interests, and had begun creating their own organizations at the regional, state, and local levels.

About a year and a half after our Toronto meeting, I was fortunate enough to receive an offer I could not refuse—an invitation to join the staff of UNESCO in Paris as its programme specialist in promoting the development of archival and records management systems and services in its more than 160 member States. For the next eight years—from 1976 to 1984—I worked closely with the International Council on Archives in developing and implementing a Records and Archives Management program (RAMP) with many of the activities based upon the American experience and directed at the developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As part of this program we planned and published, in a minimum of three languages and for free distribution, some seventy studies on archival and records management theory and practice, many of them containing guidelines of recommended practices.[6]

This experience, reinforced by visits to archival repositories in all parts of the world, reconfirmed for me the value and uses of archives, particularly government archives. This was especially evident in countries that had achieved their independence in the decolonization movement after World War II, countries that are still in the process of establishing a national identity and of writing a national history. I learned much in these countries despite the problems of language, even where English was the official language.

Today at the international and national levels archives occupy a special status, one that has been most eloquently expressed by the International Law Commission of the General Assembly of the United Nations as follows:

> While one can conceive of a State [in the sense of a nation-state] without a navy, for example, it is impossible to imagine one without a currency, without a treasury, without funds, and without archives... which constitute... these kinds of State property which are most essential and most widespread—so much so that they can be said to derive from the very existence of the State. . . Archives, jealously preserved, are the essential instrument for the administration of a community. They both record the management of state affairs and enable them to be carried on.[7]

As in centuries past, government archives continue to provide the firm foundation for the archival profession worldwide.

Some five years ago, my extended leave from the National Archives having expired, I returned to Washington and again became directly involved in the work of the society. During these years the growth of college and university archives, of special collections, and of a variety of subject-oriented collecting programs has not only continued but has accelerated. The NHPRC currently maintains information on about 4,500 repositories holding archives and manu-

[6]On the origins and development of UNESCO's RAMP program, see Frank B. Evans, "Unesco and archives development," *UNESCO journal of information science, librarianship and archives administration* 4 (1982): 158-76.

[7]Translated from International Law Commission of the General Assembly of the United Nations, *Huitième rapport sur la succession d'États dans les matières autres que les Traités. Projet d'articles sur la succession aux biens d'États accompagné de commentaires*, par Mohammed Bedjaoui, rapporteur special (document A/CN.4/292 du 8 avril 1976), 36.

scripts, compared with 1,300 thirty years ago.[8] This growth in the size of the profession, however, has not been accompanied by a proportionate increase in the society's membership.

Two developments help explain this situation. The first was the establishment of a separate national association by state archivists and records administrators. More recently that organization, to attract the membership and support of federal archivists, changed its name to the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA). The second development has been the continuing growth in the number of regional, state, and local archival associations, until there are now fifty-three, at least one of which has more than 1,000 members. We estimate that there are currently about 8,000 archivists nation-wide, but this figure is as difficult to substantiate as it is to refute. The total membership of the society, however, both individual and institutional, now stands at only about 4,300, compared with the 1,200 we had thirty years ago.[9] Of the 4,300, less than 2,700 are individual members.

The society's continuing efforts in recent years to broaden its membership base by responding to rapidly changing interests and needs are well-known. Our organizational structure has grown until it now consists, exclusive of administrative committees, of eleven standing committees, eleven sections, seven task forces, seventeen round tables, and official representatives or members of joint committees with more than twenty related professional associations. These reflect concerns and interests ranging from ethics to user groups of particular bibliographic utilities and software packages.

[8]Information provided on 25 August 1989, by Dr. Nancy Sahli, NHPRC.

[9]Information provided by SAA executive director, Dr. Donn Neal, 24 August 1989.

The Committee on the 1970s had represented the first major effort of the society to engage in systematic planning, so that instead of only reacting to external events, the society itself could become an agent for initiating desired change. In our subsequent efforts to formulate and implement an agenda for the profession, important contributions have been made by the 1977 Conference on Priorities for Historical Records, the 1982 Task Force on Goals and Priorities, and the 1983 Task Force on Archives and Society. The recommendations of these task forces are currently being implemented by two of the society's most active and constructive committees. We also have under way major grant-funded initiatives in education and preservation.

Of primary significance in implementing our long-term agenda is the society's certification program. The success of the petition phase has exceeded our most optimistic predictions. We now need your assistance and support in ensuring the success of the examination phase, and especially in finding ways of dealing effectively with still unresolved problems regarding both educational and institutional evaluation. The implementation of much of the society's agenda also depends upon our success in formulating and gaining wide acceptance of standards and guidelines for basic functions and activities involving archives and manuscripts. In these varied but related ways we will continue our efforts not only to cope with but also to manage and promote necessary change.

In terms of this personal perspective of the American archival scene during the past thirty years, I should like to share with you a number of my concerns and make several suggestions that I hope will be of some value as the society reviews and revises its agenda and priorities for the future.

My first concern is about some of the materials that are designated and being recognized as archives. Our assumption of responsibility for personal papers and other

historical manuscripts reflects our particular history, and adds a further dimension to the unique role we play in society. The fact remains that the Massachusetts Historical Society was collecting both public records and manuscripts almost a century and a half before the National Archives was created. In our current zeal to document American culture and society, however, I am concerned that some of us are attempting to transform archival repositories into specialized libraries or museums for ephemera, memorabilia, and trivia, as those terms are popularly understood. It seems to me that in dignifying ephemera and memorabilia as archives we trivialize a noble profession, and may risk having archives themselves eventually regarded as being ephemeral. Perhaps we need to develop grant proposals for projects involving records and manuscripts that will be as attractive to resource allocators and funding agencies as are those dealing with transitory aspects of popular culture.

A second concern relates to the efforts currently being made to discredit or simply reject major areas of archival theory and practice derived from experience with institutional, particularly government, records as a necessary preliminary to creating new theories and practices that will accommodate the widest possible range of documentary materials. I suggest that we instead recognize that many traditional theories and practices are still valuable when fully understood and properly applied to institutional records, and that they were never intended to be applied directly and uncritically to personal papers and other manuscripts. Through the National Information Systems Task Force and the RLIN and Intergovernmental Records Projects we are learning how to modify and supplement forms developed to describe both library materials and manuscripts to accommodate the particular features of institutional records. It is possible to increase subject access without ignoring the essential organizational and functional context of records. I submit that change does not constitute progress when it involves the rejection of theory and practice that have proved their value and that are of continuing relevance.

With many of you I look forward to the results of user studies now in progress, but I urge that we also give attention to studies of nonusers. The fact remains that the raw materials of history in the custody of government archival repositories, in particular, remain largely unknown or ignored by the great majority of American historians. Whether through the development of research materials and methods courses, or through other means, we need to get more historians to use archives. Despite changing fads and fashions in historiography, the centrality of institutions, public and private, in American life make institutional archives relevant to most historical research.

A fourth concern relates to the services provided by archival agencies. In my view, collecting historically valuable records and manuscripts and reaching out to a variety of constituencies with imaginative and useful educational and cultural programs are, to use the language of theology, necessary but not sufficient. We continue to neglect services to our parent institutions. I urge that we seek opportunities to use the institution's own records in our custody to provide to its operating officials the background information and precedents they need to deal with current problems and for decision-making, to protect and promote the institution's rights and interests, and to ensure continuity and consistency in administration and operations—in sum, to serve those purposes that have justified the keeping of institutional archives for these many centuries.

To provide such services an archives needs to cooperate closely with the records management staff, or, where a records management program is lacking, to create

a system that will ensure the scheduling and the authorized, timely, and appropriate disposition of the institution's records. By thus contributing directly to sound administration and good management, an archival program is in a stronger position to withstand the recurring budget cuts with which we all must contend. To strengthen our programs, we must demonstrate as much initiative and imagination in reaching "in" and "up" within our parent institutions as we have in reaching "out" to our many publics. I would also remind those promoting documentation strategies that scheduling the retention and disposition of institutional records was the first and still remains the most successful of documentation strategies.

I am concerned that in necessarily focusing on the problems being created by electronic records, we do not continue our relative neglect of audio-visual records, which are also fragile and whose preservation and effective use are also dependent upon costly technology. In all of history, only during the past century and a half has mankind enjoyed the benefits of the recorded image, and only during the past century, those of recorded sound. To those who would document contemporary America, here is a challenge both essential to and worthy of their goal.

Education and training will always be a major concern of the profession. We have fewer university programs and courses than a decade ago, but the curriculum and course content of many of them do not reflect the education and training guidelines adopted by the society. A number of programs have been strengthened in recent years by attracting, as full-time faculty, members of the profession who brought with them the authority and prestige of the high administrative positions they formerly occupied. We still need, however, graduates of our best programs to become faculty members, eager to engage in original research and publication and thus to advance the profession while simultaneously building their individual academic careers and reputations.

Finally, I am convinced that as a society we need to do a better job of increasing our membership among those archivists who belong to regional organizations or to no archival organization. We recognize the advantages that regional organizations offer in collegiality, in helping to break down the intellectual isolation felt by many archivists, and in savings regarding annual meetings. But we need to point out that as a profession we should speak with one voice if we hope to be heard and to be heeded; that only a national organization with a full-time staff is equipped to undertake major projects for professional development and to attract significant grants; and that the most direct and effective way that archivists can assist in the development of their profession—and in their own professional development—is through this society.

Despite this professional fragmentation, the current popularity of trendy terminology and trivia, the recurring announcements of the electronic demise of archives and archivists, and the misguided enthusiasm of some subject-oriented bibliographic controllers, I am confident that our society will continue to meet our current and future needs. I am also confident that through the essential services we provide, we will merit the attention, recognition, and respect that we seek as a profession. In a sense, the keeping of archives was organized society's first collective act of faith—faith in itself and in its future to which it bequeathed the record of its experience and the knowledge it had gained through that experience. Through our profession we continue to renew and strengthen that act of faith, to augment and transmit mankind's inheritance to our successors. Ours is indeed a noble profession!