

International Scene

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Confronting Man and Nature: The National Archives of El Salvador

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Abstract: El Salvador's archives have been continually plagued by environmental, economic, and political hardships. The author describes the challenges that he observed first-hand during his visit to the Salvadoran archives during the week of 19–25 February 1989. He outlines the basic needs of these archives and relates examples of solutions improvised by dedicated archivists who must work with few resources.

About the author: Alfred Lemmon is curator of manuscripts of the Historic New Orleans Collection. Holding a doctorate in Latin American Studies, he has pursued research interests and lectured in Latin America and Spain. In 1989, through Partners of the Americas and the U.S. Information Agency, he served as an invited consultant to the National Archives of El Salvador.

EL SALVADOR, A CITY-STATE developed around the capital city of San Salvador, is Central America's smallest country, but with a population of more than six million it is also the most densely populated of the American mainland. As a microcosm, it presents valuable opportunities for scholars to examine the familiar phenomena of Latin American countries such as monoculture, land tenure, oligarchic power, and militarism. Yet scholars are hindered because historical materials in El Salvador have been less carefully preserved than those of most other Central American countries.¹ The most serious losses occurred as a result of the earthquake and accompanying fires of 1899 which destroyed most of the government's records, including those of the Archivo General de la Federación Centroamericana (1821-40) and the Archivo de los Protocolos (notarial archives). Some ninety years later, plagued by civil war, poverty, and a devastating earthquake, Salvadoran archives are an endangered species.

In late January 1989, I received a telephone call from the Louisiana representative of Partners of the Americas who explained their immediate need of an archivist who spoke Spanish. I was asked to go to El Salvador to assess the situation of the National Archives, which had sustained serious damage in the 1987 earthquake. After a series of telephone calls with various cultural affairs officers of the United States Embassy and with representatives of Partners of the Americas in El Salvador and the United States, details of the trip were finalized. Within two weeks, I departed for El Salvador.

As part of the Spanish empire, El Sal-

vador was subject to the Kingdom of Guatemala, a dependency of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico). Therefore, records for the colonial period are preserved in the Archivo General de Indias (Seville), the Archivo General de Centro-América (Guatemala City), and the Archivo General de la Nación de México. The present Archivo General de la Nación of El Salvador dates from 1948. It holds very few colonial and nineteenth-century records, but the twentieth-century holdings are stronger and relatively well organized. The archives also has a small library and a newspaper collection. Other archives include those of the various government bodies, notably the Foreign Ministry and the National Assembly. The archives of the National Assembly is in the best condition. It contains the well-organized records of El Salvador's legislative bodies, including committee papers. Published and manuscript collections date to the founding of the legislature in 1875.

The single most important library in El Salvador is the National Library, founded in 1870.² According to law, copies of all works published in the country are to be deposited there. While the practice has sometimes been ignored, the library remains the major source for late nineteenth- and twentieth-century printed materials. Four other important collections are the library of the Museo Nacional David J. Guzmán,³ the Biblioteca Manuel Gallardo in the neighboring town of Santa Tecla, the manuscript holdings of the Universidad Centroamericana,⁴ and the ecclesiastical archives

¹For a review of historical literature and a guide to research collections in El Salvador, consult *Research Guide to Central America and the Caribbean*, ed. Kenneth Grieb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) containing articles by Kenneth Grieb, Derek Kerr, Italo López Vallecillos, Neill Macaulay, Murdo MacLeod, Mario Rodríguez, Thomas Schoonover, Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., and Miles Wortman.

²For additional information on the National Library, readers should consult *Anaqueles, Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional*. Since 1937 the National Library has also occasionally published a *Boletín de la Biblioteca Nacional*.

³Published since 1903, *Anales del Museo Nacional David J. Guzmán* frequently describes sections of the library and manuscripts division.

⁴The holdings are described in *CIDAI. Colección índices: documentos* (San Salvador: Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación, 1982).

of the Cathedral. The Guzmán Library is noted for its collection of personal correspondence (1860–63) of nineteenth-century political leader Gerardo Barrios; the Gallardo contains an impressive collection of personal papers from the nineteenth century; the Universidad Centroamericana collection contains papers of various leaders; and the ecclesiastical archives contains not only the correspondence of the bishops, but accounts of their visits throughout the country.

Effects of Civil War and Earthquake

However, the toll of an eleven-year civil war, punctuated by a major earthquake in 1987, threatens the existence of El Salvador's archives just as the earthquake and fires of 1899 did. The National Archives, housed in the National Palace, was shaken to the core during the earthquake. It has been, and remains, the most threatened of all archives. With the building left practically uninhabitable, documents were moved into the central patio. Eventually, rooms were secured for the archives, but the environment remains far from ideal. Restoration of the National Palace proceeds at a frighteningly slow pace. Areas specifically designated for storage, processing, researchers, and administration are needed. At one point, researchers worked in the central patio alongside construction crews who were reproducing elaborately carved doors destroyed in the earthquake. Space is so short that incoming documents are housed in the basement, where fumes from passing vehicles enter through street-level ventilation ducts. Security has been a major problem under such conditions.

The staff of the National Archives has continued to work under conditions that demonstrate their unfaltering dedication. In order to make the most of extremely limited resources, it was necessary to construct new shelving and find a company willing to manufacture containers for the documents.

With little possibility of obtaining acid-free containers, staff members have adapted to the situation and cheerfully say that they will rehouse materials on a regular basis.

Because the National Library's building was virtually destroyed, it is amazing that the rare book collection survived. Brought to the National Palace and stored near the National Archives, the archives staff assumed responsibility for the collection. The books probably suffered less damage during the earthquake than afterward; upon arrival at the National Palace, the books were exposed to the dust and dirt of the street because many windows had been blown out. Window shutters were nonexistent or inoperable. Workmen restoring the National Palace, needing storage space for construction materials, placed paint cans and supplies on the books. Although the rare books did eventually receive the best care possible under the circumstances, a tragic amount of time elapsed before appropriate attention was given to the rare books and archives. The National Library is now housed in several converted residences, and some major government agencies (along with their archives) operate in temporary tin buildings.

Along with other space-starved archives of various government agencies and libraries in El Salvador, the National Archives saves more than a hundred years of the *Gaceta Oficial*, later known as the *Boletín Oficial* and *Diario Oficial*. While it is necessary for these diverse agencies to retain such volumes to fulfill their official mandates, an alternative solution must be found. The most obvious solution is microfilm copies. Fortunately, the United States Library of Congress has a microfilm of this official state organ (Film number 02274). For those institutions in El Salvador that hold multiple copies of the *Boletín Oficial*, the availability of microfilm copies would save valuable space. The National Archives and other institutions are saving copies of the same current newspapers at great expense of space and manpower. While



Archival storage in Sonsonate, El Salvador, November 1989 (photograph by Steven Hoza)

the availability of craftsmen to do binding is abundant, the need for space is so great that microfilming would again appear to be the logical alternative. However, such responses by a North American archivist are readily tempered by the realization of the general lack of microfilm equipment in El Salvador and the difficulty in maintaining such equipment. El Salvador did participate in the UNESCO microfilming project.⁵ However, the copies that survive in the National Archives have been so damaged through lack of temperature and humidity control that they have been rendered virtually useless.

Common North American practices, such as mylar encapsulation, remain out of reach

for the present. Even some of the more basic preparations, such as duplication of finding aids, become complicated due to the lack of funding and photocopy machines on the premises. If an outside firm is used for duplication, the expense must frequently be assumed personally by the archivist in charge. In the absence of archival supplies, the archivists are fortunate to have available an inexpensive work force highly skilled in manual trades. For example, maps and plans containing valuable information relevant to ongoing boundary disputes with neighboring countries underscore the potential of the archives as an aid in resolving present-day problems. Given the prohibitive cost of oversize storage cabinets, special storage facilities devised by archivists are the only possible solution to the problem of map storage. The clever adaptation of bakers' racks to house oversize material is a possibility.

⁵Frank B. Evans, "Promoting Archives and Research: A Study in International Cooperation," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 48-65.

Not all problems are physical in nature. The National Archives has a small but potentially valuable collection of photographs documenting government ceremonies. The photographs remain in need of proper identification. Fortunately, the photographs date primarily from the 1950s onward, and the possibility of finding individuals to identify them still exists. Holding an "Archives Day" on which targeted audiences would be invited to visit the archives and help identify photographs could address this problem and might also help develop community interest in the archives. Perhaps this is an unrealistic public relations effort, given the current political situation in El Salvador. In addition to identification, the photographic collection needs a proper inventory, safe storage, and basic preservation.

The history of archival institutions in El Salvador focuses attention on the necessity of disaster planning. When the earthquake destroyed the National Palace and the National Library, no plan had been made for immediate rescue of the documents and books. No provisions existed for temporary alternative housing. Yet archivists appear wary of developing off-site storage facilities for duplicate materials or for storage immediately after a disaster. The reality of civil war makes reliable access to off-site storage a questionable proposition.

Fire prevention, environmental considerations, and security reflect the needs of the archives. Basics, such as fire extinguishers, are needed throughout the archives. While the nineteenth-century National Palace has provided shelter for the archives since the earthquake, associated problems such as its location in the center of town, an overabundance of windows and doors, and an extremely large construction crew working on the premises present environmental and security problems.

Despite these problems, the archives continue to receive incoming documents from villages throughout the country. Ar-

rivals are often unpredictable. Sometimes documents will travel through combat zones, while at other times the records will be hurriedly sent to the archives because of fear of military activity. Under such conditions and because of the lack of space, proper registration procedures and preservation assessment often must take a back seat to the reality of daily life.

Archival Staff

Most of the staff have received their training on the job. Four archivists from various Salvadoran ministries attended the *Curso sobre Organización y Administración de Archivos* in Spain.⁶ A few of the archives staff members have traveled to the privately funded *Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica* in Antigua, Guatemala, to observe practices there. The rescue attempts on behalf of the National Archives and the Rare Book Collection of the National Library during 1988 and 1989 were spearheaded by Joaquín Salavarría, director of the National Archives. Although he has no formal training as an archivist, he holds a degree in history and has conducted research in various European archives. The National Archives has a small professional reference library containing a variety of literature, from the outdated to the current. While the archives subscribes to various Spanish-language archival journals, they are slow to arrive.

As one might expect, ongoing educational opportunities are limited. In general, librarians have fared better than archivists, for a university-level library science program exists in the country. The thirst for

⁶For a review of this program, consult Vicenta Cortés Alonso, *Diez Años de Cooperación Archivística Iberoamericana: Curso sobre Organización y Administración de Archivos de Madrid* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1982). The four Salvadoran archivists participating were Julio César Durán Arrazola (1973), Rodolfo Portillo Ayala (1974), Marina Consuelo Díaz Maravilla (1977), and José Alfredo Cuadrón Marroquín (1979).



Phase box workshop conducted by Steven Hoza at the National Archives of El Salvador, 7 November 1989 (photograph by Steven Hoza)

knowledge on the part of both librarians and archivists is clearly demonstrated when some travel up to ten hours to attend an annual half-day workshop held on the *Día del Bibliotecario* (Day of the Librarian) in San Salvador.

One cannot help but admire these archivists working to preserve their country's cultural patrimony. Striving to document and rescue a heritage reflecting the country's geographical, political, and socio-economic struggles, they work in an environment dominated by the current version of those same struggles. Indeed, during the week of my visit in February 1989, bombs went off within four blocks of the National Archives and gunfire occurred within one block of a meeting of the country's archivists. The Salvadoran archivists practice their profession in a spirit charac-

terized by ongoing adaptation and creativity.

Reflections on International Consulting

As a North American archivist, I learned much about serving as a consultant to an archives in a foreign country. First and foremost, the visiting archivist must realize that many tools considered basic may simply be unavailable. Knowledge of the host country's language (particularly archival terminology) is of paramount importance for most of the effective work occurs in an informal setting. Preparation time is an important factor. Sufficient time must be allowed to create and bring a supply of archival supplies and slides demonstrating various archival practices. A small, basic library should be given to the host archive.

Continued contact after the initial visit is vital. Fortunately, Martha McPhail, Latin American studies cataloger of the San Diego State University Library was spending a year at the university library in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, as a Fulbright scholar. She visited and met Salvadoran archivists informally on several occasions after my visit. In November 1989, after five months of preparing and translating lecture handouts, Arizona conservator Steven Hoza gave a one-week seminar on preservation and then toured provincial archives.⁷ In 1990 Joaquín Salavarría, the director of the El Salvador National Archives, obtained a Fulbright scholarship to survey Salvadoran

holdings in the U.S. National Archives and the Library of Congress. With the assistance of Martha McPhail, he received a grant from the Council for International Exchange of Scholars to attend the California Library Association meeting. The California visit permitted him to visit several repositories such as the San Diego Historical Society, the Museum of Man, and the James S. Copley Library.

While many of my recommendations were implemented, perhaps the most lasting effect of my visit was the Salvadoran staff's excitement over meeting with an archivist who had firsthand experience with the latest advances in the archival field. Martha McPhail and Steven Hoza also experienced the same excitement during their meetings with the Salvadoran staff.

⁷*Conservation News* 9 (December 1989): 4-6.