

Presidential Address

Letting Sleeping Dogmas Lie

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Abstract: In order to advance their profession, archivists must stop thinking of themselves as an isolated group whose uniqueness keeps them apart from related disciplines. They must address the questions of advanced education versus on-the-job training, their place within the larger information community, and the core knowledge necessary to prepare them for an archival education and career. Beyond the master's degree, archivists should think of doctoral training for some who wish to go on to teach archival studies at the graduate level.

ON FEBRUARY 14, 1992, a simple message appeared on the screens of those who have computers tuned into the ARCHIVES.LISTSERV, one of the wonders of modern electronic communication. The message asked a simple question: Had anyone on the LISTSERV read Marilyn Pettit's article in the February Organization of American Historians' *Newsletter* about archivists and history? The exact title was "Archivist-Historians: An Endangered Species?"

The response that came back from the participants in the LISTSERV created the greatest archival dialogue on a single subject since Ted Schellenberg and Lester Cappon dined together at the Cosmos Club. In this case, by "great" I mean extensive, not necessarily intellectually superlative. Where else could one have participants from the United States, Canada, England, and other points of the compass continue a discussion for over three months and include directors of federal archival institutions, state archivists, university special collections librarians, rare book librarians, archival and library educators, some of the people who have written the extant archival manuals, graduate students, museum curators, records managers, members of the national or regional professional organizations, and nonmembers who have an interest in the subject? If there was ever a town hall concept in the archival community, this exchange was it.

It was not all intellectually inspiring; it was not all pertinent to the discussion at hand; it was by no means unbiased and objective. It occasionally became personalized and vituperative. When the social mores of professional communication were breached, however, hitherto unheard-from voices rose to call for order and discretion.

There was point and counterpoint, and debates within debates that were akin to side bets at a crap game, and if you just came to listen in or observe, it became very

tempting to enter the fray and voice an opinion.

And on what question was the debate brought to battle? The education of archivists: that oldest of questions, first raised by Samuel Flag Bemis in the July 1939 issue of the *American Archivist*, viz. "What is the proper educational field for an archivist?"¹ Bemis did not pose the question alone—his paper was a report of the first Society of American Archivists (SAA) Committee on Training.

The E-mail discussion ran the gamut, from those professing the traditional philosophy that only historians can rightly become archivists, to others arguing that today's archivists have to go to library school to hone their skills, and it included all shades in between and even outside of these bounds, with arguments for education in the hard sciences, political science, philosophy, music, cartography, engineering, english, and almost anything else that is taught at the college level. The debate ranged over the relationship of archival education to records management and information management. The introduction of computers into archives since Bemis's paper in 1939 interposed an argument about time and change: After all, Bemis was as far from Bearman in time as FDR was from Bush. Surely, the discussion—begun around Lincoln's birthday—echoed the words of his second inaugural: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present."

Perhaps unknowingly, E-mail debaters were echoing many, many earlier discussions of the topic of archival education, including those by Solon J. Buck in 1941, Ernst Posner in 1944, Karl Trever in 1947,²

¹Samuel F. Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 2 (July 1939): 154–61.

²Solon J. Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 4 (April 1941): 84–90; Ernst Posner, "Report of the Committee on Training of Archivists," *American Archivist* 7 (January 1944):

and others too numerous to mention up to James O'Toole in 1990 and an August 1992 draft report on the curriculum project of the Committee on Automated Records and Techniques (CART).³ The great E-mail debate could be characterized as dogmatic. The dogmas were those we have held so dear for all these years, to the point where we could recite them on any examination and thus declare ourselves to be anointed archivists:

- Archives are unique.
- Scratch an archivist and you'll find a historian underneath.
- An archival curriculum consists of one or two courses and a practicum.
- Only archivists can teach archives to future archivists.

If we sat here for a while and thought about it, we would uncover many more dogmas professed by ourselves, our peers, and our forebears, and it is these ingrained "self-evident truths" that have infused the E-mail debate with such passions. I am not here to advance or deny these beliefs ("The world will little note nor long remember what we say here"), but I do believe that we should rethink some of them—that our dogmas have held us in thrall all too long, and that, perhaps, as we move into the next century, it is time to let sleeping dogmas lie. But let's have a last viewing before confining them to eternal peace.

Archives Are Unique

True, but if archives are unique, so are historic houses, Mayan pottery, and Renoir paintings. All, however, are parts of their

own *genre*, since the records of the New York State Bingo Commission are almost the same as the California Bingo Commission and, as such, can be treated as classes or types of material, and that treatment can be shared with others.

The great E-mail debate of 1992 seemed to be affected by a sort of intellectual elephantiasis. Like the experience of the mythical blind men, archival analysts have touched and described parts of the beast but have not yet grasped the concept of the whole elephant. The beast, of course, is information, and the parts that we touch and describe—such as records management, or archives, or librarianship, or manuscripts, or information resource management—are mere appurtenances of the whole. All of these subdivisions are homologous, and the parent that they stem from is information itself.

I believe that we can use the term *information* as one uses the term *medicine* or *history*, as the generic parent with many subdivisions. It is difficult for us to do that because we think of information as a "thing," such as "*knowledge* obtained from investigation, study, or instruction" (Webster) and not as a department of systematized knowledge. David Bearman certainly did not invent the term *informatics*, but his use of it in the title of his newsletter indicates his perception of the problem. Informatics, while perhaps sounding euphemistic and hokey, is to be found in Webster, where it is defined as "information science." And it is bigger than all of us.

Our problem is that we have been a part of it since the beginning without acknowledging or even knowing it. We have defined ourselves as being apart, separate, unique, rather than recognizing the relationships to the other information professions. Of course we are different from librarianship, just as neurology is different from dermatology, or a penguin is different from a cuckoo, or a trunk is different from a tail. But those differences do not deny

68–69; Karl Trever, "The Organization and Status of Archival Training in the United States," *American Archivist* 11 (April 1948): 154–63.

³James M. O'Toole, "Curriculum Development in Archival Education: A Proposal," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 460–66; Victoria Irons Walch, "CART Curriculum Project: Final Report," prepared for the Society of American Archivists, Committee on Automated Records and Techniques, First Draft, typescript, August 1992.

those areas where we are part of a common whole.

Scratch an Archivist and You Will Find a Historian

Maybe. Probably in the National Archives, and more than likely in many state archives. But if you wish to include under the umbrella of archivists those in academic special collections, local historical societies, special libraries, and other places where the papers of poets, journalists, physicists, musicians, artists, and just plain folk are assembled, then I believe that the historian-to-archivist ratio diminishes rapidly. A recent study that I made of the records of seventy-eight students who had been in the archival program at the University of Maryland indicated that fewer than half—or thirty-two—had undergraduate degrees in history. The others, in descending order of frequency, held degrees in English, religious studies, music, the fine arts, Russian studies, philosophy, international studies, journalism, mathematics, American studies, anthropology, education, and home economics. Most of the thirty-two history majors wanted to be government archivists; most of the others were aiming at manuscript or special collections in or close to their fields.

I said we could include them if we wanted to include nongovernment archivists as part of the profession. As a professional society I think we *must* do so, since the SAA *Directory* now shows that manuscript repository members outnumber government records members. As the holder of a degree in history and as an administrator of a program that promotes the double master's degrees of history and library science, I certainly am not going to suggest we not consider history as an important adjunct to the information degree. But I do believe that we have to broaden our attraction to other academic departments while at the same time reforming our own concepts of

archival education as part of a larger sphere—not librarianship or history alone, and certainly not subordinate to either of them. In short, we are all part of the field of information studies.

Archival Education Consists of One or Two Courses and a Practicum

James O'Toole's 1990 article on curriculum development speaks of the "workshop mentality" that archivists have in their education proposals.⁴ Worse than that, in the last publication of the great and lamented Frank Evans's bibliography on everything archival, in the section on education and training, the majority of articles by archivists referred to archival "training" whereas those by librarians referred almost exclusively to library "education." Have we devalued ourselves? Are we training people, as we train assembly line workers to do as we say, with no deviation, or are we educating them to think, to stretch, to question, and thus to create? Are we afraid of that? Can we be characterized, as one recent commentator has suggested, as having a "lack of strong identity and lack of confidence evidenced by a good deal of indecisiveness accompanied by a low risk profile"?⁵ Has the profession taken to heart my recommendation of a decade ago that archivists must realign themselves with those "in related disciplines that touch on the nature of information, the management of dynamics of corporate bodies such as government and the church, and meld their concepts into the new philosophy of archives as records of human experience"?⁶

⁴O'Toole, "Curriculum Development," 462.

⁵Richard W. Budd, "Accreditation: The Way Ahead," speech presented to the Association for Library and Information Science Education, Chicago, 1986, typescript, p. 10.

⁶Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40–46.

The question of where and how to get such education may not be immediately apparent, but I believe that it is slowly becoming so. The principal purpose of history departments is to teach the discipline of research, criticism, and presentation of facts in literate exposition. It is difficult to shift from that to teach service to others, since archives are service institutions. We hold ladders that researchers climb up.

Library schools, in which are housed most of the archival education programs today, are undergoing significant change. Their very existence is being questioned on campuses across the country, and those that have survived have learned that salvation comes through change. Many of them are broadening their base and changing into schools of information studies and offering more than a single M.L.S. degree. To do so, some are contemplating changes in their core—the required courses that all students must take. The trend is to take library science out of the core and replace it with information science, which is not form- or media-specific. At that point, all students will have an equal footing; from that broad base they will be able to decide which information field they wish to specialize in, and they will do so in the eight courses left to them in a thirty-six-credit-hour curriculum.

One could envision a core that would apply equally to archivists, librarians, manuscript curators, and even, perhaps, museum specialists. A course could be offered on the history of cultural institutions and their place in society; the development, communication, and uses of information in society; and the professions that have had to develop in order to deal with information creation, preservation, and dissemination. Another course could be on the evaluation of materials for collection or retention, including the principles of the value of knowledge and its prospective uses. A third course could deal with adding value to assembled materials through their organiza-

tion and description, whether that is by tagging pottery shards, placing materials into universal classification schemes, or describing the functions that created the material and the importance of its function to understanding its organization. To this would be linked the question of communicating our information to those who may be in need of it. A fourth and final core could discuss the nature of research materials, their physical characteristics, threats to their preservation, and techniques for extending their life or the life of the information they contain.

Looked at critically, such a core need not be media- or form-specific, and yet would have application to all of the information custodian professions. With that base, the student could then go on to specialize in the areas I have noted, and the O'Toole or CART curriculum or some variant of them could come into play for archives majors.

The topics of such a curriculum would logically include "information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, selection, acquisition, organization and description, storage and retrieval, preservation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination, and management." If we can agree on that, then we have to admit that we are part of a larger professional universe, because *that* litany of activities now appears in the 1992 ALA standards for accreditation as the definition of library and information studies.⁷ The same litany might well serve as the basis for an advanced degree in information studies, without the "I" word attached, and future archivists and manuscript curators could feel comfortable with it, knowing it would become the basis for further studies in government records, personal papers, appraisal, donor relations, organization and arrange-

⁷American Library Association. Committee on Accreditation. *Standards for Accreditation—1992* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1992).

ment, description, electronic media, ethics, outreach, and the myriad of specialized areas necessary to round out one's education. These, however, would no longer be taken in isolation, because the information world is slowly enveloping all of us, and as one statement out of the American Society for Information Science (ASIS) recently put it:

Distinct job titles and career paths which were a result of hardware limitation, or were based on traditional organizational structures, or were justified by the needs of different user communities are being redefined. Responsibilities that were independent are now merging, and functions which were part of existing positions have evolved into separate jobs.⁸

Only Archivists Can Teach Archivists to Be Archivists

Well, as I've stated in earlier writings, this is a version of the old belief that only mothers could be obstetricians because they are the only ones who have experienced birth. This might be all right except that the argument becomes circular when it is declared that although archivists should be historians, historians cannot teach archives. This is xenophobically fuzzy reasoning. In an article in the Winter 1992 *American Archivist*, Paule Rene Bazin states that "it does not really make much difference whether archival educators are university teachers or archivists. Increasingly often, the teaching of administrative and technical matters is left to specialists who have had formal training in other disciplines."⁹ And in a recent issue of the *Midwestern Archivist*, Elsie Freeman Finch commented, "The archival prejudice that only archivists can teach other archivists, amounting to the view that no one can teach

us anything, is insular and dangerous."¹⁰ I could cite many more voices from the E-mail debate on this topic.

Such are the dogmas that try men's souls. While the profession is debating whether to establish the master's degree for archives in U.S. institutions in an attempt to depart from the practicum, the internship, the post-appointment "training" in order to educate archivists, the students are already contemplating the Ph.D., which will be a necessary degree if they intend to become teachers themselves and spread the gospel of informatics with an archival concentration. Dare we think of a Ph.D. in archival studies? We had better, if we expect to teach it in an accredited academic institution. Universities do not hire master's graduates as full-time graduate faculty. I happen to believe that the doctorate is viable, and I already have one student and prospects for another in such a program. But, ironically, they will receive their doctorates in library and information science, not archives. Currently there is no Ph.D. in archival administration, not even in Canada. Perhaps what we are ultimately talking of is a doctorate in informatics, with an archival subcomponent, as one receives a master of arts or a master of science, with a discipline subcomponent.

But it is a long step from the wish to the deed. We must be able to provide at least thirty-six graduate hours for the master's, that is, twelve three-credit courses in information and archival studies, with a faculty large enough to carry that load—all properly credentialed and engaged in the research that every self-respecting university demands, not to mention the additional emphases for the doctorate. We must provide the facilities, the on-line reference and research services, and the laboratory set-

⁸56th ASIS Annual Meeting Call for Papers. Copied from E-mail (Internet), 5 August 1992.

⁹Paule Rene Bazin, "The Future of European Archival Education," *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 62.

¹⁰Elsie Freeman, "Soap and Education: Archival Training, Public Service, and the Profession—An Essay," *Midwestern Archivist* 16, no.2 (1991): 93.

tings. And we must think seriously about launching such an ambitious program when hard-pressed universities are closing down what they term "peripheral" programs almost as often as up-scale department stores are failing in our cities. Can we respond positively to our universities' question about the "centrality" of archival studies to the university's "mission?" In short, can we compete with history, English, business, and physics? Perhaps Marilyn Pettit is on the right track. With the disappearance of library schools, history departments may be the only places left to provide archival education. But will they want to?

Will the double master's, as we offer at Maryland, catch on? Should it be a requirement that an educated archivist must have both a professional *and* an academic degree? Instead of its requiring seventy-two credit hours, we have worked it out to take only fifty-four, making it palatable for the student in time as well as money. We also offer the double master's in geography and could do many more. Deanna Marcum, formerly of the Council on Library Resources and now dean of the Library School at Catholic University, thinks the double master's should be required for academic librarians and said as much in an article recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹¹ Change the word *librarian* to *archivist* in that article and the shoe fits. The academic portion could be history, music, or English, or any other that suits the career goals of the student.

Or will the Bemis committee proposal for two levels of archivist—the Ph.D. and the M.A., producing the administrator and the practitioner—come to pass?¹² That may

not be the trend either; twenty years ago, six National Archives office heads held the Ph.D.—today only two do. On the other hand, the possibility that one could become a certified archivist with only the B.A. plus some years of experience may turn out to be the basis for the class system the Bemis report spoke of half a century ago. The doctorate may not be necessary for a working archivist, but it could be critical for the future professor of archival information.

I believe that the advanced archival degree will come to pass, but not easily and not tomorrow. The tragic economic condition of the educational establishment, as well as much of the rest of the civic community, does not bode well for innovation or renovation. As a child of the Great Depression, I sometimes become greatly depressed over negative economic conditions, but I also know that there is a better tomorrow coming. That tomorrow, however, will not necessarily be a reaffirmation of Sam Bemis, or Ted Schellenberg, or Oliver Holmes, or Frank Burke. It will, I think, take on an aura of Ted Weir, Richard Kesner, and maybe even Mary Ann Coyle (unfamiliar, I am sure, to most of you), who look at the discipline as part of a larger picture of information studies, information science, informationology, or even informatics, in which we all are "trained" in the basics, but then decide which route we wish to take—maps, visual materials, printed material, records, manuscripts, or others. Under the adage "By their holdings ye shall know them," we will then be archivists, or records managers, or librarians, or manuscript curators, or what have you, and the dogmas of the quiet past will have been forgotten, or at least we will have taught old dogmas new tricks.

This, then, is my legacy to the future: If we must debate on the archival LISTSERV, at least let us stop being sophomoric and instead recognize the family to which we all belong, provide service with-

¹¹Deanna B. Marcum, "For University Librarians of the Future, the Degree in Library Science, by Itself, Will Not Be Sufficient," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 August 1990, B-1.

¹²Karl Trever, "The Organization and Status of Archival Training in the United States," *American Archivist* 11 (April 1948): 154-63.

out feeling servitude, and advance the cause of knowledge and experimentation, inquiry, and doubt, without concern that the icons of the past shall fall. After all, *they* were the iconoclasts of their generation. Do not look back, neither to Bemis nor to Bearman, and certainly not to Burke. What is past is not prologue—it is past. Believe it or not, Schellenberg's *Modern Archives*

is now out of print. Let's get on with it. There are a lot of students out there ready to join us if they could only figure out who and what we are. They say that every dogma has its day. It's time for some new ones for the archival profession. That's your assignment for next year. All papers are due on September 2nd in New Orleans. Spelling counts.