

Perspective

SAA Is Us: Promoting Participation in the Work of the Society

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Abstract: While archivists participate actively in their national professional association, the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) membership is aging. In 1979, 60 percent of all members were under forty; in 1989, 60 percent were over forty. The author discusses the benefits of participating in SAA to those new to the profession and suggests means for involving younger archivists in the work of the society.

About the author: Anne R. Kenney is president of the Society of American Archivists and associate director of the Department of Preservation at Cornell University Library. This article is a revision of her incoming address at the closing luncheon of the 56th annual meeting of the society in Montreal on 17 September 1992.

DURING THE BICENTENNIAL YEAR, the Federal Bar Association (FBA) held its annual meeting in the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. My father, Colonel William R. Kenney, addressed the assemblage of federal legislators, judges, and lawyers as the forty-sixth president of the Federal Bar Association. He was devoted to his profession and to his association. I can remember as a child drawing on recycled FBA stationery and, over the years, noting my dad's ascension through the ranks as his name moved slowly up to the top of the letterhead. Dad died four and one-half years ago, but I inherited a strong sense of professional obligation from him. Service runs in my family; it also runs deep in the archival profession.

I can think of no other professional association where so many of the members become so involved in its activities. It is not uncommon for 40 to 50 percent of the individual members to attend the annual meeting and for hundreds of us to take active roles in the nearly sixty recognized groups within the society. In addition to the Society of American Archivists (SAA), there are over fifty other archival associations at the national, regional, provincial, state, and local level that archivists belong to in the United States and Canada.

Many of us consider participation in the work of professional associations part of doing our job. SAA's newly revised Code of Ethics, which was approved by council on Saturday, 12 September 1992, recognizes the importance of and our obligation to professional activities. It reads: "Archivists share knowledge and experience with other archivists through professional associations and cooperative activities and assist the professional growth of others with less training or experience. . . . They should share their expertise by participating in professional meetings and by publishing."¹ We recognize that to be well in-

formed about changes in archival functions we must have contact with our colleagues and that one of the best ways to do so is through participation in our national association. I believe this year's program serves as ample testimony to this fact.

Part of our involvement *here* stems from a recognition that our profession is small; there is one SAA member for every 89,231 people in the United States.² For comparison purposes, it is interesting to note that there is one American Bar Association member for every 890 Americans. And, according to the 1989 SAA census, the majority of us still work in one- or two-person shops. This can lead to a sense of isolation that is compounded by the public's confusion over what we do. The coming together with kindred spirits once or twice a year has been critical to our sense of legitimacy as a distinct profession. Perhaps John Fleckner said it best in his SAA presidential address: "As a professional archivist, I have joined in a community of colleagues who share not just a common occupation, but a common set of values and commitments. We join in this profession in mutual self-interest and in the pursuit of the larger public interests we espouse."³

SAA is a strong, healthy, vibrant organization, with a solid financial basis and an aggressive program of education, training, and publishing. Its greatest strength lies in the activism of its individual members. But I have some concerns about its future. One stems from an aging of our profession and a predominance of the early baby-boomers in many aspects of the society's work.

In 1950, Colonel and Mrs. Kenney cel-

Commentary, mailed with the January 1993 *SAA Newsletter*.

²"Comparative Statistics of National Societies of Archivists," *SAA Newsletter* (March 1991): 21. As of February 1993, the total individual membership of SAA was 3,068.

³John A. Fleckner, "'Dear Mary Jane': Some Reflections on Being an Archivist," *American Archivist* 54 (1991): 12.

¹*Society of American Archivists Code of Ethics and*

ebred the mid-century mark by having twins. So did Rick Pifer's mom. Some parents' enthusiasm was limited to just one child, and other 1950 babies include David Bearman, Richard Cox, Luciana Duranti, James O'Toole, Charles Robb, Kathleen Roe, Rich Szary, Vicki Walch, and Julia Young. These and other SAA members born in the five years before and after 1950 have served the society well for the past decade. It is time now for them to assist the next generation of archivists in making their mark on the profession. To turn an old saw around, we must begin to trust people under thirty.

In 1961, SAA celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with a luncheon during which former presidents were asked to speak. Morris Radoff, SAA's president in 1954–55, expressed his concern that “we have done little to prepare others to replace us.”⁴ He also worried about making SAA “useful professionally to the younger people.”⁵ He was speaking of the need to set standards and to formalize archival training, but the same is true of the leadership for the profession.

In 1979, 60 percent of our members were under forty; ten years later, in 1989, 60 percent were over forty. This statistic raises three levels of concern. First, there is the concern that fewer members of the younger generation are choosing to become archivists; second, that younger archivists are not joining SAA; and third, that those who do are not being encouraged to take an active role in the society. We need to address this concern at all three levels. As individual professionals, we need not only to actively recruit young people into the profession but to give them career paths that will keep them there.

A young sales representative I met while buying my computer told me that he had once been an archivist. He had been employed on a short-term grant but could find no archival work at the end of his tenure. He told me that the best thing that ever happened to him was to be laid off from the archives. Although that may have been true in his case, the profession can't afford to lose too many promising individuals. We need to help provide job opportunities and we must instill in younger archivists a love of the profession and a desire to persevere when times are tough.

Because so much of archival work is dependent upon activities beyond the single repository, one way to encourage younger archivists is to introduce them to our professional associations. At one time, this meant coming to SAA, but over the last decade or two, we have seen younger archivists turning to regional associations or opting not to participate at all. In his assessment of the 1989 survey, Paul Conway noted a “tendency of people new to the profession, with under two years experience, to avoid meetings and conferences.”⁶ In talking with some of them about this, several have responded, “I can't afford to belong to SAA.” Now, one of these younger archivists happens to work for Larry Hackman at the New York State Archives, and I know that he pays better than many of his archival competitors in the state. I also happen to think that my SAA dues are fair and reasonable, especially for what I get in return from the society and in comparison to the dues I pay to other national professional associations.

It is true that SAA dues are considerably higher than the dues of regional archival associations, but SAA tackles issues that require considerable time, expertise, and money—such as standards development,

⁴“Proceedings of the Society's 25th Anniversary Luncheon,” *American Archivist* 25 (1962): 232.

⁵J. Frank Cook, “The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists,” *American Archivist* 46 (1983): 387.

⁶Paul Conway, “G.A.P. Track,” *SAA Newsletter* (January 1992): 3.

representation, publications, curriculum development, and advanced education and training—on behalf of the entire profession. That is precisely what I find so appealing about SAA. My involvement here can make a difference in the direction the archival profession will take. This is a message we must get out to younger archivists: that in order to have a stake in the archival future, they can't afford *not* to belong to SAA.

As SAA looks toward a review of the membership dues structure—which it has pledged to do every three years, and which it will do again in 1993—I will ask the review committee to consider the possibility of instituting an initial membership fee at a reduced rate, to assist those just starting out. On another front, we must continue to provide affordable childcare. Montreal is the first annual meeting where parents have had to pay a significant portion of the childcare expenses. In 1985, council assessed each annual meeting attendee \$2 to support childcare. While other expenses associated with the annual meeting have risen, the assessment has remained flat for seven years. We need to review this so that meetings in New Orleans and beyond are affordable, especially for those who begin their families early in their career and would otherwise have to make an economic choice between parenting and participation. And for those of you in the audience who are managers and the keepers of the purse, providing younger archivists with release time and the fiscal ability to attend SAA is your responsibility. It is up to you to make sure that they share in institutional support to attend archival conferences.

It is encouraging to note that 36 percent of attendees at the Philadelphia meeting had been members less than five years, and for 22 percent of them Philadelphia represented their first or second meeting. Getting to that first convention or two is but one step. Returning is another matter that

requires a different set of strategies. We must make newcomers comfortable to be here and provide opportunities for them to become involved, or we may not see them coming back.

It is my belief that SAA will remain vital and relevant only through the commitment of a *large* number of its members, and that individuals benefit the most from membership through involvement in the work of SAA. I'm not the first to raise these issues. Nor will I be the last. The Committee of the 1970s was also concerned about making the society more responsive. Their report called for opening up committee membership; encouraging program committees to have sessions for all levels; and making provisions for younger, newer members to participate in program sessions.⁷ Many of us baby-boomers benefited directly from this new democratization and began our involvement through program participation. It is time to repeat this process. As Elaine Engst has indicated, the 1993 Program Committee will make a special effort to seek out newer professionals as speakers in New Orleans.

One of my goals as the incoming president is to encourage greater participation at an earlier stage in an archivist's career. Toward this end, council adopted, on a three-year trial basis, an internship program, which is aimed at encouraging the participation of those new to the profession in the work of SAA committees, task forces, and boards as nonvoting members. In the first year of this internship program, I am happy to report that I received twenty-two inquiries and thirteen completed applications, and I have offered internships to the following individuals on the following SAA committees: Penny Ahlstrand, California Academy of Sciences (Committee on Pub-

⁷Philip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies. Report of the Committee for the 1970's," *American Archivist* 35 (1972): 193-217.

lic Information); Pam Hackbart-Dean, University of Georgia (Education Office Advisory Board); Kevin Crawford, College of Physicians of Philadelphia (Committee on Automated Records and Techniques); Judy Engelberg, student, University of Maryland (Legal and Legislative Affairs Committee); Tammy Gobert, freelance archivist (Program Committee); Aimee Kaplan, student at NYU and project archivist at the Rockefeller University Archives (Status of Women Committee); Laura McLemore, Austin College (Standards Board); Peter Nelson, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society (Committee on Archival Information Exchange); Bill Ross, University of New Hampshire (Editorial Board); John Slate, student and archivist, the University of Texas at Austin (Membership Committee); George Trimarco, student, State University of New York, Albany (Library/Archives Task Force); and Stephen Wagner, archivist for the Oncology Nursing Society and doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh (Committee on Education and Professional Development). Ever heard of them? I bet in the coming years you will.

In addition to the internship program, over 25 percent of my official appointments went to individuals newer to the society or to those who had not previously served in a leadership capacity—young and not so young alike—and almost every committee and board will be infused with their blood and energy. My intent was to appoint a mix of junior and more experienced members in the belief that both groups will benefit from such collaboration.

The number of groups within SAA with *appointed* members (committees, task forces, and boards) is twenty-two; the number of groups in which individuals may *volunteer* to work (roundtables and sections) is thirty-four and growing. Thus roundtables and sections provide the best opportunities for members to play an active role in SAA. I encourage the chairs of these

groups to consider new means to involve incoming members in their group's activities.

In related efforts, the SAA Membership Committee, the Status of Women Committee, the African-American and Third World Archivists Roundtable, and the Lesbian and Gay Archivists Roundtable will be cooperating in the development of a proposal for a mentoring program to match new members with experienced professionals. The membership committee, chaired by Leon Miller, will also be working closely with Debbie Mills, SAA's director of membership, in the development and implementation of a membership marketing plan. In addition to younger professionals, we need to make a special effort to recruit nonwhites. Although their numbers in SAA have doubled since 1982, they still represent only 6 percent of the membership.

But it isn't just younger or newer members or minorities that we must involve. Late last spring, and again just recently, those of you who subscribe to the Archives and Archivists Listserv⁸ witnessed a heated debate which began, as I recall, with a statement that professional associations were now largely irrelevant because listservs provide a powerful new communication medium; the debate then went on to criticize SAA for being out of touch with the needs of most archivists. Some respondents attacked SAA as an elitist organization; others complained about not being made to feel welcome in SAA and that it was difficult to become involved because the same group of people ran everything. This group

⁸The Archives & Archivists Listserv is an electronic archives discussion group, coordinated by John and Donna Harlan, that has over 580 subscribers. The listserv is used by archivists and others to distribute information, air opinions, and ask questions. Individuals communicate with one another by sending messages to the list's network address. Mail is automatically distributed to each person who has subscribed to the list. For more information on the Archives listserv, contact Listserv@ArizVM1.CCIT.Arizona.Edu.

of people was referred to at various times as the “old guard,” the “gatekeepers,” and even the “archival mafia.” Now whether this is an actual reflection of the state of affairs—and I think it is not—or can be dismissed as a paranoid response on the part of a disenchanted few—and I think it cannot—it did come as somewhat of a shock to me that I might be part of the problem and that I could be perceived simultaneously as both elitist *and* irrelevant.

It is SAA’s obligation to make members welcome and provide ways for them to become active, and I think we can improve on that. But it ultimately rests with individuals to get involved. To those of you who are new to the profession, now is the time to volunteer, to submit proposals, and to help make SAA more responsive to your needs. For those who have not taken an active role in society affairs in the past several years, it’s time to renew your pledge. It’s important to know when to say yes and when to say no—and now is the time to say yes again. For those gatekeepers in the crowd, it may be time to pause and perhaps say, “no, not this time,” and instead turn your attention to encouraging others to become active, either as a mentor or by nominating and promoting others. There is real progress on this latter front. Judith Fortson, chair of the 1993 Nominating Committee,

reports that ninety-eight people sent in suggestions. From those submissions, there were thirty-five people nominated for vice president, seventy-two for council, and fifty-seven for Nominating Committee. This is a far cry from my experience on the 1988 Nominating Committee, when there were very few nominations received from the membership. Several people had taken the time to nominate me for a position on council, for which I was grateful—but for the fact that I was already serving on council and had been for two years.

As we all know, being an archivist and serving SAA won’t bring you fortune—and, as my story indicates, it won’t even bring you fame. But it does offer immense satisfaction, a shared pride in our profession, and a sense of “community through participation.”⁹ My dad’s message to the Federal Bar Association in 1976 was that lawyers should stress service to others instead of chasing the god-almighty dollar. As Frank Burke would say, at the risk of experiencing *déjà vu* all over again, I ask you to join with me in acknowledging our debt of gratitude and our obligation to advance our profession, in part through pro bono work for the society.

⁹Fleckner, “‘Dear Mary Jane’: Some Reflections on Being an Archivist,” 13.