

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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# Archives, Archivists, and Society

William J. Maher

## Editor's Note

In this issue we present two addresses by William J. Maher, immediate past president of the Society of American Archivists. The first address, "Society and Archives," was given as Maher was about to assume his duties as president at SAA's 1997 annual meeting held in Chicago. His presidential address, "Lost in a Disneyfied World: Archivists and Society in Late-Twentieth-Century America," was delivered September 3, 1998, at the annual meeting held in Orlando, Florida. The following texts incorporate subsequent editorial changes made to clarify issues raised by the oral presentations.

## Society and Archives

Incoming Presidential Address, August 30, 1997

At the closing luncheon of the 1983 SAA meeting in Minneapolis, David B. Gracy launched one of the most focused presidencies and SAA programs in the modern era. Under the banner of "Archives and Society," he called for a concerted campaign to increase the resources provided to archives by directing attention to archivists' need for greater recognition from society for the value of what they do. Gracy's presidency is often pointed to as a model of success. Several public programs were launched in support of "archives and society," but if the initiative succeeded, it did so because it pushed archivists to reassess themselves and their work in terms of public relations and to appreciate the enormous importance of good public relations to the betterment of archival programs.

As an organization, SAA has played a significant role in fulfilling the mandate laid down by Gracy. At the same time, the task of securing more resources and a better public image of archives is really never complete, and

we all must admit that there are some archives which are no better off today than they were before David delivered his vision to the Society. Collectively, we are still very much subject to the cycle of poverty that he identified as inhibiting the best intentions and efforts of archivists. What's worse is that, with the advent of electronic records systems, there is a new challenge capable of putting us even further behind than we were before. If we are unable to establish control of electronic records, we will no longer even hold the historical and cultural capital to claim a distinctive and important role in society.

With the increasingly complex and competitive information environment within which archives exist, we are in fact in the rather strange position of being at risk of losing the archivist in archives. In the years since Gracy spoke, we have witnessed society as a whole become increasingly focused on information, and increasingly interested in using information in nonconventional forms. In such an information age, one would think that archives should prosper; but most programs are still grossly undersupported, often underused, and archivists remain undercompensated and still marginalized on key issues of information policy.

Our tenuous position can be illustrated, at least partially, by the increasing public use, or should I say misuse, of the very word "archives." Perhaps through no fault of our own, we have lost control of the word "archives." It has been seized and used by computer specialists, librarians, advertising copywriters, academic faculty, newspapers, and electronic media to cover all manner of information gatherings that really are quite clearly not archives. On a personal level, I find that I have to spell and explain the pronunciation of "archives" far less than I did a decade and a half ago. In academic circles, I find I do not have to answer questions about whether archives are old artifacts and museum objects because there is a ready understanding that "archives" are information. In fact, according to my analysis of citations in the *Newspaper Abstracts* database, there has been a threefold increase in the use of the word "archives" in the news media from 1985 to 1996.<sup>1</sup> In our current multimedia age, there is also the appreciation that "archives" comprise not just manuscripts but documents in all forms and formats.

Despite the increased popular use of the word "archives," there is clear evidence that the misuse of the term is not decreasing. My review of *Newspaper Abstracts* for 1985 and 1996 shows that the percentage of inappropriate or clearly incorrect uses of "archives" has remained relatively constant.<sup>2</sup> One of my personal favorites was in an article by *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter Mike Kiley who, in writing about the Chicago Bears' poor track record in their

<sup>1</sup> A July 1997 Dialog search of the *Newspaper Abstracts* database found 198 citations to articles containing the word "archives" in the abstracts for 1996, compared to only 47 in 1985.

<sup>2</sup> A search for the term "archives" in *Newspaper Abstracts* for 1985 and 1996 showed that there was a slight decrease in inappropriate or incorrect usages, from 23 percent to 21 percent.

second-round NFL draft picks, must have been looking for some way to elevate his diatribe above opinion when he wrote that the Bears' "second-round archives" were "littered with lackluster talent and broken hearts."<sup>3</sup> We also note the use of the word "archives" in the popular culture media, such as the cable TV oldies service titled "VH1 Archives." A quick AltaVista or Yahoo search of the Internet for the word "archives" will show over 2 million "hits," many of which are references to professionally operated archives and manuscript repositories; but many more than that are little more than some Internet junkie's personal backfiles of top forty tunes, *Baywatch* stars' vital statistics, or logs of government conspiracies.

Although we have some of the same institutional problems as when David Gracy spoke, one can see the evolution of the language as a positive sign for archivists. Instead of archives not being understood and valued, we have rather the opposite problem—archives are seen as something so desirable that many people believe they understand them quite readily. Many university faculty I encounter, in fact, have a strong interest in developing their own so-called "archive" of personal documents and/or research material. Almost invariably their project consists of scanning documents and images collected through their research and increasingly drawn on a highly selective basis from the processed holdings of an established archival repository. These academics seek their place in the scholarly firmament as they compile a product such as the definitive "Virtual Archive of Central Illinois Alpine Skiing." As suggested by this example, there are collateral tendencies to use the word "archives" minus its North American requisite terminal "s" and to "verbify" the noun.

In many cases, the nonprofessional appropriation of the term "archives" appears to be part of an attempt by the scholar or database builder to lend panache or cachet and an air of respectability to what otherwise might be little more than a personal hobby or collecting fetish. As archivists, should we simply welcome this popularization of the term "archives" or should we be bothered by the prevalence of its frequent misuse? Perhaps we should look only on the positive side and see that the growing amateur usage of "archives" reflects the sort of public recognition of the value and importance of documentation that Gracy sought. On the other hand, there is in the popularized use of "archives" a rather significant threat to the basic goals of the archival profession. Call it paranoia, but I always have the sense that when we see "archive" used as a verb, or the word "archives" used in a bastardized way to describe what is clearly a singular, idiosyncratic, and synthetic gathering of documents, we are being confronted with a challenge to our position as professional archivists. Is this just a guild-like reaction as we see others stake a claim to what has been our sacred territory? Or is it a defensiveness

<sup>3</sup> Mike Kiley, "Bears' Unlucky Number: 2" *Chicago Tribune*, 19 April 1996.

borne of concern that society's precious few resources will be drawn off by these rogue efforts while "real" archival work goes on in a cycle of poverty?

As your president for the next year, it would be remiss for me to dismiss criticisms of the bastardization of the term "archives" as petty and irrelevant. After all, our professional societies are indeed the latter-day equivalent of guilds, and if we as professional archivists are not prepared to vigorously defend our stake in the information landscape, we have little justification for our continued existence as a Society. There are, however, more important reasons for being diligent and active in defense of the very terminology of our profession.

What is, in fact, so troubling about the many pseudo-archives now being established is that they frequently lack several of the very core archival functions. In some cases, it is that they constitute private and idiosyncratic collections developed *ex post facto*, and thus are far from the contextually based organic bodies of evidence that comprise most of the archives and manuscript collections among the members of SAA. In other cases, they are little more than undifferentiated masses of electronically stored information, often compiled by accident of system design, for backups, and frequently occupying large quantities of computer space with a low value to volume ratio. However, what is most troubling in these pseudo-archives is their lack of the professional and theory-based application of the seven major archival responsibilities. That is, what defines the professional core of archival work is the systematic and theoretically based execution of seven highly interrelated responsibilities—securing clear authority for the program and collection, authenticating the validity of the evidence held, appraising, arranging, describing, preserving, and promoting use. To help the nonarchival world understand the value of what professionalism brings to archives and information, we must continue to emphasize how our expertise in each of these seven domains is necessary to ensure that a concise and authentic record of the past is preserved and made accessible as evidence for the future.

Can we stop the misappropriation of our nomenclature? Is this an important threat to us as professionals? What role can and should SAA play in this admittedly dicey area when we often become side-tracked into lengthy internal disputes over the meaning of such basic terms as "archives," "provenance," or "evidential value"? Rather than suggest that SAA or each of us become some sort of language police censuring each prominent misuse of archival terminology, we have a more positive and proactive role to play in the rapidly changing information environment. In brief, rather than trying to fight a rear-guard action against public misuse of "archives," we should accept the positive benefits of greater societal recognition of archives but also use each such occasion to assert the professional dimension of society's use of "archives." For example, with the rapid growth in information technology

and the growing bandwidth for information formats, we must be particularly watchful of public policy developments that will impact and impede our fundamental archival goals and responsibilities. During 1996–97 SAA Council has examined or has been presented with issues such as copyright limits on fair use, electronic records, and preservation for digitized documents. We need to play a primary role in stating the archival policy on issues involved in our fundamental archival responsibilities to provide for an accountable record of our institutions and secure a historical heritage for society.

SAA's recent involvement in several policy issues fits the model of the role I see us as needing to fulfill to provide critical advocacy at the dawn of a new century. These include: taking an unambiguous stance in opposition to proposed CONFU (Conference on Fair Use) guidelines on the "fair use" of digital images; signing on as *amicus curia* in two archivally related lawsuits; adopting a policy statement on archival preservation issues involved in the digital preservation of conventional documentary materials; developing a clear public statement on behalf of the November 1996 NHPRC strategic plan priorities; providing specific recommendations to the Moynihan Committee to expedite the declassification of federal documents; and speaking out vigorously against the potential politicization of the position of chief of the California State Archives.

In this audience, I am sure there are some who may disagree with some of the stances SAA has taken. However, what I hope everyone will appreciate is how each of these positions was developed to assert a professional response on a public matter involving a fundamental archival principle. In the case of the IRS suit, it was for compliance with the Federal Records Act and thus for accountability of public agencies. In the suit Bruce Craig brought against the United States, it was for reasonable scholarly access to historical grand jury records. In regard to declassification, it was to advocate for a more effective governmental policy and a more realistic way to administer the declassification of old national security documents. In the case of NHPRC's priorities, it was for the need to fund archival projects, especially those dealing with electronic records. In the case of the position of director of the California State Archives, it was for professional preconditions of employment. In the case of the CONFU guidelines, it was for copyright policies that would not inhibit archival and research work to disseminate historical information using the latest information technology. In the preservation guidelines, it was the need to recognize the distinctiveness of archival from library or technical issues when employing digital technologies for preservation.

Such activities are merely illustrative of what we hope will be a more active SAA in advocacy. To paraphrase the epithet of the University of Illinois's founding regent John Milton Gregory, borrowed from Christopher Wren—"if you seek the monument, just look around"—"If you seek the

definition of SAA, you only need review these advocacy examples.” They define us as a profession and as a Society that sees its mission as service to society at large.

An equally critical defining characteristic of these efforts has been that in many respects, these advocacy positions have been responsive rather than proactive initiatives. In most cases, we were asked for a reaction or opinion on a policy question that others were considering. Some years ago, the emphasis on being proactive might have censured these efforts as being reactive and thus retrograde at best. In many cases, it is better to be proactive, but in the current information policy environment, we simply cannot review every possible information policy matter to identify concerns of interest to SAA. Instead, we have been blessed by an active membership and set of coalition partners who are aware of our interests and who value our support on key issues. Even in a matter so basic and traditional as the advocacy on behalf of professional employment credentials, we are dependent on, and we succeed because of, the initiative and preparedness of individual members who alert us to the issues and actively help articulate the position or policy statement that the Society ultimately issues.

In all cases, significant progress on public issues requires diligence and considerable effort by Council members who may spend hours reading background documents, preparing discussion documents or seminar sessions, and drafting the ultimate policy statement. This work has been most effective and encouraging, but at the same time, Council realizes that it must do more even if only to signal the kinds of policy problems it wishes to consider for formal positions. Consequently, we have recently considered a policy statement on our vision for archival advocacy which outlines the key principles and general policy areas we wish to emphasize and advance.

This statement appears on SAA’s website and in *Archival Outlook*, but as a preview, I note the following.<sup>4</sup> SAA is particularly concerned that the archival dimensions of the following issues related to technology, commercial developments, and governmental policy be addressed:

- mechanisms for the creation of reliable, authentic, identifiable, accessible, and manageable records of government, institutions, and society in general;
- the sustainability and viability of electronic documentary formats and media;
- intellectual property regulations that promote the use of new technologies to expand access to records and other documentary materials;

<sup>4</sup> “Archival Roles for the New Millennium,” Society of American Archivists Position Paper, 26 August 1997, *Archival Outlook* (November/December 1997): 14–15. Also available at <<http://www.archivists.org/governance/resolutions/millennium.html>>.

- development and adoption of standards and protocols that facilitate identification, description, communication, longevity, and access for both traditional and electronic forms of documentation;
- provision of adequate financial and policy support to fulfill legal, institutional, and societal mandates;
- mechanisms and policies that ensure the prompt declassification of federal records whose secrecy requirements have passed;
- assurance that the management of individual archival programs follows the norms of the profession so that the archivist's distinct role and responsibilities are not compromised by political, institutional, or other considerations; and
- accessibility of public records and documentary cultural property, regardless of format, to the public at a reasonable cost.

Developing a more active and focused position for SAA to advocate on behalf of archival issues will require more than just Council action, and more than just additional funding for SAA's support of advocacy groups and lobbying agencies. What is most critical is the involvement of individual members in a two-part process. On the one hand, members need to alert Council and the executive office to issues on which a clear archival policy statement is needed. This can be done both individually as well as through SAA constituent groups such as committees, sections, roundtables, and representatives. On the other hand, once SAA has adopted a statement, it behooves each of us as professional archivists to incorporate the item within our own repository guidelines and policies. At the least, each of us bears a special responsibility to disseminate archival policy positions at our home institutions. If we wish to ensure that archivists remain in society's view of archives, it is archivists who must place themselves at the center of society's perception of archives. Through such efforts, we will define ourselves, and in the spirit of Christopher Wren and John Milton Gregory, create the "archives" that society will seek.

#### Afterword

I would like to close with a final favorite example of the public misuse of the word "archives," which aptly illustrates the mixed feelings we all must have as we see "archives" embraced by society and commerce.

Some time ago, I returned a mail-in rebate coupon from the distillers of Glenlivet, my regular brand of single-malt scotch. I have subsequently been on the mailing list of the *Glenlivet Society* and receive periodic promotions from the society's "concierge." A recent mailing encouraged me to visit the distillery in Banffshire, Scotland, and included a special invitation entitling me and my guests to several privileges—free admission, inscription in the



V.I.P. guestbook, and a V.I.P. private tasting of “the Glenlivet Archive,” a special bottling not available to the public.<sup>5</sup> So rather than curse the corruption of the language, I propose that we engage in the “archives” of society and impose on it our archival principles, spirit, and values.

### **Lost in a Disneyfied World: Archivists and Society in Late-Twentieth-Century America**

Presidential Address, September 3, 1998

The improbability of archivists meeting at Disney World suggests a Manichaean dualism which reflects on our role in late-twentieth-century society. It brings into focus the perception of a vast divide between the authentic world represented by archives, historical collections, and their users on one hand, and, on the other, the entertainment industry's appropriations of heritage for commercial purposes, often dependent on advanced, synthesizing technology. Archivists understand the past as complex, multi-faceted, and fractal. They know it conflicts with the present and offers both intellectually and spiritually enriching perspectives on life. In the other world, we see well-funded, slick, and often superficial presentations of the past that generally reflect a single harmonious, monolithic, and monocultural image, free from disturbing incidents or experiences that might engender the question of “why.”

The social appropriation of the past for commercial and political use is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, it bolsters public interest in history and would seem beneficial to archives. On the other hand, much of the mass market appeal of history seems to operate on a more superficial and sinister level. There is a strong primary emphasis on the emotive appeal of the past; nostalgia and “event experiences” are very much in contrast to documentary-based examinations of the past where the evidence can be removed and reexamined. To put a political cast on the issue, one might argue that many of the commercial and media-based evocations of the past are part of an escapism that at the least assists the distraction of citizens away from the problems of the present and, at the worst, may be creating a mythical harmony to quiet dissent from conformity to current political and economic norms.<sup>1</sup>

In our more cynical moments, archivists may slip over into a millennialist, apocalyptic thinking that contrasts the pure realm of archives with an anti-

<sup>5</sup> Glenlivet Society, “V.I.P. Pass,” advertising mailing in the possession of the author.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Steyn, “The Entertainment State,” *New Criterion* 17 (September 1998): 24–29 provides a biting critique of the decline of American politics into simplistic images perpetrated by the entertainment industry. While published after this address was delivered, Steyn's critique is fully consistent with the thinking that developed in this address.



archives entertainment kingdom guarded by the seven-headed beast of Disney, Universal Studios, Busch Gardens, MGM Studios, Oliver Stone, Ken Burns, and Norman Rockwell. What these entertainment icons share is an emphasis on taking a distant time or place and making it immediate to a public that is increasingly dependent on a fast-food diet of culture and science. Archivists bemoan the commercial approach to the marketing of heritage in which the *modus operandi* is the sentimental and expressionist evocation of a harmonious and monolithic past all the while purporting to provide an authentic experience. By contrast, we see our beleaguered profession and collections as the guardians of the “true,” or at least a truer, past that can only be discovered through examining and digesting both textual and nontextual documents. The apocalyptic perspective is only heightened by the readily apparent vast discrepancy between the resources of the “edutainment” industry and the cycle of poverty and neglect experienced by academically driven cultural institutions.<sup>2</sup>

In our grossly underfunded institutions we survive by nursing a dream of a coming millennium when we will be able to properly care for and present our understanding of the past through rich documents that touch citizens as effectively as the efforts of our commercial counterparts. We dream of a day when archives will have a determining role in the public’s contact with history. We dream of a world where archives will provide an authentic message, and we dream of the opportunity to present archival images as effectively as Disney’s Main Street America but which actually reflect the variegated experiences of the victims as well as the victors of society.

The more optimistic among us believe that by working with those responsible for so much of the marketing of history, we can thereby advance archives and authenticity by applying archival knowledge and theory directly in service to the commercial projects. Some of us more passively try to emphasize the value of archives to society by pointing to all the occasions in which our collections are passingly used in such large projects as Ken Burns’s “Civil War” or “Baseball.” In these scenarios, at least the ether of nostalgia that envelopes the public in theme parks, movie theatres, and in the mass marketing of history may seem somewhat more authentic because of our participation. The more pessimistic among us see the examples of Disney’s “Pocahontas” or Oliver Stone’s “JFK.” The truly pessimistic look further and see instead the Enola Gay problem, in which leading independent public cultural institutions find themselves fully unable to manage the presentation

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Greenberg, “‘History is a Luxury’: Mrs. Thatcher, Mr. Disney, and (Public) History,” *Reviews in American History* 26 (March 1998): 294–311. In addition to suggesting ideas that supplemented the development of this address, Greenberg’s essay provides an excellent case for the need of historians, and by my extension, archivists, to accept the popularization of history. At the same time, however, archivists must maintain a role separate from “public history” because they are the managers of authentic evidence.

of well-researched alternate perspectives on the past if that presentation contains images that conflict with the public's hazy perceptions of the past or if the presentation raises thought-provoking questions and doubts about key events in our evolution as a people.

Archivists know that popular conceptions and misperceptions of the past are easily belied by the archival record. Unfortunately, few archives have the resources to make broad public presentations of archival evidence that challenge popular conceptions of the past. Given that our narrow resource base is so dependent on the continued good humor of public funders and private philanthropists, we are not in a position to raise questions that cause discomfort to these resource allocators. The problem for institutional archivists can be particularly acute if their parent institutions become uncomfortable with archivists who regard it as their mission to utilize historical documents to provide institutional accountability when the institutions desire instead warm nostalgia and just a retelling of past glories.

If it is fair to say that archivists are in the business of the past, we can also be said to have a legitimate concern about how others utilize and exploit the past. We appreciate the entertainment value of the past, but we care more about the educational value of the past. And we understand that the greatest educational value comes from archives not as a source for images of the past but as the font of evidence. Where we particularly should be taking issue with the mass media use of the past is when it is used for escapism from the present. Indeed, we have a special responsibility to note when slick entertainment presentations are built upon narrow selections of the past in order to paper over the moral ambiguities and cruelties of the past which we know are often well reflected in our archives.

As archivists assemble for the sixty-second annual meeting of the world's largest professional archival organization, we are sadly a very small body. As we embark on this meeting, we can see the difficulty of making a dent on the commercial and entertainment world around us. Even if we were to decide that all of us should wear a unique colored rain-poncho, let's say imperial purple, it is likely that our purple would be quickly swallowed up by the sea of yellow ponchos offered by Disney's shops.

Nevertheless, as we embark on the annual meeting and the professional year it opens, we must reflect on the archival values that we hold deeply, for it is our role and responsibility to be *the* faithful archivists for society. Even when it may appear futile, since archives seem endemically undervalued by the criteria of the external society, we must stand fast and hold true to our role as custodians and guardians of the authentic record of the past. In contrast to the seven-headed beast of the entertainment industry, we need to keep our focus on the seven domains of archival work by which we fulfill our mission of managing an authentic record of the past.

In other words, our first responsibility is to be thoroughly proficient in these domains and to advance theory and practice so that society may indeed entrust us with the care of their records and heritage. These areas define us as a profession and provide a means for us to organize our work, subdividing it into specialties and related activities, and ultimately ensuring the overall unity of the profession. You have heard them before, but the list bears repeating. These seven core functions are: authoritative establishment and administration of programs, authentication of documents, appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation, and use. What they have in common aside from the interrelatedness of their execution is the assurance that their proper execution ensures that authentic evidence is preserved and made accessible while its full value and meaning is retained to enrich the future.

It may be old-fashioned, but I would emphasize that we presume that archivists preside over the past so that others may examine it; that is, that our mission is not to interpret the documentary record or limit it to one set of meanings. We should hold fast to the luxury that our goal is to manage the documentary record for use by others who will form their own opinion and picture of the past.

However, we face a very significant challenge in trying to do archives in the midst of the *fin de siècle* Disney-world. First, we need to understand that our role as archivists is indeed different from several of the other roles around us. This is especially difficult since many of us come to our archival careers late and nearly all of us are educationally framed or institutionally placed such that we are adjacent to comparable professions—public history, museums, library service, records administration. Because we have affinities to these other fields and sense a need for many allies, we often do not attend sufficiently to our own professional identity as archivists. As much as these other fields provide a useful perspective on archival work, we need to make sure that we preserve our identity as archivists and keep our profession as archival in the midst of competing alternatives. In our cycle of poverty, it is often tempting to change our focus to garner the resources and attention available in these allied fields. Doing so, however, carries with it the significant risk of losing our identifying mission and purpose.

For example, public historians and museums are in the business of entertaining and educating the public with history and objectifying the past, often building on nostalgic memories and linking the viewer to established conceptions of the past. With varying success, they also attempt to break traditional preconceptions of the past. Ultimately, however, the role of public history and museums is as interpreters and promoters of the past.

Libraries are in the business of capturing information that has been created specifically for mass dissemination and making that information readily available to multiple publics. However, librarianship is an information pro-

fession wherein data are valued as independent entities, separate from the context that created them. By contrast, archivists must focus on unique documents created often as the accident rather than the object of an action. We are not information professionals like librarians—we are evidence professionals.

Archivists should treasure their role as presiders over evidence, the substance of history from which all interpretation, presentation, and dissemination must proceed. We need to accept this role as a noble calling, and we need to focus on conveying this message to the public. In the post-David Gracy era since 1984, we need to move beyond the archives-and-society utilitarian promotion of archives, wherein the emphasis has been on the economic value of archives. Instead, we need to move into very specific and strategic publicity on the cultural value of archives as the authentic past, especially in contrast to the artificiality of the nostalgic world around us. We need to emphasize the importance of the value of the “real thing,” of the archival record in contrast to the pop culture images that succeed because of their syrupy sweetness.

We are fooling ourselves if we think that archivists will ever hold center stage in society’s understanding of the past. But we should neither chastise ourselves for being on the margins, nor accept the perception that what we do is marginal. The nobility of our calling as guardians of historical truth and authenticity is demonstrated by our commitment to selecting and keeping a reliable record, not by the number of curtain calls we receive. Unless we accept and profess ourselves to society in a way that demonstrates that we value ourselves in this way, we will set ourselves up for failure and disappointment because we can never compete with Mickey, Donald, and Goofy. If we set utility as the ultimate arbiter of value, we will be ceding the valuable ground of higher purpose at the same time as we attempt to compete in a contest where we are armed with toothpicks and our competitors have industrialized weapons.

There are, nevertheless, some important internal actions that we must take. Within SAA, we need to realize that the all-important focus on technique and process that so predominates our field must not become the substance of our work. We need ever-improving techniques and methods, and only the associations of archivists can be the crucible for perfecting techniques and disseminating standards and professional knowledge. But we also need to keep our eyes on the substance of our repositories and our reason to exist—to provide an authentic, comprehensive record that ensures accountability for our institutions and preservation of cultural heritage for our publics. As we burrow into the latest protocols for electronic system design, MARC tagging, Encoded Archival Description mark-up rules, or appraisal models, we also need to remember the broad purposes that unite us as a

profession, and we need to look for ways in which each of us relates our specialty to the archival whole. This is the answer to the much-noted worry about the fragmentation and balkanization of the profession.

As your president and a twenty-year member, I can see no better forum for our philosophizing as a profession than SAA. It is true that, like you, I can find some things that I would like to see different in the Society; but the genesis of my criticism, like yours, is our high hopes for the organization. What SAA provides, above all, is the network of people who help us grow and help us think. Indeed, what I value most in the organization is the network of people who bring a common set of interests and a vision to problems about which each contributes to, or draws from, the expertise of the whole.

So for those of you who feel that SAA sometimes lacks an overarching purpose or identity, I call on you to engage in a philosophical examination of the functional value to society of what you do as your particular archival career specialty. I ask you to think of how you can condense that rationale into a few words that will have currency and value to society at large. In the new millennium, we need to define ourselves not as process and technique or as a control, but as products and values.

For my money, with all due apologies to Coca-Cola, what I believe archivists provide is the “real thing;” but we need to expand this idea to create similar concise descriptions of each of our specialties. Coke’s catch phrase shows the value that a simple set of words can have in defining the very substance of what we do as archivists. If there is one thing that I hope you will carry from my comments, it is that each of our specialist areas needs to spend some time condensing their functional mission statements to a simple motto that will be readily comprehensible to our external audiences. In particular, I think we need to emphasize the outcomes and products of our work.<sup>3</sup>

In a large capitalist, consumer society that operates principally by finding continued new markets, we are likely to find it difficult to secure the attention and financial support of society. This is often because we do not control the valves in the financial pipeline, but it is also because society finds it easier to hold on to simplistic, artificial notions than to complex, variegated ideas. Our response should not be to compromise our message, but to hold fast to archival authenticity and the bedrock importance of what we do. However, we do need to be able to describe accurately what it is we do as products and what the results are for society. We need to focus on the broad, intangible “products” that we provide. We can point to the preservation of heritage, the assurance of accountability of institutions and government, effective access to corporate historical assets, and assurance of availability of records that

<sup>3</sup> For example, preservation specialists might start their consideration with a phrase such as “without us, your past is not even ‘history.’”

protect individual rights. We cannot expect society to suddenly embrace us with praise and financial resources, but in the end our self-conviction in what we do and in our key principles will carry us further in all our efforts with the public than any resort to retailing the utilitarian or financial value of our work.

After all, there is no way we can compete against the financial resources of the commercial world, and the media's realm is far beyond our control. But this does not mean that we should be demoralized or compromise our principles. For at the end of the day, there is no disputing one unassailable fact—we are the keepers of that extremely rare and valuable commodity, the authentic documentary heritage in all its multidimensional richness, the “real thing” to which the future will need to return again and again. We should never underestimate its value.