

ARCHIVISTS AND HISTORIANS: The Times They Are A-Changin'*

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To paraphrase John Donne: No archivist is an island; we are all influenced by the swirl of social forces all around us. Our job is to interpret, understand and anticipate those forces so that we might have some control over them, both as human beings and as archivists. Archivists, like auto workers or carpenters, or for that matter, most workers, have a tendency to internalize their work experiences. Work by its very nature engenders and fosters parochial and provincial attitudes and outlooks. Not looking beyond the confines of his or her archives, the archivist is concerned primarily with the day to day requirements of the job. Just as it is difficult for the auto worker to transcend the confines of tightening the same nut with monotonous regularity and visualize his or her role in the entire production process, or a carpenter to place the house she or he is building in the context of providing decent housing for the people of a nation, archivists, too, have necessarily found it difficult to conceptualize the historical and societal framework of their role.

The nation has recently emerged from a particularly turbulent period in American history. The 1960s witnessed a massive unleashing of social forces concerned with the issues of minority oppression, the war in Southeast Asia, and the struggle of women to achieve full equality in modern society. We all shared the experience of the sixties and are familiar with the decade's impact both on our own personal lives and our profession. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that the modern American archival profession also had

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its birth in a decade of turbulent social change—the 1930s. While the archival profession was indeed well established in Europe and embodied literally centuries of tradition, experience and theory, the American continent was a relative archival desert until the thirties. To be sure, exemplary research repositories did exist, such as the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and the Library of Congress, but the archival profession itself was fragmented and dispersed. The national government had no systematic archives, most universities had none; what collections that did exist were administered by librarians, historians and well-intentioned amateurs.

The crash of 1929 and the social crisis that ensued engendered massive unemployment among most strata of society. The turbulent times created a situation which coalesced the embryonic archival profession into a distinct entity in its own right, forged a cadre of archivists who would lead our profession for the next 30 years, stimulated a project which provided archival jobs for thousands of unemployed academics and students, and established a national archives to house the records of a nation.

The social crisis of the 1930s posed as its solution the alternatives of reform or revolution. Through the implementation of the New Deal, the former alternative prevailed. The Roosevelt administration was faced with the harsh reality of millions of unemployed workers understandably quite discontent with their condition. Attempting to stave off this discontent, the administration initiated a large scale program of public works. Most of the jobs created were manual and consisted chiefly of civic and community improvement projects. Special consideration, however, was given to students and unemployed members of the academic community who constituted a potentially explosive social layer. Federal art, writing and theatre projects were established both to absorb the creative energies of their participants and provide them with subsistence wages. For members of the historical profession, the Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration was established. Young historians and history students were dispatched to conduct a monumental survey of the extent, condition, and location of the records of the country.

From the Historical Records Survey project emerged a generation of historians-turned-archivists who had learned their trade in the field. Similarly, with the establishment of the National Archives in Washington in the mid 1930s, a corps of young unemployed historians

and graduate students were transformed through experiment and experience into a cadre of archivists who would found the Society of American Archivists. Many of these pioneering archivists eventually became almost legendary giants in our profession.

The social turmoil in Europe led to the arrival of Dr. Ernst Posner on the American archival scene. Dr. Posner personally embodied the traditions, experience and theory of the European archival past and, as such, would come to serve as both the bridge to long established European archival practices and as the major theoretician of the American archival craft.

The advent of World War II pulled the country out of the depression and created the need for new archivists to cope with the rapidly accumulating records of the Army, Navy, and War Departments, the Office of Strategic Services, and other war-related agencies. Many young archivists who completed their apprenticeships during the New Deal period, moved into these new positions, gaining further experience in the process.

With the war's end in 1945, a quarter century of unparalleled prosperity unfolded. A rapidly expanding American economy created the need for literally millions of college-educated personnel. As a consequence, we witnessed a veritable explosion in higher education, visibly manifested by the development of the mass public universities and university systems.

This educational explosion had a greater impact on our profession than any previous phenomenon. With the educational expansion came thousands of new jobs in the history profession, a geometric increase in historical research, and a commensurate need for facilities for the care of the raw materials of historical research. As the universities themselves expanded, a need was created for the systematic preservation, organization and servicing of their own official records. Some corporations, flush with new wealth generated during the post-war prosperity, began to give serious attention to their records, providing ample financing and staffing for newly established corporate archives.

During the late 1960s, as the economy began slowing down, federal funds became more difficult to obtain. The Society of American Archivists had begun to stagnate, with neither its numerical membership nor its overall outlook reflecting the changes that had occurred within the profession and in society as a whole. Both the Society

of American Archivists and the archival profession entered a transitional period—a period spanning adolescence and maturity that was marked by a generational turnover within the Society itself. A new generation assumed leadership roles. The founding members of the profession and the Society, the same generation forged by the conditions of the thirties, gave way to a new generation shaped by a different set of social conditions.

This new generation, represented by such individuals as Robert Warner, Herbert Finch, Mary Lynn McCree, Philip Mason, and F. Gerald Ham, began questioning some of the values and assumptions of the founding generation of our profession. Many of these values and assumptions while novel and innovative in their time, had become encrusted, ossified, and impervious to changing reality during the quarter century following World War II. Behind the McCrees, Masons, and Hams loomed still a younger and even more strident generation of archivists who had come to the profession during the social upheaval of the 1960s. Together these two younger generations began pushing the Society and the profession, not without resistance, in the direction that it is moving today.

Many members of both new generations began drawing a number of conclusions about the profession and the Society of American Archivists:

- (1) The SAA itself was stagnating in terms of its activities, outlook and membership. It neither reflected the reality of the changing profession nor adequately met the needs of its members.

- (2) The SAA, led in part by a rather staid and closed group comprised in the main of top-level administrators, National Archives administrative personnel and an unusually large number of archivists from Southern states who held rather traditional values, was seen by many newer members as an elitist and undemocratic organization.

- (3) The SAA was virtually lily-white in its composition and, with but a few notable exceptions, women in the profession were not treated as equals.

- (4) Many traditional notions of what types of primary source materials should be collected and from what sectors of the population source materials should be solicited encouraged an elitist approach to writing history, an approach that in effect ignored the history of blacks and other minorities, women, working people and the poor.

- (5) The national priority of spending public monies on foreign wars,

especially in Southeast Asia, instead of meeting the needs of Americans for improved health care, housing, and educational and cultural opportunities (including archives) was seen as a fundamentally wrong priority, one that must be altered.

As these issues began to penetrate the hitherto impregnable walls of the SAA, they were reflected in a number of ways, including:

(1) The Report of the SAA Committee on the Seventies which initiated the process of democratizing the Society.

(2) The creation of the *ad hoc* SAA Committee on the Status of Women in the Archival Profession which was charged with inquiring into that question and, eventually, offering remedies for abuses extant in the profession.

(3) Pressure placed upon the SAA to adopt a policy opposing discrimination within the Society and the profession.

(4) The development of action groups within the SAA such as ACT (Archivists For Action) and the emergence of newsletters such as the *New Archivist*.

(5) The initiation of a campaign to recruit new members and secure funds to support a full-time executive secretary for the SAA.

(6) The development of the regional archival organizations to meet needs the SAA could not fill.

Many of these new ideas were by no means held by a majority of either the SAA membership or practitioners of the profession. This fact was perhaps best exemplified by the remarks of a respected senior member of the profession at the 1974 SAA Annual Meeting in Columbus, who objected to the fact that the SAA was getting too large and wondered aloud about the credentials of the new members who had recently joined.

Many of the problems and issues currently facing the profession should be examined in the context of a generalized downturn in the American economy. In short, the post-Vietnam War period of economic expansion has run its course. This is said not as a prophecy of doom but as a realistic observation of the fact that the American economy no longer reigns unchallenged on the world market—Japanese and German capital have become competitive and the American economy is no longer artificially stimulated by the massive military expenditures of the Vietnam War.

What implications will this new economic situation likely have for archivists?

(1) An already tight job market will become tighter.

(2) Large-scale cutbacks in public expenditures for archival operations can be expected. Archives, after all, in a non-expanding economy, are a luxury. With the cutbacks will come layoffs and threats to job security.

(3) For the next few years, at any rate, unemployed history PhDs will continue to compete with apprentice, on-the-job trained, archivists, for the few jobs and promotions that become available.

(4) With the tight job market, no substantive change in the almost exclusively white complexion of the profession will occur.

(5) The use of part-time students and other para-professionals in order to cut costs will escalate. Such use of student help will inescapably undercut jobs for full-time archivists.

(6) Salaries will barely keep pace with the rate of inflation; the days of generous salary increases are over.

(7) Controversy over the right of privacy vs. the right of access to our holdings will increase. Watergate is merely a foreshadowing of things to come.

(8) Many archivists will militantly defend the gains they have already made and actively seek further gains. Archivists, especially in non-administrative, lower-paying positions, will begin to join trade unions such as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Federation of Government Employees in order to protect themselves, simply because the profession, small as it is, packs no real economic or political clout.

(9) The SAA, compelled by the new turn in events, by its increasingly younger composition, and by pressure of regional groups such as MAC, will seriously try to come to grips with some of the problems facing the profession.

(10) The related phenomena of individuals becoming archivists by default, and the archival profession comprised in the main of history prelim flunkouts and librarians assigned to archival work against their wishes, are over. The new archivist will be a person who consciously and deliberately chooses to enter the profession. Criteria for prospective archivists will be determined more and more by exigencies of the economy combined with apprenticeship performance rather than being based upon artificially imposed educational standards.

If in the past the historian has been the bricklayer and the archivist

the hod-carrier, the future will witness at least an equalization of these roles. If the archival profession can manage to organize itself, it will become a meaningful pursuit in its own right and not simply an appendage of either librarianship or the pursuit of history. To achieve this maturity it will be necessary for archivists to commence a dialogue with colleagues in other fields—especially historians.

Prior to 1970 most archivists came to their chosen trade after brief stopovers in the temple of Clio, but the relationship between archivists and historians in the period following World War II has not been particularly cordial. Most historians tended to view archivists in the same manner as they did filling station attendants, while archivists, especially those with history backgrounds who entered the archival craft by circumstance or default, looked upon most “real” historians with resentment and jealousy.

This situation was perhaps best articulated by W. Kaye Lamb, then Dominion Archivist of Canada, in a paper presented at a joint luncheon of the Society of American Archivists and the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C., in 1961. Noting that to historians “the archivist is essentially a hack, a hewer of wood and a drawer of water,” Mr. Lamb devoted the balance of his presentation to an impassioned defense of archivists, calling upon them to shed their collective archival inferiority complex.

The infamous “Lowenheim affair”, involving scholarly access to records at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, exacerbated the uncongenial relationship between archivists and historians. Separated by a wall of mutual suspicion and narrow specialization, archivists and historians, in many respects, became adversaries. The longstanding European tradition of the archivist as historian-scholar, as exemplified by Dr. Ernst Posner, virtually disappeared in the United States by the 1970s.

Yet, ironically, two of the most important critiques of contemporary archival practices in recent years have come from historians. In both instances an historian came before the Society of American Archivists with a trenchant criticism of commonly accepted archival theory and practice and challenged the Society and its membership to transcend narrow and parochial traditions and concerns and begin to implement a wholly different approach to acquiring and making available the records of our time.

Professor Howard Zinn of Boston University shocked and offended

many in his audience with a paper entitled "The American Archivist and Radical Reform" presented at the 1970 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Washington, D.C. Zinn delivered his paper at a session on "The Archivist and the New Left," chaired by Frank Evans. The other panelists were Philip Mason of Wayne State University and myself.

While Zinn's paper most certainly was received with disdain by many of those present, it was welcomed most enthusiastically by a relatively small group of mainly younger archivists who thereafter committed themselves to publicizing Zinn's views and persuading their colleagues of the validity of his criticisms of the archival profession.

Largely as a consequence of Zinn's challenge, a small number of archivists in San Francisco the following year for the 35th SAA Annual Meeting founded ACT, an informal caucus dedicated to reform within both the SAA and the archival profession. During the six years since ACT was founded in 1971, many of its ideas and recommendations have been adopted by the SAA.

At that same meeting in San Francisco, another historian ventured into the archival den, offering a critique and challenge similar to Zinn's. Professor Sam Bass Warner, Jr., then of the University of Michigan, presented at the session on urban archives a paper entitled "The Shame of the Cities: Public Records of the Metropolis" in which he scored the deplorable state of urban archives in the United States and called for a fundamental reassessment of all of the traditional assumptions, notions, and practices connected with the acquisition, preservation and research use of municipal archives. His views, in large part, were echoed and reinforced by the other members of the panel, including Dennis East, then of Wayne State University, and Allen Weinberg of the City and County Archives of Philadelphia. The session was chaired by Edward Johnson of the Florida Bureau of Archives and Records Management.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, Warner's paper did not have the same impact as Zinn's, in part because of the relatively small attendance at the San Francisco meeting. Warner's plea, however, did not go entirely unnoticed. F. Gerald Ham, in his SAA presidential address given in Toronto in 1974 entitled "The Archival Edge," called attention to Warner's suggestions and urged that they be given careful consideration.

Most archivists, however, have only heard about Zinn's and Warner's papers. Few have had an opportunity to read either of them. Warner's paper was never published and Zinn's appeared in a small circulation journal not easily accessible to archivists. It is thus as a service to the archival profession that the *Midwestern Archivist* is including both Zinn's and Warner's papers in this issue. I hope that readers will consider these articles not merely as historical documents but as contemporary guides for action, offered in good faith and with good will. These colleagues from an allied profession had the courage to disregard the arbitrary constraints that confine and circumscribe academic disciplines. Their stimulating critiques and recommendations present archivists with a challenge that warrants serious attention.