

WHAT'S YOUR TOTEM? ARCHIVAL IMAGES IN THE PUBLIC MIND.

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Consider for a moment: What animal would you choose as a symbol for archivists (and thereby for archival work)?¹ What animal exhibits attributes most closely parallel to our own?

For eons humans have chosen animals to express the brave, dynamic, proud characteristics they have wanted to emulate or project. Our advanced society certainly is no exception. We try to draw strength from, or intimidate opponents by, invoking the traits of animals. Consider the nicknames of athletic teams, for example. Wasn't it the merciless, determined Tigers who triumphed in the 1984 World Series? (The meek, self-effacing Padres had no chance!) Throughout the year, in the Southwest Athletic Conference, the tough, rangy Longhorns, the quick, fierce Razorbacks, the wise Owls, the speedy, persevering Mustangs, the lumbering, relentless Bears, the quick-strike Cougars, and the fearsome, ugly Horned Frogs tear into each other in inter-collegiate athletic competition.

Shift from athletic teams to automobiles: There are Skylarks, Firebirds, Rabbits, Colts, Mustangs, Foxes, and Rams. In the heyday of passenger trains you could ride the Eagle, the Owl, the Wolverine, the Flamingo, and the Hummingbird. Amtrak still runs a few, including the Mule in Missouri. Look to the heavens: who hasn't heard of the Flying Tigers of World War II? Airplanes have carried the names of Hellcat, Cobra, Condor, Hawk, Tigershark, Mustang, Aardvark, and Grasshopper.

In still other spheres, animals represent stations of achievement. In the ranks of scouting young men move from Bobcat to Wolf to Bear, and on up to the coveted, highest rank of Eagle. Even the "high-tech" computer world has its user-friendly "little mouse."

Returning to the original question, what animal would you select to symbolize archivists? What animal exhibits characteristics most closely parallel to ours? The barracuda, eagle, bear, mustang, or owl? How about the elephant? It is the only archivally-adopted animal I have yet run across. The Lennox and Addington County Museum in Toronto, Canada, used a cheery, high-stepping pachyderm as its symbol on "Heritage Day," a day devoted to explaining, discussing, and promoting archival service to society. The elephant was covered with newsprint and surrounded by a circle of words reading: "An Archive Never Forgets: Save Our Heritage." Unfortunately, however, the elephant may not have been the most appropriate symbol for

archivists and archival service to society. At the end of the Heritage Day program on archival enterprise and local history, one member of the audience wrote: "I enjoyed the whole day immensely because I like history. However, I fail to see any relevance of these matters for club records."

If not the elephant, which animals does the public associate with us? I have found three. The most recent association appeared in a July 9, 1984, *New York Times* editorial concerning the decision of the Vatican to open the records of Galileo's trial 351 years after the event. "Through wars, plagues, floods, and fires," the editorial proclaimed, "the squirrels remain to pick up and put away the evidence of our passage through the centuries. Without them we wouldn't have our history, which means we wouldn't have our selves."² An animal of similar characteristics that more commonly comes to the public mind is the pack rat. These furry little nuisances stash away paper and other things on general principle, on impulse, and out of instinct. They exhibit neither selectivity nor conviction in what they bring to their nests. Is this the archivist? Another animal the public equates with archivists and archival endeavor is the mole. The mole is subterranean, retiring, shy of the light of day, and lives comfortably in dirt. You may recall the newspaper headline, from a midwestern institution of higher learning that I mentioned in my "President's Page" in the Summer 1984 issue of the *American Archivist*, which reflects this image so succinctly. "Archivist Surfaces to Receive Award," it read, apropos of nothing in the article. Is this the archivist? Not to me!

We speak of the public's image of the archivist and of the archival service to society as if it is something formed by the populace from whole cloth. In fact, of course, the image reflects the presence we do, or at least have in the past, consciously or unconsciously, put forth. The indisputable cause and effect relationship of projection by one group and corresponding perception by another has been starkly and instructively documented by John Molloy, author of the popular, *Dress for Success*. Molloy wrote in another book, *Live for Success*, of a research project on the image of the librarian he conducted for the Texas Library Association. The principles he found at work are universal. The parallels between the library community and the archival community are, I suspect, uncomfortably close.

"When we did research on their image for the Texas Library Association," Molloy begins, "we discovered the public held them in very low esteem. More than 70 percent of those questioned believed that it was not necessary to have a college degree to work in a library and that everyone who worked in a library was a librarian. The fact is," he continues, "that the minimum educational requirement for a librarian is a master's degree and that most of the people you meet in libraries are simply clerks."

"The problem," Molloy reports, "is not one of public ignorance but of poor image. The way librarians dress and conduct themselves gives the public the impression they are glorified clerks. As a result, they are one of the most underpaid groups of people in the United States.... every time there is a budget crunch, the first to feel the impact are the libraries. One of the reasons," his evidence reveals, "is that the people who run them announce through their poor image that libraries are not important places because they are run by unimportant people."

"This is," he concludes, "a classic example of how the perceived socioeconomic image of a group affects its real socioeconomic position."³

If the poor public image of librarians and archivists can be traced in part to a common root, archivists at least have begun to recognize the cause. Several who responded to my letter to the SAA membership of December 1983 focused on this point.

"Face it," wrote one, "archivists can be real dull." "I feel our biggest problem as a profession," admitted another, "is our own lack of self-esteem. How can we convince others that we serve an important function in society when we are not convinced of that ourselves?" A third archivist elaborated: "Archivists are partly to blame for their low recognition factor in society. Too many of us come off as passive, uptight hoarders and protectors of materials in our control rather than as people who play a worthy role in society...." This colleague continued, "Since we archivists so often put on a Rodney Dangerfield 'I-don't-get-no-respect' act, we have to admit quite simply that we are often our own worst enemies by not taking pride in our work and not doing it well."

An archivist with twenty years' experience echoes this opinion, summing up the sentiment of many when he observed that "In the years that I have seen go by, I cannot see that the 'profession' has made much progress toward defining what it is about.... We cannot decide what an archivist is," he wrote in disgust, "or how those persons claiming to be archivists should be trained. We have not established any test that archivists must meet if they are to call themselves by that title, and we are only pussy-footing around the issue of standards for archives. We have allowed an allied profession to take over most of our training, and to require that many archival positions be held by persons with the professional training and degrees of that allied profession.... It is going to be difficult to change the image of the archivist in the minds of the public," he concluded bleakly, "when we ourselves are not at all sure what we are."

This archivist's pessimism did not abate when he looked at the "person" of the archivist. "Persons who become archivists and librarians generally choose the profession because they are not in the mainstream," he contended. "They can generally [and would rather] work away from the public.... They can [and would prefer to] work at scholarly rather than public things.... Archivists are not at all knowledgeable about how to obtain publicity, and most of them are in this business for reasons that are the exact opposite of what is needed to get publicity.... Most of them," he concluded dejectedly, "are far too concerned with 'keeping up' to spend much time on public relations."

Is it any wonder, then, that archivists are seen as squirrels and pack rats and moles? Is there any doubt that the most basic, if not the first, step we must take in changing the public's image of us is changing our own impression of ourselves and thus the image we project? We have an obligation to the public and to ourselves to change our image. Archives are not unimportant places run by unimportant people.

We must begin with the way we project ourselves as individuals. Each of us has to decide that he or she wants to break out of our ill-fitting molds. The decision to do so is easy to make when we look around and recognize

change already taking place. Archivists are ceasing to be production workers — employees whose major responsibilities include the production of a certain number of output units, whether they be cubic feet arranged, finding aids produced, or patrons assisted. We perform basic programmatic duties of manager, planner, system designer, leader and supervisor, mediator, writer, speaker, fund raiser, researcher, subject expert, collection builder, budget analyst, proposal writer, statistician, consultant, and entrepreneur.

The problem for archivists is that our performance of these varied duties and responsibilities, little reported by archivists, consequently has been noted only dimly by institution directors and boards or by personnel and budget offices, where traditional concepts of the archivist prevail, and not at all by the general public. The varied work that we do “conforms perfectly with the federal government’s characterization of the work of professional employees. It is predominately intellectual and varied rather than routine, manual, mechanical, or physical. It involves the consistent exercise of discretion and judgment in its performance. The output produced or the result accomplished cannot be related to a standard unit of time.”⁴ Archivists have much to be proud of in their work and many new things to say about it.

Second, we need to provide ourselves and our publics with a benchmark by which to measure archival knowledge, attainment, and quality of being an archivist. This benchmark is a program of certification of individual archivists. In establishing a certification program, the archival profession would define that basic body of knowledge one must have to be recognized as an “archivist.” That knowledge comes through education — at annual meetings, in workshops, and/or from the classroom. It comes through on-the-job experience as a practitioner. It is measured in combinations of length of service, nature of work experience, amount and nature of formal education, and by examination. As discussed by the SAA Council at its meeting in May, 1984 (reported in the July 1984 SAA *Newsletter*), certification would include provisions for “grandparenting,” tied with a requirement of periodic recertification to encourage continued competency. Recognizing how fundamental practical experience is to sound performance of archival duties, the SAA Council specified that any certification program should include provisions for basic work experience; a person could apply for certification only after having spent a specified minimum number of years in archival service, not simply after completing classroom work.

The SAA Council placed the development of a model for such a program in the hands of the SAA’s Committee on Education and Professional Development. A subcommittee, chaired by Susan Grigg of Smith College is preparing recommendations for consideration by the full committee and the Council. In due course, the proposed certification program will be published in the SAA *Newsletter* for comment. Council recognized, however, when it charged the subcommittee, that the initial proposal for a certification program is not likely to be perfect. Whatever final version is adopted will require continued attention and revision. In the first years of a certification program, we cannot let the absence of perfection deflect our resolve. The fundamental purpose of a program for measuring and certifying archival competence is to improve our image in the public mind, thereby enhancing our ability to obtain the resources we must have to perform the service we provide to society.

Third, we must take to the American people, using every forum available to us, the message of what service we perform and why our performing it enriches their lives. We must promote our important work unabashedly, unreservedly, and unstintingly. To do so, we must reach beyond ourselves and enlist the knowledge and expertise of marketing professionals. As one archivist wrote bluntly and truthfully, "If we are to increase public awareness of our holdings and our reasons for being, we must take active, positive steps to present ourselves to our publics. We must live, breathe, and think outreach. It must be our most important product." For the marketer, outreach is vital, but only one arrow in the quiver. We must look to the marketing expert for new concepts and approaches to developing and describing, to packaging and promoting our product — archival service. Marketing is more than selling, more than stocking shelves and waiting for customers to appear. Marketing offers techniques for working with the customer to develop the customer's appreciation of the product. Marketing also works to prepare the product to meet the needs of the customer. The Midwest Archives Conference is taking the lead in this effort. MAC will offer, on the two days prior to its spring meeting in May 1985 a pilot workshop on marketing techniques for archivists. It will be taught by Kevin Flood, Director of Publications for the National Archives and a member of the SAA Task Force on Archives and Society. After the pilot effort, the task force anticipates developing other presentations on marketing archival services in the form of additional workshops and publications.

The changes archivists are working for will not come as quickly or as easily, or be as widespread as we would like. As one writer put it: "We realize of course that decades of neglect and low self-esteem will not change overnight as a result of the efforts of one task force, yet this cannot be used (as it often is) as an excuse for inactivity. SAA at the national level and the regionals at the local levels must actively promote a positive attitude and seek to instill a sense of pride in what we do." There is work to do on every level.

Fourth, every regional archival organization has a role to play in a common effort to reform our image of ourselves and the image that the public has of us. Each regional organization should form a group to coordinate and lead in this endeavor. A Midwest Archives Conference Task Force on Archives and Society could carry forward the projected May 1985 workshops on marketing by developing public relations efforts using the media, events, and educational programs.

Regional archival organizations are in a superb position to establish liaison with local and regional organizations of allied professions, such as the American Records Management Association and the American Library Association as well as municipal clerks and other pertinent associations. The chapters and local components of these associations meet frequently enough to provide opportunity for meaningful cooperation on specific projects. We need to look more closely at the relationship of archival work to the activities of allied professions. Consider the following remarks addressed to the library community, which could just as well have been directed to archivists. In it I have substituted the word "archives" for "library."

The essential characteristics of society in the information age are instant availability of news and access to the gargantuan amount of informa-

tion.... How does *an archives* participate effectively in the information age? How does *an archives* remain as one of the primary stakeholders of information? We can't depend on 'business as usual.' In the absence of a national consensus for *archives*, we have become overdependent upon past concepts of what *an archives* is supposed to do, and the role *an archives* is supposed to play in society. The absence of a new role and a new vision for *archives* leaves the community with no visible reason why *archives* should increase their budgets, be upgraded and remain the guardians of information. *Archives* can't accept a no-growth future — a future, where their importance fades away just as the typewriter has given way to the word processor.... The idea that the future holds less promise than the past for *archives* is unacceptable.⁵

The relevance and importance of this message for both the library and the archival communities demonstrates the undeniably strong relationships we have with sister fields in the broad information community. For the several professions within the information community to serve and survive, we — archivists, librarians, and records managers — all must put behind us the defensive, mutually self-destructive and self-defeating attitudes of "my work is more important than your work" and seriously explore means of cooperating in this, the information age.

Fifth, we need to focus attention to the fact that education about the value of archives entails more than just education about the practice of archivists. Education also involves developing a love of the kinds of information we hold. We must work to instill a love of both history and the lessons the public can draw from history. Because the public is often impatient with the humanist arguments for preserving archives; because the public does not want to believe that our documentary heritage can tell us how we got here so that we can chart where we are going; because the public chooses not to accept the truth; this neither invalidates nor justifies abandoning it. Archivists, as individuals and in our organizations, have much to do. One regional archival association, for example, intends to design, print, and distribute a poster promoting an awareness of archives and archival materials. The poster will be designed for use in archival repositories, libraries, businesses, and schools. It likely will be oriented to a particular activity the regional undertakes, such as International Archives Week or a state archives day. It could as easily be linked to a history appreciation week or a heritage day.

Achieving a positive change in the public's knowledge, appreciation, understanding, and support of archival contributions to society is fundamental to our ability to continue to provide such service. That ability is so compromised at this point that the author of a handbook on the methodology of scholarly research writes without hesitation: "Sight unseen you can predict a few things about almost any archives in the world. It's short on money, short on space, short on time, and short on manpower."⁶ Let's not also be short on ourselves. We have to believe in ourselves and in what we do by reassessing how we present ourselves, by establishing a program to certify individual archivists, by adopting the techniques of marketing to promote our work, by using regional organizations to carry the message and to promote cooperation, and, finally, by broadening our heretofore narrow approach to educating our publics.

Believing this, it becomes even more imperative to answer the question posed at the outset: what animal would you choose as a symbol for archivists (and thereby for archival work)? What animal exhibits attributes most closely parallel to our own? For me, it is the ant. I always recall the song:

Just what makes that little ole ant
 Think he'll move that rubbertree plant?
 Everyone knows an ant can't
 Move a rubbertree plant.

If we recognize that we have an image problem, as we should, ... if we believe that we can do something about it, as we can ... and if we work for change, as we ought, it won't be long before we, too, are singing: "Whoops, there goes another rubbertree plant!"

FOOTNOTES

1. The author expresses his appreciation to colleagues Carolyn V. Majewski, Chris LaPlante, and Michael R. Green for their critiques of the manuscript.
2. "Time, the Pope and Galileo," *New York Times*, July 9, 1984.
3. John Molloy, *Live for Success* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), p. 23.
4. I acknowledge the insight in Allen B. Veaner, "Librarians: the Next Generation," *Library Journal*, April 1, 1984, pp. 623-625, from which this quotation is taken.
5. Dataphase Corporation, "An Open Letter to the Library Community" (advertisement, 1984).
6. Mary-Claire van Leunen, *A Handbook for Scholars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 206.

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