DOCUMENTING THE DIFFICULT OR COLLECTING THE CONTROVERSIAL

KAREN M. LAMOREE

ABSTRACT: Conflict has traditionally been a wellspring of historical research and interpretation, for it is inherently interesting. Examining controversy permits study not only of the contested issue itself but also of the context in which it is found and the factors that led to its appearance. Despite such inherent interest many archival and manuscript repositories have failed to document relatively recent conflicts in their areas of collection responsibility. Why, as a profession, are we reluctant to document the battles over school prayer, integration, abortion, gay rights, and even the fluoridation of water?

Political conflict of the legislative kind from any period is automatically accorded historical significance by our profession. *Old* community disagreements, particularly if all participants are long dead, are also apparently deserving of historical attention. In contrast, political conflict of the grassroots sort, the messy, divisive, deeply felt, sometimes ugly sort, is often seen as less worthy of our professional attention, especially if it is current. Perhaps this judgment reflects less an historical analysis than our own discomfort with conflict, inexperience in analyzing current events for historical importance, elitism, fear of being tainted by controversy in coming near it, and/or lack of knowledge about the best way to proceed with documenting controversy.

Lack of knowledge and the fear of being tainted with the brush of controversy often seem to override a repository's potential interest in documenting a conflict. Knowledge can be obtained only through experience; a repository or archivist embarking on documenting a controversy should indeed proceed with caution. Nonetheless, most, if not all, potential problems can be avoided by a careful and thoughtful approach to collecting. *The key to success lies in a strategy for documenting an issue rather than a side, group, or individual.* Other essential points are always to present a neutral, objective, professional image; to constantly reiterate the fact that the repository's program and personnel are neutral, fair, and evenhanded; to provide a forum in which everyone with an axe to grind may talk with the archivist as part of a local documentation project; to know the issue and the participants to the extent that the archivist can anticipate their reactions; to have the right staff; and, finally, to have the right timing.

Documenting an issue rather than an individual, side, or particular event places a repository in the best possible position to reap the fullest benefits and

incur the fewest losses, both politically and professionally. *The potential to obtain a well-rounded and complete collection is the most important long-term benefit from issue-oriented collecting.* Such holdings permit and encourage comprehensive research which might then depict the complexity of society and promote more sophisticated analyses.[1]

Collecting, or at least attempting to collect, material on all sides in a dispute also enables the repository to present itself as fair and evenhanded, a desirable and useful image. Fairness, both apparent and real, is an essential, even necessary, aspect of documenting a controversial issue. From childhood cries of "No fair!" on the sports field, to jury deliberations involving large corporations' liability, to the current debate over affirmative action, Americans seemingly have a passion for the pursuit of fairness. This concern often manifests itself in a desire for one's story to be included as fully as possible and cries of foul when an individual or group feels left out or misrepresented (as any parent of two or more children can attest). Encouraging all participants to donate materials fosters a sense of inclusion, enables actors in an issue to be participants in the documentation of that issue, and often diffuses criticism of a repository's choice of documentation projects. Occasionally, a group not necessarily considered fanatical will argue against fairness. Such groups are vocal minorities seeking to erase painful memories or otherwise "offensive" events or words from existence. Being sensitive to such feelings should not preclude professional responsibility to fairness, objectivity, and intellectual freedom, all fostered through collecting comprehensive, well-rounded collections.

In donor or public relations, this neutral and comprehensive position allows staff to counter arguments that the repository should not be documenting the "other side." In the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's statewide treaty rights and national abortion collecting projects, staff has found that the vast majority of people can not, or will not, argue with the fairness of documenting both sides because that would make *them* seem unfair.

The key to handling activists is to know and understand their level of activism. As one progresses up the ladder toward fanaticism, the fairness argument can become less effective. In such cases, a useful technique is to ask, "What do you think of the other side?" Inevitably the answer of an activist of this type will be, "They are evil, or at the very least, crazy." The archivist may then ask, "How will people of the future know that unless we document what *they* think and what *they* do?" Most people are swayed by this point. If not, their next argument tends to be that the other side's attitudes, actions, or materials are deeply offensive and should not be saved. It is not effective to say, "In this country we do not have a right to not be offended." Rather, the archivist should return to the last point, with a new twist: "If you find that material offensive, if you cannot believe that someone would say, think, do such a thing, imagine how unbelievable it will be for people of the future to understand not only the other side but also your response if they don't know to what you were/are responding? Isn't it important that we remember that this exists?" The author has found that this argument almost always brings agreement.

Occasionally, there may well be fanatics who will not participate in your project if you so much as mention the other side and, although usually small in number, they can make a lot of noise, especially when they are staff in your own institution. The collecting path should be so well prepared that everyone

touched by the project responds that it is being run professionally, objectively, and fairly. To take a lesson from the advertising world, if one says something long enough, often enough, and loud enough, people will buy the product. As many a manufacturer has learned, however, the public will keep buying a product only if it lives up to its promises. The repository must truly make the attempt to document the issue.

The repository can emphasize its neutrality by the title or description of the well-rounded, comprehensive project. For example, rather than announce that the repository is documenting the "attempts of Earth Firsters to stop local logging," state that the goal is to document natural resource allocation. Stating that it is documenting "racism toward American Indians" will not build as many bridges as a statement that the repository is documenting race relations. At all times, stick with the official title of the project and do not shorten it to the "Earth First" project or the "tree huggers" project. Somehow, someway, someone will hear about it, decide the repository and/or the archivist has a bias, and the repository and project will suffer for it.

The right staff people are crucial to the success of this type of collecting. Just as not every archivist is suited to donor relations, not every donor relations archivist is suited to documenting controversy. The archivist must be able to look at and to be involved in an issue solely from an historical viewpoint, ignoring or suppressing personal beliefs or transforming them into useful tools. Archivists must be professional and objective in their demeanor and interactions with donors, the press, and the public in general at *all* times. This means that the archivist must not participate publicly in any partisan activity which touches on the issue, from protesting at a rally to writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Maintaining neutrality is essential to successful donor and public relations in collecting controversies.

To be sure, this is a fine line the archivist must tread. While using the helpful approach of appealing to a potential donor's ego, the archivist must avoid sycophancy or acceptance of a subordinate status as such a position will result in loss of control over the donor relations interaction. The archivist must seem sympathetic, understanding, and accepting, yet not make a point of agreeing with the potential donor. She or he must be able to hide incredulity or even disgust at a belief expressed or outright lie told by either side of an issue. It may be difficult, but it is just as important, to hide one's opinions from those with whom one agrees as from those with whom one disagrees, in order to maintain the image of a fair, objective professional. Potential donors may ask the archivist quite bluntly for their opinion on the issue. They may ask subtly, or they may wait to see if they can ascertain it from words, demeanor, or body language. When asked, the archivist should be prepared to answer. The author has found the following response to be effective: "My opinion is quite irrelevant because I am acting as an objective, professional archivist and historian." This will reinforce the stance of neutrality and invariably halt further questioning, without seeming terse. For those who continue to prod, it is best to deflect them with humor; have a joke or two prepared in advance. To be sure, working with fanatics is neither enjoyable nor easy, and even the staff person most capable of suppressing personal beliefs will have the occasional problem dealing with such individuals. If all else fails, the staff can remind themselves that they have the power to ensure that this type of thought or action is documented for posterity.

In short, donors will think the archivist and the repository are going to handle the papers well either because the archivist agrees with them or because the archivist is a professional and that is what professionals do. The latter is a preferred belief to cultivate in terms of donor relations. Agreeing with a donor's politics for the sake of obtaining a collection always puts the repository in a precarious position, if only because if one side thinks staff agrees with it, the other side will learn of it. Then the mantle of objectivity is removed and at the very least the repository will not get materials from the opposing position.

To foster and reinforce the appropriate image and to begin collecting, the repository must be visible and open to all sides. For example, in the case of the raging and sometimes violent conflict over treaty rights in Wisconsin, which occurred during the 1980s and early 1990s, the author visited reservations and nearby towns and talked with everyone possible in the fall, when tensions were low. In the spring, when controversy was at its height, the author visited a boat landing during a protest, in part to ascertain how best to document this aspect of the issue. The press, which converged on the landings every spring, had heard of the Historical Society's work and sought the author out for a story. The reporters were so intrigued with the notion of documenting history as it happens that the Society received three highly favorable articles in papers throughout the state. These visits provided not only an opportunity to collect, but also a visible presence and a chance for people on all sides to give staff "advice" on how to document the issue in a well-rounded manner.

Providing people with a chance to talk with an historian/archivist is an especially effective way to involve people in a project, make them feel good about it, and yet maintain control. Performing oral history interviews is another way to achieve these goals and, more importantly, to capture those aspects not otherwise documented.

In its nearly century-long practice of documenting social action, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has endeavored to collect information and materials about a controversy either as it was happening or shortly thereafter. Two of our best-known areas of collecting—the anti-Vietnam War movement and the civil rights movement—were documented as they happened. However, they were not the result of efforts to document an issue but movements organized against the existing order. Today wherever possible the Society documents issues to achieve a well-rounded collection which permits research not merely of particular aspects of an issue, but also the interrelationships between philosophies, practices, and people. Timing, however, remains essential. The information and paper explosions notwithstanding, we live in a mobile, disposable-oriented society which does not foster the saver mentality or space necessary for fruitful collecting twenty years hence. If the repository approaches an issue at the right time, the archivist will only occasionally find donors who want to retain their papers indefinitely out of sentimentality, belief in their currency, or fear of allowing them "out." In such cases, if the collection is less than a cubic foot or so and staff consider it to be highly important, it is usually possible to arrange to duplicate it. If the collection is larger, it is best to inform the donor of existing interest and keep in close contact. The more common problem with contemporary collecting is a donor's desire to restrict all or part of a collection because of privacy, safety, or confidentiality concerns. Depending on the issue in question and its currency, these concerns are not *necessarily* the result

of paranoia. If the collection merits acceptance and the donor is handled with care, the papers may be donated with some restrictions, which, of course, have a sunset date on them.

The Society's history of documenting controversies is of great benefit in collecting materials about contemporary conflicts, not only because current donors can find something with which they agree or that they admire in our "older" collections, but because of the long tradition staff can point to when seeking documentation of potential hot potato controversies such as the treaty rights issue or the national debate over abortion. Having a proven track record when it comes to handling difficult issues is a useful advantage and one that can and should be cultivated over time. For example, on the few occasions when someone has expressed disbelief about the Society's wading into treaty rights or abortion, someone else will invariably dismiss their concern with, "Oh, they always do stuff like that." When an individual or institution does something "outrageous" successfully and long enough, it begins to seem "normal."

In conclusion, several factors are keys to documenting a controversy. First, choose an issue rather than a group, side, or individual. Staff must know the issue and the players well, be able to anticipate their reactions, and counter any arguments against the project. They must always present a neutral, objective, professional image. Reiterate that both staff and repository are neutral, fair, and evenhanded. Provide an opportunity for all parties to speak to staff as part of a local documentation project, but structure such a forum so that staff retains control of the conversation and of the project. Finally, the project needs the right staff and the support of the larger organization. Documenting a controversy requires playing one's cards right, and proper planning and implementation can provide the repository with a winning hand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Karen M. Lamoree was the social action archivist for collections development at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin from 1990 to 1996. The Society has been collecting social action on a national basis for nearly a century and holds premier collections in the areas of labor, civil liberties, civil rights, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the contemporary peace movement, and the issue of abortion.

NOTE

1. If it is not possible or necessary to document both sides, the repository should state its intent to document the issue as far as possible. If another institution or corporate body has responsibility or authority over records documenting an aspect or side of the issue, staff should know what the other repository is collecting and be in communication with it. Resources should be spread evenly over the issue if they are limited; do not document only one side because of resource deficiencies. Such decisions are, to outsiders, clear indications of the repository's stance on the issue.