Starting an Archives

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More archives have developed from the manager of circumstance than have sprung full grown from the head of Zeus. One school in the Southeast received its first historical manuscripts soon after the Civil War, accessioned major donations in the 1930s, but did not establish an archives until the 1960s. Another institution, in the North, which had talked of establishing an archival repository for half a century, did not finally act until its centennial approached, with an obvious need for historical information. A third, in the Southwest, began collecting material under one librarian, only to see some of it thrown out by another. Thirty years after the initial accessioning, a formal program was founded. A fourth, in the West, developed after collections had been received by a museum to support its exhibits. And the recital could continue ad nausium.

The point is that most archives have existed de facto before a formal archival program was developed to manage them. Of course most sprang up under the wing of another agency, such as a university or public library, a museum, historical society, or historic preservation association, or a business firm. All came to life when their parent body decided "to do something worthwhile" with their manuscript holdings. And new archival operations are inaugurated every year, for the paper explosion of the twentieth century brings not only more documents to save but also more pressure to act.

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Traditionally the word "archives" designates the agency which preserves permanently the records of its parent organization. Hence the National Archives, a federal agency, preserves the records of the government of the United States. "Archives" are also the records so preserved. Over time, the word has come to be applied, in addition, to agencies that collect the records and papers of others--historical manuscripts repositories. In this article the word is used primarily in the informal sense, because "archives" is the only single word that designates collectively both historical manuscripts repositories and formal archives.
Why establish an archives? An archives, of course, is by its very nature designed for the preservation and studied use of historically valuable records. It is a memory bank. It may develop from, or expand to include, a records management function; it may display a few choice artifacts. But basically an archives, to function as such, must preserve and make available for research written or pictorial papers of enduring value. It also may be a showplace, but this activity should be subordinate to the receiving, preserving, and servicing of original records. Few circumstances frustrate users more than finding a repository supposedly prepared for research, but in reality designed for ornamentation.

To avoid this situation, a trained archivist should direct, or at least be consulted about, the establishment of any new archival operation. Our profession, though young, is distinct. Records managers concentrate on the filing and controlled flow of records from creation to final disposition, which is usually in a shreader. Librarians deal with items fundamentally different in nature and use, for books have tables of contents and indexes, are neatly bound, deal with one subject, and are classified and filed by subject. Moreover, library patrons are encouraged to find and use the resources by themselves. Museums collect for display. Archivists, on the other hand, preserve for informational content of enduring value, must process their materials painstakingly by record group, keeping collections together in order to make them readily usable, and assist every patron to utilize the repository as thoroughly as possible. Surely these distinctions are oversimplified, and all four fields can and should work together for mutual benefit. But just as surely, each is a separate job demanding its own professional.

The competent archivist will bring to his work a basic knowledge of archival procedures gained primarily from practical experience. Archival institutes and university courses are developing rapidly to speed training. But because archival work, unlike library science, remains largely uncodified, judgment and experience are particularly essential. In addition to possessing archival competency, the archivist must be able to work with a wide variety of individuals, including subordinates, donors, and researchers, and he must function well both outside the office, speaking and collecting, and inside the office, processing in precise detail his accessions. Finally, he should possess a knowledge of history and historiography in order to appraise critically the enduring informational value of a collection of papers.
Alone, however, the archivist cannot start an archives. He must have the support of three different groups. One provides the operating funds and space, another donates the material, and the third uses it.

The first group—with the operating funds and space allocations—must provide more than the bare minimums if the archives is to reach its potential. Though of course budgets will vary, certain categories of spending are common. Staff will consume the lion's share of the allocation. Universities seem favored in this respect on account of the availability of student assistants. But because processing of collections is precise and exacting work, a dedicated, efficient professional staff should be selected from the large labor supply.

Equipment and supplies demand a large portion of the initial budget. Boxes provide the least expensive, efficient housing for the archival collections. Archives cases from the Hollinger Corporation hold fewer pages per container and hence are easier to handle. Moreover, they are free of harmful acid, which, along with light, is paper's worst enemy. Document boxes by Pohlig Brothers are more rigid and offer greater protection in transit. Records center cartons by the Paige Company and others permit storage of larger, bulkier items, and are also useful in transferring materials into the archives. To house the material within the boxes, the archives needs acid-free folders available from the Hollinger Corporation or any paper manufacturer. Other necessary supplies and equipment for the archival operation—as distinct from the administrative work of the office—are typewriters, tables or desks for both staff and researchers, a card catalog cabinet and cards, book trucks to move the material, and boxes, folios, or cabinets to hold the oversized material. Further information on these and other products is available from the advertisements in Georgia Archive and in the American Archivist, the quarterly publication of the Society of American Archivists, and from library supply houses.

Many archives operations find the printing of stationery, forms, and promotional material a significant initial cost. Other categories of spending include both communications and document repair by firms such as the Arbee Company of Bernardsville, New Jersey, and W. J. Barrow Restoration Shop of Richmond, Virginia.

An archives which concentrates on collecting historical manuscripts (as distinguished from receiving only
the records of a parent body) must place travel expenses high on its budget request. An archivist must go to the donors, for precious few of them will come to him. From time to time the acquisition of valuable material for a historical manuscripts repository may necessitate purchase of collections.

An archives needs space for four kinds of activity: clerical duties of the staff, processing of accessions, research by patrons, and storage not only of present holdings but also of future accessions. Processing requires both a table top on which to study documents, and adjacent shelves for spreading the collection into a myriad of piles for sorting, arranging and describing. Each researcher similarly requires a table top adequate to open a file and take notes. Where storage space is ample only for present holdings, an archives can perform but half its work, because records worthy of preservation in a historical manuscripts collection or in the archives of a parent body continue to be found and produced.

The second group which must be interested in the archives before the program can succeed is the one possessing the collections. The archives, to come into being, must be able to obtain the material it wishes to collect. And a historical manuscripts collection in particular needs material to process and service for research while it is first announcing its existence to potential donors. The repository may also need to have its legitimacy—its purpose and goals—certified to some possible contributors by a friend of the archives. It goes without saying that as broad as possible a groundwork for collecting should be laid before the archives ever opens its doors.

Users comprise the final group whose interest in the archives should be established initially. In Wisconsin, for example, many depositories for regional historical manuscripts have gone unused because no one associated with the schools at which they were located had an interest in their holdings. And one of the principal justifications for an archives to the funding institution is, of course, the use that is made of the records. Archives of parent bodies often pay their way by providing evidence for legal cases or policy decisions, and by offering grist for advertising and promotion mills.

To organize and publicize the archival program to the three groups, the archivist should prepare a formal
statement of policies explaining the functions and services the archives will, and will not, perform. Many repositories have no such document; some need one more than others. But in any case, the policies should be clearly defined. The value of the document rests in having these decisions firmly and publicly established. The policy matters most commonly included are the collecting purpose and goals, the name of the repository, a description of how the material will be received, handled, and used, and the establishment of an advisory council.

Historical manuscripts repositories should choose carefully, and define clearly in their policy statements, the fields in which to collect. There was a time when archives claimed only a geographical boundary, with the implied intention of seeking all documents within their territory. Facing an impossible chore, most of them concentrated on papers or collections of especial historical value. Fortunately for the researcher and for the documentation of our complex society, archives have begun to specialize in subject areas as well. Labor, for example, was a field of small concern until a decade ago, and established archives took only a fraction of the papers available. As labor became a major focus of historical inquiry, however, repositories concentrating solely on this subject appeared, at least four being inaugurated during the last twelve years. Instead of quarreling over available records, the labor archives work together, as they should, to the end that the maximum of valuable records may be preserved. A private organization establishing a program to manage and preserve its own records should include in its archival policy a statement that no records shall be destroyed without the archivist's concurrence.

Most repositories prefer to receive their collections only as gifts. With prices on the collectors' market shooting upward, repositories no longer can afford to compete there for material. Although it is possible to accept documents on loan, the practice is generally risky since the donor can demand the return of his material, which the archives has invested time and money in preparing for preservation and use.

Donors of papers, of course, may impose restrictions upon the use of all or parts of their gifts. The one common ingredient in donor restrictions is a time limit. Whether all or part of the gift is involved, whether only certain groups may see it, whether its use is conditioned by
stipulations, or any combination of these, the restriction must expire.

   Literary rights fall under separate restrictions from ownership rights. Each individual retains forever—unless specifically relinquished—the rights to his own writings. Hence a donor can give custody of someone else's manuscripts (a letter from a friend, for instance), but cannot, without the author's permission, give the literary rights permitting publication.

   In addition to specifying what records are wanted, the policy statement especially of historical manuscripts repositories, should also explain why the material is wanted. Many, perhaps most, potential donors have only a vague, and sometimes sinister, idea of the researcher's interest in their records and how these materials are to be used. Many believe that archival programs collect only printed histories, while correspondence, diaries, minutes, scrapbooks, and photographs are the types of material most frequently sought, if complete files are unavailable.

   Since few people know what procedures an archives follows in preparing its accessions for use, the policy statement should include a brief description of the stages of processing. Preparation of the outline provides the archivist an opportunity to work out and codify a system of operation specifically adapted to the circumstances and goals of the repository. In designing his system, an archivist may draw on several fine guides to archival procedure, such as Ruth Bordin and Robert Warner's The Modern Manuscript Library (New York, 1966), Lucile Kane's A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts (Nashville, 1960), and T. R. Schellenberg's The Management of Archives (New York, 1965). Frank B. Evans's The Administration of Modern Archives: A Select Bibliographic Guide (Washington, 1972) provides further listing of the literature on all aspects of the archival profession.

   Though systems vary from one archival situation to another, every well designed program will meet the two most critical demands on an archives: locating research material for the patron and finding for the donor the collections he has given and the work that has been done on them.

   Five functions form any archival design: accessioning, inventorying, housing, describing, and servicing for research. Accessioning operations should not only record
whence the collection was received, but also establish the stages through which it must pass. During inventorying, the collection is inspected item by item, sorted, and arranged so as to prepare it for research, description, and housing. The description may include an inventory document showing arrangement, content, bulk, and inclusive dates, as well as card or other indexes, descriptive notes prepared for the Library of Congress's National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, and scholarly journals. Housing, of course, is the process of placing the documents in folders and boxes for storage with the manuscript collections or among the outsized or photographic items which, because of their physical nature, require separate handling. If done well, the housing will provide both adequate protection for the documents and a uniform, neat appearance. In servicing a collection for research, the archives should not only open the holdings as freely as donor restrictions will allow, but also keep a record of what has been used, to assist in providing security for the holdings and in future verification of citations if necessary.

The point to be stressed from this brief recital of procedures is simple: the various functions should relate to each other. Accession records, by tracing a collection through the stages of processing, provides a record of the work and a monitor on progress. The inventory document not only serves as a finding aid, but also doubles as a receipt to the donor. A thorough initial description may serve as a basis later for news releases, lists, and guides.

Though the design may appear complicated, it is not. Forms can carry much of the load. Accessions, inventories, indexes, research requests all may be recorded on forms. Not only is the system thus simplified, but also it gains consistency. And yet creative thought is not sacrificed, for the forms bring regimentation only to the kinds of information reported, not to the information itself or the analysis which produces it.

To the greatest extent possible, a repository should open its holdings for research. But an archives certainly may impose restrictions of its own on the use of the materials it is responsible for. These regulations commonly protect the security of the papers by requiring use within the archives's reading room and use of only a certain amount of material at one time, prohibiting smoking, eating, or drinking in the room, restricting note taking to typewriters and pencils, demanding briefcases be left with the reading room.
attendant, requiring permission to publish from the holdings, and demanding the regulations be read and signed. Many archives, however, limit access to their holdings. Several universities collecting in volatile areas, such as labor relations, open their collections only to "qualified" researchers. Without such a policy, the collections would not have been relinquished to them for research at all. Some archives of private institutions, particularly businesses, permit their holdings to be utilized only by their own personnel, on the grounds that their money brought the information together. Nevertheless, the most satisfactory policy permits the largest possible number of persons to use the materials. For the duty of an archivist is to promote knowledge, not horde it. Regulating who may view the materials determines who will write from them, and thereby what sorts of things will be said. This is managed history.

Finally, some archives, particularly historical manuscript repositories, should establish advisory councils. Such councils not only involve more people in the work of the archives—and keep them involved—but also can materially aid in the collecting campaign by increasing the number of persons active in promoting the program. In addition, they can assist in settling difficulties with patrons. And by existing to serve this purpose, they give reassurance to many hesitant donors that their materials will be utilized in a responsible manner.

No archivist who collects historical manuscripts, and few who deal only with the records of a parent organization, can afford to sit back and wait for the records to roll in. They seldom do. Forms can serve here also in searching for material. The use of form letters is obvious, as is a survey to discover what material exists and where. Though voluntary surveys rarely receive strong response, they do perhaps aid in informing potential donors of the archives and its work. A biographical questionnaire not only can secure information, but also can strengthen the collecting campaign by demonstrating an immediate interest in information about the potential donor and by starting him contributing to the archives.

The collecting side of the public relations program should be balanced by a concerted effort to inform the public of the work, services, and needs of the archives. Except within a parent organization that has a records management operation, more donors will learn of the archives through word of mouth and printed statements than through personal contact. And even in a business, information on the archives
should continue to flow to the offices so that each new secretary and executive is made aware of the repository. Researchers, too, must be informed of the holdings through releases in newsletters and journals. The work of the archives in collecting and making available valuable historical records is enhanced proportionally as the public relations program develops.

Should a new repository inaugurating its archival project simultaneously develop oral history and microfilm programs? The answer depends not on the merits of such programs, but on the ability of the repository to incorporate these functions without diminishing its primary concern for the historical manuscripts and records. One project done well is far more valuable than two done poorly.

Oral history, a field born but a quarter century ago and now a major source of historical information, is probably the most common adjunct to archival projects. There is no doubt that, in support of a collecting program, offering to record a person's reminiscences is a positive commitment stronger than leaving a biographical questionnaire to be completed. Moreover, interviews obtain information that is never recorded elsewhere, because writing is more tedious and time-consuming than speaking. And interviews often can fill information gaps in collections held in the archives. But taping interviews is expensive in equipment and especially in time. While selected interviews may need to be done soon, most should be delayed until the archives can develop the program adequately.

Microfilm is not the panacea many once thought it to be. For an archives, it only saves storage space and reduces wear on materials frequently consulted. Preparing material for filming requires as much time as processing for preservation. Film is much more difficult to use. And most importantly, it is simply no substitute for the original. If the original is worth keeping, it is worth keeping in the original.

The archivist of a business or other agency may of necessity have to assume some of the functions of a records manager, particularly establishing retention schedules and overseeing their implementation. Possibly archivists collecting from organizations may perform similarly. To be sure, every agency in need of a records management program should secure a professional records manager to direct it. But each archivist ought to be familiar with the principles
of this related field.

As each archival situation is unique, so the starting of a new archives is an individual enterprise. A viable program cannot be created without considering the points mentioned in this article. Yet it is the good judgment and careful planning of the archivist that finally combines the principles of the profession with the specifics of the occasion to produce an effective archival operation.