Pandora's New Box: A Look at the Records of Women's Voluntary Associations

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Holding forth on the proverbial soap box is a cherished picture of American democracy in action; sitting down with friends, fixing up a letterhead, and preparing to launch an organization is another. Voluntary action, with its concomitant freedom of expression, is the essence of the American system. The character of voluntary action, mirrored in the associations which frame it, offers the most intricate picture of the changes, tensions, new directions, and structural relationships of the American community at all levels. In the voluntary association Joe and Jane Citizen confront the hierarchies of government.

Because of their importance to the political process, voluntary groups have always fascinated historians. All major social movements—from the Revolution itself, through the abolition of slavery, the woman suffrage question, the support of public education, prohibition of alcohol, and public welfare, to the consumer interests of today—have first come to public attention through what we regard as "grass-roots" democratic action. Even the political parties themselves are merely overgrown voluntary bodies, and most of our everyday institutions—schools, libraries, banks, hospitals, and recreation centers—were founded because a group of private citizens once banded together to meet a perceived communal need.

It is easy enough to see why the Democratic Party is important and why efforts are expended to protect the historical records of its National Committee. But in this period of reviving volunteerism in the United States, what of the records of agencies of lesser significance and more limited outreach such as the local garden club or the nearest chapter of the ASPCA? Who will protect their records? The thought makes archivists quake at visions of unorganized, unusable, organizational material lying in box after box in hall after hall of records, while at the same time social historians fairly quiver at the potential of all that research.

What in normal circumstances is a knotty problem—the preservation of voluntary association records—is today aggravated by the recent trends of history and the new interests in local records, non-official agencies, grass-roots activities, and Joe and Jane Citizen (especially Jane). Voluntary association records have
now assumed an historical importance which, if acted upon, promises to strain archival capacities. For now, not only the politics, but the very facts of organizational life have assumed historical significance. Organizations as social agents are now the focus of attention. How do they create environments for self-expression and personal growth? How do they contribute to the development of individual, gender, and class identifications? Whom do they educate, and how? What are their service records, and where do they serve, and when, and whom? How (and why) do they protect self-interest, status quo, or threatened peoples? Who are their members, and who, by implication, are not? How have they themselves changed with time in relationship to the broader community? To get at answers to these questions, the use of organizational records already in archives and the instinct to collect more such materials promise to increase dramatically.

In this connection, the specific interest in women's organizations is particularly acute. As for any sub-culture or minority group, their organizations have played irrevocable roles in the political maturation of American women as well as in the social interaction of daily living. Organizations have been the cutting edge of feminine political practice, since women performed political acts (such as lobbying and petitioning) as groups before they had individual political rights. Predictably, those organizations of greatest political significance (e.g., suffrage or equal rights) have up to now received the most historical attention, but other facets are beginning to be investigated. Women's organizational roles in facilitating public responsibilities, in transmitting cultural ideas, in performing necessary social rituals, in easing counter-group tensions, in upholding moral attitudes, in supporting aesthetic values, in regulating (or censuring) some forms of sexual relationships, in establishing female-to-female communications networks, in creating support systems where otherwise none exists, and so on, are now grist for the historical mill.

At stake is the "other" side of history -- the unofficial, private, feminine, and underside of the public record. Documenting the "other side," for example, are the records of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, acting to curtail the convict lease system in Georgia, as opposed to the records of the prison system itself. Records of the Free Kindergarten Associations throughout the state, working to establish preschool training (from 1890 on), offer a different perspective from the official records of public school systems. Records of the conservation efforts of Women's Clubs during World War I are complemented by the official reports of the Council for National Defense, and the institutional records of the state's attempts to regulate public health services may be compared to the records of
visiting nurse associations, once the only public health "service" available.

The burden of filling out and balancing history is a heavy one, and lies squarely on both the historians and the guardians of the raw evidence. Where women's organizations are concerned, the materials are not accessible for ready scholarly consumption. All too frequently the records are not available in archives; they often remain unprocessed, unidentified, or even uncollected.

Although the priorities of archivists and historians have had much to do with creating this situation, the organizations themselves are also at fault, and perhaps this is the most critical factor. First of all, poor record-keeping seems to be endemic to voluntary associations. Few of them are large enough to have a permanent, functioning archivist or historian, and that, usually, only at the national level. At all other levels, records tend to circulate among officials. Even those groups which have a central office and an executive staff often have split responsibilities (and hence split records) between the principal staff members and the elected heads of the organization. Files are known to pass from house to house, from basement to basement. Much is lost in transit; sometimes, everything. One rather humorous example of this process is a woman's club which reputedly carries a locked, four-drawer, filing cabinet of club "records" along with the rest of its presidential baggage. The cabinet, which requires two men to move it, has gone from chief official to chief official for years. No one knows what is inside, because no one has the key.

Of course, the usual determinants of record survival also apply—deaths, deterioration, disaster, flood, fire, removal, political squabbling, and disaffection—but the possibilities for record destruction are multiplied by the number of persons who actually hold organizational records. In sum, cohesive records collections do not usually exist for organizations at the organizational level itself. Here, too, records are unprocessed, unidentified, and uncollected.

Again, the specifics of women's organizations need to be considered. A psychological set of the subordinate sex ascribes certain attributes to women's groups and has them convinced that their activities are not as meaningful, as historical, or as worthy as the activities of men's groups. This attitude, as it affects record-keeping, may be best illustrated by numerous women's patriotic groups who offer to archives as their historical collections, not their own internal records, but external documents pertaining to people and events of topical interest to the organizations. One need only think, for example, of the number of DAR, UDC, and Colonial Dames' collections around the state which have no material in them relevant to the donor organizations, however irreplaceable the collections might be to Georgia history.
Establishing the value of documenting women's history through organizational records is, however, only part of the problem. Pursuing women's organizational records is also a sensitive and tricky business. While most men have been able to depend on profession and employment to define their personal identities, many women have substituted voluntary activities for the same source of personal definition. The results complicate the historical process. The ego reward systems of women's organizations are so intricate, the identification between individual presidential accomplishment and group accomplishment so close, and the nature of the social interactions so serious that the line between "personal" papers and "organizational" papers is a very fine one. While often undervaluing the significance of their voluntary efforts, women still jealously guard the records of those activities. Taking records from the hands of officials who have them in private possession is often viewed as an act of aggression and personal deprivation—even if done by the organization in question. The most logical appeal to history is doomed to stumble before such sensitive social machinery, which so easily can turn the slightest disagreement into an armed, political crusade. In the female organizational world, however, because so much personal identification is involved, there is seldom a "slight" disagreement. (One need only regard the current heat of battle over the Equal Rights Amendment to see how uncivilly women's groups can differ with each other.) This is not pettiness, but rather the process of social definition at a raw, agonizing, complicated, and basic level. In this light, history becomes not praise, but exposure. Courageous, then, is the organization which will offer an honest record of itself for scholarly scrutiny. More typical is the organization which passes off externally generated documents for itself, scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and publicity releases being the most common. More rare is the organization which is courageous enough to allow its opposition to enter the historical record.

Yet scholarship is not the only reason for promoting access to women's organizational records. Scholarship may eventually contribute to knowledge and human understanding, but it may also only perpetuate more interminable, federally-funded research projects. Preserving organizational records is fundamental to the future of voluntarism because voluntary organizations need a much clearer understanding of themselves—where they have come from, what they have done, how they have changed, where they fit into the comprehensive community scheme of things. Rare is the organization or society which has a truly sophisticated historical sense of itself, but the organization which has no desire at all to gain some historical perspective on itself is nonexistent.