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Senator Cranston

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Case Studies in Appraising Congressional Papers

The first three of the following case studies were originally delivered in the Congressional Papers Roundtable meeting at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada, September 1992.
Appraising a Retiring Senator's Papers: A View from the Staff of Senator Alan Cranston

Susan Goldstein

Congressional records, although defined as personal manuscript collections, are comparable to business records—typically, however, from an office that never implemented any records management. In order to describe the scope of the Cranston project, it is helpful to think of the Alan Cranston Papers as a collection originating in an office that has been in business for twenty-four years and employs over ninety people in four different work sites—the main office in Washington, DC, and three California branch offices. This, of course, does not take into account campaign offices that have come and gone over the years as well as the activity that created pre-senatorial papers.

It is true that everyone's experience with congressional papers is slightly different. A little background information

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on the conditions of my employment with Senator Cranston is useful. I am part of the deed of gift. When Bonnie Hardwick, head of manuscripts at the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley, realized how large the collection could be, one of her stipulations was that the Cranston staff hire an archivist to do preliminary appraisal and weeding of the materials. This plan has both pros and cons—both of which will be discussed. And I'll include a brief digression on handling the unique problems that political scandal brings to a congressional staff and how this affects archival and records management work.

This plan was essential to the orderly transfer and processing of the collection. The Cranston papers initially consisted of over 6000 cubic feet; when completed, I estimate that the collection will be approximately 700 cubic feet. This is still a huge collection, but nothing like what The Bancroft Library would have had to fact if 6000 cartons of material had been dumped on their loading dock. The first year was spent in California, locating and processing the pre-senatorial papers. The second year was devoted to surveying and appraising the senatorial papers in Washington, DC. And the third year was spent in both locations, processing and assisting in the closing of the California and Washington offices.

My focus will be the significance and benefits of my role on staff and how that enabled me to make early appraisal decisions and better prepare the collection for the repository. To me, the defining factor is serving on the staff and engaging in onsite appraisal.
Perhaps it is best to consider the pros of this situation first. The biggest advantage that the on-staff archivist has is the chance to experience and understand the context in which records are created. She has the opportunity to know firsthand the office environment and the staff and become familiar with daily work operations. The importance of this cannot be repeated often enough; I can’t imagine an archivist wading through and making sense of Cranston’s convoluted office systems after the fact. When I arrived written documentation did not exist. The staff, for example, used two different lists of subject headings for different types of records; copies of each were tucked away in obscure locations, and no one was sure about the origins or differences between them. The entire flow of the mail system—how to handle mass mailings as opposed to individual letters, how they were microfilming, indexed, and filed—existed only in staff memory.

During my time in Washington, I was able to document office systems and procedures on paper and gather together indices and other guides. Understanding the office work flow is an important step in appraisal, and it could prove daunting for an archivist in a repository to reconstruct this whole process from the files. She would also miss out on staff personalities and dynamics that make each staff what it is.

Another advantage is the ability to appraise papers on-site before they are shipped to the repository. This includes weeding which cuts down enormously on bulk and, therefore, shipping costs. It also provides the luxury of time to do a thorough appraisal of the main and all field offices,
with contact with both current and significant former staff, and the possibility of repeat visits. I did most of my inventory on a laptop computer in dBase III+ which was easily transported from Senate storage attics, to offices, to people's homes. I decided on series titles, and then coded all series, locations, dates, and notes so that I could enter them into database fields. This was an enormous help, especially when placing orders with the federal record centers for shipping or destruction.

Once I had inventoried the collection, and the Senator had made the decision to retire, I was allowed to ship all noncurrent records created before 1987 to California. The final shipment will occur in December 1992, so the bulk of the collection arrived in two shipments. I knew what was in each box and could physically and intellectually organize them by series when they arrived.

Yet another "pro" to being on-staff was that I was able to be part of and influence administrative decisions. This meant that I was consulted on changes affecting my work areas, and that I could recommend and implement records management and weeding and storage guidelines. It was also possible to offer ongoing archival and records management advice, from how to store files to recommending that the Senator save the daily schedules that he kept on index cards in his pocket. This benefitted the staff and ultimately benefitted me, while also improving the quality of the material saved.

The staff trusted me as an insider who was acting in their interests—organizing noncurrent records for the reference needs of the staff, and preserving the history of
the accomplishments of the entire staff. Everyone allowed me access to their records and it was also important that I was there following through on promises, about such things as ease of records retrieval. I remained accountable for guidelines. At one point, the legislative director, who had been dubious about the whole records management process, was amazed and pleased to find that she was able to retrieve the exact box and file she needed from the records center using the storage and retrieval procedures that I had created. Staff members consulted frequently about records management and storage questions; I certainly felt like an integral part of the office operation.

Yet another advantage is that as a staff member the archivist can develop contacts and access on the hill to make her job easier. Working relationships formed with service departments provides better oversight and enables the archivist to work the system, be it having boxes over the allotment in the Senate Micrographics Office for microfilming or specially filled requests at the Washington National Records Center.

It was also possible for me to be more effective in helping with Cranston's oral history project. In working with the oral historian, I could inform her where the gaps in the papers existed so that she could include questions from those periods in her interviews. And I was able to give her background material and lists of names from certain periods in the senator's career that aided her in conducting her interviews. Generally, the staff archivist becomes a repository of staff history.
And, finally, I served as an archival emissary to an alien world. This was both a plus and a minus. As the only archivist on staff, as the only person focused on history a workplace that was obsessed with the immediate bill, issue, or crisis at hand, I could rarely discuss my work with anyone in the office. But I was able to educate the staff about archival issues. Appraisal workshops trained the staff to weed their own files when the office closed down. And I feel that I instilled some appreciation for the archival profession in my alien environment.

There are not many negative aspects to working on a congressional staff, except possibly toiling in the uninsulated Senate attics. Two points might be specific only to my situation. First, because I was hired as part of the Bancroft deed of gift, I was expected to do initial appraisal, but also a good chunk of the processing. It was sometimes difficult to combine the roles of archivist, both appraisal and processing, and records managers. My priorities were sometimes at odds with those of the staff or the senator. Instead of getting as much processed as possible, I spent much more time on records management that anticipated.

Senator Cranston's political problems in his last term, and his review by the Senate Ethics Committee, also is cause for reflection. His situation affected my work on a practical, daily basis, it affected the support of the receiving institution, and it will affect public perception and the use of the papers.

As records manager, I was not allowed to destroy noncurrent papers that had no information value and were taking up room in storage, because of the public relations
problem this would pose if leaked to the press. Even though those papers were completely irrelevant to the investigation at hand and should have been destroyed long before, I had to wait until the closing of the office. Using the word "destruction" in memos to staff was also not possible. Nothing I did could be construed as subverting the investigatory process.

On the other hand, as archivist, I was keenly interested in documenting the whole controversy. The archival perspective was unique among the staff. When, for example, the Senator gave his response on the Senate floor after his reprimand, the staff watched the speech on C-SPAN. I could see that he was writing on his statement and knew that it was important to retain his original speaking notes as he had made final changes and comments on them. So, while the staff was concentrating on his speech, I blurted out, "I need to get that copy of his statement when he's done!" Of course, much eye-rolling and groaning ensued. Someone remarked that I always had such a unique take on these situations that helped put them into perspective.

Cranston's dip in popularity makes the collection less desirable in certain ways. The possibility of raising grant money to finish processing or produce a flashy guide is less likely; the state legislature is certainly unlikely to support this collection as they have others. And research use might change. Will patrons want to see the Ethics Committee material as soon as the collection opens? Will the collection be used differently than it might have been?
These thoughts led to some general questions: How does scandal affect the value of the papers and the way that they are perceived? Everything in them is the same; they document the inner workings of a senate office, the different roles of a senator, and state politics over several decades. Are these congressional collections mostly enormous tributes or do they exist for serious research use? And, if the latter is true, why does the question of political scandal enter into their funding and completion? I'm searching for some of these answers myself in thinking about notions of history, memory, and posterity.

Susan Goldstein worked as Senator Cranston's archivist from 1988 to 1992 and is finishing her MA in history.