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Ellen Garrison
Middle Tennessee State University

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The Very Model of A Modern Major General: Documentation Strategy and the Center for Popular Music

Ellen Garrison

In the last two decades much has been written defining, defending, and extolling an approach to the traditional archival goal of "identification and retention of records of enduring value" \(^1\) called by its supporters documentation strategy. The term itself is relatively new; nowhere, for example, does it appear in Frank Evans’s 1974 "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers". \(^2\) But the concept can be found in American archival literature as early as the writings of T.R.

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\(^2\) Ibid.
Schellenberg, and as this article will demonstrate, many special subject repositories like the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University have been practitioners, although not philosophers, of documentation strategy since their inception.

Much of the rhetoric of documentation strategy represents in part a reaction to the attitude toward collection development which dominated the profession until the mid-1970s. Characterized by David Gracy in a 1975 Georgia Archive article as the "spilt milk" approach to collecting, this custodial tradition presumed that all information needed about an individual, an agency, or a movement had been—or would be—captured in records (usually written records) and that the task of the archivist was to await the arrival of the records in a repository and then choose those which ought to be preserved.

This custodial era in archives, which stretches from Hilary Jenkinson and beyond, created a professional world in which acquisitions were, as Larry Hackman has written, "decentralized, uncoordinated and incremental" and the archivist "reactive and passive." Awash in the demands of standardizing finding aids, articulating ethical standards, writing open and equal access policies which also protected privacy and copyright, and preserving fragile materials, archivists easily developed a propensity for collecting what was most easily accessible.

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3 T.R. Schellenberg, Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 140, urged archivists to collect all those records "necessary to provide authentic and adequate documentation."


Pressured to show increased holdings by superiors with a preference for papers of prestigious (or at least recognizable) individuals, the many new repositories which mushroomed in the 1960s often found themselves in competition for "prize" records and papers. And archivists, perhaps biased toward the rich, the powerful, and the literate by their own custodial blinders, too often bowed to the influence of researcher-data gatherers, thus subjecting archives to the whims of academic fashion.

When academic winds shifted in the late 1960s, tillers in the vineyard of the "new history," which focused on previously ignored minority groups and the quasi-mythical "common people," discovered and often loudly criticized the biases and gaps in the documentary record assembled during the era of custodial passivity. At the same time other factors within and outside the profession forced archivists to reconsider their own role in the new "information age."

Personal papers (even of those white males) documented an increasingly narrow segment of a society structured in groups in which decision making was becoming institutionalized rather than personalized. Magnetic storage media, photocopiers, computers, and other new technology had changed the format, content, volume, and even longevity of records. Archivists faced a world filled with more and more paper which recorded less and less information just as budgets shrank and resource allocators from state legislatures to grant agencies demanded accountability and rationality in archival collecting.

In a 1975 article, "The Archival Edge," Gerald Ham, Wisconsin state archivist, former Society of American Archivists (SAA) president, and chair of SAA's Committee on the '70s, catalyzed the thinking of archivists buffeted by these internal and external changes. Building on earlier critiques of the bias of archival documentation by Howard Zinn, Sam Bass Warner and G.P. Coleman, Ham excoriated the profession for a "lack of
imaginative acquisition guidelines or comprehensive collection strategies" and for "a limited view of what constitutes the archival record." Archivists' narrow concept of their task, he argued, had produced "a biased record [with] incredible gaps in the documentation of traditional concerns." He proposed a three-pronged strategy to overcome these deficiencies, including what he called "linkages" between related repositories in order to develop "a co-ordinated acquisitions program... representative in subject coverage [and] inclusive in informational formats." 6

Ham followed this initial foray with papers at the 1980 and 1982 meetings of SAA which outlined specific strategies and tactics for moving into what he termed the "post-custodial era": creation of databases to facilitate sharing information on holdings; research on and development of models in documentation strategy; deaccessioning; reduction of record volume through sampling and micrographics; establishing better pre-archival control of records; disciplined application of appraisal criteria "to the whole range of the historical record"; and, above all, coordinated planning at the repository, multi-institutional, and professional level. 7

Ham spoke primarily from the perspective of a public records administrator, but in 1981 Linda Henry applied the same criticisms and perspectives to special subject repositories in


criticisms and perspectives to special subject repositories in another milestone article which summarized the position of the "activist archivist." She too called on archivists "to be more sensitive to and imaginative about the types of material that document the history of American culture" and "to assume responsibility beyond a collection to a responsibility for the subject." She broke new ground, however, in her list of tactics for achieving these goals which for the first time included "creating materials about a special subject" and filling gaps in the archival record by utilizing oral history, videography and other recording techniques.  

Throughout the 1980s, articles, grant projects, and papers explored the rationale, application, and implementation of what Shonnie Finnegan called, in her 1985 SAA presidential address, "that important but ungainly term 'adequacy of documentation'." The American Archivist devoted an entire 1984 issue to what the

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editor termed collection management. 11 In a 1986 article, Helen Samuels concisely summarized the rationale and techniques for developing documentation strategies, pleading with archivists to "offer the future not individual trees but a forest." 12 One year later Larry Hackman provided a detailed structural model for undertaking a documentation process, a model illustrated by Joan Warnow-Blewett in a companion article on the American Institute of Physics. 13 That same year the final report of the SAA Committee on Goals and Priorities enshrined "appraisal techniques" and "collecting strategies" as coequal and coordinated articles of faith, committing the profession to a new way of approaching a fundamental archival task. 14

These and other writings on documentation strategy did not directly influence the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), since its director is not an

11 Charles R. Schultz, "From the Editor," American Archivist 47 (Winter 1984): 3. American Archivist followed in the fall of 1987 with an issue exploring efforts to implement a documentation strategy model within a single region. The issue, produced by the New England Archivists (NEA) and guest edited by Eva S. Moseley, included articles on regional strategies for documenting the built environment, religion, high tech industry, rural life, and recreation and tourism. NEA originally planned the issue as a collaborative effort between scholars and archivists; Moseley's introduction explores some of the problems which arose in implementing this plan and the implications thereof for documentation strategy.

12 Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?," American Archivist 49 (Spring 1986): 124.


archivist. But the center's approach to collecting does embody the process and the product advocated by those who have urged archivists to consider both the universe of documentation and the universe of repositories in establishing acquisition and appraisal policies and to create as well as collect contemporary records. Thus, the center might be considered, in Gilbert and Sullivan's phrase, "the model of a modern major general."

The center's collecting policy is rooted first in the original proposal for the center and in the campus academic programs which it was created to support. English professor Charles Wolfe, an authority on country and gospel music, and Geoff Hull, head of the university's recording industry management program, chaired the proposal committee which included faculty from history, music, and English, and the university librarian. This group has evolved into the center advisory board and thus functions as what Hackman termed a "documentation strategy group," providing advice on collecting policy from both users and creators of the center's resources.

The second major ingredient in defining and delimiting the center's broad mandate has been the education, professional experience, and what center director Paul Wells calls his "instincts." Thus, development of the center's collecting policy also illustrates Eva Moseley's dictum that "people are the most important factor determining success or failure" of a documentation strategy.

Given, Wells says, "a largely free hand" in acquisitions, he has drawn on his academic training in music and folklore, his work as operations manager of the University of California, Los

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15 This and all other quotations from Paul Wells taken from interview, 16 November 1987.

Angeles (UCLA)-based John Edwards Memorial Foundation collection, and his experience in commercial record production to function as a one-person "strategy implementation group-internal" (Hackman's term). He also developed an informal "strategy implementation group-external" (Hackman again) during the center's early months by making visits to collections at UCLA, Brigham Young University, the Library of Congress, Rutgers University, the New York Public Library, and the Country Music Foundation.

Both sources—internal and external—quickly pinpointed gaps in documenting American popular music. While there are one or more collections devoted to country music, blues, jazz, folk music, hymns, and show/mainstream pop music, no repository specializes in either rock or vernacular religious music. Therefore, the center, while building study-level collections in all genres for use by its campus constituencies, has concentrated its research resources in these two fields.

And the center, unlike most other repositories which specialize not only by genre but also by format (e.g. sound recordings, sheet music, manuscripts), has taken a broad format approach in collecting for both study and research use. The center is not, as the director emphasizes, a sound recording collection. Rather the center's goal is to provide "a picture of the whole," a microcosm of the varied ways in which American culture has been expressed by and through music in a collection which includes monographs, microforms, sheet music, serials, sound recordings, photographs, vertical files, artifacts, posters, and other ephemera as well as manuscripts. By underwriting faculty research projects and by recording center-sponsored lectures, performances, and interviews, Wells also works to fill gaps in the existing documentary record.

The center's approach to collecting is perhaps best illustrated by surveying briefly its research resources documenting the evolution of vernacular religious music. This genre of music has
had five distinct incarnations: congregational hymn singing, participatory singing schools or conventions, performing gospel groups sponsored by songbook publishers, independent performing and recording gospel groups, and contemporary Christian music.

The center’s acquisitions focused first on the products of this evolution: hymnals, singing school songbooks, biographies and autobiographies of performers, serials like *Contemporary Christian Music*, and sound and video recordings ranging from independent-label 78s to "Jesus metal" videos. Manuscript collections like the personal papers donated by MTSU faculty member and gospel music writer Don Cusic, which included over one thousand photographs of gospel performers, boxes of press releases from every major Christian record label, and his notes and other records as a member of the board of the Gospel Music Association, complemented these print and audiovisual resources.

Documenting the process by which this evolution occurred proved more difficult. Traditional gospel music has been too image-conscious for much of the "story behind the story" to appear in print, and much of the development of contemporary Christian music has generated little or no written or printed documentation. To fill these gaps the center turned to producing oral history interviews, conducted by Charles Wolfe and Don Cusic; taping visiting lecturers like Don Butler, executive director of the Gospel Music Association; and locating and copying video tapes of early Christian rock festivals and interviews with Christian rock pioneers Chuck Smith and Paul Baker.

Documentation strategy is, as Helen Samuels has said, "more a matter of spirit than one of process," 17 and this example

17 Helen Samuels, Remarks at a session on documentation strategy, Society of American Archivists annual meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 October 1988.
Center for Popular Music
demonstrates the way in which the Center for Popular Music has, admittedly unconsciously, built its collections in that spirit. First, the center clearly defined the phenomena which it wished to document: American social and cultural history as expressed through popular music. Second, the center based its collecting emphasis in research-level resources on an assessment of the policies and priorities of other repositories with similar objectives, identifying gaps in this collecting universe and then working with other repositories to serve the needs of its own and other researchers. Third, in building the center's collections, staff analyzed the existing archival, print, and nonprint documentation within those areas on which it chose to focus and then began videography, oral history, and other programs to fill the gaps thus identified.

The center is not, however, a perfect example of documentation strategy. Because neither creators nor users of popular music research materials have a single professional association with which the center can work, the center's "documentation strategy group-external" is at best informal and meets sporadically. And the center's first priority has been and will continue to be the needs of the institution to which it is accountable and from which it receives the resources which support its operations.

Nor is the documentation strategy model without problems and pitfalls. Neither library nor archival descriptive theory supplies adequate tools for establishing intellectual control over a focused multimedia collection such as the center. However, combining the archival technique of collection description and library formats and networks for information exchange enables the center to provide better access for popular music researchers than would either approach alone. For example, library rubrics require item-level cataloging of sheet music and establish access points which are better suited to classical than popular music. But an in-house database which uses appropriate access points
for popular songs (e.g. first line as well as title) complements group-level Archives and Manuscript Control-format entries for sheet music collections in local and national library databases, and these entries in turn direct users to the in-house database.

For the Center for Popular Music the benefits of documentation strategy far outweigh such disadvantages. Consulting with other repositories while developing a collecting policy led the center into a cooperative agreement with the Library of Congress for exchange of duplicate sound recordings. Participation in a center sponsored and recorded concert of traditional string band music prompted one performer to give the center a large collection of demonstration country music tapes produced by his father, a pioneer Nashville promoter.

The list is—or could be—endless. But the greatest benefit of adopting the documentation strategy model in developing a collecting policy is the knowledge that the Center for Popular Music has found and filled a niche in preserving the history of American popular music.

Ellen Garrison is archivist of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro. This article is adapted from a paper given at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 October 1988.