

January 1975

Just Think ...

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Recommended Citation

Horn, David E., "Just Think ...," *Georgia Archive* 3 no. 1 (1975) .

Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol3/iss1/10

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JUST THINK . . .*

by David E. Horn

During the annual convention of the Society of American Archivists last October in Toronto, I met and listened to archivists and researchers from the United States and Canada discuss their work, the problems they are encountering, and their plans or hopes for the future. At first their specific circumstances and challenges seemed myriad, but on reflection these boiled down to a few key issues. The concerns archivists who attended the meeting expect to face during the next few years--or decades--include:

ACCESS: Archival holdings are for use; their value does not consist exclusively in adding to the accession statistics of archival repositories. Transfer to archives might prevent some deterioration of materials and the break-up of collections, but what is the real advantage of this if the documents are no more available for research in the depository than they were formerly?

COLLECTING: Cooperation must replace competition for acquisitions in all subject areas. We cause needless expense, and we frighten away potential donors, when we engage in open or clandestine war for materials. We must not substitute the passing glory of a "prize catch" for the permanent accomplishment of handling less sensational but equally important materials.

FUNDING: Archivists have long been famous and admired for their ability to perform wonders of service with virtually no resources. As operations and staff become more expensive

*This issue of *GEORGIA ARCHIVE* inaugurates as a regular feature timely comment by David E. Horn, Archivist at DePauw University, Chairperson of the SAA Committee on Terminology and Uniform Statistics, and former editor of The New Archivist. The Editors invite reader response in order to stimulate dialogue on current challenges facing our profession.

and as the public demand for archival service grows, we must develop equal skill in obtaining adequate financing for our work.

PERSONNEL: Many archivists feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of their tasks and the scarcity of workers. To make the archives field attractive there must be a concerted and sustained effort to encourage women and minority group members to join our ranks by assuring equal opportunity for employment and advancement. Another important aspect of this is improved conditions for non-professionals in archival work. They need proper training and compensation.

PRIVACY: Archivists must be particularly concerned with all government action on access to records. We can see such proposals in proper perspective and can provide leadership in maintaining a balance of rights.

PROCEDURES: New kinds of records require new procedures. New approaches to research require new finding aids and, perhaps, new ways of processing collections. New emphasis by researchers change our criteria for what we acquire or keep. And we must continually question whether rules developed for large government collections should be applied to other records.

PUBLIC RECORDS: Archivists are aware of the problems of ownership of, and access to, the papers of government officials. Recent Watergate-connected interest in these problems gives archivists new opportunities to press for careful disposition of Presidential and other papers.

PUBLICITY: Archival institutions cannot be merely storehouses of collections or research centers for the elite. They must attract people who ought to utilize their resources by giving proper notice of collections acquired and processed, and by maintaining regular contact with potential users.

RECORDS NOT IN ARCHIVES: There are, and will continue to be, extensive manuscript materials that are not in archival institutions or under the care of trained archivists. Much of this material rests in public and smaller college libraries. Archivists should cooperate with and assist the curators in appreciating, preserving, and making available these historical materials.

USE: New publishing programs and increased requests for photocopying raise questions about the proper uses of our materials, especially those received from private donors. Recent federal and state legislation provides some guidelines in balancing the right of access with the right of privacy, but archivists are the experts. We must continue to exercise our professional judgment as we strive to open research materials to a greater variety of users.

These and other topics will be treated in detail in later columns. Suffice it to say in conclusion here that the size and complexity of the tasks before us is matched by the enthusiasm of the workers. An eagerness to plunge into the work characterized the archivists I encountered in Toronto. They gave me the comforting certainty that I am not alone.