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THE HISTORIAN, THE ARCHIVIST, AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS:

A Case Study*

Anne Sims and Susan Tannewitz Karnes

The coming decade promises to prove both challenging and exasperating for those engaged in historical enterprises. On the one hand, constituents are going to demand greater and more diversified services. On the other hand, historians will be obliged to operate within an environment of economic retrenchment and resource scarcity. In many respects, historians have always been caught between the exigencies of the community's need and desire for historical programs of every description and the community's hesitancy to commit funds to such undertakings. The recent ascent of "public history" to a place of prominence in the minds of academic historians is in part a reflection of the growing awareness among professionals that they must look for fresh avenues of development if they are to meet the challenges of the 1980s.¹ Thus, there are individuals with formal historical training pursuing a wide range of career options in the private sector as well as in government and education.

These changes have not been without their significant implications for the traditional historian's ally--the archivist. While in the past the archivist has devoted his or her energies towards the collection, preservation, and servicing of primary research materials for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, this role has also undergone a trans-

*Portions of this paper served as the basis for a presentation by Richard M. Kesner before the South Atlantic Archives Conference on May 14, 1981.
formation in light of current events. The public, nonprofessional user is now the most frequent archives patron. Genealogists and local history enthusiasts are not only demanding a proportionately larger share of staff time, but they are also making different types of demands upon archivists. Some of these users are as sophisticated in their research as any professional. Others, however, require greater instruction on how to gather information in an archives. These special needs have led archivists to restructure their approaches to patron education and, in some instances, to the way they process and describe manuscript collections. Furthermore, the growing interest in genealogy has led to the collection of research materials hitherto neglected by archivists.

As a profession, archivists have not been oblivious to the changes taking place around them. The Society of American Archivists (SAA), for example, conducted a poll of its membership asking them to identify "the five most significant problems which archivists and the archival profession will confront in the next five years." The five areas of greatest concern were found to be scarce resources, technology, professional education, conservation, and public education/relations. To a certain extent, all of these problem areas address the broader issue of a growing and more diverse constituency of users who are demanding more services during a period of declining financial support. The 1980 annual meeting of the SAA devoted a week to an "Agenda for the Eighties" and to a substantive response to the professional questions rising out of the membership survey. One of the themes of that conference was "archival outreach." Like its cognate public history, archival outreach seeks to extend and to diversify the activities of the professional archivist in an effort to serve the greater community. As such, outreach programs afford scholars a fresh, creative outlet. They also bring many people previously unaware of their own history into closer proximity with the documents that chronicle their heritage. More generally, outreach programs augment the archives' contribution to the cultural and intellectual life of the community.
This article shares the results of a highly successful archival outreach program and discusses the implications of this project for those seeking greater involvement of the community in the study and appreciation of history. Furthermore, specific products generated by this particular outreach effort may serve as models for historians searching for ways to apply their expertise in a nonacademic setting. Indeed, the former project coordinator for this program currently works as an independent producer of programs employing the skills and experiences that she derived from her connections with the archives.

In 1978, East Tennessee State University (ETSU) located in Johnson City, Tennessee, established the Archives of Appalachia in conjunction with a campus-wide effort to augment the university's offerings in Appalachian studies. ETSU serves a student population drawn largely from the surrounding five-state area: Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. It also acts as the sponsor for a number of continuing and adult education programs as well as a general educational resource center for the central southern Appalachian region. From its inception the archives sought to identify, collect and preserve those documents that chronicle the history and development of the five-state area within approximately one hundred miles of the university's main campus. Like most archives connected with educational institutions, the staff of the Archives of Appalachia originally viewed the scholarly community, both at ETSU and elsewhere, as their primary user constituency. However, as the archives' program matured, the staff came to realize that due to the broader community commitments of their parent institution, they needed to devise educational services addressing the interests of nonspecialists.

The success of the archives' collecting program further encouraged an expansion of its program through public outreach activities. After careful consideration, the archives staff chose the theme of "social and economic development of Appalachia in the twentieth century" as its collecting focus. In particular, the archives endeavors to
attract the papers and records of persons or organizations active at the local, grassroots level. Its collections, therefore, include corporate archives, labor union records, the papers of craft guilds and economic cooperatives, self-help and church organization files, and private manuscripts. While many of these collections contain information of value to scholars, they also embrace a wide range of materials in the form of photographs, oral histories, maps and diaries that are of considerable interest to the community as a whole. The problem then became one of sharing these documents with the public while preserving their physical and intellectual integrity for academic users.

The archives staff faced two major obstacles in this regard. In the first place, archival collections are unique records of past events--once lost they can never be recovered. As part of any agreement to accept materials from a donor, the archives pledges to preserve these items and to make them available for use by scholars. To expose these documents to constant examination by the public would undoubtedly threaten their survival.

One could, therefore, argue that to provide open and unrestricted access to the materials in the care of the archives would constitute a violation of the institution's agreement with the donor and an obviation of its responsibilities to academic users. Secondly, even if the archives allowed the public to handle and examine its collections, the public lacks the time, training, and indeed, interest to study and synthesize the contents of archives. Thus, if the Archives of Appalachia sought to enhance access to its holdings--especially among the general public--while at the same time preserving the original documents for the use of scholars, it required a format whereby the staff could share the intellectual contents of its collection with the community.

Through the assistance of a grant provided by the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities, the archives began in the winter of 1979 to produce a series of slide-tape
programs based upon manuscript materials and audiovisual collections left in its care. The project fell into two discrete phases. During the first stage, a production staff and a community advisory board produced a series of nine slide-tape presentations as well as a brief introductory program which describes the Archives of Appalachia and the nature of its outreach activities. The second stage involved, and continues to involve, the distribution of these programs by the archives staff. Both phases require and benefit from the historian's basic tools, namely the ability to analyze the documents of past events, the capacity to synthesize the content of these records, and the aptitude for conveying the distilled subject matter of these materials to an interested audience.

The actual production of the slide-tape programs was very much a team effort and this led to its success. At the center of this process stood the production staff: an archivist/historian, a folklorist, an ethnomusicologist, and a media specialist. In addition, an advisory board composed of both academic humanists and interested lay persons served as a critical sounding board for the production staff's ideas. They also acted as a liaison body to the greater community.

Ultimately, the holdings of the archives proved to be the most significant determinant. From the outset, the production staff committed itself to the use of archival materials for both the visual images and the audio narrative upon which each program was to be based. The education needs of the community were also a matter of some concern but the research interests of the staff were of much less importance in this regard. Once agreement had been reached on the focus of each program, the staff identified specific materials that might be employed. In the case of a program dealing with the coming of the railroads to the mountains of southern Appalachia, for example, the staff surveyed the photographic archives, map collections, vertical file materials (ephemeral publications), and special collections (rare books) for visual images. They also examined the archives' railroad company collections for data that eventually served as the basis for the narrative portion of
the program. This material was further supplemented by excerpts from the archives' audio and video tape collections and by additional interviews with community people involved with railroads. The final product draws upon a wide range of archival materials as well as the comments gleaned from a dozen interviews.

With the raw materials in hand, one or more members of the production staff began script preparation. The script page is divided into two wide columns; the left is devoted to the narrative, including the dubbed portions of oral history interviews, and the right indicates the visual image (i.e., slide) which accompanies that particular audio portion of the program. The historian's craft is essential both in the initial identification of archival documents for the production and in the composition of the script. Just as in the preparation of scholarly publications, the producers of slide-tape presentations need to insure that the various portions of the program fit together logically and intelligibly. However, whereas the historian is concerned with the documentation of his or her arguments and sources, in an audiovisual format, the program developer must also watch that the audio and visual portions of the program work well together. This is a more subtle process than one might at first expect, involving as it does the careful matching of words and images and, in some instances, even the consideration of subliminal suggestion. In the end one has a work which, if well done, conveys the story of some historical event or personage, employing many of the same sources that members of the audience might have examined had they conducted the research themselves.

The dynamics of program creation are considerably more complex than can be conveyed in the context of this brief article. The archives pulled together many community resources in preparing its programs. For example, the staff relied upon the university's photographer for much of the slide work and upon a sound technician at the local, public radio station for a final edit of each program sound track. The production staff worked together in the development of each script and incorporated the views of the advisory board.
in the refinement of the final product. In addition, many community people were involved in the project. It was found that the best narrator for a particular program was someone who had direct knowledge of the subject. Thus, an individual who had grown up in the logging camps of Tennessee and southwest Virginia served as the narrator of the slide-tape program dealing with logging camp life during the depression. Similarly, a person who had devoted much of her professional life to the study of the coal industry narrated the show on coal miners and their families. Finally, as the staff worked through a given production, they often discovered that it lacked a particular segment of oral or visual information. They, therefore, returned to the field to gather these program components and, in so doing, added to the research holdings of the archives.

The final structure of slide-tape programs will often depend upon the resources of the parent institution. Most universities rely on in-house expertise for such things as slide preparation, production graphics, and sound track editing. They will also have much of the hardware required for the project, including tape recorders, cameras, copy stands, sound editing equipment, and slide projectors. Historical agencies that cannot draw upon similar pools of resources will need to scale down their production expectations accordingly. The Archives of Appalachia also employed a two-projector, Wallensak slide-tape system with a two-speed dissolve unit. Similar units are available using from one to as many as thirty-five slide projectors. Obviously, the complexity of program design increases with the number of projectors utilized.

A credible job is possible with just a single slide projector and a typed transcript read aloud at each showing. However, this approach limits the usefulness, economy, and flexibility of a recorded narration. A complete slide-tape presentation does not require the actual presence of the narrator at each showing; distribution may, therefore, be handled by any staff member. Furthermore, when at least two projects are used in tandem with a dissolve unit, one may simulate the effects of motion while remaining in the
slide medium. As the archives began to show its productions to community organizations, the staff discovered that the slide-tape format held the attention of audiences much more readily than if they had worked in a video or film format. The reason for this is quite simple. Few audiences had ever seen a slide-tape program. The medium, independent of show content, became a point of interest to them.

During the 1979-80 academic year, the archives produced a nine-program series. Each show ranged in duration from twenty-three to forty-five minutes. The average cost of each program was one hundred and fifty dollars excluding staff salaries and the contributory time of university personnel. It is not unreasonable to estimate the total cost of a slide-tape show including labor averaging two thousand dollars. The Tennessee committee grant paid for all of the archives production and distribution costs as well as the salary of a full-time project coordinator. The subjects covered by the programs included: the history of the quilting bee as a social institution; the development of commercial country music in the Tri-Cities of Johnson City, Kingsport, and Bristol, Tennessee; depression era logging camp life; the story of Appalachian coal mining and coal miners as told through their songs and ballads; historic homes of the region; the history of Johnson City, Tennessee; the history of Embreeville, Tennessee; and the impact of the railroads on the development of southern Appalachia. In keeping with the spirit and the mission of the Archives of Appalachia, all of these productions focus on the transformation of the region in the twentieth century and on how these events altered the lives of mountain people.

The second phase of the project, that of the actual distribution of the slide-tape programs, began once the staff had completed approximately one third of its production work. With the assistance of the advisory board, the staff contacted community organizations, such as churches, public libraries, historical societies, senior adult centers, and civic and social clubs. In most instances, an archives staff member contacted the agency or organizational officers individually, although notices were also circulated through
the local media, the archives' Newsletter, and a regional arts journal. On occasion, a local sponsor asked to preview programs from the series before committing his or her group. But the staff encountered no difficulties in filling the calendar with showings throughout the region.

Each community showing followed a basic program format. The local sponsor took responsibility for publicizing the series. An archives staff member, usually someone from the production staff, would make a few brief remarks about the archives and its outreach efforts. The showing was followed by a question-and-answer period that often evolved into a lively discussion pertaining to the theme of that particular program. While they enjoyed the slide-tape media format, audiences were most interested in the actual archival materials employed in both the audio and visual portions of the programs. Indeed, viewer familiarity with the subject matter of each production and with many of the original documentary components contributed to a warm audience response. It was not uncommon for viewers to find pictures of themselves, their friends, or their homes and work places appearing on the screen. Nor was it unusual to find members of the audience who recognized voices on the sound track.

The close, personal bonds thus established between the public and the archives' outreach efforts carried over into the discussions that followed the showings. Certain local sponsors, particularly libraries and historical societies, exploited the initial interest and enthusiasm generated by the archives' slide-tape presentations through their own book and artifact displays. While the long term effects of these activities are difficult to monitor, reports from local sponsors indicate that the archives' programs did spark further community interest in regional history and culture. For example, more nonacademic users came to the archives for assistance in local history and genealogy projects; public libraries witnessed a growth in the use of their own history collections; and organizations, from quilting bees to country music associations, experienced increases in membership. Though the archives cannot take credit for all of these
developments, its outreach program did contribute to an environment in which people began to look more carefully at their own history and culture.

Beyond an increase in local patronage, the archives benefited in other ways from its outreach programs. In the first place, the slide-tape shows made thousands of people in the community aware of the archives and its services and the importance of collecting and preserving the documentary records of our past. As a result, dozens of important photographic and manuscript collections have come into the possession of the archives. In addition, the archives now enjoys the assistance of a body of friends who are careful to inform the staff of potential acquisitions or donors. Through both improving its standing within the wider community and enriching its holdings, the archives has also strengthened its position vis-a-vis the university, encouraging the parent institution to support other archives undertakings. The success of the outreach program has not been without its costs in terms of staff time and institutional resources. However, the program continues to enlarge the archives' user and donor constituencies.

The implications of the Archives of Appalachia's outreach program for the public historian are perhaps less apparent. Based upon the experience reported in this case study, the authors recommend the use of slide-tape productions as informative, entertaining, and, yet, extremely economical alternatives to other media. As educational exercises, they make excellent training experiences for individual students or teams of students working in the field of public history. The sense of immediacy that slide-tape shows can convey make them an ideal form of communication with out-of-school audiences and even with young people.

The public historian may apply the slide-tape concept in any number of nonacademic settings as well. Municipal and county governments, historical associations, and private businesses and industries have from time to time contacted the archives concerning the creation of programs based upon
their own particular history and activities. Since only large corporations maintain public relations departments capable of generating slide-tape productions, an enterprising person with a sensitivity for communication in this medium may very well find ample employment opportunities as an independent producer. As this case study has endeavored to demonstrate, the historian is well suited through his or her training and interests to participate in this process. The intricacies of program production are not difficult to master and they will afford the scholar an opportunity to work creatively with historical materials. Every step taken in this direction will contribute towards bringing the public into a closer association with the historical discipline—a goal to which all historians aspire.

Notes

1 The introduction of the Public Historian as a quarterly publication in 1978 is a reflection of this trend. See the special issue of the Public Historian subtitled: "Public History State of the Art, 1980," 2, 1 (1979). The University of California at Santa Barbara also plans to issue a newsletter devoted to public history programs in American colleges and universities. In addition, the National Council on Public History is now publishing its own Newsletter 1, 1 (1980).


3 The SAA annual meeting in Cincinnati included the following sessions devoted to new archival clientele and outreach programs: "Workshop on Reference Services," "Beyond Politics and History: Our Growing Clientele," "Documenting Neighborhoods: Gathering and Using the Documentation," and "Beyond the Reading Room: Archival Outreach Programs and the Clientele of the Eighties." The SAA 44th Annual Meeting: Agenda for the Eighties, Cincinnati, Ohio, September 30 to October 3, 1980 (Chicago: SAA, 1980).
The Archives of Appalachia provides the community with a number of public services including paper conservation workshops, a genealogy research room, training in archival administration and historic preservation, and a resource center pertaining to Appalachian studies. Program brochures as well as subscriptions to the archives quarterly Newsletter are available free of charge from: The Director, Archives of Appalachia, The Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 37614.


Like many state humanities committees, the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities receives most of its funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The committee in turn distributes its funds to worthy humanities-oriented projects throughout Tennessee. Usually, only "seed money" is available from state committees and one must apply to the NEH for continuing support. See History News 34, 10 (October 1979) devoted to the state humanities committee structure.

For those unacquainted with slide-tape programs, the fundamental operating principle behind the medium is a special tape recorder which places and subsequently reads inaudible signals on the tape. These signals instruct the slide projectors when to change and, if the system is at all sophisticated, how to change (e.g., rapid change or slow dissolve). When using two or more projectors, a slide-tape system gives the effect of continuous visuals and even motion. While most systems are simple to operate, one can execute very subtle slide changes, much to the delight of audiences.