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OUT OF THE STACKS AND INTO THE STREETS:

Outreach Activities at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs

George D. Tselos

Increasingly, archives and manuscripts repositories across the country are moving beyond their former role as custodians of documentary material to that of active purveyors of historical information to the public.¹ This new outreach activity has encompassed a wide variety of programs and projects including exhibitions, audiovisual productions, publications, tours, lectures, conferences, and the production of curriculum resource packages. Obviously the word "outreach," which has often been used as a descriptive term, includes a great diversity of efforts with varied goals, contents, and potential audiences.

Defining outreach policies and priorities may be best understood when placed in the context of the possible goals and approaches of outreach programs. An archive may use outreach activities to disseminate information about its holdings to traditional user groups in order to increase user statistics, which are usually a key component of budget justifications. Or an archive may broaden the entire concept of the educational use of documents and of the community of users by taking materials from its stacks and placing them on public display in various ways.

These efforts not only advance community historical knowledge but may also generate direct or indirect support for the archives program through donations or endorsements by individuals or organizations. Outreach activities may also be planned and directed with the specific aim of reaching donor constituencies or people who have a role in

¹
organizational record keeping in order to arouse a greater consciousness of the importance of records preservation.

The questions of what is to be done and how to do it depend upon the mission of the particular institution, and in many areas there is no sharp distinction between public relations work and educational work in archival outreach activities. The development of outreach activities at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs in recent years expresses an unusual commitment in the field and reflects the mission of the archives to collect, preserve, and make available for scholarly, educational purposes a wide range of documentation on the modern American labor movement and on associated reform organizations.

The archives is housed in the Walter P. Reuther Library on the campus of Wayne State University. It is the official depository for six contemporary unions; the small, but historically important, Industrial Workers of the World; a number of related labor and reform groups including the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Workers Defense League, and the Association for Union Democracy; and voluntary reform organizations in the Detroit metropolitan area in which labor representatives have played a major role. The archives collects the files of selected local offices as well as those of the national headquarters and seeks out the papers of individuals who have been active in these organizations as officers, rank and file, labor arbitrators, and others.

In the past, the archives has promoted a number of traditional activities directed to potential researchers and the education of the general public. Researchers as well as the archival community receive a newsletter describing new accessions, recently opened collections and special projects. Through the Wayne State University Press, the archives has supported the publication of a guide to its holdings, bibliographies on the United Farm Workers, and a comprehensive American Federation of Teacher Bibliography. A staff member is currently preparing a bibliography on the Industrial Workers of the World.
The general public has the opportunity to see exhibits on labor and urban history and workers' lives which are displayed in the main floor gallery of the Reuther Library. Some of these exhibits--"Workers and Allies," "Children in Bondage," an exhibit of Lewis Hine photographs, and "Just Before the War"--were obtained as a package on tour. Others have been prepared from the archives' own resources by the curator of the audiovisual collection. These exhibits have included "Michigan and the World of Work," created for the American Bicentennial, and a photographic display on the early years of the Industrial Workers of the World, arranged in 1975 in commemoration of its founding.

The archives celebrated the centennial of the 1881 founding of the American Federation of Labor by mounting an exhibit called "Labor's Centennial in Michigan," which includes approximately 200 historical photographs dating in the 1880s plus such artifacts as tools of the trade, badges, buttons, and printed materials. Some sixty different Michigan craft and industrial unions are represented. The oldest item on display is an 1854 charter for the Detroit Typographical Union. The exhibit opened with a reception which received live television coverage and was attended by leading Michigan labor union officials and Wayne State University administrators.

During the first eighteen years of its existence the archives has occasionally sponsored programs on labor history, and in each of the last three years it has cooperated with the Wayne State university history department in organizing what has become an annual event, the North American Labor History Conference. Scholars and graduate students are the primary audience for the sessions in which labor history papers are presented. In addition, people from the labor movement and the community are drawn to those portions of the program which are intended to have a more popular appeal--the performance of labor songs, readings of work poetry, and a speech by Crystal Lee Sutton of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union whose experiences were the basis for the movie "Norma Rae."
For several years, the archives has also annually cosponsored a local history conference with the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library and the Detroit Historical Museum. The audience attracted to these meetings includes primarily nonscholars with an interest in history, plus staff members from historical institutions in the southeastern Michigan area.

Policymakers at the archives have recently concluded that, particularly in a period of financial retrenchment, it is in the interest of the institution to focus its limited resources on the potential audience within the labor community, using both traditional types of outreach activity and some new approaches. Since the Walter P. Reuther Library building opened in 1975, a modest program of inviting labor groups to view the exhibits, take a tour of the building, and receive a brief explanation of the functions of a modern archives has been in operation. These groups have included the staffs of union headquarters departments, the executive boards of local unions, and union retiree chapters.

Such visits by union officers and their staff members encourage them to place a higher priority on records preservation. In many cases, the visit is the turning point in obtaining an agreement to deposit the files of the union in the archives. These efforts, coupled with follow-up contacts on a regular basis, enable the archives staff to lessen the problem of files being thrown out because nobody remembered they were wanted. This kind of educational work is also important because the turnover in the ranks of union staff and officials on a local level means a continuing influx of new people who need to be informed about the archives program. It should also be noted that the archives provides records management consultation to depositing organizations upon request and even encourages this in the case of key offices where the need may be acute.

Another aspect of union-oriented outreach work is the development of exhibits and educational activities at union centers and conferences. For many years, the archives mounted historical exhibits at the national conventions of major depositing unions. Such exhibits result in many
collection leads from individuals and also draw attention to the archives' interest in records preservation. Semi-permanent historical exhibits are also put up at such off-campus sites as the United Auto Workers' (UAW) Walter and May Reuther Family Education Center in northern Michigan. In addition, the archives has received a university grant to develop a small, traveling exhibition which will be sent to regional and local union halls. The full potential of such a program is unlikely to be realized, however, until funding improves for the university and for grant agencies.

Educational outreach work for union audiences is being diversified in other ways. Staff members with historical training have given presentations on labor history to labor conferences, using the opportunity to explain the basic elements of the archival program. Increasingly, archivists responsible for donor relations seek out occasions to appear before union retiree groups at their own local union halls. A slide show depicting the operation of the archives has been developed to show during such visits.

In 1980 the archives embarked on the production of several short, labor education films financed by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The films are intended for use by several types of audiences, including local union members, union retiree chapters, and labor education classes at colleges and universities. Produced under contract by filmmakers Morten and Gudrun Parker in cooperation with the United Auto Workers, the films deal with women workers, attitudes towards work among different generations of workers, and the impact of plant closings on workers and the community. The films, made with contemporary interviews as well as on-site shooting, are accompanied by discussion guides and are intended to inform and stimulate audience discussion about the values, attitudes, and experiences of workers. The unused footage and interviews taken during the course of production will be preserved at the archives as an historical resource after the films are completed in mid-1982.

Of course, the archives will continue to produce
exhibits, programs, and publications which will be attractive to the general public as well as researchers. Increasingly, however, more of the archives' outreach efforts are aimed directly at various union-related audiences. Other historical agencies usually do not reach these groups with either historical presentations or explanations of archival work. It is their history that the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs documents and, as a result, the archives has received an enthusiastic response from them. These audiences provide many collection leads and other support. They are a fundamental part of the archives' constituency and one which the archives is committed to serve through its programming.

Notes

1 This trend has been recognized by the release this year of a new publication in the Society of American Archivists Basis Manual Series, Archives and Manuscripts: Public Programs by Ann Pederson and Gail Casterline.