Manuscript Collections, Archives, and Special Collections: Their Relationships

by **RICHARD C. BERNER***

Special collection units were formed for administrative convenience in libraries to take care of miscellaneous non-conforming library materials such as photographic collections, incunabula, and historical and literary manuscripts; "archives" of the institutional variety are a more recent addition to the list. Traditionally, these materials have been administered by existing techniques and practices of librarianship because more suitable practices had either not been developed to handle them, or practices were underdeveloped, or suitable practices that had been developed were viewed as irrelevant.

Consider, for example, historical manuscripts. Normally such materials were opportunistically acquired in the first place, and were not the conscious product of a coherent collection development policy. Private collectors typically sold or donated their collections to libraries or historical societies, and these collections in turn served as a nucleus — potential or real — for future institutional collecting.

In the library or historical society, these collections accumulated more often as backlogs than as actively used collections. In the absence of coherent collection development policies, these collections remained embryonic because their inherent documentary linkages with extant collected and uncollected materials were not being realized — I am speaking mainly of the era before 1960. What these manuscripts also represent are the accidental documentary remains of the past that happened to have been collected, then made publicly accessible in libraries and historical societies. The items and clusters of items that were accessioned had become dissociated from related items with which they were once joined in series. They were considered not only "rare" but prestigious to own. (Ownership of them often became the major reason for having them, but that is another pertinent feature of their administration best discussed separately.)

The combination of being rare and separated from related items with which they were formerly linked as documentation, suggested that they be treated as items, like books in fact. And, there being only one body of knowledge to deal with books — librarianship — this is the way they were treated, *as discrete items.*

* This address was originally delivered to the American Library Association annual meeting on 28 June 1983. Perhaps the analogy between the situation of special collections in libraries and special media collections in archives will add ammunition to the "Tyranny of the Medium" debate about total archives that occurred in *Archivaria* 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Normally these historical manuscripts — as they became categorized — were placed in subject or form classes and arranged chronologically within. Typically, calendaring was the goal, a process whereby items are arranged chronologically and are accompanied by a synoptic statement. Item catalogues, special subject indexes, shelf lists, and other finding aids gave provisional access prior to calendaring. Given the nature of the materials — accidental documentary remains of the past — these techniques sufficed until collecting of twentieth-century materials began in earnest in the 1930s. By the mid-1950s, they constituted the bulk of most major manuscript collections.

The "register" was added by the Library of Congress in the 1950s to the above array of finding aids. Combined, these aids represent elements of what I have characterized as one of the chief elements of the Historical Manuscripts Tradition (HMT). Each finding aid was the coequal of the other, there being no single point from which the information in them could be approached, as in a union catalogue, for example. Although the register was developed by the Library of Congress to deal with twentieth-century accessions — and it was modelled on the National Archives inventory — it is not itself used as the primary information source when cataloguing of the accession is done. I have termed this proliferation of finding aids a *bifurcated system*, although "system" lends it too much credit, I believe. This system persists despite its obsolescence in the form of Chapter 4 of the AACR2, dealing with manuscript collections.

With this historical backdrop in mind, consider now another line of development, that of the Public Archives Tradition (PAT). The PAT was initiated by the American Historical Association when it established its Public Archives Commission in 1899, out of which state archives enabling legislation was passed in about thirty states beginning in 1901 (Alabama) and 1902 (Mississippi). From the start it was agreed that library practices were inapplicable, and that records should be kept according to their origins instead of being distributed among preconceived subject and form classes. These state archivists, joining with historian Waldo G. Leland and bibliographer Victor Hugo Paltsits, found the European principle of provenance applicable to the records they were encountering — administrative records that were integrally linked through records series in which items were classified originally according to administrative needs and filed accordingly — no "accidental remains" here, if they remained substantially intact.

Bear in mind that historical manuscripts were and are collected — they are artificial creations to which finding aids provide access. They are collected primarily for their potential research value and pride of institutional ownership. Also, bear in mind that the nature of historical collections of twentieth-century materials shared all of the essential characteristics of public archives due to their integral or organic character. In the PAT, record items derive their meaning from their original association with other items in the same and related record series. To deal with massive twentieth-century collections effectively, methods for intellectual control were borrowed from the PAT, contributing to that curious amalgam — a bifurcated system.

A further complication is that administratively, in academic libraries at least, these historical manuscript collections remained in special collections units even after the collections had developed beyond the embryo stage. Often there is more than one category of manuscript collection at one institution, and usually each is autonomous, even to the degree that there is no union catalogue to all the manuscript collections of that institution — an ironical byproduct of the HMT. It is also in the nature of special collections units that each component tends to be independent on the basis of format, but each is nevertheless treated technically as though existing techniques of librarianship could provide suitable access to the collections. Ultimately disillusionment follows and either alteration of library techniques occurs or they are abandoned altogether.

In academic institutions, recently, there has been added college and university archives — the largest growth sector in the archival field since the mid-1960s. These are usually adminstered separately also, but normally within a special collections framework.

Missing in this concept of historical manuscripts, literary manuscripts, subject collections, and institutional archives is the recognition that all documentation is part of a *continuum*. The main problem is to link the parts together, as best it can be done, by first collecting, and then by developing appropriate methods of intellectual control and access. But collecting itself must be guided by coherent policy if there is to be a foundation on which linkages can be structured.

For the documentation that is collected to be authoritative, it must show evidence of being essentially intact — of its having passed through different custodial hands with substantially little disturbance of the original order, and subjected to minimal weeding. To do this effectively, on a continuing basis, records and personal papers of the contemporary scene must be collected, while continuing to collect more accidental remains of the remoter past.

Institutional archival programmes try to achieve this objective of authoritativeness by means of records management techniques that were originally developed in the National Archives to control the life cycle of records. Manuscript collections of all types lack this records management perspective on their collecting efforts. The one exception is at those institutions having the equivalent of standing archival agreements with private corporate bodies and with living people whereby inactive records and papers are transferred on a regular basis to the manuscript collection. This trend is a growing one and is realistic if the objective is to maintain the integrity of the documentation as best as possible. In such cases, the manuscript collection staff serves as records manager for the corporate body whose records are transferred to the custody of the manuscript repository.

Two dynamic factors have been identified thus far that help to distinguish manuscript collections and institutional archives from other materials that fall under library administration. These are collection development and intellectual control, with control responding to the collecting. Together, they constitute a form of dynamic equilibrium unconscious though it be — methods of control have changed as the nature of collecting has changed. But these dynamic factors are also a source of tension within the special collections framework because once they have matured in every essential way their relevance is called into question. The tensions become jurisdictional, inevitably. Let me list some unique characteristics already touched upon:

1. Collection development is wholly different from that for traditional library materials. Negotiation and donation are the typical means of acquisition; special legal problems apply in addition, affecting both ownership and literary copyright. Assuming its archival value, the aim of collection development is authoritativeness of the documentation collected.
2. Processing and intellectual control are wholly different, and so too are the modes of user access. These demands cannot be accommodated — have not been accommodated — by traditional librarianship. This work must be done in terms of the characteristics of the material and of the nature of user demand.
3. Scale affects #1 and #2 at every point. The scale is huge — practically unlimited — and on this basis alone, autonomy is justified.

If autonomy for manuscript collections and institutional archives is granted, it follows that the diverse archival collections of an institution should be administratively merged on the basis of their commonality, and not themselves remain autonomous satrapies. Some users have need for intellectual access to all of an institution's collections. They should be able to approach all such collections from a single point — a point that is analagous to a union catalogue or a cumulative index.

Reference has already been made to the bifurcated finding aid system that typifies most libraries having jurisdiction over manuscript collections and institutional archives. The utility of a union catalogue for providing a single point of access to all "archival" holdings of the institution has rarely been considered necessary, although its utility in providing access to monographs and serials has never been disputed. Each archival unit usually has its own array of finding aids, devoid of a single point of access to them. "Bifurcation" occurs really in two ways. One is the bifurcated or proliferated finding aid system represented by that for each special manuscript collection or archival unit. The other way is in the fragmentation that occurs as a result of the autonomy of each such unit — each with its own set of finding aids and its own processing standards. The latter compounds the problems of the former according to the multiplication factor represented by the number of archival manuscript collections there are at the institution.

I contend that this non-recognition policy, in regard to the potentially integrative functions of a union catalogue, is due mainly to the "special collections" mentality associated with each component of a special collections administrative unit. Each component was specially conceived in the first place, and its identity tends to be maintained by its administrators even after these other collections — photographs, maps, drawings — have passed into maturity. Parkinson's Law at work in librarianship — territoriality.

Not only has there been a tendency towards accretion of non-conforming source materials in special collections units, but within this general framework the accumulation of special types of archival collections has already been noted. Before the 1960s, at some major academic institutions, there had been autonomous manuscript collections, western Americana, various subject collections. To these were added the academic archives during the 1960s. "Centres" also became fashionable — centres for urban affairs, conservation, social welfare, labor history, women's sources. Each "centre" by its own designation suggested that it was the "one-and-only." This was sheer pretense — an expression of unreality, of fiction, of a public relations approach to documentation, generated primarily by the search for institutional prestige and less for a concern for the collecting of documentation-as-documentation.

Our concern should be focused on the quality of the documentation collected, that which collecting policies were designed to acquire. Authoritativeness is the key measure of quality. "Unbroken custody" is in turn a key measure of authoritativeness. The degree to which collected materials reflect unbroken custody and the absence of prior weeding will attest to the authoritativeness of the collected manuscripts and archives.

Collecting in this vein is aimed at continuity of major record series in organizational records and personal papers that are acquired. In addition to serial continuity, collecting must aim at comprehensiveness. No one issue is adequately documented from the records of only one key participant, if there is more than one such party to an issue. If comprehensiveness is to be a major factor in collection development, the collector must acquire related sources and know those related sources that exist at other repositories. Within a given institution, collection development must be complemented by oral interviews and parallel collecting of related non-textual sources such as photographs, pamphlets, and cartographic materials. Cooperative projects must be conceived with other repositories having common collecting interests. To attain their common goal, repositories, having authoritativeness as an objective, must cooperate. Indeed, since the late 1960s, cooperation has been gradually replacing competitiveness. But cooperation needs to be concerted so that the growing network of archival sources will become deliberately rationalized.

As to cooperation and collaboration in the archival field, the prospects are good. The younger generation shares such values in contrast to those of my generation and earlier — those were largely a more competitive, bloodthirsty lot who sensed that some other institution's gain was their own's loss. The new generation seems to realize there is more archival documentation to be collected than all existing archival repositories can possible collect. They also agree that the emphasis should be upon research and reference value instead of ownership — that prestige will come primarily from use and not merely ownership. This transition has occurred only since the early 1960s. A similar transition must take place in the orientation of directors of special collections units if the records and papers of contemporary society are to be successfully collected and administered. The directors of such collections typically came from rare books backgrounds and carried over that orientation to manuscript collecting and administration; they must adapt to changed needs and environments.

Records appraisal also poses a nagging problem. Mass must be reduced to manageable proportions for the repository and user alike. With collecting of twentieth-century materials constituting the typical manuscript collection now, the motive for collecting has changed to the seeking of fulness of documentation so that research can be more authoritative. The objective is to collect complete record series in which the items within them derive meaning and impart a validity that is lacking, as when they have been dissociated from other items with which they had formerly been linked in a record series.

The degree to which completeness of documentation has been preserved also provides a solid basis for appraisal of their documentary value to take place. Weeding of these massive twentieth-century collections is essential, but it must be done with an awareness of what documentation already exists and in relation to other series of the given accession. Appraisal was not a serious factor in collecting of pre-twentieth-century materials — collectors were grateful for almost any record that survived extinction.

Appraisal is essentially a records management function. It is accomplished mainly by means of records disposition and retention schedules, which are the first formal appraisal documents. There is now general agreement that records management should be the foundation for any institution's own archive, but it also follows that in collecting twentieth-century papers and records a manuscript repository also must perform these records management tasks as well on the material it collects. An essential component for effective records management is a records centre. This records management direction takes the programme even further out of the Historical Manuscripts Tradition. It also calls into question the appropriateness of its place under a special collections administrator.

What are some of the implications of the foregoing for library administration of manuscript collections and institutional archives? *Scale* is a major factor to consider. If the aim is to have comprehensive coverage and continuity of major records series, then programmes must be developed to achieve these objectives as effectively as possible. Storage space, processing procedures, finding aid systems, and information-sharing must become tuned to implement the necessary programmes. Records management must become an integral element. A vital part of effective records management is the key role that a records centre must play as the connecting link between an institution's own archives and its records management programme. In this context, a manuscript collection sharing the same objectives must serve as a records centre for the records and personal papers it acquires by means of its individual archival agreements. Is the traditional special collections division appropriate to administer such collections in addition to its other components of far lesser scale and of less complexity?

Scale also affects the methods of control that are chosen. Processing and intellectual control programmes must abandon those practices that are rooted in the Historical Manuscripts Tradition and instead fully incorporate procedures of the Public Archives Tradition. This means abolition of traditional cataloguing with its randomness and instead articulating arrangement and description as two parts of a single process of control. To do this, control must proceed progressively by record levels and a control document must be produced from which indexing can be done. The inventory format is the only format devised thus far that is suitable for use as a control document. With automation, it will be possible in the future to index while composing the inventory. In present manual systems, indexing must be done after inventory composition. But in either case, the inventory is *the* control document. Indexing from it can be under control at all times.

This radical departure is one that I venture few directors of special collections units are prepared emotionally and intellectually to take. And, if they choose this radical departure in order to cope with twentieth-century collections, will they still be able to justify administering these collections as part of a special collections unit or, for that matter, other comparable special materials collections that have reached maturity? The incongruity seems blatant. What is lost to a special collections unit by allowing manuscript collections and institutional archives to become autonomous, to be administered in terms of their own characteristics? Both scale and technical considerations seem to justify autonomy.

Bear in mind that "administrative convenience" was a major factor leading to the establishment of special collections in libraries. It had been administratively more convenient to group collections of non-conforming materials accordingly, as a kind of miscellany. As long as such collections remained small, and as long as they could be handled by only slight modifications of traditional librarianship, no serious harm was foreseen — in terms of resources commitment particularly. But when scale is magnified, and when adaptations of traditional librarianship no longer suffice, then such collections must be administered in terms that are consistent with the characteristics of the materials. Once the "miscellaneous" connotation is no longer applicable, once the infant has reached adulthood, it should be treated accordingly. Modern manuscript collections and institutional archives are no longer infantile, but are vigorous progeny requiring that they be treated on their own terms.