

“Preoccupied with our own gardens”: Outreach and Archivists

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A recent newspaper article told about the “discovery” by a graduate student of several letters written by a prominent feminist leader during the early part of this century. The article went on at some length about how the letters lay unnoticed on the “dusty shelves” of the archives, and how their recent discovery was a great event that would serve the cause of scholarship, etc. There were also warm words from historians.

Although one’s first reaction is to be pleased at *any* publicity, in fact, such articles serve archivists poorly — at least they would if anyone ever gave them serious thought. After all, what is the real message? It is that archivists do not even know enough about their own holdings to have discovered this treasure long ago, and that it took a graduate student to do so. It is that archives are places where things lie around collecting dust, and that, although an archivist must have agreed to accept and preserve the papers, their being in an archives was a form of burial, *not* of discovery.

Such instances reveal how badly the archival profession has fallen short of the mark in promoting the use of archival materials. This is sad because it was archivists who were responsible for the letters being acquired in the first place, and archivists who were responsible for their being preserved. In other words, even if the description was somewhat wide of the mark, archivists did everything right until they put the records on the shelf. But then the records sat for decades while everyone forgot why they had been acquired in the first place.

Our casual attitude toward promoting the use of archival materials is evident in the way we approach this task. In most discussions, outreach¹ is unique among the archival functions in that we invariably think about it only in terms of its atomic components: publications, exhibits, lectures and the like.² In our minds, outreach has become a series of projects, with an identifiable beginning and end. In actuality it should be ongoing. In fact, outreach should have as its foundation four basic assumptions. First, it should be treated as part of our normal work, not as an added responsibility. We should not have to request, as some now do, “special” release time to do outreach work, as though it were some sort of trick to get additional paid vacation. Outreach should be treated as a basic archival function that falls logically within the scope of our normal duties. We must continually remind ourselves that ultimately we preserve archival materials so that they will be used. We employ arrangement and description in order to make historical

records *easier* to use. Security and conservation measures ensure that historical records will be preserved so that they *can* be used. Outreach ensures that they *are* used.

Secondly, outreach should be ongoing, not simply a series of haphazard short-term projects, undertaken as time and money permit. It should be tied to our mission statement.³ It should have short-term and long-term goals, just like acquisitions development. And just like acquisitions development, outreach is made up of a variety of activities none of which comprises outreach any more than a single accession makes up acquisitions development. Archivists should not assume that because they are publishing photographs in the local newspaper they are “doing” outreach. A single activity is not enough. We need a sustained, ongoing programme that may consist of public presentations, workshops, brochures, guides, media features, displays, audio-visuals, curricular exercises, news releases and other activities — whatever is appropriate to our goals and to the constituencies we serve.

Thirdly, outreach and public programmes should be balanced with other activities. If an archivist were placed in charge of an archives where nobody was doing any processing, he or she would initiate a processing programme immediately — even if it came at the expense of other activities and stretched resources to the limit. Any archivist would do this because we accept the premise that processing is something that every archives should do. Furthermore, our decision would be met with approval because *everyone* agrees that an archives should process its holdings. When outreach and public programmes gain this level of acceptance, they will have achieved the balance they should have had all along.

Fourthly, outreach must be integrated with other activities. It is not something that should be undertaken in isolation. It stimulates interest in and lends support to other aspects of archival programmes such as acquisitions development. The feedback received through it helps archivists to improve the way they do their work. Thus outreach is an investment, not simply an expense.

This article will examine three issues that are important to developing outreach programmes.⁴ First, what will it take for outreach to be considered as a core archival function rather than an isolated activity marooned on the fringes of professional practice? Secondly, how should we think about “publics” or constituencies that outreach programmes should reach? Thirdly, how should the outreach programmes that archivists undertake address the issues of image, awareness, education and use?

Regarding the first issue, there are deeply ingrained attitudes that have prevented us from bringing outreach and public programmes into the mainstream of archival practice. F. Gerald Ham, in his influential 1981 *American Archivist* article, said that the profession had entered a new period in its history, one that he called the “post-custodial era.” Among other things, he said that the custodial era had made us “uncommonly introspective, preoccupied with our own gardens, and too little aware of the larger historical and social landscape that surround[s] us.” In the custodial era, our role was passive, reactive, more concerned with the materials in our care than with anything outside the walls of our storage vaults and reading rooms.⁵ Although it is true that Ham was talking about acquisition and documentation issues, he could as well have been talking about outreach, public programmes, and user-related activities. The mind-set he describes has been apparent in the attitude that generations of custodial archivists have taken toward their work, once the archival materials have been meticulously acquired

and brought to the safety of a temperature- and humidity-controlled archives. Many of the issues and problems surrounding the profession's attitude toward outreach are deeply rooted in the attitudes and beliefs of our custodial heritage.⁶

Archivists must "rescue the notion of public programming [or outreach] from the periphery of the archival tradition,"⁷ and place it alongside the other core functions that all archivists perform; but this may be easier said than done. In any event, it is a question with which the archival profession has been wrestling for a long time. It may be true that statutes such as the *National Archives of Canada Act* have legitimized public programmes in archives, but the more difficult battle may be to legitimize them in the minds of archivists themselves. At the founding of the Society of American Archivists in 1937, President A.R. Newsome acknowledged, "Some of the most puzzling and important problems of archival administration relate to availability. Should archivists be content with the maximum availability of their records to the small number of visiting and inquiring investigators, or should they extend availability to the public?"⁸ In 1940 an *American Archivist* article quoted an SAA member's critical comment on the annual meeting: "I have listened to a great number of papers on such subjects as the training of archivists [and] the classification and cataloging of archives . . . [but] I have been particularly impressed with the lack of attention given to the subject of the relationship between archival institutions and the public."⁹ Fifty years later, in 1990, we are still ploughing the same ground. The term "outreach" is not even included in SAA's 1974 "Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers."¹⁰ As recently as 1987, SAA's Reference Access and Outreach Section was still debating the definition of each term.¹¹ When spoken or written, the word "outreach" is unique in archival usage in that it is invariably preceded by the word "and!"¹² It is the inevitable afterthought. If the profession is finally to resolve this dilemma and bring these concepts into the mainstream of archival thought, archivists will need to re-examine some of their fundamental assumptions.

This is a difficult task; even those who are committed to outreach find themselves unconsciously lapsing into the familiar custodial litany. To put a stop to this we must begin by changing the very way we articulate our mission as archivists. The 1986 report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities, the GAP report, states that the mission of the archivist is "To ensure the identification, preservation, and use of records of enduring value."¹³ Our mission has been described in similar terms by others: ". . . to identify, acquire, describe, preserve, and make available records of permanent value."¹⁴ Like an old pair of shoes, both statements are familiar and comfortable. They have a certain amount of logic, or chronologic: they describe what we do in the order in which we do it.

But with all due respect for chronology, by accepting these statements as they are, we archivists have confused our *goal* with the *means* that are used to achieve this goal. In both statements availability and use are *last* on the list when, in fact, they should be *first*. This may seem a minor point, but the consequences are insidious. Outreach and use come last; inevitably they become afterthoughts — something to be undertaken only when all the rest of the work has been done. But for the past fifty years the rest of the work never seems to have got done. We say that we must keep up with technology. That is true, but technology is always changing; archivists in the 1930s were saying the same thing. If it is not technology then it is something else — perhaps the backlog of unprocessed holdings — but there is always a reason why we do not have time for

outreach and user-related activities. The *goal* is *use*. We need continually to remind ourselves of this fact. Identification, acquisition, description and all the rest are simply the *means* we use to achieve this goal. They are tools. We may employ all these tools skilfully; but if, after we brilliantly and meticulously appraise, arrange, describe and conserve our records, nobody comes to use them, then we have wasted our time.

It is time for archivists to begin to define their mission more accurately, turning the usual statement around somewhat as follows: "To ensure the availability and use of records of enduring value by identification, acquisition, description, and preservation." Perhaps, by thus shifting the emphasis, archivists will be able to concentrate on *why* we are doing what we are doing, rather than simply *how well* we are doing it.

Some have used the argument that "it has been our very success with outreach work that has contributed to [a] public service crisis. Increased client demands . . . have not been accompanied by greater human and financial resources."¹⁵ To suggest that the "success" of outreach has contributed to a "crisis" in public service lets the real villain off the hook; it provides us with the excuse we need to postpone again any outreach or user-related activity. After all, we do not want to cause a crisis!

But the resolution of the crisis will not be found in "greater human and financial resources." Should an increase in use precipitate a public service crisis, it is more likely that what the success of outreach activities *really* has shown is how inadequate some of our methodology really is. If we take an honest look at it, much of our corpus of archival knowledge is based upon the *presumption* of a low level of use. What better example is there than our traditional reference service, which assumes that an archivist will have the time to meet with each individual patron and conduct both an entrance and an exit interview. Imagine our colleagues in the library field trying to operate on the same basis; in that context, the idea is utterly ludicrous. Librarians have been forced to find other ways to bring information and users together. Archivists need to do the same.

Increased use will likely show us deficiencies in the areas of appraisal, description and preservation as well. Archivists should be prepared for outreach and public programmes to bring into question even the hours we keep, and the way we organize our reading rooms. Finally, archivists should not expect that increasing the use of archival materials through outreach will bring immediate rewards. After having exposed to a sober stare the inadequacy of the way we work, archivists should not expect that sympathetic resource allocators will simply reward us with more money and staff so that we can continue our inefficiencies. Developing use and promoting our holdings through public programmes brings with it the obligation to look for the best ways to do our work, and to make the changes necessary to meet the increased demand.

To integrate outreach into the mainstream of archival theory and practice, we will also need to clarify who it is we serve, and under what circumstances. This is another major area in which archival attitudes have hampered our commitment to outreach, public programmes and user-related activities. Part of the problem stems from the various definitions that we attach to the value-laden term "public." Most use it in its generic, dictionary sense: "of, pertaining to, or affecting the people as a whole, the community, state, or nation."¹⁶ But it can also be used to pinpoint a segment of the general populace, such as the novel-reading public, or the movie-going public. This second sense is the more useful, because it allows each of us to formulate priorities and activities based upon those "publics" that are identified in our institution's mission and goals.

However we define the term “public,” in certain respects archivists are a schizophrenic lot. On the one hand, we wail about how we are under utilized, under appreciated and under funded. On the other hand, many of us can be extremely fussy about whom we choose to serve, considering, for instance, genealogists and local historians to be second-class citizens. The 1940 article cited earlier quotes an anonymous archival official to the effect that “all genealogists should be hanged.”¹⁷ Small wonder that we have failed to attract a loyal, enthusiastic following! We persist in scanning the horizons of our reading rooms waiting for the elusive academic historians. One of the great myths of our profession, and one of our most debilitating misconceptions, is that archives exist simply to serve scholars. In fact, if most of us were forced to justify our existence through the numbers of scholars we served, we would be out of business. There are other groups that would benefit from using archival materials, but we must first educate them as to how and why. In other words, we may choose to be fussy about whom we serve, or we may complain about how we are under-utilized. But we may not do both.

In the same way, we should not accept the notion that there is a distinction between publicly- and privately-funded repositories when discussing outreach. Some suggest that public repositories face a greater challenge in this arena, and that “it is acceptable for a private repository . . . to decide that ‘use . . . is determined either by membership . . . or by producing evidence of an applicant’s scholarly need and academic integrity.’”¹⁸ A private repository certainly should have the right to choose those whom it will serve. But whether it elects to restrict its clientele to a favoured few, or to throw open its doors to the general public, *any* archival repository still has an obligation, both ethical and practical, to inform its constituency about its holdings and services. Our “public” may be only the corporate officers and staff of a major business. It may be only the faculty and administrative staff of a college or university. Or it may include the general public. But if we take seriously the idea that outreach is a core archival function, then we should no longer absolve one type of archival repository from doing it any more than we would absolve that repository from doing appraisal, or arrangement and description, or conservation, or reference.

Most archivists have dealt with patrons whom we identify as resulting from the “*Roots* phenomenon” and in the U.S. we should add the Declaration of Independence bicentenary. This is familiar territory to most of us, but even as these researchers have come into our institutions, archivists have overlooked the most important lessons surrounding the reasons for their coming to an archival repository. For instance, the importance of *Roots* is that it illustrated the enormous reservoir of interest in the past that was waiting to be tapped. Archivists could have tapped it long ago if we had thought about doing so; we can do so now if we try.

The fact of the matter is that everyone is interested in archival records — in history; it is just that most people do not realize it yet! How else can one rationally explain a recent feature on a national news broadcast about the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of “Silly Putty,” or an article in a national news magazine about the fiftieth anniversary of the invention of “Spam”?¹⁹

These foolish examples lead us to the second lesson embodied in “Ericson’s First Law of Outreach”: No human being is able to resist celebrating an anniversary divisible by twenty-five. The point of the law is not to say that archivists ought to run out and immerse themselves in pageants and centenary histories, but that there are predictable

moments — events one can anticipate — that lend themselves to demonstrating a need for archival records and thus promoting an interest in their use. The key word is anticipate — something we have not done very well as a profession. By anticipating commensurable events archivists can prepare for them. Otherwise, as is more usually the case, we are forced to react at the last moment to what seem impossible demands of patrons who then depart discouraged, convinced that archives are not equipped or willing to serve their needs.

The ability to anticipate events also allows the outreach programmes we develop to ride a wave of existing interest, rather than forcing archivists to build interest from nothing. For example, frequently when a new and important acquisition is processed, the archivist tries to generate some publicity by creating a display or holding a public programme of some sort. The processing of a holding may be an important event in our professional lives, but — let us be honest — most people could not care less. Nevertheless, we can tap into a reservoir of latent interest if the display or programme is scheduled to coincide with some external event such as an historically important day, an anniversary or a community festival. Any difficulties with past outreach activities probably have been the result of either poor planning, or a lack of planning altogether.

Promising opportunities abound. A story headlined “Big Celebration Planned” pointed to the imminent fiftieth anniversary of the Dunkirk evacuation.²⁰ It illustrates why every archivist in the United States ought to be working on a guide to archival resources documenting World War II. 7 December 1991 will see the beginning of enormous and sustained interest in what, for Americans, was the beginning of the War. Anniversaries need not even be so sombre. Surely enterprising archivists with even a small holding of meteorological records can find something to do on dates such as January 31, which is, according to *Chase’s Annual Events*, the anniversary of the coldest day ever recorded in Canada!²¹ People will be interested to know that the temperature (–62 F.), was recorded at Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, on 31 January 1947, but at the same time they can be coaxed to understand *how we know that fact*: thanks to archival records.

Commemorable events need not always be twenty-fifth or fiftieth anniversaries. College and university archivists can better anticipate periodic reunions, annual homecomings, accreditation reviews and forthcoming courses that might make good use of archival records. We all can anticipate annual observances, events such as Women’s History Month in March or Black History Month in February. If we do, we will soon conclude that it is not a matter of struggling to find ways to reach out to our constituencies, but rather of choosing wisely from among the multitude of opportunities that present themselves once we look for them.

The point about such activities is that they are important because they are educational. Even assuming that the primary, the highest, duty of archivists is to provide information so that elected officials can make better public policy decisions and/or to serve the needs of scholarship, outreach activities are useful in carrying out either function. They teach people that archives are places to which they may come for information. A person’s first experience may be an event celebrating an anniversary; the second may well be the pursuit of facts or documents needed to safeguard a civic right. The first experience may be of an exhibition display; the second may be to donate an important set of records. The first experience may be of research for a term paper for a

journalism class; the next may be to research an article on pollution. The first may be in connection with observing Black History Month; the next may be to seek evidence in a discrimination suit.

Our custodial skills are also an important resource in outreach. Almost everyone has an old, yellowing newspaper clipping, or a folded marriage certificate, or photographs of family and friends. Chances are that such documents are creased and torn, and probably "mended" with scotch tape. The scotch tape probably is yellow and brittle, and the document stained. At the last family reunion moreover, one of the children smudged a greasy thumbprint on that photo of dear old Uncle Harry.

Archivists know how to deal with such problems. We know that polyester encapsulation will prevent tears and greasy fingerprints. We know that the yellowing in the paper is caused by the action of acid, and that the only way to stop the yellowing is to deacidify the paper. (We may not have the facilities to do the deacidification, but we know what needs to be done.) And we can state with authority that one must never use scotch tape to repair mementos.

This is important. The document may not matter to the archivist, but it is important to the owner. To this person the message is clear: archivists care about historical records and know how to conserve as well as preserve them. Furthermore, the message has been communicated without expensive exhibit preparations, mass mailings or publication costs.

Finally, four key concepts are frequently proposed as cornerstones on which outreach activities should be built: learning more about our *users*, enhancing our *image*, promoting *awareness* of archives, and *educating* people about archives.²² Most would agree that it is important to know more about our users. But in many respects, as with the examples cited above, we know quite a lot about them already. We know, for example, circumstances that will bring them into the archives and also what types of materials they likely will want to use; we simply do not use that information effectively. A more important aspect of the user question is those who do not use archives, and especially those who have a direct need for them. User studies are important, but like keeping up with technology, they can also be a substitute for more direct action. Archivists should study those who use our records and benefit from what we learn, but at the same time, let us also concentrate on bringing in more users so that we can study *them* as well.

Regarding our concern with image, awareness and education, it is important to keep our focus on the records we are preserving and the impact they have (or may have) on the lives of people who would benefit from using them. We should bear in mind that if people do not know what archivists are, or what they do, it is simply because archivists have not touched their lives in any meaningful way — in much the same way as many do not know what a podiatrist is until they have problems with their feet. We either have no image at all or one that is a stereotype, or an image that is absolutely ridiculous, such as the occupational outlook that equated the work of archivists with that of crossword-puzzle makers and disc jockeys. As long as we stay in our reading rooms and avoid touching the lives of those whom we would serve, then all of our well-intentioned efforts to improve our image, and all our programmes to explain what we do and why it is important will fall on deaf ears. We need to *show* people, not tell them.

In her 1985 *Midwestern Archivist* article entitled "Buying Quarter Inch Holes," Elsie Freeman expressed the idea eloquently:

"Theodore Leavitt, a widely published and quoted professor of marketing at the Harvard Business School reflects . . . on why people buy. It is not the *things* they buy, Leavitt says, but *solutions*. Or as the storekeeper put it when he explained why people buy quarter inch drill bits, 'They do not buy quarter inch bits. They buy quarter inch holes.' . . . people do not buy possibilities; they buy results. They do not want to know what an archives contains, or what archivists do. They want solutions to problems. They want quarter inch holes, not quarter inch bits."²³

The problem — the board that needs the quarter-inch hole — may be scholarly; it may be legal; it may relate to a student's studies, an adult's job, or to a business deal or real estate transaction. It may even be avocational as with the genealogists and local historians, or with enthusiasts of all shapes and sizes. But until we begin to offer solutions to the problems or challenges that our chosen public faces, we shall remain irrelevant. Our outreach activities and public programmes need to be more accurately directed toward producing results for those toward whom we would direct those programmes.

In other words, we need to concentrate on the *goals* of outreach rather than the *means*. We need to move beyond simply reciting the litany of outreach activities and concentrate on why we have outreach and public programmes. Not "why" in the sense of justifying them, but "why" in a planning sense: why we selected one activity over another at a particular time; what the results were. We need to concentrate more on the impact of our outreach activities, and the lessons we have learned from them — in other words, to evaluate our efforts. We need then to concentrate on applying these lessons in order to improve the effectiveness with which we are able to make archival materials available.²⁴ But most importantly, it is time for us to *do* something rather than simply continue to talk about it.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this paper I shall use the term "outreach" in the general sense of including any type of promotion and public programming.
- 2 Linda Wills, "Advocacy and Outreach in Community Archives," *ACA Bulletin* (March 1990), pp. 5-6; (May 1990), pp. 8-9; (July 1990), pp. 9-10. The above articles are excellent, but alone they are insufficient. In order to put the ideas they present into context, and to help archivists to choose wisely from the many different possibilities, we need to approach the topic of outreach conceptually as well.
- 3 Ann ten Cate, "Outreach in a Small Archives: A Case Study," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 28-35.
- 4 Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives," in *Archivaria* 31. This article is adapted from a commentary on the above paper, presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Victoria, B.C., 2 June 1990.
- 5 F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981), pp. 207-216.
- 6 Some of the most striking examples may be found in our conservation literature, in which users are frequently portrayed as the enemy.
- 7 Blais and Enns, *op. cit.*, note 4.
- 8 A.R. Newsome, "Objectives of the Society of American Archivists," *The Society of American Archivists Proceedings Providence, R.I., December 29-30, 1936 and Washington, D.C., June 18-19, 1937*. (Urbana, 1937), pp. 62-63.

- 9 William D. McCain, "The Public Relations of Archival Depositories," *American Archivist* (October 1940), p. 235.
- 10 Frank B. Evans *et. al.*, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* (July 1974), pp. 415-433.
- 11 George W. Bain, "From the Chair: Outreach? Or Public Programming?" *Reference-Access-Outreach Newsletter*, 2, 1 (May 1987), pp. 1-2; Elsie T. Freeman, "Public Programs: What Alice Didn't Say," *Reference-Access-Outreach Section Newsletter*, 2, 2 (August 1987), pp. 3-5.
- 12 What better example than the SAA's own Reference, Access, and Outreach Section. The trend is similar in our archival literature, where outreach and user-related topics are generally the last chapter of a book, or near to it. The same is true of archival education — whether in the classroom or in an institute or workshop.
- 13 SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities, *Planning for the Archival Profession* (Chicago, 1986), p. vi.
- 14 Blais and Enns, *op. cit.*, note 4.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *The American College Dictionary* (New York, 1964), p. 978.
- 17 McCain "The Public Relations of Archival Depositories," p. 238.
- 18 Blais and Enns, *op. cit.*, note 4. See also, "Outreach in a Small Archives: A Case Study," pp. 28-29.
- 19 Bill Barol, "The Year of Living Nervously," *Newsweek* (8 June 1987), p. 84-85.
- 20 *The Milwaukee Journal*, 6 May 1990.
- 21 William D. and Helen M. Chase, *Chase's Annual Events* (Chicago, 1985), p. 23.
- 22 See for example, Blais and Enns, *op. cit.*, note 4.
- 23 Elsie Freeman, "Buying Quarter Inch Holes: Public Support Through Results," *Midwestern Archivist X*, 2, (1985), p. 89.
- 24 "Outreach in a Small Archives: A Case Study" *op. cit.*, note 3 is a good example of the type of literature we need to nurture. The article discusses the reasons why particular activities were chosen, and the problems and accomplishments that resulted.