

THE PREPARATION OF FINDING AIDS
FOR MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL ON MICROFILM

by

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To the practising archivist a reel of microfilm represents a problem in all three major functions of the archivist; the preservation, the arrangement and the description of manuscript material. The first and somewhat startling fact which the archivist must face in considering the handling of microfilm is that while a reel of microfilm may contain manuscript material, it cannot be handled like the rest of the manuscripts in an archives repository. It will require special storage facilities, and above all it will necessitate special descriptive techniques to make the material it contains as accessible as possible to the research worker.

The storage problem is a fairly obvious one, and is prompted by the physical structure of the microfilm itself. In order to preserve the film emulsion bearing the image for the longest possible time and in the best possible condition, it should be stored in a temperature ranging from 60 to 70 degrees fahrenheit, and in a humidity of 40 to 50 percent. Unless your whole repository is air-conditioned within such conditions, the microfilm should be stored in a special room where they can at least be approximated. Apart from the climate of the room required for microfilm, the size of the microfilm reels themselves would make it too expensive and decidedly awkward to shelve them with the other manuscript material. Because of their small size they would waste shelving, and they would easily be lost. On the other hand, because microfilms are uniform in size, they can be stored efficiently and compactly on shelves or in cabinets which have been especially designed for them.

The primary finding aid employed at the Public

*Mr. Kula gave this paper at the 1957 annual meeting of the Archives Section, C.H.A. While some phases of the Public Archives of Canada program have changed since its presentation, the basic principles are still valid.

Archives evolved from this necessity for special storage facilities for microfilm. It is perhaps basic practise in all archives that when the material arrives in the building it is accessioned and assigned a location. Because the space required for microfilm is prime space, and therefore expensive, all microfilm arriving at the Public Archives is numbered and is then shelved in numerical order. The number then acts as a location guide. We complicate this system at the Public Archives by dividing our collections into eight groups, each one indicating the source of the microfilm, but that need not concern us here. The basic system allows the archivist to shelve all the reels in numerical order, as they are accessioned, so that there is no need to leave space between the reels as there would be if a classification scheme were to be imposed. However, because the reels are shelved in numerical order, and not through some form of subject arrangement, it is necessary to provide a precise guide to its location, let alone to its contents.

At the Public Archives the next step is to prepare a rough description of the content of a reel, or a collection of reels, on 3"x5" cards which are then filed alphabetically by subject. With a generous, but controlled, cross-reference to these main entries, this catalogue serves as both a guide to the contents and as a guide to the location of the reel or collection of reels. For on each card we note the reel number, or the reel numbers making up a collection, and the reel numbers act as a precise location guide. In addition we prepare shelf list cards for every reel, which are filed in numerical order. These cards list the contents by page, volume, date, correspondent, or collection if there is more than one on a reel. This should be detailed enough to enable the archivist to select the precise reel the research worker requires, and where the collection has not been sufficiently organized before filming, a detailed list of the contents should indicate on which reel the material is contained.

The most obvious advantage of this system is its simplicity. With it, it is possible to catalogue every reel of microfilm that enters the building very soon after it first arrives. The material is thus almost immediately accessible, and this minimum is absolutely essential when working with microfilm. It provides a

rough content notation, and a precise location guide, and for material which is highly organized, and which is accompanied by a detailed guide, inventory, or calendar, it may be the only finding aid that the archivist will be required to prepare. The most obvious disadvantage of this system is that when a collection is acquired in stages, over a period of years, it will be shelved in five, ten, or twenty different locations, or in several sections. The result is that continual reference must be made to the catalogue cards when attempting to locate a specific set of volumes. In general, however, we have found this system operates efficiently, and after the catalogue cards have been prepared, it may safely be left to the tender mercies of a clerical assistant.

The catalogue card then, at the Public Archives, is the first finding aid for manuscript material on microfilm. Before considering the next stages or possibilities, such as the preparation of inventories, detailed lists, indexes and calendars, however, it should be pointed out that if a microfilm program has been properly planned and executed it would be unnecessary to consider any other finding aid for archives on film. A microfilm project, and by this I mean the planned micro-filming of a set body of manuscript or printed material for preservation or duplication purposes, should never be undertaken before the material to be filmed has already been arranged to the fullest degree envisaged as possible by the archivist, and only after the finding aids considered practicable for the size and value of the collection have been prepared. In effect, if all filming projects were carried out under ideal circumstances there would be no need to prepare finding aids for manuscript material on film. The catalogue cards, used in conjunction with the prepared inventories, would provide the means whereby the microfilm archivist could produce the exact section of the completely arranged body of papers on demand.

Unfortunately, this ideal is rarely achieved. Microfilming not only provides an economical method of acquiring an exact reproduction of a manuscript collection, it provides a very rapid method as well. A good camera operator, working with papers in good physical condition and of a fairly uniform size and consistency, can complete

four or five reels of microfilm a day. That is, he can reproduce some four or five thousand pages of manuscript material a day. The result is that for small collections of, say, a few hundred letters, a series of diaries, and some business papers, it is possible to secure a microfilm copy in a few hours. Leaving aside the vexatious questions of errors and their consequent retakes, and the need for checking against the originals where the material is not numbered, the result is that a collection can be borrowed for a few hours, under ideal conditions, filmed, and returned, and another accession scored for the filming institution. The use of microfilm in this direction is probably well known to all. It provides an ideal method of securing material which is being jealously guarded by a proud relative, a protective family or an unscrupulous hawker of autographed credit notes. You can borrow the papers for a few hours and return them none the worse for wear. The owners still hold the originals and Canadian historians have the information. The difficulty, of course, is that there is seldom time to arrange the papers, in such cases, let alone prepare a finding aid before the documents are filmed. And where sufficient time is allowed to organize the material, it may be impossible to do so. The material may be bound, and the owner may insist that the bindings be retained, or it may already have some unsatisfactory arrangement and the owner may insist that it be returned in the exact condition in which it had been stored beneath the cellar steps for lo these hundred years. In many cases the collection may be too extensive to organize while in the possession of the original owners. The task of organizing the Laurier Papers to take an extreme example, may take two or three men as long as three years. The tragedy is that the task of preparing a finding aid for an unorganized collection on microfilm as large as the Laurier Papers would take much longer than three years, and I strongly suspect you would run through a great many archivists before you were through.

Manuscript material then, does arrive in the archives on microfilm and unorganized, with perhaps a title sheet as the sole finding aid to the collection. The problem then arises to prepare a finding aid that will provide the maximum in accessibility with the

minimum time and effort. I should add right now, before any hopes are raised, that if there is an easy solution to this problem it is not included in this paper.

A reel of microfilm is inscrutable. It reveals nothing of itself through immediate observation. Unlike books or manuscripts, there is little to be gained by picking it up. There are no apparent content sheets or indexes. You cannot browse through microfilm. Its shape or colour gives no indication of its contents. A register on microfilm loses its identifiable characteristics. It is no longer the large morocco volume at the end of the third shelf. Instead it is a sequence of 120 frames at the 17 foot mark of reel 1789. In short, because of its physical properties, microfilm requires far more detailed finding aids than comparable manuscripts originals. To be used, microfilm must be located, charged out to the research worker and scanned. This scanning process, if the material is not precisely analysed in a finding aid, can be a very arduous, wearisome and frustrating task. Especially if the research worker has been given the wrong reel in the first place. And the most frustrating aspect of working with microfilm is that if the reels are not accurately marked, and the contents analysed on a list or finding aid that the user can study, the user may have to go through the whole reel before he realizes he has been given, or what is also more likely, he has asked for the wrong reel. It may take three hours or more to scan a reel of film. In many types of readers it is impossible to keep the film passing your line of sight and still note the type of material contained. The image goes out of focus with every turn of the spindle. At any rate, the rate of motion has to be very slow in order to absorb some idea of the nature of the material, and here the loss of the physical characteristics differentiating an official thick-papered despatch from the flimsy carbon or private enclosure further complicates the scanning or thumbing through process. A reel of microfilm may contain five or six volumes of correspondence, some containing 200 pages, others containing 500 pages. On film this size differential disappears. Although each volume may be preceded by a guide sheet, the student has no idea when flipping rapidly through a reel what volume he is at unless he carefully ticks them off mentally as he goes through a reel. This can be prevented by using a bottom

of frame, or side of frame marker giving the series and volume number with every frame of film, as our camera operators do when filming at the Public Record Office in London. This not only provides a useful viewing guide, but at the same time identifies each frame in case enlargements from the microfilm should be required. This, however, is part of an ideal filming project, and it should be noted that it also consumes a considerable amount of space by necessitating a larger frame than would otherwise be required.

The research worker then, has a right to expect that the microfilm will be sufficiently marked and catalogued to enable the archivist in charge to locate the exact reel that he requires, if his references are reasonably specific, just as he can expect the right volume or series of volumes in the original manuscripts. Where, however, there are no finding aids, and the material has not been properly arranged, the research worker will have to plow through a large mass of material to discover the information he requires. The point I would like to make here is that the use of microfilm places a greater burden on the user, and that the physical difficulties in using microfilm are too great to demand of the user the same degree of "research", the scanning of a large mass of documents in search of specific information, as would normally be expected. Every type of microfilm reader that I am aware of, either of the projector or viewer type, operates through a system of reflected light in order to enlarge the image on the film and make it visible to the student. As a result, every type of microfilm reader, and this applies to microcards, and all the other forms of microcard techniques, reflects the light through or off the card into the viewer's eyes. The result is that after a few hours use there is a serious degree of eyestrain, and we find that users cannot view microfilm for more than two or three hours at a time. Therefore, it takes longer in terms of days or weeks or even months for a searcher to go through a body of papers on film than it would if he were using the originals.

Microfilm, then, if I have made my point, requires a greater degree of preparation before it is ready for general use. The finding aids must be more detailed, for one of the most useful services a microfilm archivist can perform is to be able to inform the research worker that

there is nothing along the lines of the information he requires within any set of reels. I have found that even the most ardent scholar responds with a pronounced sense of relief when informed with some certainty that a collection on microfilm holds nothing of interest for him. The media, however, sets considerable obstacles in the path of the archivist attempting to prepare such finding aids.

To begin with, you cannot arrange material that has already been microfilmed. True, you can cut and splice a reel of film to a limited extent, so that whole volumes which have been filmed out of sequence can be re-arranged, but anyone who has attempted to re-arrange a number of individual documents on film will agree, I am sure, that it is impracticable and downright nerve-wracking. The only course available then, is to re-arrange the collection on paper. This paper inventory may have complete, limited, or no resemblance to the physical arrangement of the collection on the film. Before a paper inventory may be made, however, a detailed list of the contents must be prepared. When dealing with a collection composed of letter books, entry books, registers, and correspondence, it may only be necessary to discover the order of the individual units on the film, treating the correspondence as a unit, and then listing the units in a paper inventory in a manner which will best portray the activities of the office, agency or individual who produced the papers to make them most meaningful to the research worker. The correspondence may not be in any definite order, and unless it is very valuable, it will perhaps not be worth while continuing the organization of the collection on paper to the extent of preparing an alphabetical index or subject guide.

When, however, a collection of correspondence is both extensive and valuable, and has no specific arrangement, or one which is inadequate for general use, the further arrangement on paper involves the archivist in a considerable amount of effort. The only solution to the problem is to list the items of correspondence in the order in which they appear on the film. This list will have, as a minimum, the name of the correspondent, the recipient, the date and the place. If a more elaborate list is desired a subject phrase could be added, or a full scale calendar can be prepared. The preparation of this list presupposes there is some method of identifying the exact

letter on the film; that is, that there are page numbers, frame numbers, or some letter designation. When this list is completed, then an alphabetical list or index may be drawn up.

The preparation of paper inventories then, involves the preparation of two distinct lists. One represents the order of the material on the film, and will be marked so that either used by itself or in conjunction with the shelf list cards it acts as a reel location guide, the other the inventory proper listing the material in the order it should have been filmed in the first place. The latter includes the alphabetical or chronological listing of the correspondents, which in this case, because it is necessary to list them on paper, instead of arranging them in the original, acts as an index to the correspondence.

A complete finding aid for manuscript material on microfilm at the Public Archives then, involves reference to a main entry catalogue which in turn will refer to the shelf list reel numbers and to an inventory of the contents which is filed separately.

The use of microfilm is becoming more widespread in North America, and some film enthusiasts envisage the establishment of regional archives, much like branch libraries, consisting entirely of microfilm copies from central repositories. Frankly, the thought frightens me. At one time, a shield was proposed for the microfilm archivist which was to consist of a dust-grey background, representing the archives profession as a whole, on which is superimposed a reel of microfilm artistically draped around a white cane. How such regional repositories will affect the eyesight of the coming generation of Canadian historians, I leave to your imagination. There may, however, be technological advances in the next few years that will stave off such a disaster. In the meantime, the archivist will have to continue in his efforts to make the manuscript material on microfilm as accessible as possible within the limits of his time, his budget, and his almost legendary patience.