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DIVERSITY AND TRADITIONAL COLLECTIONS AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Ronald L. Becker

With the establishment of both regional and national ethnic, gender, cultural, and religious collections, the concept of diversity in archives encourages a fragmented world. This is one in which a researcher has a few clear-cut options—go to a women's repository to do research on women, a labor collection for labor history, an African-American archives for African-Americans, and so forth. However, time has demonstrated that no repository has a corner on the market for diversity which can also be found in holdings of what are often referred to as "traditional collections." Such repositories, whose primary objective is to document state and local history, already reflect the entire scope of the society which they seek to chronicle including diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural communities.

However, disseminating information about these multifaceted holdings is as important for traditional collections as acquiring the collections themselves. Through finding aids and other descriptive tools which take advantage of the new

electronic world, as well as through traditional presentations, archivists and others who develop, preserve, and make available research collections have a number of excellent opportunities to contribute to the documentation of diversity. The experience of the Special Collections Department at Rutgers University aptly demonstrates some diversity documentation strategies and the importance of the traditional collection to understanding diversity in society.

Diversity Documentation Strategies

Like many repositories in the 1980s, the department, which was established to collect records on all aspects of New Jersey history and culture, began a campaign specifically to document the diversity of the geographic area which it serves by undertaking a fairly conventional documentation project focused on the Jewish community of New Jersey. The state has had one of the largest Jewish populations in the country since the turn of the century, but in spite of its size and importance there had been no concerted effort to document the history of its people and institutions by repositories in New Jersey or elsewhere.¹ Granted a year's sabbatical leave, the director of the Rutgers Special Collections undertook to

¹ Scattered collections can be found at the American Jewish Historical Society, e.g., the papers (1898-1955) of Sarah Kussy, a prominent educator and community organizer in Newark, New Jersey. The Balch Institute in Philadelphia houses a few collections relating to Jewish communities in southern New Jersey, and the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati holds the records of several organizations in Bayonne and Newark and unpublished manuscripts relating to synagogues and other organizations in New Jersey. But the material was not collected in any organized fashion and covered only a sliver of the Jewish experience in New Jersey.

fill this documentation gap by carrying out the New Jersey Synagogue Archives Project.

His work began with the dispatch of a letter and survey form to every existing congregation listed in the various denominational directories and the yellow and white pages of every phone book in New Jersey.² The survey form asked the usual questions about the types and quantity of historical records being kept by each congregation (being careful to explain what was meant by *archives* and *records*) while the cover letter underscored the importance of their institution and the importance of the records in documenting their community.³

The survey elicited a 17 percent return rate. Armed with those responses, the project director got on the phone to make appointments, then hit the road, visiting each responding congregation, covering the entire state county by county, wearing out two old cars, and encountering every kind of traffic delay and inclement weather New Jersey has to offer. A written on-site survey of each synagogue followed, along with an offer to help them organize their records if they so desired and, of course, to take the records off their hands if they were inclined to donate them to a repository.

² As is often the case in such a survey, the project director underestimated the number of congregations, putting the number at two hundred when in fact there are over five hundred current and defunct synagogues in the state.

³ Aware that many synagogue officials might be suspicious of the motives for undertaking the project, the director added a short biographical sketch which included information about his activities in a local synagogue and regional Jewish organizations.

Somewhat surprisingly, a number did donate their archives to Rutgers, and nearly all presented the university with historical publications, newsletters, and other documentary materials. As a result, Special Collections now has two dozen new archival collections, a fairly accurate survey file for nearly every congregation, and a printed or manuscript history for many of them, and staff still receive phone calls for advice and offers to donate more material. More important, because of the project several new historical societies have been born, and existing ones have begun to collect records of the Jewish community in New Jersey.⁴

Other documentation projects followed and were focused on the large and active Asian communities in the state. Because these were relatively new communities, a unique opportunity existed to document institutions and organizations as they evolved, to help those communities record their experience in the United States from day one, and to ensure the permanent safekeeping of the documents thus created. This endeavor has not proved easy, however. For any group of recent immigrants the daily challenges of making a living, raising a family, and learning to survive in a new culture far outweigh any academic inclination to document these

⁴ The Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest in Whippany holds the archives of the United Jewish Federation which includes archival, printed, and pictorial material documenting the federation's cultural, educational, and social welfare activities in the seven county area of northeastern New Jersey since the 1850s. The Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey (located in New Brunswick) holds the archives of Temple Anshe Emeth, c.1880-1970, and other collections documenting Jewish activities throughout central New Jersey. The Jewish Historical Society of North Jersey in Wayne holds materials documenting that community, which originated in the 1840s in Paterson.

struggles for the sake of posterity. Since archivists themselves are not a particularly diverse group, most repositories which try to document diversity within a region must therefore rely on special contacts within the communities.

Nor can the role of plain old luck be discounted. When the university acquired the records of the Compulsive Gambling Association of New Jersey, for example, its past president, a physician of Philippine background, worked closely on the negotiations for the association's archives. Although she was also active in the Philippine community and professional associations in New Jersey, it had never occurred to her that material generated by these organizations might also be of historical value.

Very little persuasion was required to convince her that these records were every bit as important as the gambling records, and she went on a one-person tear through the New Jersey Philippine community. Under her auspices Special Collections staff appeared at meetings of a Philippine nurses' association, the federation of Philippine social organizations, and several other groups to talk about archives and building community through documentation. The department expects to receive much of that documentation in the coming years even though the original enthusiastic contact person has since left the state.⁵

⁵ The department has had a similar liaison with New Jersey's Chinese-American community through a technical services librarian at Rutgers who is active in group organizations but still lacks contacts in the Indian communities that have sprung up in several parts of the state.

Thus, as these experiences demonstrate, it is important in documenting ethnic groups to develop contacts in these communities and move ahead from there, trusting to the future. A number of Jewish historical societies have sprung up all over New Jersey, inspired in part by the synagogue project that influenced a number of people to take an interest in archival practices. If this occurs again in the state's Asian communities, Rutgers's current documentation projects will create similar constituencies in those communities with the advantage of a much earlier start. For the present, however, Rutgers and other traditional repositories must also look to collections they already hold to provide scholars with information about the diverse ethnic and cultural communities in their region.

Finding Diversity in Traditional Collections

Diversity encompasses not only ethnicity, race, and religion but also all aspects of human endeavor. If an archives has done its job of documenting the institutions and organizations in its regional or subject collecting areas, it is likely that it has also documented much of the diversity within those areas. What individual repositories often have not done satisfactorily is to let the world know just how effectively they document diversity. This task can be accomplished through finding aids and catalog preparation as well as through public and outreach programs.

Since 1965, for example, Rutgers has served as the official repository for the AFL-CIO's International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine, and Furniture Workers (IUE), organized in 1949 as the result of a split from

the left-wing Union of Electrical Workers (UE). Until receiving grants from the Department of Education and the National Historic Publication and Records Commission to arrange and describe the papers, however, department staff did not appreciate the impact of the union not only on its members but also on many aspects of the state's life. Processing the collection turned up documentation of diversity in virtually every record group and series, many of which go far beyond labor organizing and routine workplace activities. The IUE Archives yielded rich files on civil rights, women's rights and gender equity, education, fair housing, and numerous other political, social, legal, and economic issues.

Acquired in 1974, the records of the first consumer product testing organization in the United States also remained underappreciated until they were processed with help from federal funds. As one would expect, the records of Consumers' Research, Inc., are rich in evidence of the evolution, marketing, and reliability of thousands of products and of the development of the technology and culture necessary to test these products. What is less expected is the way in which this same collection documents the intellectual, political, and social history of New Jersey.

In addition to fifty years of technical product testing reports, the collection includes files relating to consumer issues and thought, co-operative movements, war preparation in the 1930s and 1940s, and post-war politics and government. Much of the diversity within this collection derives not from Consumers' Research founders' involvement in a wide range of social issues but from the organization's remarkable and dramatic political transformation from a leftist institution to

a rabidly right-wing, anti-Communist one following a 1935 attempt to unionize and strike by its employees.⁶

As pack-rats and creators of every conceivable type of information, Consumers' Research made certain that every bit of documentation it compiled over its history would be saved, including files on every consumer advocate with "evidence" of that person's alleged communist background or influence.⁷ Researchers, therefore, can now explore many unexpected topics in what on the surface appears to be a narrow, predictable collection.

In addition to distributing the grant-funded guide to the Consumers' Research records on the Internet, Special Collections staff mounted an exhibition on the organization which included material from all parts of the collection as well as some of the product testing equipment itself. This turned out to be one of the department's most popular exhibits ever and evoked comments about how multifaceted its collections must be from many who were more accustomed to the department's literary and other traditional subject themes. A

⁶ After the strike, its founders moved from the organization's headquarters in rural Washington, New Jersey, back to New York and, with the help of many of the former supporters of Consumers' Research, organized Consumer's Union which eventually rivaled and then far eclipsed Consumers' Research as the leader of the consumer movement. The bitter Consumers' Research directors became obsessed with what they believed to be the communist influence at Consumer's Union and much of the rest of the consumer movement.

⁷ The organization shared these files with the House Un-American Activities Committee, and not until 1953 did HUAC remove Consumer's Union from its list of subversive organizations, the only organization to be so removed.

special issue of *The Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*⁸ on consumerism, labor unions, and the pursuit of the American dream, guest-edited by labor archivist James Quigel, described these and other collections and demonstrated how they have been used in historical research and their potential for future research.⁹

Another consumer collection, the Consumer's League of New Jersey Archives, also goes significantly beyond the consumer movement to document unfair industrial practices, workmen's compensation, and the exploitation of women and children. Because the League of Women Voters of New Jersey did significant work in the areas of civil rights, equal pay, minimum wage, sweatshop regulation, disease control, sterilization, and child welfare, its records chronicle much more than suffrage and political issues. These two collections along with the New Jersey Welfare Council archive and the papers of Mary Roebling, the country's first female bank president, constitute Rutgers' Women in Public Life Archives Project, yet another source for the study of diversity. But only through careful processing and intensified promotion of these and other collections did the staff and patrons of Special Collections become attuned to the diversity documented by its holdings.

⁸ vol. 67, nos.1-2 (December 1995).

⁹ A previous issue (vol. 66, no. 1, June 1994) dealing mostly with the history of the New Jersey African-American community included an essay on manuscript resources at Rutgers relating to that community.

Conclusion

Traditional collections should never sell themselves short as resources for developing and enhancing programs and services that recognize and respond to the diversity of their institutions. Nor should archivists allow institutional administrators or governing bodies to overlook the importance of archival collections as more and more universities issue diversity statements which elaborate affirmative action policies, advocate cultural and ethnic toleration among students, and propose plans for increasing diversity and fostering multiculturalism on campus but leave out references to the usefulness of special collections and archives in this effort.

Even the Rutgers University Libraries Multicultural Life Committee Report issued in April 1995 did not dwell on collections of primary resources. However, a member of the Special Collections professional staff who served on the committee had provided concrete suggestions and examples for the report. These recommendations specifically mentioned the Special Collections and University Archives for developing exhibits and displays to reflect diversity and publicize existing Rutgers collections that document diversity and support multicultural research.

It is curious that most college and university libraries do not take greater advantage of their special collections in this context. This not only signifies something about lack of recognition but also seriously weakens the diversity statements themselves. A treasure-trove of diversity lies just beneath (or above or adjacent to) the offices of those writing these policy documents. Archivists must accept responsibility for letting

the outside world know about their contributions to diversity and multiculturalism. Otherwise, one of the chief components in libraries' efforts to document diversity will go unnoticed and unrecorded even though such efforts are an ongoing part of every archivist's day.

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