

January 1989

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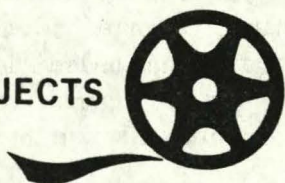
Recommended Citation

Joyce, William L., "Short Subjects: Foxes Guarding the Hen House: Archivists in Special Collections," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 7 no. 1 (1989).

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SHORT SUBJECTS



Feature

Foxes Guarding the Hen House:
Archivists in Special Collections

William L. Joyce

While deciding on a title for this presentation, I selected one that was less provocative than that which initially occurred to me, the first iteration being: "Foxes Guarding the Hen House: The Coming Archival Takeover of Special Collections." I decided against this title for two reasons: first, it overstates the current situation and likely future condition of research libraries generally, and special collections units in particular; and, second, it only exacerbates the attitudinal problem that I believe all of us need to acknowledge.

Without meaning to turn this into a pale imitation of *Animal Farm*, I will say that we archivists are, like foxes guarding the hen house, under suspicion. Our contributions to library management are underestimated. Of course, for our part, we often reciprocate the suspicion and perhaps undervalue our own contributions by emphasizing how we are different from librarians and why our own traditions and procedures warrant being maintained separately and apart.

In fact, there is underway at this moment a remarkable convergence of interest between librarians and archivists in which archival methods and approaches are receiving a new hearing in research library circles--because we have something to offer regarding some of the vexing problems currently facing research libraries. By the same token, research librarians have something to tell archivists about our problems and we need to listen.

There is no doubt that archivists, curators, and librarians need one another, and we should seek closer relations. To go further, the recent advent of the archival method in special collections produces ways of addressing problems in research libraries that complement those of traditional library practices. The complementarity of the library and archival approaches needs to be recognized as the opportunity for cooperative problem solving, not as competitive striving.

I use the term *archivist* generically to refer both to archivists and manuscript curators, and the phrase *special collections*, also in a generic fashion, to include archival and manuscript materials and rare books, as well as the wider range of materials that have, especially since the emergence of the new social history of the 1920s and 1930s, been collected for their research value. These include broadsides, pamphlets, playbills, newspapers, maps, photographs, sheet music, prints, and other graphic materials, ephemera such as menus, technical reports, and, lately, machine-readable records. Very often, these materials are more valuable in the aggregate than in the sum of their individual parts. The

bulk of special collections materials now collected--such as those I just enumerated--is amenable to processing according to the tenets of the archival tradition by which the material is arranged and described by provenance and which material derives significance only in relation to other material of the same type.

In considering the traditional areas of collection development, bibliographical description, preservation and conservation, reference and outreach, and education, the respective contributions--indeed, the essential complementarity--of the library and archival traditions become apparent. Such knowledge can help reduce suspicion and misunderstanding and promote fuller cooperation between archivists and special collections librarians.

Collection development

In the library tradition, selection decisions are made item by item through identification in catalogs, approval plans, and other approaches that normally give selectors responsibility for developing collections in broad subject areas. Increasingly, cooperative programs such as those offered by the Research Library Group, the Center for Research Libraries, and local library networks provide opportunity for less unilateral and more cooperative library activities. As librarians face continuing pressure from inadequate acquisition budgets and severe space constraints, the archival concepts of appraisal and documentation strategies, and that of bulk reduction techniques through sampling, would seem to offer librarians useful strategies for collection building, even as they may ease space pressures. We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that it is the normal condition of research libraries to grow.

Bibliographical description

The growing convergence of the library and archival traditions is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the cataloging of books and book-like materials and in the processing of archival materials.

At the simplest, most direct, level, it appears to be only a matter of time before the archives and manuscripts control (AMC) format and the books format, together with others (including those for visual materials, maps, serials, and music scores), are linked in a single, integrated format. This will pose a serious challenge as to whether we can be more confident that there is a sufficient consensus on the use of vocabulary so that we can communicate the significance of what we have cataloged. (Is the descriptive language of materials sufficiently precise? *Series* means one thing to an archivist; it means something very different to a cataloger of monographs. Will, for example, chronological subfields be common and equally germane in libraries, archives, and museums?)

The experience of archivists with the AMC format shows the importance of authorities, tables of value, and standardized lists, and we realize that librarians have accomplished much in the area of standards and authorities. We have much to learn from them, as the recent work of Max Evans and the growing archival concern for standards demonstrate.

If we view the archival tradition as an alternative model to that of library cataloging for the organization of information, then the archival approach of understanding material in terms of its origins and the purposes for which it was created becomes more important. Information is seen in its institutional context and institutions are treated as coherent systems (similar to the systems that are so central to information studies). This approach is especially congenial to cataloging or processing those special collections whose collective value is greater than their individual components. This accounts, at least in part, for the current popularity and rapid growth of the AMC format, which is branching out into recording online the contents of the *National Union Catalog for Manuscript Collections*, as well as recording appraisal information on state records.

The Machine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) Visual Materials format, substantially based upon the work that led to the AMC format, offers a flexible approach to cataloging visual materials that combines the item and collection approaches to cataloging, though the use of standards in connection with that format is also of rising concern. As the use of automation by librarians and archivists forces all of us to rethink our procedures and assumptions, distinctions between the work of archivists and librarians are rapidly becoming blurred.

Preservation/conservation

While the "brittle books" campaign appears to focus on the preservation needs of published, as opposed to unpublished, materials, campaign sponsors appear to be aware increasingly of the preservation needs of archives. Certainly we need to maintain pressure to ensure that archival materials are eligible for funding from such programs. A significant problem associated with preservation microfilming for archivists is the immense amount of preparation most unpublished collections require before filming. In the area of conservation, it was archivists at the National Archives who developed the concept of "intrinsic value" to determine when a document or series of documents should be conserved and retained in its original format because the artifact contained information or characteristics that would be lost if the original was not maintained.

Many times, there is information in the very properties of the original that dictate that it be saved; examples include a copy of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona* bound in birch bark, a document with an important watermark in the paper, material with color illustrations, or simply those items with potential value for exhibitions. For a recent exhibition, for example, the New York Public Library found itself borrowing Margaret Sanger's newsletter because the original had been filmed and discarded.

Surely, the concept of intrinsic value holds as much value for rare book librarians as for archivists.

Reference/outreach

The current restrictive environment in terms of copyright as the litigation surrounding the biographies of J. D. Salinger and L. Ron Hubbard attest, privacy, and other access issues, confers increasing importance on the administration of restricted collections. It is archivists who are experienced in dealing with such situations, and the technological challenge to copyright will likely lead to further legislative adjustments and may lead to an expanded role for archivists accustomed to managing such matters.

A good many libraries are also contending with exhibitions these days, and it is frequently the prints, broadsides, ephemera, manuscripts, and other materials from special collections (frequently in the custody of the archivist) that are so often used. Ironically, exhibitions are often "driving" other library outreach programs, including publications (primarily in the form of exhibition catalogs) and events such as lectures, symposia, conferences, and other activity. Librarians and archivists are equally burdened by the need to become more knowledgeable and active in the outreach area.

These complementarities show that, if their relations are not altogether symbiotic, the common purpose shared by librarians and archivists requires both to collaborate in their work as fully as possible and more frequently than ever. In many situations, either the library or archival tradition will be called upon; the key is in training librarians and archivists to recognize what situations warrant the application of one or the other tradition.

Education

The education of both librarians and archivists appears to be equally unsettled at the moment. The American Library Association is making wholesale changes in the accreditation of

library and information studies programs, while there also appears to be widespread dissatisfaction among librarians with the nature of the education. Many library schools, such as the School of Library Service at Columbia, are undergoing curricular changes, including more courses in other fields.

For our part, we archivists have revised our graduate education guidelines and are seeking ways of influencing accreditation of those programs. This certainly includes the prospect of our involvement in the new approaches to library education.

The core courses of library and information studies curricula should be adapted to include archival, as well as library, theory in areas as basic as bibliographical description. It is also noteworthy that the new dean of the School of Information Studies at Drexel University is Richard Lytle, former archivist of the Smithsonian Institution, while the new dean of Michigan's School of Library and Information Studies is Robert M. Warner, former director of the Bentley Historical Library and, most recently, archivist of the United States--foxes guarding the hen house indeed.

The problems of the nation's research libraries are massive and getting more so. (Simply ponder estimates of the cost to eliminate the nation's brittle books problem.) Whether on campus or in some other setting, research repositories need all the help they can get to address their problems. Librarians at such institutions can begin to help themselves by carefully considering all possible solutions to problems--especially what we might call the archival alternative--and then to begin to forge the consensus to implement those solutions. That will require careful education of all constituencies--especially our researcher patrons and

administrators--outreach, and advocacy to increase broad understanding to achieve what one archival colleague calls the process of "defining common problems to forge cooperative solutions."

William L. Joyce is associate university librarian for rare books and special collections at Princeton University. An earlier version of this article was given as the keynote address at a meeting of the New England Archivists in Wellesley, Massachusetts, on 26 March 1988.