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The Status of Users In Archival Enterprise

Michael Widener

T. R. Schellenberg, the dean of modern archival enterprise, set a dual objective for the profession. "The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and make them available for use," he wrote.¹ When Schellenberg wrote these words some thirty-five years ago, archivists were oriented primarily toward the materials they worked with and perceived the users of these materials as a relatively small, elite group of scholars, mainly historians.

Those days are long gone, however. Users are much more numerous and diverse than they were thirty-five years ago. Even the historians themselves have changed. The political, social, financial, and technological spheres in which archival institutions now operate demand that the profession set aside its focus on the records themselves and instead

¹ T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 224.

concentrate on the users of the records and the uses to which they put the records. In short, the archival profession is being challenged by events to rethink its mission.

As late as the mid-1970s, virtually all discussion of users dealt with cooperation between historians and archivists or with the value of primary source material for this or that field of research. These works, written as much by historians as by archivists, were based on generalizations from personal experience with very little rigorous analysis, as Michael Stevens has observed.² The literature on archival reference work, where one would have expected more interest in users, has been scanty, and as Janice Ruth has noted, mainly concerned with "standardized practices designed to resolve the conflicts between researchers' access needs and archivists' preservation concerns."³

However, in the past fifteen years or so archivists have begun to reach past assumptions and platitudes about archives users. The change in attitude was clearly signaled in the 1987 report of the Society of American Archivists' Task Force on Goals and Priorities:

Archivists tend to think about their work in the order in which it is performed. Inevitably, use comes last. Since use of archival materials is the goal to which

² Michael Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," *Georgia Archive* 5 (1977): 70.

³ Janice E. Ruth, "Educating the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 268.

all other activities are directed, archivists need to re-examine their priorities.⁴

Recent literature shows that archivists have begun taking a serious look at their user communities. While most of the literature is produced by Americans, interest in users is not limited to the United States. Indeed, while archival institutions in the Third World would seem to have little time to study their users as they struggle to fulfill their basic needs, their lack of development could be seen as an opportunity to develop their own models for archival institutions based on the unique needs of their users before they adopt western models that may not be as appropriate.

A Classification of Archives Users

Archives users can be divided into three broad groups. The academic user is a scholar who consults archival sources to arrive at an understanding of the past and/or the present, with the intention of disseminating this understanding through publication or teaching. The practical user is a representative of business or government who enters the archives seeking information to assist in taking action or reaching a decision. The non-specialist user comes to the archives to satisfy an internal, personal information need; although this user may be conducting historical research or trying to make a decision, the

⁴ *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 23.

information is valuable for its own sake over and above its value for secondary uses. To this basic scheme one could also add artists who use archives as a source for ideas and inspiration, as well as those who publish archival materials.⁵

Historians Aren't What They Used To Be

Archival reading rooms were originally dominated by the academic users, in particular historians and other scholars conducting historical research. Historians came to study the great men, the great events, and the great institutions of the past. Historians and their fellow academics were connoisseurs of archives. They worked with archival sources for extended periods of time with the goal of producing knowledge. They were much like the archivists themselves, who were also typically trained as historians, and as a result there developed a sense of community between archivists and academic users.⁶ This may help explain the earlier lack of interest in user studies. Archivists may have felt there was no need to study users who were cast from the same mold as themselves.

Historians played a central role in the creation of archival institutions, particularly those in the United States and Great Britain.⁷ In Europe, historians were largely responsible for

⁵ César A. García Belsunce, "El uso práctico de los archivos," *Archivum* 29 (1982): 77-78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁷ Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 6-8.

the training of archivists. Archival enterprise was itself classified as an auxiliary discipline of history, as is reflected today in the Library of Congress classification system.

The nature of academic research in archives, however, has undergone profound changes in the past few decades. The sheer number of researchers has increased rapidly and substantially throughout the world as a result of overall growth in higher education. The field of history has become much more diverse, with such sub-disciplines as economic history, social history, business history, and women's history, to name only a few. There has also been a tremendous crossover between history and other disciplines. Fields such as science, education, and geography now have their own historians. Social and political scientists are using historical data to test hypotheses. Historians are themselves borrowing techniques from other fields such as quantitative analysis, elite studies, and psychoanalysis.⁸ Academic research in general has become much more interdisciplinary in nature.⁹ These changes have dramatically affected the quantity and types of records requested by researchers.¹⁰

Research about historians as users of archives has itself broken new ground, challenging some of the assumptions that both archivists and historians have held about the

⁸ Michael Roper, "The Academic Use of Archives," *Archivum* 29 (1982): 27-29.

⁹ Hugh A. Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?", *Archivaria* 25 (1987-1988): 14-15.

¹⁰ Roper, "The Academic Use of Archives," 29-32.

process of historical research using primary source material. Historians have told us that they need more guides to archival holdings, yet several studies have shown that they make little use of the guides that already exist. Studies by Paul Conway, Margaret Stieg, and Michael Stevens have shown that historians rely much more on word-of-mouth, citations in the literature, and other informal sources to learn about useful archival sources.¹¹ However, two citation studies of archival sources used by historians have produced some contradictory results. While Jacqueline Goggin found that historians tended to under-utilize the source material available to them, Frederic Miller's study of social historians documented extensive use of archives for a wide variety of research. Goggin and Miller agree on one point: the level of processing seems to be an important factor in determining use.¹²

Another finding, one that some archivists have yet to realize, is that historians and other scholars are no longer the primary users of archives.

¹¹ Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," 69-74; Margaret F. Stieg, "The Information Needs of Historians," *College & Research Libraries* 42, 6 (1981): 549-560; Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey" *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 35-56.

¹² Jacqueline Goggin, "The Indirect Approach: A Study of Scholarly Users of Black and Women's Organizational Records in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 57-67; Frederic Miller, "Use, Appraisal, and Research: A Case Study of Social History," *American Archivist* 49 (1986): 371-392.

Archives: They're Not Just For History Any More

The number of practical users has increased steadily over time. These users are government officials, bureaucrats, businessmen, or others who come to the archives seeking quick answers to help in taking action or reaching decisions. They could be from the institution that created the records or from outside the institution. Their answers are often found in a handful of records from the recent past. These users, unlike academic users, are often not at home in the archival world; their education has not prepared them for consulting primary source material, and the archives themselves are not organized to provide them with the type of service they are seeking.¹³

The archival community itself has paid little attention to the needs of these "practical" users until recently; in earlier archival literature (pre-1976), there are few articles on the use of archives for decision-making, for example, even in the literature on business archives.¹⁴ The impression is that archivists saw the queries of practical users as somewhat pedestrian and uninteresting. However, as César García Belsunce cautions, if archives do not provide

¹³ García Belsunce, "El uso práctico de los archivos," 78-79.

¹⁴ Frank B. Evans, comp., *Modern Archives and Manuscripts: A Select Bibliography* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975).

"information for action," the practical users will create other institutions that do.¹⁵

The last class of users to appear in the reading rooms (and the lowest class, in the eyes of many archivists) is the non-specialist user, or "common man." This is also becoming the largest group, and is thus challenging the traditional image of archives as a cultural resource for the elite. In the English-speaking world and Western Europe, this group is predominantly genealogists. In other parts of the world, local history seems to be the most common research interest of these users. Administrative research is an important activity of non-specialist users in all parts of the world. A survey by the Italian archivist L. S. Principe showed that the non-specialist user is usually an infrequent visitor:

He is drawn toward the archives out of cultural interest or mere curiosity; but he is driven off by them because their hours and their research aids (which are either insufficient or too complicated) make it impossible for a layman to overcome the difficulties inherent in archive research. In addition, a great many archives still require that those handling the documents be qualified researchers [thus driving] away many who might eventually have become avid archive users.¹⁶

¹⁵ García Belsunce, "El uso práctico de los archivos," 79.

¹⁶ L. S. Principe, "Everyman and Archives," *Archivum* 29 (1982): 136.

Principe points out that repositories which organize themselves for this type of user tend to draw more of them. Genealogists have attracted the greatest attention from archivists. Their reception by archivists has sometimes been hostile;¹⁷ and Michel Duchein, a leader in the archival profession, terms their growing numbers "alarming" and a threat to the physical condition of the documents they use.¹⁸ However, genealogists helped to create many archival institutions in the U.S. and remain among their staunchest supporters.¹⁹

Despite the large proportion of non-specialist users in archives (Principe's survey set their share at seventy percent of users world-wide, while branches of the National Archives report from fifty to eighty percent), there have been remarkably few studies of them. Conway's study of

¹⁷ Ivan Borsa, "The Expanding Archival Clientele in the Post-World War II Period," *Archivum* 26 (1979): 122. For complaints by professional genealogists about poor attitudes toward them on the part of archivists, see Milton Rubincam, "What the Genealogist Expects of an Archival Agency or Historical Society," *American Archivist* 12 (1949): 333-338; and Mary Speakman, "The User Talks Back," *American Archivist* 47 (1984): 164-171.

¹⁸ Michel Duchein, *Obstacles to the Access, Use and Transfer of Information from Archives: A RAMP Study* (Paris: Unesco, 1983).

¹⁹ Phoebe Jacobsen, "The World Turned Upside Down': Reference Priorities and the State Archives," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 341-345.

presidential library users showed that non-specialists are less confident about their ability to use archives, need help in defining and narrowing their topics, and place a high value on personal attention. He argues that archives should accommodate the reference services to the non-specialist users, not the other way around.²⁰ Principe cites a French study of genealogists, and a forthcoming study of National Archives users should shed additional light.

Is There a Science to Archives?

Discussions on archival theory have addressed the scientific aspirations of the archival profession. A round of articles on archival theory in the 1981 issues of the *American Archivist* made virtually no mention of users or user studies. Frank Burke envisioned archival science as a study of the process of record creation and of reverence for artifacts.²¹ These are valid concerns for archivists, but if archives are to be more than collections of old records, they must take part in the broader network of information sources and look to the use of archives as the point of contact. Lawrence Dowler makes this point in his research agenda for the archival profession:

²⁰ Conway, "Presidential Libraries," 46-55.

²¹ Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 40-46.

In the end, we may discover that what is distinctive about archival practice does not really constitute a separate and unique profession, but rather is one part of a broader profession concerned with the uses of information. . . . Archivists must redirect their attention from the records or form of material to the uses of information, including potential uses. We need to put aside sentiment and tradition and, drawing upon the social sciences, begin to analyze and evaluate archival work.²²

Thus, if there is a science to archives (or to librarianship or information, for that matter), then an understanding of use and users must surely be a central component of this science. For all its pretensions, information science is not that far ahead of archival science in some respects. As Hugh Taylor points out, archival theory and information science share the characteristic of being a "cluster of concepts based on practical experience" instead of true theories.²³ "'Archival science' must be supported by a body of knowledge which is more than personal observation or even collective wisdom, if it is to have any genuine scientific pretension," he adds.²⁴

²² Lawrence Dowler, "The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles: A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use of Records," *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 77.

²³ Hugh A. Taylor, *Archival Services and the Concept of the User: A RAMP Study* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

Implications of Use and Users for Archival Work

"There is, of course, a sense in which every task we perform is a service to the user, directly or indirectly," argues Hugh Taylor.²⁵ A review of the components of archival enterprise shows how a user orientation serves to unify these components.

Appraisal. Studies that investigate the types of materials used by different groups of researchers and how the materials are used provide valuable insights for appraisal decisions. Given the tremendous volume of twentieth-century records and the impossibility of keeping everything, it is more important than ever that archivists make appraisals based on what will be of value to users now and in the future. "There may be extremely valuable materials being lost today because there is much of far less value on our shelves with an implied commitment to process it," says Taylor, "but will it ever be of significant research use?"²⁶

Appraisal has been one area where assumptions about users have been prevalent. Financial and organizational records have typically been placed high on appraisal priorities because of their value in describing an institution's operations, yet the previously cited studies by Goggin and Miller show that these types of institutional records are little used. However, who is to say that these

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

records will not be useful for new research interests not yet envisioned? This point illustrates one of the shortcomings of user studies: how do you study users of the future? This problem does not worry Miller. He points out that social historians develop their research questions first and then adapt the available materials to obtain answers; the available archival sources do not determine the research questions. "Only in rare cases should archivists suspect that one appraisal decision might seriously change the course of historical research," he concludes.²⁷

Arrangement and description. Several authors have pointed out the inadequacy of the standard finding aids for many types of archival research, including genealogy, practical uses, and the new social history. In fact, benefit to the user should be the primary yardstick for gauging the worth of particular descriptive practices. Randall Jimerson has suggested that the convenience of the archivist has been a more common standard in the past.²⁸

In this regard, Richard Lytle has studied the efficacy of provenance-based searches compared with subject searches. His results indicated that neither method produced good results, although he concluded that provenance searching was preferable since it was less dependent on the quality of index terms than subject

²⁷ Miller, "Use, Appraisal, and Research," 391.

²⁸ Randall C. Jimerson, "Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society," *American Archivist* 52 (1989): 332-341.

searching. His study also suggested that large quantities of potentially useful materials are largely untapped by existing finding aids.²⁹

A study by David Bearman of user queries at eighteen repositories and the previously cited study of historians by Michael Stevens both showed that names were the most common access points provided by users. Bearman, however, cautions that the users may not be so much expressing what they want as asking for what they know the archives can provide.³⁰

In summary, the studies conducted so far tell us about the usefulness of our present finding aids but not about new types of finding aids that could better serve user needs. Several writers have argued that, given the great diversity in the needs and background of today's users, the ideal solution would be specialized finding aids for different types of users.

Access. Principe's survey of national archives indicates the impact that access policies can have on use patterns. Those repositories which put forth greater efforts to make themselves accessible to non-specialist users through more

²⁹ Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: II. Report of an Experiment Comparing Provenance and Catalogue Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (1980): 191-207.

³⁰ David Bearman, "User Presentation Language in Archives," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 3, 14 (1989-1990): 7; Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," 72-74.

convenient hours, more open access to documents, and active exhibition and outreach programs saw greater growth in use by non-specialists.

Reference service. Nowhere in archival services is an understanding of the user more important than in reference activities. Given the complexities of archival finding aids and the holdings themselves, a reference archivist's assistance has been deemed essential in conducting research in archives.

Reference services in archives, however, have been roundly criticized on several points. "Current practice relies too heavily on the subject knowledge and memory of the individual archivist, and is too dependent on the personalities of the researcher and archivist," says Mary Jo Pugh, who argues that better finding aids would help provide more consistent reference service.³¹ Several authors have noted poor attitudes on the part of reference archivists, especially when it comes to dealing with genealogists and other non-specialist users.³² Jacqueline Goggin, a former reference archivist who became a researcher, describes the poor quality of reference services she found in several repositories and said user studies will be of little use if archivists do not first change their attitudes

³¹ Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (1982): 38-39.

³² Ruth, "Educating the Reference Archivist," 268-270.

about users.³³ Paul Conway calls for reference services tailored to the user's needs. "One of the worst disservices we have done to ourselves," he said, "is to continually call reference service an art and to use that as an excuse to dismiss analysis of it."³⁴

These observations lead one to the conclusion that perhaps there is a need to study reference archivists as well as the users they serve. If use and users are indeed so central to archival work as the SAA's *Planning for the Archival Profession* report asserts, the profession cannot go on alienating users through poor reference service.

Archival education. The preceding discussion about reference also highlights the lack of training on users and user services in most archival training curricula. Janice Ruth's article summarizes the views of many in the profession on this need, and proposes a curriculum in which user studies would be a primary component.³⁵ Paul Conway and Elsie Freeman, among others, suggest that conducting user studies would be a valuable research and training tool for archives students and faculty.³⁶ The

³³ Jacqueline Goggin, "Commentary," *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 87-89.

³⁴ Conway, "Presidential Libraries," 55.

³⁵ Ruth, "Educating the Reference Archivist," 266-276.

³⁶ Paul Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (1986): 406; Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder:

findings of existing user studies have yet to make their way into the standard texts on archival enterprise, and Jacqueline Goggin notes that the studies seem to have had little impact on actual practice.³⁷ Communication skills would be another important component of a reformed training program for reference archivists. "All student archivists would surely benefit from what [Bruno Delmas] calls the 'psychosociology of communications,'" says Hugh Taylor.³⁸

The archival training curriculum is not alone in its lack of training on users. In my own passage through a master's program in library and information science, there has been surprisingly little discussion of users or their needs.

Automation. Being on the frontier of automated access to collections provides archivists with the opportunity to take the user into account in the design of automated finding aids, unlike what happened during the development of most traditional printed finding aids now in use. Hugh Taylor sees the computer as a means of fundamentally changing the reference archivist's role from providing answers to clarifying questions. He warns that if we are not careful in the design phase, automated systems could end up burdening archivists with more questions than before. He

Archives Administration from the User Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (1984): 122-123.

³⁷ Goggin, "Commentary," 87.

³⁸ Taylor, *Archival Services*, 88.

also points out that the trend in end-user computing is to empower end users to do their own retrieval without intervention from "gatekeepers."³⁹

On the whole, the archival profession has avoided stumbling blithely into automation and taken a rather cautious approach. By doing so, archivists can benefit from the successes and failures of those in the library field. However, they should not miss the opportunity to open their holdings to users in new ways.

Preservation. While preservation should not be the ultimate goal of archival enterprise, it is also true that it is impossible to use records that are poorly preserved. Use patterns have important implications for preservation priorities. In response to the large numbers of genealogical researchers in U.S. repositories, archives have microfilmed a large part of the records of greatest use to genealogists, such as the U.S. census records. Preservation concerns have been used in the past to create barriers to use by non-specialist users but, as Principe suggests, this need not be the case if archives can provide for "special consultation aids, suitable space, appropriate technical aids and sufficiently trained personnel to satisfy a demand that is different from the traditional one."⁴⁰

Outreach. If use is the primary objective of archival work, archives cannot sit and wait for users to show up. The

³⁹ Taylor, "Transformation," 23.

⁴⁰ Principe, "Everyman and Archives," 136.

SAA's Committee on Goals and Priorities rightly gave outreach programs a prominent role in its proposals for the profession. If outreach programs are to be successful in bringing new users into archival repositories, they must embody an understanding of who those users are, what their information needs are, and how the repository is prepared to meet those needs once the new user comes through the door. Elsie Freeman, the most vocal advocate for outreach programs in the U.S., has called on archivists to incorporate user studies into their outreach activities.⁴¹

Use and Users in Developing Nations

Outside of the United States and Western Europe, there is little evidence of user studies undertaken by archival institutions. Peter Mazikana, an archivist from Zimbabwe, confirmed this observation in a 1990 RAMP study which looked at the role of national archives in decision-making. "If one asks [archivists] about their users they are able to tabulate the categories of records used and the purposes for this but when one prods deeper one suddenly realises that all that exist are generalities," he reported.⁴² He found that archivists were out of touch with other government

⁴¹ Elsie T. Freeman, "Buying Quarter Inch Holes: Public Support Through Results," *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985): 92.

⁴² Peter C. Mazikana, *Archives and Records Management for Decision Makers: A RAMP Study* (Paris: UNESCO, 1990), 13.

agencies, and that decision makers likewise ignored archives as an information source in decision-making. This ignorance about users does not bode well for users' ability to access information in the archives or for the archives' ability to garner support, he added. Mazikana advised archives to become aware of information needs in their governments and to become aggressive marketers of their services.⁴³

Lack of use is a common lament in the Mexican archival literature, exemplified by Enrique Ampudia Mello's book *Institucionalidad y gobierno: un ensayo sobre la dimensión archivística de la Administración Pública*. He argues that Mexican government archives failed to keep up with the explosion of document output and with modern techniques of archival practice, and as a result were increasingly ignored by the public administration.⁴⁴

There are several possible explanations for the lack of user studies in developing nations. In many of these nations access to archival sources is still restricted to qualified scholars; such policies reflect a custodial orientation on the part of archivists and a lack of interest in understanding or expanding use and users.⁴⁵ Cultural norms or historical patterns could be responsible for

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13-18, 43-46.

⁴⁴ J. Enrique Ampudia Mello, *Institucionalidad y gobierno: un ensayo sobre la dimensión archivística de la Administración Pública* (México, D.F.: Archivo General de la Nación, 1988).

⁴⁵ For a summary of access policies around the world see Principe, "Everyman and Archives," 136-142.

concern or lack of concern with users. In Mexico, for example, there is no tradition of public libraries or of open government.

It is tempting to excuse archives in developing nations from conducting user studies because of the immensity of pressing problems facing them: a huge backlog of unprocessed materials, poor facilities, lack of trained staff, lack of funding, and so on. However, it is precisely the nature and magnitude of their problems which makes it important for these institutions to understand their current and potential users. Such an understanding will enable them to direct their limited resources toward the most pressing needs of their users, thus raising their status as vital and worthwhile institutions in the eyes of decision makers and citizens.

In fact, the state of archival under-development can be seen as an opportunity for archival institutions to make a fresh start, taking user needs into account from the beginning as they create new models for archival enterprise. In the U.S., by comparison, the archival profession is retrofitting user needs onto a system that was designed with the needs of the physical record in mind. Why should a developing nation import a model for archival enterprise when it can build one of its own that reflects its own unique needs and characteristics?

The Role of Archives: To Preserve or To Serve?

The question of use and users is a question about the basic nature of archival enterprise: do archivists preserve or do they serve? When they study their users, archivists are in

a sense studying themselves. User studies hold up a mirror to the profession and archivists see how their users, and by extension society, sees them.

A different kind of user study, the Levy Report, shows the results of decades of archivists playing the role of records custodians. Resource allocators see archivists as quiet, unassuming detail-oriented servants.⁴⁶ David Gracy has pointed out that by defining the archival mission as keeping records for future use, archivists are making a very weak case with present-oriented funding agencies.⁴⁷ Randall Jimerson urges archivists to set aside the passive role of an information custodian in favor of an active role as an information processor, geared to meeting the needs of users. He proposes a marketing paradigm for the archival profession, where an orientation to the "customer" replaces the "product orientation" of the past.⁴⁸

If archivists still have difficulty leaving their custodial role behind, perhaps they should ponder an archives without users. What good are the records if no one uses them? As Hugh Taylor points out, "Without users (which include ourselves) records and the information they contain have only a potential, a pent-up energy."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984).

⁴⁷ David B. Gracy II, "Is There a Future in the Use of Archives?", *Archivaria* 24 (1987): 3-9.

⁴⁸ Jimerson, "Redefining Archival Identity," 336-337.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Archival Services*, 3.

An orientation to the user is vital to the future of archival institutions and to archivists as a profession. It defines their purpose, it unifies the facets of their work, and it gives archivists an important role to fill in the eyes of society. To serve the user, archivists must first know him.

Michael Widener has been the Archivist/Rare Books Librarian at the Tarlton Law Library, University of Texas at Austin, since October 1991. This article was originally written as a paper for the Seminar on Archival Enterprise taught by Dr. David B. Gracy II in the spring of 1991.