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PAKS AND ARCHIVAL EDUCATION:

PART I: AN OVERVIEW*

Nicholas C. Burckel

Problems in Archives Kits (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980--): PAK I: Appraisal (1980), \$17 members, \$20 others; PAK II: Security (1980), \$17 members, \$20 others; PAK III: Starting An Archives (1980), \$11 members, \$14 others; PAK IV: Archival Processing Costs (1981), \$12 members, \$15 others; PAK V: Can You Afford Records Management? (1981), \$17 members, \$20 others; PAK VI: Developing A Brochure (1981), \$8 members, \$11 others.

The Society of American Archivists' (SAA) latest entry in the field of continuing education is a series of PAKs--Problems in Archives Kits. Although PAKs are available for individual purchase, this handy six-PAK of kits developed thus far costs a total of \$82 for members or \$110 for non-members. The SAA Bookcase describes them as "a new publications service in a flexible format which may include reports, manuals, forms, sound tapes, and other materials chosen for their usefulness." Although the materials included in each PAK differ, each offers a ready collection of diverse materials on a given topic, saving the user the time and effort otherwise required to gather the information.

Describing the format of the PAKs does not, however, explain their purpose. Since the exact

*Part II, a review of individual PAK kits, will appear in the next issue of Georgia Archive.

purpose of the PAKs is not stated, either in the PAKs themselves or in SAA's promotional information, it is difficult for a reviewer to judge them against the standard set by their creators. If the audience to whom they are directed is the practitioner with archival experience and education, then most fall short of the mark because they generally do not provide sufficient detail to make their purchase worthwhile. If, on the other hand, the audience is the beginning archivist in a small shop, then the PAKs risk confusing the novice who needs unambiguous direction, not the diversity of opinion among professionals on even basic issues such as appraisal, records management, and security. A tyro attempting to seek basic archival education through partial reliance on PAKs is like the bewildered undergraduate history student confronting for the first time the historiography of the causes of the Civil War. Overwhelmed with the range of opinion and analysis from the experts, the student turns helplessly to the survey text in hopes of finding certainty and clarity.

The value one ascribes to PAKs probably varies with the attitude one has on the future direction of archival education. Those who wish to develop a full-blown master's level degree in archival administration as the proper professional credential probably will view these PAKs as a band-aid approach when radical surgery is necessary. For them, only when archival positions can be advertised as requiring a master's in archival administration, from an SAA-accredited education program, will archivists truly have arrived professionally. For those at the other extreme, who see archival work as a craft to be learned at the master's knee in an apprentice program, the kits have limited utility because they lack the hands-on experience. For those struggling with the current realities that relegate archives to a relatively unimportant cultural fringe benefit of an affluent society, however, PAKs may be an important way of increasing on-the-job training and a way

of more effectively using the limited financial resources available for continuing professional education. For the price of a single round-trip coach fare from Chicago to San Francisco, an institution could buy two six-PAKs and the SAA Basic Manual Series.

PAKs might well serve as a point of departure for classroom discussions or for supplemental readings in regular, accredited courses in archival administration. They might also be used to disseminate information quickly on a rather specialized subject or topical issue. PAKs might, for example, deal with subjects too narrow to be treated in a special subject issue of American Archivist or subjects so topical that much of their relevance would be lost in the lengthy editorial process required for formal publication.

Unfortunately, some of the initial PAKs do not appear to meet either need. Appraisal and security, the topics of PAKs I and II, are hardy perennials and are important enough to have generated two widely-acclaimed contributions in the Basic Manual Series. Articles have appeared in the last five years on starting an archives, the contents of PAK III, including those for religious groups, businesses, and colleges and universities. More recent PAKs hold greater promise, however. The solid literature on archival processing costs, for instance, is exceedingly thin, and PAK IV dealing with that thorny issue is a practical contribution to efforts to measure and quantify archival services and procedures. PAK V explores the pros and cons of adopting a records management program as part of the archives on college and university campuses. While records management has also been a regular topic at annual meetings, its linkage with an established university archives is a relatively recent issue.

PAKs appear to be modeled to some extent on the successful SPEC kits published by the Office of

Management Studies of the Association of Research Libraries. Thus far, Systems and Procedures Exchange Center (SPEC) kits number seventy-five, date from 1973, and cost \$15 a kit, half that price for regular subscribers.* While the SPEC kits are restricted to printed material, they do provide a brief flyer introducing the topic and presenting the results of a survey of ARL libraries. A similar introductory overview for each PAK topic would be helpful, but if that proves too time-consuming to develop, then at least an annotated select bibliography should accompany each PAK.

Before too many more PAKs are produced, SAA's Education Committee may need to assess their success to date, measured not merely in terms of sales. Although the early PAKs have been a financial success, the PAK concept still needs review. Early sales may merely indicate that, properly marketed, anything sells. It is not clear that archivists know exactly what they are buying when they order a PAK. If the contents of the PAKs were more clearly listed in the advertisements, then the potential user could decide whether or not to make the purchase. Without knowing the contents, however, caveat emptor.

What is needed, at least, is feedback from users of PAKs. All SPEC kits include a brief one-page questionnaire asking users how they used the materials, how helpful the kit was for that purpose, and soliciting suggestions for future kits. While the review should not be so cumbersome that the chance for quick response to archivists' needs is unnecessarily delayed, some quality control and evaluation should be built into the process, if this form of

*The kit most relevant to archivists is the one on Special Collections, reviewed in Georgia Archive, 9 (Spring, 1981): 118-20.

What are the criteria, for instance, stated or implied, for determining the subjects and contents of PAKs? One possible criterion, other than those suggested above, might be that the PAK include a significant amount of material not routinely available to most archivists. Instead of taping sessions at annual meetings of the Society, thus perhaps reducing the attraction for members to attend the annual meeting and its sessions, sessions at other professional meetings should be covered. While most archivists can be expected to be aware of the activities and programs of the SAA, the only national professional organization for archivists, they might not be aware of programs of regional archival organizations and allied professional organizations. Any one of a half dozen regional archival organizations may well provide information of interest to a wider audience than those who could attend the regional meeting or who were even aware of its sessions.

This in fact suggests an ideal way for SAA and the regionals to cooperate to their mutual benefit. A small task force or subcommittee of the education committee could review the printed program of each regional in advance of its meeting to determine which sessions offer the greatest promise for use as a PAK. Those sessions could be taped by the regionals, with the approval of the session participants, and their papers and taped discussions forwarded to the committee for review of audio quality as well as intellectual content. A minimum number of PAKs could then be prepared with the profit, if any, divided between SAA and the regional. This would provide a service to all archivists and give the regionals some publicity and an incentive to produce top quality, relevant programs. It would also allow SAA to control the quality and not have to rely on its annual meetings to produce the PAKs as well as likely articles for the American Archivist.

One could easily expand this idea to allied professional organizations, including the American Association for State and Local History, the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, the Oral History Association, the American Library Association, and the Association of Records Managers and Administrators. A review of the annual programs of each of these organizations, especially those in history, reveals a number of sessions of possible interest to archivists, but ones they would not be likely to attend, especially if they chose to attend the annual meeting of the Society and of their regional archival association. Some of those might be taped as experiments, with SAA bearing the risk of loss, but reserving the right to profits.

If PAKs are to continue, and that question needs to be answered first, then the Society should take a more careful look at how the PAKs can be improved and systematized. The existing PAKs illustrate the need for some form of quality control. The sound quality of the oral tapes is very uneven. Those that generally succeed best are those involving a panel or seminar seated around a table within a short distance of the microphone. Sessions with questions from the audience caused obvious problems for small cassette recorders, and panelists and speakers or program chairs apparently were not instructed to repeat the audience questions. The auditor must therefore surmise from the panelist's response what the question must have been.

Some PAKs include both a tape recording of the formal part of the session and a copy of the papers presented; others provide only the papers and taped discussion. Where copies of papers are actually included in the PAK, it seems unnecessary to provide a tape of the papers being read. While the early tapes are accompanied by a brief list of who is speaking on each topic, some of the session tapes are not. A list of the questions asked and the names of the

major respondents from the panel would also be helpful to the user.

The sound quality of the tapes, however, is only a part of the larger problem of the quality of the PAKs. Even if these aids to learning are produced as quickly and inexpensively as possible, they still bear the implicit imprimatur of the Society. For that reason alone, better quality control is necessary. Just as some irrelevant discussions were apparently deleted from the tapes of the appraisal and security seminars, so, too, the discussions recorded from other sessions could have been tightened up. Not to do so dilutes the significance of those portions that are salient and deserve attention. It simply discourages the listener, who must listen to the entire tape in order to glean the major points of discussion. The papers that accompany PAKs should also be at least edited to eliminate misspellings, misinformation, and undocumented statements of questionable validity.

Volume does not compensate for a lack of quality archival literature. Cranking out more publications in unfinished form may make it more difficult for the incoming archivist to separate the wheat from the chaff. Because he or she may not have the knowledge or experience to evaluate the wide range of available publications--PAKs, manuals, monographs, journals--it will be more difficult to learn the necessary information in the best sequence. Some editing, therefore, either by the session chair or the appropriate SAA subcommittee should be required.

As this review demonstrates, it is easier to criticize what has been done than to produce an alternative satisfactory to everyone. An understanding of the evolution and development of the PAKs should, therefore, temper any criticism. Anyone who has worked on the necessarily all-volunteer Society committees, task forces, and professional affinity groups knows how slowly they move. Consensus is achieved only after frequent meetings, full discussions,

and adequate time. None of those characteristics, unfortunately, is necessarily efficient or fast. In an effort to respond to the Society's needs as quickly yet inexpensively as possible, the Chicago staff has developed these PAKs. Had any one of them, much less all of them, been required to pass muster with a large committee, geographically dispersed, the first PAK, no doubt, would still be on the drawing board. That the national office saw a need and stepped in to fill it is to be applauded.

An already heavily-taxed and thinly-staffed Society headquarters has managed to sandwich in this publications experiment among all the other duties of coordinating the affairs of a 2,300 member professional organization. In fact, because the PAKs are an experiment, it was impossible to estimate accurately the number of individual PAKs to duplicate, and the staff had to wait for a certain number of orders to accumulate before it became economical to reproduce the material. That problem can be controlled to a certain extent by limiting the availability of the PAKs or selling them only for a certain length of time. The staff has apparently considered this option and may soon discontinue sales of PAKs I and II. That also makes sense from another point of view as well. If the PAKs evolved to meet short-term needs not already adequately addressed by available publications, then full-scale publications on those topics should have a chance to catch up by the time the respective PAKs are discontinued. If PAKs address current or topical needs, then as the popularity of the topic declines, so too does the need for the PAK. It is to be hoped, however, that some copies of all PAKs (perhaps available for loan at cost) will continue to be accessible to archivists.

Future PAKs will soon appear, including one on "Records Management for Religious Archivists", based on a session at the 1980 annual meeting, the source for two of the six existing PAKs. Another PAK-- "Local Records Programs"--will apparently include

H. G. Jones's Local Government Records, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's Municipal Records Manual, and a local records manual from the California State Archives. Both topics undoubtedly deserve attention, but on what basis are they, and earlier PAKs, being selected? If the idea behind PAKs is to produce a useful product with a minimum of red tape, then the two-year experiment should be ready for review.

Such a review should not result in abolition of a valuable service, but in the enhancement of it. Allowing knowledgeable archivists to edit PAKs, encouraging regional organizations to develop sessions on topics that might make suitable PAKs, continually evaluating user reaction to PAKs, and soliciting suggestions from the Society's Professional Affinity Groups, need not add to the costs or time of production, but they may provide some needed quality controls. The experimentation and innovation evident in the PAK idea needs to be encouraged, but as with any experiment, the results need to be analyzed. Now is the time.