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Archival Stories

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Archival Stories

When my mother moved to a retirement home a few years ago I helped her decide what to save among the 17 cartons of family papers stored in the attic. It was the first time that she could clearly understand my professional expertise. She began telling her friends that every family should have an archivist. For me this story shows the importance of being able to explain the roles of archivists and the value of archives in society.

The health of our profession depends on public awareness and concern for archival issues. As Elsie Finch wrote in *Advocating Archives*, "To the extent that the public understands that archives exist to be used for reasons that affect their lives, property, civic well-being, and political influence, the public will be disposed to support and encourage archives."

Freeman's volume on advocacy grew out of the archives and society initiative led by SAA in the 1980s.

An archival needs assessment project had revealed troubling problems with funding and awareness of archives. As Bill Joyce concluded: "Lack of public understanding and regard leads to underfunding of historical records repositories and underutilization of their holdings."

The Task Force on Archives and Society, created in 1983 by President David Gracy and SAA Council, commissioned a study of resource allocators' perceptions of archives and archivists. In their report, *The Image of Archivists*, Sidney Levy and Albert Robles concluded: "To improve their situation, archivists need to . . . communicate greater freshness and distinctiveness in imagery"

and show their "relevance to modern life." We need to become unabashed promoters of archives.

In the past 20 years we have made important progress. However, we need to do much more to secure a better public understanding of the positive benefits and services that archives provide to society and to individuals. Without such understanding archives will not gain the funding and support necessary for us to serve the public good. In this context, advocacy becomes an essential educational tool.

Like charity, advocacy begins at home. In our local repositories we can expand outreach efforts to establish a more visible presence in our communities. Why are archives relevant, even essential, in an information society preoccupied with the future? How do we convince ourselves, our resource allocators, and the public that archives are important? Why do archives matter to

the average person? Why should anyone care about "old records" when they rely daily on electronic records and are obsessed with Internet-based access to information?

We need to answer these questions, both individually and, as a profession, collectively. In doing so, I suggest we return to the oldest form of communication: storytelling. Archivists need to be able to explain succinctly and convincingly what we do and why it is essential.

In teaching the Western Archives Institute for the past two years, I have asked participants to make a two-minute "elevator speech" about their archives. The scenario is to explain to the chief resource allocators of their institutions why archives programs are essential and how they contribute to their organizations' mission. If we could all do this effectively, we could use such statements to tell our story to funders, to donors, to researchers, and to anyone who should know why archives are essential in modern society.

Historian James McPherson wrote a fascinating essay a few years ago entitled "How Lincoln Won the War with Metaphors." McPherson argued that Lincoln's success as a communicator derived from his skill in using figurative language, rich in allegory, parable, fable, and metaphor. The stories he told made his goals clear and memorable. Lincoln stated that he tried to put his ideas "in language plain enough . . . for any boy I knew to comprehend." One observer said Lincoln's "lightest as well as his most powerful thought almost invariably took on the form of a figure of speech, which drove the point home, and clinched it, as few abstract reasoners are able to do."

If we as archivists can tell our own stories as clearly and memorably as Lincoln told his, we can overcome the public's lack of knowledge and understanding about archives. We can explain why archives are essential in modern society. This must start locally, with what we do in our own communities. But as we help our local constituencies understand the services and research opportunities available in our own archives, we can plant the seeds for greater understanding of how the broader profession contributes to protecting the rights of citizens and enriching our lives.

What archival stories can you tell? Please send me examples of how you explain the value of archives and/or metaphors you use. Collecting these stories will help us explain the power of archives. ❖

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