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## Reflections on the AED 20th Anniversary

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# Reflections on the AED 20th Anniversary

JON KUKLA

We were all younger then, and at thirty I guess I was younger and I certainly had done far less than most of the people gathered in a hotel room in St. Louis to establish the Association for Documentary Editing. I'm quite certain that I didn't say anything—for although I was strongly committed to documentary editing, the Southern Historical Association was meeting at the now-demolished hotel near Forest Park, and on the previous afternoon I had presented my first paper to a professional historical meeting. Linda Grant DePauw had commented, Merrill Peterson had chaired, and I was grateful not only to have survived but to have won a few words of praise. At the initial meeting of the ADE, I found myself once again in the company of important historians whose names I held in awe, as well as terribly impressive literary scholars talking of “CSE standards” and “vetting” and other wondrous things.

Two years earlier I had accepted responsibility for the then moribund historical publications program at the Virginia State Library, and immediately attended the NHPRC's Camp Edit at the University of South Carolina. My application had been outrageously candid: I wanted two weeks to think about documentary editing and what the State Library should do. It was a great group; about a third of us became active in the historical profession and in ADE. At Camp Edit, I heard Louis Harlan confirm one of my deep convictions, then and since: “documentary editing is one of the things that historians do.”

Bob Rutland, then at the Madison Papers, published ADE's first newsletters, and somehow I got hoodwinked into succeeding him as Director of Publications, with an admonition from Ray Smock that we needed to make the newsletter substantial. On the ADE Council, I was once again awed by the company of really impressive people: Arthur Link, Lester Cappon, and Ray. The ADE had, of course, precious little money. So, in addition to my full-time job, completing and defending my dissertation, the arrival of my first daughter, and the ongoing “sweat-equity” renovation of an old house—in 1979–80 I published four sixteen-page newsletters from my din-

ing room table. I buried the cost of typesetting with other State Library projects, but to keep costs down I got only one round of corrections before accepting a set of waxed galleys from which I pasted up each issue at home using transfer type for page numbers and last-minute stuff.

These circumstances led to perhaps the largest transposition in the history of recent documentary editing: I had traced the initials ADE for the front cover from a sixteenth-century alphabet, cut them out of black construction paper, and used them to create camera-ready copy for a journal with 6-by-9-inch covers. Then I learned that I could publish 8½-by-11-inch pages more cheaply, so I cut up the cover art, reworked it to the larger size—and, as everyone knows, pasted down the 240-point letters in the wrong sequence. There were no proofs, no blueline, and the autumn 1979 A E D Newsletter went to press and into the mail.<sup>1</sup> A paragraph of “Errata” appeared in each of the three subsequent issues I published—and in my report to the 1980 business meeting I expressed my gratitude for the opportunity to embarrass myself before such a distinguished company. Thankfully, while old ADE presidents become dinosaurs, old newsletter editors merely become extinct.

From the outset, the ADE was attractive to me as an interdisciplinary forum of scholars engaged in the demanding and essential work of textual editing. I'm especially grateful for all that we historians have learned from the literary scholars—even if that meant hearing a great deal about fashionably impenetrable Frenchmen or outbreaks of feverish deconstruction.

If I have reservations about the life of the ADE in the past twenty years, they reflect some disappointments in the general course of scholarship, particularly in the discipline of history. A narrow and humorless specialization is now rampant in a discipline that should embrace all human behavior since the beginning of time. Some have treated documentary editing too much like a separate craft, when in fact (unless Bishop Berkeley was right) *any* act of comprehension involves a human mind attempting to perceive, comprehend, and describe some kind of external physical evidence.

In practical terms, unlike our literary colleagues, we have allowed historical documentary editing to be pushed out of the curriculum where it belonged (I use the past

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tense deliberately: read the fine print in the catalogue of any long-established university referring to edited texts as Ph.D. dissertations) and pushed into adjunct offices and the realm of soft money and so-called public history. And—my familiar hobby horse—instead of making the case for historical documentary editing within the universities, in the states, and in the quasi-private institutions, we have too often focused our energies within the Washington beltway, squabbling over pieces of a federal pie that refuses to grow.

The most recent round illustrates my point: Do the math with me. Had the Archivist of the United States been successful in his scheme to abort nationally significant editorial projects and squander NHPRC's entire \$5 million pittance on electronic records projects in the state archives, each of the fifty states could expect, on average, a mere \$100,000 a year. Look beyond the beltway at those state and private institutions that used the past twenty or more years building the case and making friends at home for their own historical records and for their publication in scholarly editions.<sup>2</sup> As citizens—not as editors—we ought to make that case, just as we ought to insist that federal agencies budget for the costs of consigning their records to the archives so that we can shepherd our meager federal dollars into editorial programs whose truly *national* scope makes them less attractive to state or local government sponsorship (although perhaps *not* to the more cosmopolitan of our learned societies).

How? I've liked Ann Gordon ever since that formidable "Smithy" pulled out her camera in George Rogers's

backyard and committed a public act of nostalgia by taking a group photo of the 1976 Camp Edit participants. We ought to heed her report about where people do their research in these United States: They start in small, convenient libraries. We ought to think about the world's need for reliable information about the United States—and about our national self-interest in having citizens of other nations know who we are and what we stand for, warts and all. The nation should place documentary editions into libraries of every high school, college, and town in our country, as well as the provincial capitals of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It takes vision—and a whole bunch of village libraries.

## Notes

1. John Kaminski put the run of *Documentary Editing* on fiche and showed me that my blunder is visible with the naked eye!

2. As to proper funding sources, in governments as in corporations, electronic records are an issue with contemporary electronic records, only some arguable portion of which have permanent archival and *historic* value (just as with paper). When Congress fashioned the NHPRC out of the NHPC, the adjectives *national* and *historical* continue to define its proper role. One must also object to the diversion of NHPRC's resources from historical projects to records management. In bean-counting terms, as with paper records, the vast bulk of the records produced in corporate and government offices are nonarchival. Retention schedules and the other tools of well-developed records management programs offer substantial and measurable savings in day-to-day productivity and storage costs, savings against which the costs of any electronic records initiative should be charged.

## Annotation

*Annotation*, the quarterly newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, is available free of charge. *Annotation* provides the latest news about the commission's work and programs, and each issue explores a different theme or particular subject area that has received NHPRC support.

The December 1998 issue looks at documentation of this country's national wonders—from the early expeditions of Zebulon Pike and John C. Fremont, the Pathfinder, to the work of Emery Kolb and his brother, Ellsworth, two turn-of-the-century photographers.

Recent issues have highlighted the Commission's support of projects devoted to African American history and to America's artistic and architectural heritage. A forthcoming issue will focus on NHPRC-sponsored projects related to World War II.

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