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Why I Am an Archivist

Randall C. Jimerson Western Washington University
Western Washington University, randall.jimerson@wwu.edu

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Why I Am an Archivist

I knew that Uriah Parmelee had died long ago, but reading the report of his death still made me slump back in my chair. For two days in the spring of 1975 I had been sitting in the reference room at the Duke University Manuscripts Department, reading his Civil War letters. From Parmelee's enthusiasm as an 1861 Union volunteer, to his disgust with Lincoln's slowness to embrace emancipation as a war measure, I had followed his military career and political awakening. I admired his commitment to ending slavery and had begun to think of him as a kindred soul. When he wrote to his mother two weeks before Appomattox, he assured her that he was "in perfect health." But the next letter in the file, in a different handwriting, described Parmelee's death at the Battle of Five Forks

on April 1, 1865. With this unexpected news I felt as if I had lost a friend.

I soon regained my composure, and resumed the methodical ritual of taking notes. Uriah Parmelee became part of my doctoral dissertation on sectional consciousness during the Civil War. But in this moment I realized for the first time the power of archival documents to connect us to the past and to let us enter the world of our ancestors. The direct connection to the past that we can find in manuscripts and archives is even more

powerful than can be conveyed in history, literature, or film. Real people, often long since dead, created these documents or received them, and the experience changed them in ways great or small.

When I realized that some people got paid to work with such documents, I was hooked. Back in Ann Arbor to write my dissertation, I applied to be a graduate assistant at the Bentley Historical Library. In the first collection I processed, the papers of an obscure 19th century farmer in Michigan, I discovered a letter from a former slave in Virginia. I soon took an NHPRC-funded position processing temperance and prohibition papers, including the records of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. As the first person to examine these records in more than 60 years, I discovered a rich correspondence between Frances Willard of the WCTU and an array of national reformers, including Susan B. Anthony—now available for public research.

When the grant project ended, I obtained an assistant archivist position at Yale University. While processing the Bingham family papers I met two of the donors, whose father, Hiram Bingham III, had

discovered the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu in Peru before becoming a U.S. Senator. The family papers began with Hiram Bingham I, the first missionary to Hawaii in 1820, and his son Hiram II, the first missionary to the Gilbert Islands. This direct link to the archival past made the often tedious processing of manuscripts vibrant with real people and connected these historical figures to people I knew personally.

As the first archivist hired at the University of Connecticut, I spent 15 years meeting people in all walks of life, from the President of the University to the truck drivers who transported archival collections, from the head of the Connecticut AFL-CIO to Members of Congress, from whom I was soliciting archival collections. I was able to fill gaps in the archival record by acquiring labor union records, papers of political activists, and records of such organizations as the Prince Hall Masons, an early black fraternal group.

One of the most memorable experiences I had, however, came when a 65-year-old woman phoned with a reference request. She needed proof of her age in order to begin collecting Social Security. The City of Hartford voter registration records, which we had acquired when the state retention requirement expired, provided the needed proof of her birth date. Because of our archival records she could obtain her retirement checks. Similar requests came several times a year. I thus learned that archives are more than repositories of historical resources. They also protect the rights and benefits of all citizens—even the poorest and most needy.

When anyone asks me why I am an archivist, these are the stories I want to tell. Sometimes I settle for the short-hand of saying that I want to help preserve the past so we will know our social heritage. Sometimes I refer to the rights of citizens, or the necessity of keeping public officials accountable for their actions. But underlying these general platitudes are the stories from my own experience.

My father dedicated his life to public service—as a prison chaplain in Virginia, a civil rights activist in Alabama, a community welfare director in Elmira, New York, and co-director of a peace center in Roanoke, Virginia. After putting aside a career in architecture to raise five children, my mother later co-directed the Roanoke peace center and then worked on Capitol Hill as a Congressional liaison for the Church of the Brethren. One of my sisters served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras before developing AIDS education programs in developing countries; my other sister has been a social worker helping troubled teens, halfway house

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President's Message

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residents, and school children in Haiti. One brother is an artist and mental health worker who just completed a graduate program in counseling services; and my other brother is a social worker who developed an award-winning service program for teenage fathers.

Coming from such a family, I have often felt that I had taken a less service-oriented career path, that I was not doing enough to help other people. But I feel better about my career choices when I reflect on the experiences I have had—the people who received retirement benefits because of my work as an archivist, those who discovered links to their family's past, the researchers who understand more clearly how their home communities developed, and the public officials who may think twice before violating the public trust. As an archival educator for nearly 25 years, I have also had the privilege of seeing other people join this professional community, develop their talents and abilities, and contribute to their own institutions and constituencies.

I am an archivist because I can thus contribute to a richer human experience of understanding and compassion. I can help to protect the rights of citizens, and to hold public figures in government and business accountable for their actions. I can provide resources for people to examine the past, to comprehend the present, and to prepare for a better future. This is the essence of our common humanity.

In addition to this, I have remained an archivist for three decades because I have become part of a larger professional community. Apart from my family and a few college friends, I have known many of my fellow archivists longer than anyone else. I rely on these friends for advice and encouragement. But most of all, when I want to share joys and triumphs or recall shared experiences, I have colleagues on whom I can always depend. Without this professional network, represented most clearly for me by SAA but also by regional and state associations of archivists, my career as an archivist would miss an important component. As members of SAA, we share a powerful bond—a commitment to public service, a belief in the power of truth and authentic records, and a joy in sharing these gifts with others. That is why I am an archivist. ❖

From the Archivist of the United States

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of America's essential "records that defy the tooth of time."

This Spring we are celebrating, with appropriate programs on NARA's past, present, and future, the 20th anniversary of its status as an independent agency. Led by former Archivist Bob Warner, a dedicated band of NARA staff members; historians, archivists, genealogists, and NARA users; the media; and finally key players in Congress restored NARA's independence effective April 1, 1985.

Today NARA has a state-of-the-art building in College

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Park, MD, as well as new and improved facilities across the country. The majestic National Archives Building in downtown Washington, DC, has been remodeled and the National Archives Experience provides a greater public awareness and offers visitors a truly unique glimpse into the records of our nation. The Electronic Records Archives is addressing previously intractable electronic records issues and has created for NARA a pioneering role in this far-from-resolved realm.

A passion for working on archives or records management is obviously essential to performing NARA's mission successfully. I know that many NARA employees share that passion, as do our professional colleagues in SAA and other archival organizations. The wellsprings of motivation in each of us are personal and complex, ranging from core values (and core documents) to traditions, moral and religious beliefs, and a concrete work ethic. Additionally, we at the National Archives and Records Administration have as our professional and personal template not only the Charters of Freedom but the entire governmental documentary heritage (literally) at our fingertips. What an awesome privilege it is to care for these records and to help ensure access to them.

As one of NARA's newest employees, I have asked myself every day since first coming to work: What better opportunity than at NARA to do something great in proximity to the heritage and values for which so many Americans, whether great figures or ordinary folk, have fought over the more than two centuries of our national lifespan? ❖