Managing Change and Chance: Collecting Policies in Social History Archives

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Abstract: The traditional methods for developing collecting policies do not work well in social history archives. Because social history archives typically have less than complete knowledge of the records available in their collecting universe, coherent guidance, flexibility, and a means for ongoing reassessment become equally important requirements of an effective collecting policy. This paper is a description of the process employed by the Research Library of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies to develop a viable collecting policy and to implement an active collecting program. The process entails a cyclical approach to policy development and a careful consideration of collecting strategies.

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COLLECTING POLICIES REPRESENT a peculiar problem for archives. The literature attests to a recognition of the importance of defined, articulated collecting policies and, at the same time, to a realization that many archives have not developed effective collecting policies.[1] This paper attempts to address problems that collecting policies present for social history archives and to suggest alternatives to the traditional methods of formulating them.

As used in archival literature, a collecting policy is an *a priori* statement of specific, long-term collecting goals and requires an attendant commitment of the organization's resources to achieve the goals.[2] This definition assumes that those who create collecting policies live in a stable world where the records potentially available within their collecting universe are known and the archive's ability to acquire a portion of those records is predictable.

These two assumptions of knowledge and predictability hold true for some repositories. Established institutional archives, for example, usually have extensive knowledge of the records within their collecting universe, and they can predict annual accession rates through retention schedules. Policy statements, like other planning instruments, will require periodic review and reassessment, but they can be expected to provide reliable medium-to-long-term criteria for allocating resources and making appraisal decisions.

Archivists in manuscript repositories, however, typically live in a relative instead of a Newtonian world. Knowledge of the records in their collecting universe is seldom complete, and there is a reciprocal relationship between collecting strategies and collecting policies. As collecting strategies are implemented, the knowledge gained through field work may require revisions in policy and even a redefinition of the collecting universe. Social history repositories represent the opposite end of the knowledge/predictability scale from institutional archives. They typically confront a vast universe of potential documentation—a universe in which, at least initially, records are unidentified, sources are unknown, and the repository's ability to predict what records it may be able to acquire is almost nonexistent.

The ultimate goal of an effective collecting program is to develop a collection which represents a "microcosm of a particular universe."[3] Archives which are confronted with an unknown universe from which to collect must deal with two basic procedural issues in order to begin to develop a coherent, well-focused collecting program: (1) defining initial collecting parameters and (2) determining which of various collecting strategies are best suited to organizational goals and available resources. These issues are examined in the following pages. Throughout, the experience of the Research Library of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies is used to describe and illustrate efforts to address the issues and to develop a representative collection.

The Balch Institute was created in 1971 by the Orphan's Court of Philadelphia, acting on behalf of trusts established by the Balch family a half-century earlier. The court mandate was to establish a non-profit library, museum, and educa-

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[1]Faye Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 31; Linda J. Henry, "Collecting Policies of Special-Subject Repositories," Ibid. 43 (Winter 1980): 63.

[2]Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies," 36.

[3]Virginia R. Stewart and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, "The Constituencies of Urban Archives: Donors, Users and Institutions," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 13 (October 1977): 62.

tional program which would document and interpret the principles of liberty, independence, and freedom with emphasis upon the contribution of ethnic and minority groups. The institute's board of trustees and administration have interpreted this mandate as prescriptive as well as enabling: the mission of the institute library is to document all immigrant and ethnic groups in America.

Most of the Balch Institute Library's holdings were acquired during the early- and mid-1970s. They consist of approximately fifty thousand volumes, twelve hundred linear feet of manuscripts, five thousand reels of microfilm, and smaller but significant holdings of photographs, other graphics, audio recordings, and ephemera. The collection represents a rich but disparate body of material on more than seventy different ethnic groups. Geographically, the print holdings cover the U.S.; manuscript collections represent primarily the mid-Atlantic region.

In 1981 and 1982, after the library had devoted several years to organizing and establishing intellectual control over existing holdings, the author and other staff members began to consider plans for reimplementing an active archival collecting program. The existing archival holdings were broad but lacked depth and coherence, and in the proposed collecting program the staff wanted to begin to build an archival collection which would provide a quantity of comparable information sufficient to support research. Available resources included an experienced professional staff of five archivists and librarians and a modern physical plant with environmental controls and extensive expansion room. Although active field work would require outside funds for additional personnel, existing staff could insure that new ac-

quisitions would be processed and made available for research.

In formulating plans for collecting, the staff realized that they were not yet prepared to establish long-term policies or goals. Because of the breadth of the libraries mission, lack of knowledge of the records potentially available in the collecting universe, and the absence of a coherent organizing theme within the existing holdings, the staff began to think in terms of successive collecting cycles instead of a monolithic collecting program based on an *a priori* collecting policy. The collecting program would evolve through cycles of exploration, acquisition, and assessment. Both a growing knowledge of the collecting universe and the materials acquired would allow for progressively more focused and longer-term decisions about collecting policy over time.

This cyclical approach to collecting does not decrease the importance of defined collecting policies. Articulated policy statements are an essential part of the planning process for each cycle. The cyclical approach, however, places policy statements more clearly in the context of means of achieving goals rather than ends in themselves. It also offers two other benefits. First, by structuring policy development as an ongoing process, it allows the archives to better respond to chance and opportunity, which are inevitable and important factors in any collecting program. Second, it emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between collecting policies and specific collecting strategies. As a result, it requires a careful analysis of available strategies.

Collecting policies are usually based on one or more of three delimiters: subject area, time period, and geographic area.[4] The library's general subject area, immigration and ethnic life, was determined

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⁴Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies," 32.

by the institute's mission statment. In order to develop meaningful goals for the first collecting cycle, it was necessary to establish a policy statement broad enough to encourage exploration and provide for opportunity, while giving guidance and coherence. Further refining subject coverage (e.g., limiting collecting to the records of the ethnic press or fraternal benefit societies) required more knowledge than the staff had of the records potentially available in the collecting universe. Accordingly, they decided to define collecting by geographic area and time period. For the time being, active archival collecting would be limited to eastern Pennsylvania. (The collecting of printed materials remained national in scope.) The time frame would be 1789 to the present. This time period, while very broad, has special meaning in Pennsylvania which had an enduring and prolific German press throughout the colonial period. Two other qualifiers related to specific groups: blacks and American Indians. Because of existing strong collections, both local and national, the staff decided to collect materials on blacks only after 1865 and on American Indians only as they related to the urban movement and the ethnic revival beginning in the 1960s.

Having refined the collecting policy to this extent, they next considered collecting strategies which would support the goal of developing a unified collection. As part of the planning process, they identified five collecting models.[5] The first of these five, the research model, represents the genesis of many important archival collections.[6] The research model was first applied in ethnic history by Professors Timothy Smith and Rudolph Vecoli of the University of Minnesota in the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s. Smith and Vecoli obtained grant funds and recruited graduate students who were researching specific ethnic groups. In tracing patterns of immigration across this country and back to Europe, they and their students collected the core of the present Immigration History Research Center Collection.[7]

The second model, developing a network of supporters from within the archives' collecting universe, has been the mainstay of traditional, single-group ethnic repositories.[8] By identifying and establishing trust with ethnic leaders and developing a constituency within the ethnic community, the repository becomes the natural destination of archival materials from within the community.

The third model, targeting of records, is closely related to networking and is the surest way of ensuring mutually supportive documentation. It is also one of the commonest approaches to collecting. Targeting consists of focusing collecting efforts on specific papers or records which relate directly to collections already in the archives.[9]

The fourth model, conducting regional

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[5] A sixth model, purchasing collections, was not considered. The Balch Institute Library, like many social history repositories, does not purchase archival materials.

[6] F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 7–8.

[7] Rudolph J. Vecoli, "'Diamonds in Your Own Backyard': Developing Documentation on European Immigrants to North America," *Ethnic Forum* 1 (September 1981): 2–16.

[8] Networking is a commonly used, common sense approach to collecting. For descriptions of the networking concept, see Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscript Library* (New York and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1966), pp. 30–31, 115; Edward C. Kemp, *Manuscript Solicitation for Libraries, Special Collections, Museums, and Archives* (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1978), pp. 39–40; Mary Lynn McCree, "Good Sense and Good Judgement: Defining Collections and Collecting," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 11 (January 1975): 33.

[9] Kenneth W. Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care, and Use* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), pp. 63–65; Kemp, *Manuscript Solicitation*, p. 38. Duckett describes this approach as the "'snowball' theory of collecting."

surveys, was first applied in the field of ethnic and immigration history by Frank Zabrosky of the Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh, in the late 1970s. Zabrosky and his colleagues conducted a systematic, two-year project to survey and collect materials on immigration and ethnic life in the ten-county area surrounding Pittsburgh.[10]

The fifth model, creating documentation, has usually consisted of oral history interviews. However, it can include photographs and other kinds of documentation as well.[11]

In selecting from among these five models, the staff considered three major criteria. First, they wanted to use the collecting strategy or group of collecting strategies which would provide a better knowledge of the universe and create the basis for a long-term collecting program. Second, they wanted to achieve initial results in terms of acquisitions quickly. Third, since they did not have the resources to hire a field worker, they had to choose either strategies which could be implemented by existing staff or strategies for which they could obtain outside funding. With these criteria in mind, they could see strengths and weaknesses in each of the five models.

The research model promises subject expertise in history and can provide an opportunity to develop in-depth collections for specific ethnic groups. This model, however, presents a general problem of focus and control. Collections developed by researchers pursuing their own topics represent, first and foremost, the interests of the researcher, and those interests may or may not coincide with the collecting focus of the archives.[12] Where the interests do not overlap, prob-

lems of appraisal develop which may be serious enough to challenge or even derail the organization's collecting policy. The model also presented two specific problems for the Balch Library: administration and financing. The Balch Institute is not affiliated with a university, and establishing an integrated, unified program with independent research grants would be difficult. Obtaining the discretionary funds to support research on a variety of different ethnic groups from either public or private sources seemed unlikely.

The second model, networking, shares with the research model the problems of control and focus. Again, control over collecting is transferred to some extent to individuals outside of the archives who may or may not share the same conceptual framework as the organization's staff.[13] In addition, avoiding damage to the personal relationships on which the model depends can become as important as maintaining a coherent collecting policy. As a result the archivist may end up accepting materials of marginal value or over-committing the organization in order to avoid hurt feelings. Developing and cultivating networks is also a slow and time-consuming process. Doing so on a national or regional level is expensive, and may well be impossible to maintain over time. Despite these two very real problems, developing relationships of trust and support among ethnic leaders and a constituency within ethnic communities is essential to ethnic repositories.

The third model, targeting, is similar to networking in both strengths and weaknesses. Targeting offers the opportunity to build on existing strengths, but it, too,

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[10]Frank A. Zabrosky, "Final Report, 'The Survey and Acquisition of Source Materials on Immigrant and Ethnic Life In Southwestern Pennsylvania'," (NEH project final report, 21 November 1979).

[11]Ham, "Archival Edge," 9.

[12]Ibid., 8.

[13]Bordin and Warner, Modern Manuscript Library, 30.

requires time to produce results. Targeting presented an additional problem for the Balch Library. Some of the major collections were from areas outside of eastern Pennsylvania where the staff had decided to concentrate active collecting during this cycle of collection development.

The fourth model, the survey and accessioning project, was in many respects especially attractive. It offered the opportunity to concentrate on a given geographic area and to collect materials on different ethnic groups responding to the same or similar environmental, social, and economic forces. If successful, a survey and accessioning project would permit the development of an in-depth collection, one that would support comparative and cross-cultural research on different ethnic groups. It also provided the opportunity to develop long-term relationships with ethnic communities in the area being surveyed. The drawbacks were equally significant. The survey of out-of-repository materials is always uncertain. Another drawback was money. A survey and accessioning project, especially one conducted outside of the Philadelphia area, would be costly and would have to depend on outside funding.

The fifth model, creating documentation, despite its obvious attractions, appeared to be the one most fraught with pitfalls. Oral history interviews are expensive, and it is difficult to obtain outside funding for them. In addition, the general applicability of oral history interviews in social history remains open to question.[14] Other types of created documentation, however, especially

photographs, offered greater promise. The institute museum was preparing its first photo-documentary exhibit and had plans for others in the future.

Having considered the strengths and weaknesses of each of the collecting models, the staff decided that the primary emphasis during the first cycle of collection development would be on conducting a regional survey and accessioning project. This decision was made for several reasons, based on the goals for the cycle. The survey and accessioning model, more than most other collecting strategies, allows the archives to control and direct field work and collecting. This was of special importance because of the breadth of the collecting universe; a strategy that required the library to share or surrender control over collecting to individuals outside of the library would reduce the chance of maintaining a coherent focus. In addition, the survey and accessioning model would allow the staff to explore the collecting universe and to identify potentially available records, thus providing needed information for future collecting cycles. It would also allow the staff to begin active collecting immediately. Finally, there was a realistic chance of obtaining outside funding for a survey and accessioning project.

After deciding on a collecting strategy, the staff chose the area to be surveyed. The anthracite coal region, a 480 square-mile area in northeastern Pennsylvania, was an obvious choice. The coal companies in the region had recruited immigrant workers through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating a population that one observer has de-

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[14]Henry, "Collecting Policies," 59; Keijo Virtanen, "The Use of Oral Testimony in the Study of Migration History," (Paper delivered at the International Symposium on Emigration from Northern, Central, and Southern Europe: Theoretical and Methodological Principles of Research, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, 9 November 1981), pp. 8–9.

scribed as a "paradigm of American immigration."[15] Further, for a variety of reasons, ethnic group identification has remained a strong and enduring factor in the region. Equally important, contacts with local historical societies, other cultural organizations, and ethnic leaders convinced the staff that they could depend on the cooperation of area institutions and the support of the community.

To be viable, a survey and accessioning project in the anthracite region required the cooperation of local historical and cultural organizations for two reasons. The first reason is practical and immediate. The Balch Library did not have the resources or contacts to conduct an active, large-scale field program on its own, especially one centered more than one hundred and thirty miles from Philadelphia. The second reason for cooperation is equally practical but responds to the changing nature of collecting primary sources in ethnic and immigration history. Within the past fifteen years the popularity of ethnic studies has awakened the interest of local repositories across the country. Today few archivists are content to sit by and watch an outside repository collect ethnic materials from their geographic area. Ethnic repositories which claim a regional or national mandate must develop mechanisms for cooperation and for sharing the materials that they collect. In the proposed project the staff depended primarily on selective microfilming but also considered other means of sharing collections with local repositories, including identifying their special collecting interests and referring contacts to them.

In 1983 the National Endowment for the Humanities funded a two-year survey and accessioning project in the anthracite

region, and field work got underway at the end of the year. As the staff developed the anthracite region proposal, they were also selecting among the other models to determine which they could implement in the Philadelphia area with existing staff and financial resources. Implementing the network model locally was a high priority, and they began to develop and expand their contacts within Philadelphia's ethnic communities through cooperation of a different kind —cooperation among the departments within the institute.

The institute as a whole was in the early stages of a capital campaign, and the museum was attempting to acquire artifacts for a major exhibit on immigration through the port of Philadelphia; at the same time the library was preparing to begin an active collecting program. Working together, they developed a public relations program around the theme of "the Search"—the search for archival and library materials and museum artifacts. The program emphasized the services that the institute provides to local ethnic communities in documenting and preserving their past. The Search, repeated in talks to groups and in press releases and other contacts with the media, received fairly wide local coverage. The library also publicized its collections and collecting program through the museum's exhibits.

Establishing effective networks in the ethnic community depends, of course, upon personal contact, but media coverage creates interest within the community and provides an entree to organizations and individuals. Publicity alone has attracted some donations of personal papers, including two valuable collections of immigrant letters. The public relations program has had two

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[15]Michael A. Barendse, "Slavic Immigrants in the Pennsylvania Anthracite Fields, 1880–1902: A Study of the Contrast Between Social Expectations and Immigrant Behavior" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ball State University, 1976), p. 7.

other benefits as well. It has been carried out at relatively little cost to the library in terms of staff time or resources, and it has promoted coordination of activities among the departments within the institute.

In addition to surveying and networking, the library has also begun to implement two other collecting models, targeting and creating documentation, on a limited and experimental basis. Targeting has thus far been limited to a few preliminary contacts, but it will become an increasingly important strategy during subsequent cycles of exploration and acquisition. Creating documentation, too, is in its infancy, although by working together with the institute's museum, the staff hopes that commissioning and collecting documentary photographs will eventually represent a significant means of collection development.

In 1986, after the anthracite region survey and accessioning project is completed, the staff will reassess the collecting policy and collecting program and evaluate the progress made toward the goals for the cycle. They will also address specific concerns that have arisen as a result of either field work or changes in research use of the collection. Concerns to be addressed include the applicability and effectiveness of the collecting strategies that they have implemented, the extent to which they have accomplished the primary goal for the cycle (i.e., acquiring a relatively comprehensive overview of the records potentially available within the collecting universe), and their readiness to implement a new cycle with new goals and objectives. A policy question that has arisen thus far

during the cycle is whether the library should selectively expand the geographic coverage in order to target papers and records outside of eastern Pennsylvania that directly support acquired collections. This question and other aspects of the collecting policy will be reviewed and examined as part of the reassessment.

The collecting program that the Research Library of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies has implemented is specific to its mission and its organizational goals and resources. The process that the library has employed in developing an initial collecting policy and in selecting collecting strategies, however, has broader application for social history archives and, perhaps, other manuscript collections as well. A defined collecting policy is essential to coherent collecting, but, as Zabrosky has observed, "the symmetry and logic of grand collecting designs loose their luster when implemented in the field."[16] Because social history archives typically have less than complete knowledge of the records available in the universe from which they collect, coherent guidance, flexibility, and a means for ongoing reassessment become equally important requirements of an effective collecting policy. The cyclical approach to developing a collecting policy, which is described in this paper, allows the organization to respond to internal and external forces and to its developing knowledge of the collecting universe. In order to be effective, a cyclical approach requires a critical consideration of available collecting strategies. Identifying and analyzing potential strategies provides the organization with the means to make informed policy and program decisions and to respond appropriately to change.

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[16]Frank A. Zabrosky, "Collection Strategies for Acquiring Fraternal Organization Records at Local and National Levels" (Paper delivered at the Archivist's Conference [on Fraternal Organization Records], Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, 19–20 April 1979), p. 7.