Conservation: What We Should Do Until the Conservator and the Twenty-First Century Arrive

Let me begin parenthetically by saying that the keynote speaker—at least in my mind—has both the greatest of handicaps and advantages before him or her. In a conference where a large number of speakers are present, like this one, she/he must avoid being specific about anything, unless she/he duplicates what others plan to say. My remarks, then, must be of the most general nature. And the danger from too broad a generality is that the comments may not be direct enough to be valuable. On the other hand, the advantage that I see is an opportunity to present a broad overview of a complex and challenging subject that has filled my professional life with some of its greatest difficulties and greatest joys.

The Challenge to Conservation in Difficult Times

To paraphrase Dickens, these are the best and the worst of times. We certainly are confronted by a serious economic situation nationally and internationally, and the support libraries enjoyed only a few years ago (relatively speaking) is diminishing. With the exception of a few fortunate institutions, largely in the Sun Belt, funds for staffing, new services and programs, and acquisitions are diminishing. Americans are historically optimistic, I believe, and we all look to things getting better. Perhaps they will, but many of us believe that they will get worse before that occurs. On the other hand, what I believe to be great advances and opportunities are taking place in preservation now and in the future. Conservation must be put in a broad perspective.

I will say that the advent of a heightened preservation awareness, coupled to the development of improved managerial systems to administer
programs, plus the revolutionary impact of technology generally on libraries, creates the greatest of ironies. Our resources are smaller, and with all the existing programs libraries are struggling to manage we must—if we are to meet our professional responsibilities—add another expensive program, that of conservation. And, while we attempt to mount this program, we must be increasingly conscious that the emerging information delivery and storage technology will increasingly make printed records obsolete. This is to say, and I will speak to this question later on, that we must not only attempt to develop preservation programs, but that we must also develop stronger critical facilities about what we intend to save, and how we intend to go about it. We have more choices today than we had five years ago, and the number of choices will increase as we move toward the next century.

Preservation as a Library-Wide Concern

One of the most important views I can impart to you is that preservation is a library-wide concern, and that librarians must be the persons who will develop preservation programs. I will say that in my experience, in most libraries, it is the rare book and special collections staff who initially take the leadership of preservation, and who work harder with their administrations to develop programs, competing as they do with other library programs and services. It is, of course, natural for them to do so. They are, by definition, protectors of those materials deemed to be more valuable than those in the general collections. But it has been my observation that since most libraries do not consider their special collections programs to be in the mainstream of their programs, they are not always successful in competing for additional funds. Also, it has been my experience that the needs of special collections librarians (real or imagined) may be treated by general administrators as esoteric, elitist, even precious. The result for an emerging preservation program is that it may take a long time in gaining support. I realize in saying this that this will not parallel the experience in some institutions, but that it has been the experience in many. (But, in fairness, let me also say that special collections librarians often do not see the need for preservation programs in the general collections.) They certainly do so, and if they do work to educate the library staff throughout the library, they will have created a successful strategy that builds a groundswell that will convince administrators of the need for such a program.
Preservation as the Responsibility of the Librarian

My earlier point, the second one, is that librarians must take the responsibility for educating themselves about conservation. They must educate themselves to the point that they can design and implement their own programs. To wait for the conservator, unless one works in an institution blessed with enormous resources and good fortune, is like waiting for Godot, although it is hoped, with a more positive long-term outcome. The reason we must take this responsibility is because we currently lack the corps of conservators we need. In my view, the preservation profession is at the same stage of development that librarianship was in during the last two decades of the nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth century. With an exponential rate of change characteristic of the last years of this century, we may not expect to wait as long for the preservation profession to develop as we did for the library profession. At this time, conservation does not generally have an accepted curriculum. In a society which has developed highly structured educational paths for careers of all kinds from neurosurgeon to cosmetologist, no clearly defined way yet exists in preservation in which to seek such a career. There are some most hopeful and promising developments taking place right now, but the apprenticeship and internship system which has been the prevailing means of educating conservators is still the rule rather than the exception. I do not mean to suggest that years of hands-on experience still will not be necessary for the conservator, any more than years of experience do not improve the practice of any profession.

But for the time being, there is a shortage of professionals in the preservation world, and while it may be alleviated within the next ten to twenty years, librarians will have to, as I said earlier, educate themselves and develop programs to meet their needs. Actually, I am comfortable about that, because I believe it parallels the way in which librarians have learned to use another technology—automation. Within the past twenty years we have seen librarians educate themselves to the point that, while they were not electrical engineers or computer programmers, they understood the basic principles of data processing and articulated their needs to the computer professionals who designed the systems. Many libraries now have automation officers on their staffs who, in most cases, are librarians with data processing expertise. Within the next few years, we will have preservation officers—again librarians—with the necessary training.

The New Technology and Preservation

The emerging technology—which at this time librarians are not successfully assimilating or interpreting in my view—offers, in the view of
some, the prospect of a paperless society. While I personally do not believe that Gutenberg is dead, or that paper will become unknown in the next century, we should try hard to grasp the fact that the new technology adds a complex and challenging factor to preservation. Electronic publishing, alternative forms of electronic transmission (using fiber optics and satellites), new forms of micropublishing (including laser disc with astonishing image storage capacity), mean that we must exercise a greater selectivity and discrimination in decision making. I believe that significant changes in the basic ways in which information is stored and made accessible will change. I do not believe that the library of printed material will go away, but that it may be initially augmented, and then, perhaps, largely supplanted by new forms. We must also recognize that the new means of storing information are unlikely (from the very dim vantage point of today) to retrospectively convert all existing printed matter into the new electronic formats.

**Preservation in the Context of Collection Development**

This leads to the role of the librarian in collection development, of which preservation is a part. My need here, however, is to point out that preservation is a part of the decision-making that librarians are qualified to make (in consort with the scholarly community, to be sure), that deal with the question which is the most basic one: What do we need to keep as objects for their own intrinsic value as objects; and what intellectual content do we need to preserve? In both cases, what means do we use to make our decisions? There are a number of alternatives in both cases, and their number will increase over the next two decades.

You will hear at this conference from a number of speakers who will give you a clear idea of what kinds of choices one has in preservation. Again, I must remind you that they represent parts of the broad continuum of options which exist in a collection development program, which is another way of saying collection management. George Cunha, one of the nation's outspoken champions of conservation has been saying for years that librarians must create and sustain conservation programs and that conservation is, after all, management.

**Costs and Implications**

A fact of preservation is that it is expensive, whether one is looking at it from a perspective of binding, establishing environmental controls, providing optimum housing conditions, simple repairs, mass deacidification, microform applications, etc. Given that, and the state of resources now or in the immediate future, I will draw several conclusions. The first is
that we must exercise the greatest critical judgment in determining in what form we will preserve materials or their intellectual content; and second, that the impulse for cooperation promises enormous short- and long-term benefits. The library profession has a good track record of cooperation almost from the beginning of its development one hundred years ago with its collective programs such as interlibrary loan and now online systems. Given a shortage of professional conservators, short funding, and increased knowledge about the rarity of materials which online bibliographic systems should offer, we can set about to share resources.

Collective Action

The thrust toward cooperative action in preservation is, I believe, its most dynamic characteristic at this time. That impulse to join together has taken shape to meet one of the most pressing goals in preservation today—that of providing education. You will hear considerably more on this subject in the coming days. At this time, let me say only that an explosion of information in preservation is taking place today, and one of the greatest needs we have is for selective, high quality information. To meet that need, a number of institutions and agencies are currently examining the concept of information clearinghouses, as you will hear. I also believe that another collective proposal that ultimately will find support is the regional treatment center. You will hear more of that also as this program continues.

I want to stress that I believe preservation to be the greatest challenge the library and archival professions will face in the next decades. The reason I believe that is the continuing need for good information. Also, preservation is not likely to be supported by commercial applications of technological developments as library automation was bouyed along by computer technology. The potential for enormous technological application, including increased interest from the private sector, is there, but I think it unlikely that the kind of off-the-shelf systems one encounters now will be available soon. This is certainly not to say that the commercial sector does not have (and in some cases has not had), the greatest of interest in preservation. We have seen a large number of new products appear recently, and I feel quite safe in assuring you that there will be more. And, like many of the new automation products, they will promise much. They will often deliver what they promise, but occasionally will not do so. My advice is to look at new products of all kinds with the same caution you should exercise in looking at other products in our profession.
Organizing for Preservation

I would like now to make some very specific suggestions of ways in which you can begin immediately to set up a preservation program in your institution, or to strengthen the program you have now. You will find these suggestions in a large number of places in the literature, and I will try to pull them together for you here. In my experience they represent a way of addressing some basic needs. All but the smallest of libraries can create a preservation committee, or at least charge an individual with developing expertise and responsibility in that area.

Briefly stated, these committee charges, or responsibilities are as follows: (1) examine the library's physical environment, and make recommendations for enhancing environmental factors, including an effective monitoring system; (2) prepare a disaster plan for the library; (3) examine current bindery, handling, processing and repair practices, making recommendations to bring these procedures into conformity with accepted conservation practices; (4) explore avenues which will provide the library with access to professional conservation expertise and facilities; (5) explore and recommend what in-house physical repair and treatment can be undertaken for providing better housing, and minor repair of materials; (6) develop a collection development approach for dealing with materials, developing systematic options for storing and accessing materials; (7) identify possible sources of funding for conservation programs, including national, regional state and local sources; (8) establish an in-house clearinghouse of preservation information for the use of staff; and (9) explore the feasibility of joining cooperative conservation efforts at local, regional and national levels. (These charge responsibilities are outlined in my article appearing in the May 15, 1979 issue of Library Journal entitled "Organizing for Conservation.")

In closing, I hope that I have given that broader perspective which I believe conservation badly needs at this point in its development—that it is a library- and profession-wide concern, and that we have many more choices before us than simply how to repair and preserve a valued physical object. We also must face the fact that the emerging information revolution on how information is disseminated and stored will have a significant impact on decision-making in libraries, only a small part of which will include actual physical preservation concerns. Librarians are intelligent and resourceful people, and the profession is recognizing (perhaps belatedly) that higher managerial skills are needed if we are to accomplish our historic mission—that of housing and delivering information to our patrons.
DISCUSSION

Charles H. Davis (Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): One thing I heard you say pleased me very much. While I'm not a specialist in preserving and conserving things, I am a specialist in automation and think it's a point worth making that we have to conserve things regardless of the medium. I am thinking about magnetic tapes, video discs and the rest of it. Gutenberg, himself, may be dead but the spirit lives on and we'll also have paper for some time I think.

Robert H. Patterson: That's very true.

Louis Jordan (University of Notre Dame Libraries, South Bend, Indiana): What should be the percentage of the total library budget allotted for preservation?

Patterson: That's a very difficult question. I think it depends on the nature of the collection. It depends on where materials come from initially; where they are published. A library, for example, that collects heavily in materials from non-European countries such as Asia, Latin America, Africa, will probably have greater preservation needs than one that collects entirely materials from, let's say, North America because of the nature of the way materials are printed and bound in those particular places. I wouldn't even dare give a percentage.

What we all have to realize is that we spend more money on preservation than we think we do. I think a lot of librarians don't realize that when they pay to have materials bound, they are making a very significant preservation commitment. And while a lot of you won't like this, I would also suggest that one of the ways I have to support preservation programs was to take some money out of the binding budget on the premise that preservation and binding are all part of the same bits and pieces that link this whole thing together.

I think the kind of procedures and practices that we draw to govern our binding practices have to be reviewed as a preservation activity. While class A library binding may be absolutely marvelous for a lot of materials, it is abominable for a lot of other materials. And we have to exercise the judgment that we have as librarians and bibliographers, and as subject specialists, to run our entire binding procedures and specifications through the most careful scrutiny to make sure that we are, in fact, giving the materials the kinds of treatment that they actually need. Very few libraries have done this. There are people here, however, who are taking part in the program, who have and can tell you a great deal about how you go about developing that kind of program.
William DuBois (Northern Illinois University Libraries): How have challenge/match programs for funding aided library preservation efforts?

Patterson: The amount of progress in preservation technology and preservation development, I believe, in the last few years, can be, in at least part, attributed to intelligent use of grant money. I realize that in certain political areas, grant money is under the worse kind of attack, but organizations like NHPRC and the National Endowment for Humanities, just to name two that I think are the most important, have been enormously helpful in developing some important pilot programs that have had a great deal of positive effect and have proven themselves to be very workable, and have helped us learn a lot. Unhappily, the amount of funding available for those programs is not as great as it once was.

Gerald Gibson (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.): The Library of Congress is very interested in preservation as their paper materials, too, are deteriorating. Nonpaper controls are one method being used for preservation.

Patterson: The directions the Library of Congress seems to be taking in preservation at this point are a very helpful sign. Those of you with preservation problems in the past know that the preservation staff of the Library of Congress has been enormously helpful with any problem. You could simply pick up the phone and call them and they try very hard to help you.

D.W. Krummel (Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): How much is being done to make conservation less expensive?

Patterson: I think one of the ways that has been tried to address the cost in preservation is to develop collaborative and cooperative ventures. The whole clearinghouse concept which is rapidly emerging is a very important way of getting information into collection development.

Robert J. Adelsperger (University of Illinois at Chicago Circle): What should be the split between conserving and preserving special and general collections? I think we are realizing that special collections and rare books librarians can't carry it alone.

Patterson: I think the only long-term answer to that problem is to educate library administrators and the library world generally, that preservation is not an elitist kind of concern, and that while people in rare books do have an obvious clear vested interest in the process, that it is a problem for the entire general collection. If that kind of information can be imparted and learned, then it will bring, I think, administrators around. Again, I don't want to address specific kinds of things because they will be talked about in much more detail later on, but just the fact that some of the major library
organizations, such as the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), have taken a major concern about preservation means that those people who might not ordinarily learn about preservation will have it called to their attention now that their major organizations are examining it. This is important. It's a very important change. I remember talking to several ARL library directors at least ten years ago—"Nothing to worry about." "What problems?" I don't think you could find an ARL director today who would say that. They might think it still in their hearts, but there is enough pressure from within their own national organization to view preservation as a problem. They would have a great deal of difficulty saying that they didn't recognize the problem. That's enormous progress.

James C. Dast (University of Wisconsin at Madison): What is the role of library schools in preservation?

Patterson: I'm so glad you asked that question. I think we have seen in library education in the past five years, in particular, a growing interest in preservation. The Preservation Education Directory, a publication of the American Library Association, began a few years ago with only one or two pages; now it is thirty pages listing regular courses, workshops and other kinds of programs. I would hope that trend might continue and that the library schools would increasingly offer more and more in this area. Considering the importance of preservation for libraries, for library schools not to offer (if not a complete course) at least some exposure to the student of the problem, is not to really prepare students. The whole question of trying to create an awareness, again throughout the entire profession, means starting at this level. We're not talking about rare book librarians, we're talking about people who must have their own awareness heightened so that they recognize that there is a problem. Since we can't wait for the conservator to appear (he or she isn't going to appear for an awfully long time), they, as librarians, are going to have to develop the preservation programs.

Davis: I think we in library schools don't necessarily have to have courses labeled "preservation" to teach concepts—e.g., courses in library administration and technical services often cover these areas. Because schools don't have courses labeled preservation does not mean they don't have offerings.

Unidentified Speaker: Doesn't the library staff have an obligation to educate their staff and users about preservation? There is a lot that we can do to educate people about not harming books.

Patterson: I think that you have already answered your question. Clearly, one of the responsibilities of a preservation officer or preservation committee is to look at programs to train and educate the library staff about what is proper handling and what is not. There are a wide number of very, very
fine slide and tape shows, publications, all kinds of things, designed for the training of the library staff, whether they are students handling books in the stacks or whether they are persons working in processing or binding. There are a large number of programs that are now available or are being developed in a large number of institutions, which, I am sure, you will hear about as we go on in this conference. It is clear that education is one of the primary roles of the preservation officer.