

Creativity *v.* Despair: The Challenge of Preservation Administration

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“MILLIONS OF VALUABLE BOOKS deteriorating in nation’s libraries,” we were told on Valentine’s Day 1978 by the *National Enquirer*, which might have added, “along with countless manuscripts, prints, photographs, films, sound recordings, etc.” To librarians involved in the administration of preservation activities, the strident headline was scarcely news, but it neatly summarized the awesome challenge confronting those charged with preserving for future generations the collections of past and present.

There is no doubt that significant proportions of the materials housed in most libraries today are in poor physical condition, due both to the chemical and mechanical instability inherent in their nature and to damage resulting from improper storage and handling. Despite the absence of comprehensive statistics,¹ awareness of the vastness of the problem has had an important influence on the pattern of response now discernible in the emerging field of library preservation.

Without attempting a history of that emergence, it may be observed that the literature of the field pays unusual attention to the role of administration in coping with an essentially technical crisis. The reason may be found in the early recognition that the growing availability of technical solutions—deacidification, improved binding methods, sophisticated restoration procedures, accurate reproduction processes—is only a first step toward salvaging the countless objects threatened with disintegration. We might coin the term *strategies of scale* to de-

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scribe efforts to relate individual treatment possibilities to the needs of very large collections. The theoretical need for such administrative strategies is apparent: time is running out for many materials. A conservator or two, no matter how highly skilled, cannot meet all the needs of a collection of any size. Only through the development of large-scale programs capable of providing protection and remedial treatment for thousands, even millions, of items in a relatively short period can a cultural disaster be averted.

Related to the problem of sheer numbers is that posed by the diversity of materials and the preservation problems they exhibit. Implicit in the variations in treatment appropriate to different materials is the need for selection criteria and decision-making systems, which have little to do with the technical quality of individual treatment but everything to do with responsible and effective allocation of time and money.

A third factor contributing to the importance of administration to preservation is found in the relationship of preservation to almost every other library activity. Building plans, collection and access policies, processing procedures, and handling methods used by both staff and patrons from the moment an item arrives in the shipping room through its last trip to the discard pile, all have a direct bearing on the survival of the collections. Put another way, the responsibility for the physical care of the collections is, whether recognized or not, diffused throughout the library, at every level of the staff. The correction of practices which endanger, and the coordination of those which preserve, is an administrative challenge of no small dimensions.

The successful development of preservation programs requires a combination of administrative skills and technical knowledge, exercised within an organizational structure flexible enough to foster cross-departmental identification of problems and solution-seeking, the gradual realignment of certain functions, and the retraining of staff. The shortage of professional staff with appropriate preparation and experience to undertake this work had the predictable effect of limiting preservation program development to a relatively few libraries. In those few, the absence of tested procedures and common practices made necessary much trial-and-error inventiveness and patience in the face of false starts and the pressure of critical need.

The establishment of a conservation department or preservation office does not constitute the implementation of a program. In the early years, the preservation librarian, officer or administrator brought to the

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task either a technical background, most often in bookbinding, or general library experience coupled with good administrative skills or potential. For each, successful performance required much on-the-job learning. The technical expert had to develop managerial skills and a broad understanding of library operations if practical plans for expanded preservation programs were to be sold to a staff accustomed to thinking of binding and preservation as marginal activities carried on in an obscure corner of the basement. The generalist had to master enough technical information to earn the respect and cooperation of technicians within the unit and to ensure that proposed changes in methods, materials and policies affecting the care of materials were based on the best available knowledge.

The information needs of both were difficult to fill. Technical information about the many facets of preservation was scarce and widely scattered in sources unfamiliar to most librarians. Procedural guidelines, organizational models and patterns for administering preservation activities were practically nonexistent. Early appointments were almost all in large research libraries, in which institutional complexities and a wide range of endangered materials compounded the difficulties associated with systemwide planning. The field was so small that there were few opportunities for professional contact and support. The enthusiasm engendered by the opportunity for participation and leadership in a vital new area of librarianship was in continuous tension with the frustration and discouragement born of working in near isolation with too few human and material resources.

These conditions have begun to change, as we shall discuss presently. But recognition of the factors constraining the first group of preservation administrators offers valuable insights into the nature of developments within the field as a whole. The following observations are based on the author's own experience as preservation administrator and on interpretations drawn from conversations with others over an eight-year period. Apologies are offered in advance to the historically-minded, who may find them annoyingly unspecific; names, places and dates are deliberately suppressed to avoid the appearance of praise or criticism. While some efforts appear more successful than others in the short term, all contribute to the present capability of the library profession to respond to the preservation crisis, and an understanding of these influences ought to improve our collective ability to direct the future.

Observation: Mistrust and inadequate communication between "bench people" and "paper pushers" have delayed the development and application of new techniques.

Whether the "bench" is a repair unit, conservation workshop, commercial bindery or microform laboratory, technical knowledge of a high order and skills developed through long years of experience are essential. Furthermore, these skills are applied to materials one at a time. Attention must be narrowly focused. Production pressures and the limits of existing equipment may preclude experimentation. Change may threaten livelihood, or commercial investment, or the perceived value of a lifetime's devoted labor. Changes requested by newly-appointed administrators without technical credentials may be bitterly resisted, especially if those same paper-pushers ignore requests for support in areas recognized as important by the bench people. While the bench person seeks to perfect and execute a specialized technique, the paper-pusher worries about statistics, quotas, budgets. Communication is often to cross-purposes. It may take several years for each to learn enough about the other to overcome the initial mistrust and begin to apply their complementary abilities to the common solution of problems.

There are two critical factors: (1) the shortage of expertise—both perceived and actual; and (2) the tension between the time/cost of individual treatment and the needs of massive collections. The first can be relieved through the publication and distribution of preservation information, and through expanded training and educational programs at both technical and professional levels. The second is not so easily managed, being essentially an economic problem apparently well beyond the scope of imaginable resources. Even here, however, technical expertise applied to the development of mass procedures can produce imaginative approaches, "phased preservation" (the protective boxing or encapsulation of fragile materials as a holding action until more extensive treatment is feasible) being the most obvious, though by no means the only example.

Observation: Emphasis on cooperative approaches to preservation at too early a stage can actually retard preservation program development.

There can be little doubt that cooperation is essential to avoiding wasteful duplication in preservation microfilming activities, or that regional or network support of such centralizable services as master copy storage, disaster assistance, and provision of special preservation treatment facilities makes good economic sense. However, effective

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cooperative programs can best be developed by pooling and then building upon experience and skills from within the cooperating institutions. Without a common knowledge base, needs cannot be accurately identified, nor can programs to meet those needs be intelligently planned, implemented or evaluated. The theoretical promise of solutions through cooperative action has often led to inaction at the local level. Individuals or institutions may be afraid to initiate something that might not fit into a larger system at some future time. Or, they may be reluctant to commit the time required for development of a program in the belief that they can more economically replicate a program developed and offered through some cooperative agency.

Two significant factors in this situation are first, the distinction between those activities which can best or only be performed through cooperation and those which must go forward in each institution even after cooperative programs are fully operational; and second, the matter of timing. Every library must accept the responsibility for improving its own storage conditions and handling practices, for educating itself about improvements in care and repair methods, binding, reproduction, and the myriad other technical matters involved in preserving collections. To the extent that cooperative resources—workshops, consulting or treatment services, information clearinghouses—are available, they should be exploited; but their scarcity does not negate that local responsibility. Indeed, only as institutions move forward individually without waiting for “them” to lead the way will a collective preservation capability emerge, because, of course, “we” are “they.” Thus, to the issue of timing: individual and cooperative developments will take place alternately, with individual action always leading. Library A develops a method for treatment of material which is shared through some cooperative mechanism with libraries B and C. B and C adapt it, improve on it, share the results with A, and together they produce a cooperative standard of practice or even a centralized facility for this treatment which is then shared with libraries D and E. D and E try it, improve on it—and the process goes on. Cooperation is vital, but if too many institutions see themselves in the D and E category, waiting for A, B and C to start things for them, the process will be very slow.

Observation: Vision and inspiration at the highest levels of leadership are essential to the development of a profession's commitment to solve new problems, but senior leaders are seldom in a position to devise the practical methods and routines that will constitute working programs.

Preservation encompasses an almost bewildering array of technical problems. It has been observed “that ‘the problem’ is, in fact, an appar-

ently infinite complex of many discrete problems—of physical chemistry, of lighting design, of environmental pollution and control, of engineering, and so forth.”² When “the problem” first received serious attention some twenty years ago, it stimulated the development of bold schemes and imaginative proposals set in the context of national library planning. The goals of those early plans and the basic approaches outlined for meeting them remain valid. But much painstaking groundwork must be laid—by lab workers, technicians, first-line supervisors and middle managers—before the vision of top management can be brought to life. This is probably true in every field of endeavor. In preservation it has been especially true, and frustrating, because so many interrelated technical and procedural matters are involved. Furthermore, the very grandeur of the early plans may have had a discouraging effect: where to begin when everything remains to be done? This conflict between the need for broad planning and the intricate requirements of system development exists at the institutional level as well, and must be managed successfully at that level before a national program can be developed.

Two lessons emerge from reflecting on the recent history of library preservation at both the local and national levels. First, endorsement of an ideal leads to progress only when coupled with a substantial commitment of operational staff to examining and improving rather prosaic daily routines. Second, perspective, patience and good library skills are essential to the development and administration of preservation programs—perspective for understanding how each component will fit into the total scheme, patience for working through the mundane details, and good library skills to ensure that preservation activities mesh with collection goals, bibliographic systems and service responsibilities.

Observation: Interest in and planning for the preservation of library materials has been heavily weighted toward the needs of paper records, especially bound volumes, leading to a dangerous neglect of the preservation needs of other materials.

Large old collections tend to consist primarily of books and bound serials, and the deterioration of nineteenth- and twentieth-century book papers has reached crisis proportions. When resources are inadequate, it is natural to concentrate on the most apparent and urgent problems. But nonprint media collections are already large in many institutions, they are growing at a faster rate than print collections, and they are by no means immune to damage and deterioration. Some—color film and

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magnetic tape, for example—are even less stable than most paper, while the mechanical stresses associated with viewing or listening equipment can make ordinary use considerably more damaging than use of book materials. Unfortunately, the common segregation of library collections and services by format often results in media ghettos, with knowledge about the special needs of nonprint materials limited to a few specialists in units remote from the operational mainstream of the library.

There are two implications: (1) the preservation needs of nonprint media ought to be recognized and addressed before their problems reach the same proportions as those of paper records; and (2) preservation policies and programs need to be designed in such a way that nonprint media can be easily integrated with other materials. Though storage requirements differ slightly, and treatment procedures substantially, from those for paper, basic principles of care are the same, decision-making criteria and procedures can be applied to all formats, and the budgetary implications of an active preservation program affect all materials. In very large institutions, preservation staff may specialize by format; but even there, coordination is desirable, and in most institutions the same staff will have to be involved in planning and administering activities for the preservation of all formats. Because most people thus far have come to preservation work through interest in the book, special attention to learning about other materials is essential to avoid inappropriate program biases.

A common theme runs throughout these observations, which might be variously described as the information problem, the lack of expertise, the undeveloped preservation knowledge base. As with any new field, a very few people know a lot about it, more know a little, and most know nothing. Even among the few, given the variety of technical and procedural matters which fall under the rubric of preservation, knowledge and experience tend to be concentrated in subfields—such as book conservation or preservation microfilming—and what is known is acknowledged to be primitive, tentative and incomplete.

Administration involves planning, decision-making, evaluation, and supervision. Accurate information is crucial to the success of each activity. Thus, the major obstacle to the development and administration of preservation programs is the shortage, not of money, as many suppose, but of knowledge. Financial constraints are serious and will become more so; but until the preservation field reaches the point at which most people know what ought to be done and how it should be

done, the lack of money to do it on a scale appropriate to the need is not terribly significant. The preservation administrator, therefore, must spend a great deal of time seeking, sorting and analyzing information: technical information about the physical nature of materials, the effects of environmental conditions, the pros and cons of preventive and remedial treatment alternatives, sources and costs for supplies, equipment and services; and management information about methods of identifying candidates for preservation attention, selection criteria and mechanisms, preservation policy formulation, processing, treatment and replacement procedures, organizational development and staffing requirements.

In fact, in the first years the search for such information was often fruitless, and much thought and creativity had to be devoted to the invention of guidelines, procedures and policies. This primitive phase was passing rapidly as the 1980s began, and though creativity continues to be an essential ingredient in preservation administration, it can be applied more often to adapting, building upon and expanding existing knowledge than to dreaming up wholly new ideas and approaches. The literature of the field has grown dramatically in the past few years, as recent reviews of preservation developments amply document.³ In variety, quantity and quality, that literature reflects the steady growth of practical efforts to respond to the preservation challenge, and itself contributes further to the collective capacity for response.

Several additional kinds of resources for alleviating the shortage of expertise have emerged above the horizon, offering important tools for preservation administration. Three examples will illustrate the present status of the field.

In 1979 Yale University Libraries began a three-year project, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, with several major components: (1) development and testing of procedures for surveying the condition of materials in a large collection; (2) refinement of techniques for the simple, economical protective treatment of materials; (3) creation of training aids for the education of patrons and the training/retraining of staff; and (4) internships for librarians and technicians seeking to enhance their preservation knowledge and skills. The materials resulting from this project will be widely available, and the experiences of the interns, taken back to their home institutions, should have a strong leavening effect, raising the level of preservation activities across the country.

In 1980 the Association of Research Libraries Office of Management Studies launched a two-year preservation project, also funded by

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the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its products will include a self-study process enabling libraries to analyze their preservation needs and plan programs for meeting them, along with extensive compilations of technical and procedural information to support this analysis, planning and implementation of preservation activities. These materials, bringing together the results of individual efforts in many institutions, should accelerate subsequent developments, providing the raw material from which standards and effective traditions of practice can be fashioned.

Finally, in 1981 the School of Library Service at Columbia University, in cooperation with the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, offered two new graduate programs, for the education of library conservators and of preservation administrators. (These programs, too, are funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by the Mellon Foundation, both of which have made extraordinary contributions to the emerging field of preservation.) Combining general library education with intensive study of technical theory, laboratory instruction and a supervised internship, the three-year conservator program will begin to alleviate the critical shortage of professionals qualified to execute and direct physical treatment programs. The two-year administrator program (one year for those already holding a master's degree) will include some laboratory experience and much observation and study of the theory and practice of preservation, providing in organized form the technical and managerial information which the first generation of administrators had to ferret out, or invent, for themselves. These graduate programs mark a new stage in the expansion of educational opportunities in the field, which before were limited to workshops, isolated courses, and a few internships and apprenticeships. These three examples, none of which would have been possible five years earlier, symbolize the acceptance of preservation within the larger field of librarianship, and hold a firm promise of rapidly expanding resources to shape and support the administration of preservation activities in the future.

Major elements to be included in comprehensive preservation programs at the local level were identified early on.⁴ Much energy has since been devoted to working out in practice the solutions to preservation problems first suggested by theory. Now another cycle begins, with practical experience reviewed, analyzed and incorporated into a more mature theoretical framework, itself to be tested, refined and expanded by further practice, in a continuing process.

The preservation administrator stands at the intersection of theory and practice, testing the vision and wide perspective of library educators and other leaders against the realities of daily operations, while evaluating and shaping practice to meet the goals suggested by the emerging theory. Not an easy position, a delicate balance to be maintained; but the rewards are great for those who respond to the challenge.

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