

BOOK REVIEW

Meyer H. Fishbein, ed., *The National Archives and Statistical Research* (National Archives Conferences, Volume 2). Athens, Ohio University Press, 1973. 255 + xiv pp. \$10.00 U.S. ISBN 8214-0104-1

by Patrick McDonnell

This book reproduces the papers and discussion of a two-day conference held at the U.S. National Archives in May of 1968. The conference was attended by three types of people: staff members of the National Archives, staff members of various U.S. Government agencies (e.g. Census, Labor Statistics, Commerce) and social scientists, primarily economists and historians with a few geographers and others.

The objectives of the conference were "to explore the values of the numerous important quantitative sources in the custody of the National Archives, to discuss the problems of embargoes on private data possessing considerable research value, to investigate current developments in the production and use of statistical data, and to predict future needs for data sources in machine-readable form". It sought these goals in three ways: general sessions on "archival problems relating to the preservation and use of statistical materials", panels on six sets of special interest areas (e.g. one on manufactures, one on welfare, education, religion, and crime), and distributing to conference members a series of papers detailing various specific statistical sources in the National Archives. These papers are not reproduced in this volume, but are listed in an appendix and are available from the U.S. National Archives. The book is a reproduction of the conference and follows the same format.

The general sessions present the archivist's case to potential users; how he has gone about organizing materials, how he may go about organizing computer-readable material, how he deals with the problems of what to save in what ways, who is to be allowed access, and when. There follow ten pages reporting discussion on these issues.

The panels generally have three speakers each: one from the staff of the archives, one from a government bureau and one academic. The talks are reproduced in three to five pages each and then there is about ten pages of discussion. The discussion sections are either very faithfully reproduced or very cleverly edited, for they give one a feeling of having been there.

Judging from the book, the conference was, as such things go, a success. The efforts of the contributors are very uneven, of course. Some of them merely list series of records available in sections of the National Archives, some of them talk about ways they have used historical statistical material, some of them complain: about the unreasonable demands users place on archives, about the unreasonable restrictions government place on use of data, about the lack of guidance archives get from scholars on what material might be useful now and in the future. The discussions sometimes go off on tangents, sometimes get bogged. All conferences such as this are uneven in these ways. But the three groups did get a chance to come together, to present their viewpoints, and to question one another.

Throughout the papers and discussions common themes keep emerging, and the value of this book is that one can find remarks about these issues from various perspectives. Some of these themes have already been mentioned: the issue of confidentiality; the problem of continuing liaison with the scholarly community about what may be useful, and how it could be useful; the concern with adequate documentation and finding aids necessary to use both conventional and machine-readable sources. Others are: how changing technology will affect the media in which information is stored, the ways it will be retrieved, and the amount that can be stored; the ways in which archival material can be used quantitatively. These are the recurring themes; others are mentioned.

The problem with such conferences and thus with this book is that such subjects are mentioned, briefly discussed and dropped. In this format there is no possibility for extended, focused development of any particular issue. This makes the book useful for raising problems and seeing various viewpoints on those problems briefly expressed, but not for moving closer to any solutions.

Anyone seriously interested in any of the problems mentioned in this book will not find it of much use. Anyone seriously interested in the use of the U.S. National Archives for statistical research should consult the papers prepared for distribution to the conference, which are not in this book but which are available from the National Archives. Someone interested in a general discussion of the range of issues mentioned will find it a pleasant source, for the book is fun to read, especially the discussions.

ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS

Mr Haworth is a Senior Education Officer in the Division of Curriculum Research, New South Wales Department of Technical Education. A primary function that the Division of Curriculum Research undertakes is the investigation of need and demand for courses, and the specification of skills and knowledge required in a wide range of occupations. Service is provided for over 170,000 students enrolled in more than 700 courses.

Much of the information contained in the paper was obtained while conducting an industrial survey of the work of health inspectors. As part of the task of defining their duties, their relationship to the other officers of council was defined, and the organisation of records within the council structure was examined in order to see how the Health Department dovetailed with the councils' other responsibilities.

Mr Alan Ives is the Acting Librarian, Australian Archives, Canberra.