

Small Archives or....

The Plight of the Lone Arranger

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The management of small archives has been little discussed in the Australian literature, a fact which belies the large numbers who face the challenge of running them. The authors draw upon their own experience as well as upon data from a recent New Zealand report on the education of archivists to comment on the issues facing 'lone arrangers'. Access to appropriate education and training inevitably looms as one of the major needs, and funding and professional isolation are also discussed. The authors also cover some of the special implications of scale of operation, such as the need for generalist skills, dilemmas regarding level of collection control and the vital importance of exhibitions.

WHAT MAKES AN ARCHIVES SMALL? Is it the quantity of records, the facilities, the budget, or the number of staff members? Discussion with colleagues would seem to confirm the general opinion that the 'small' archives is best defined by its personnel quotient—one or less than one full time staff member, in other words the 'lone arrangers'. In New Zealand, a survey of the profession in 1993 used the category 'sole-charge archivists and small repositories'.¹ In the survey only three out of 180 archives had more than one or two full-time professional employees. It seems probable that a similar picture exists in Australia. A quick count of the archives listed in the *Directory of Archives in Australia* suggests, using the most conservative guesstimate, that perhaps one in seven would employ more than one archivist. This means of the 458 archives listed, approximately 380 would fit into the category of small archives. What is impossible to assess, is how many of these smaller institutions employ a professional archivist, paid or unpaid, either full or part time; an untrained archivist whose primary task is to manage the archives;

or a librarian, records manager, museum curator or other employee whose management of the archives is only a portion of their job. It is interesting though perhaps of no significance that in only approximately a third of these small archives, the person to contact is listed as 'the archivist'.

For the purposes of this paper we will mainly be commenting on the role of the lone archivist who is in employment, paid or unpaid, as an archivist, whose primary role is to manage the archives of an organisation, who may or may not be professionally qualified and in whose archives there is no more than the equivalent of one full-time archivist.

The reasons for the existence of the small archives are as varied as the locations in which they evolve. Why do these small collections develop? Accumulation of records, lack of office space, the need to keep some records for long periods of time, a legal battle, a suggestion from present or past employees, a need to find documentation and photos, an interest in the past and a desire to see the records of the past securely cared for, can each be the motivation to establish an archives. But while these factors provide the initial impetus to start an archives, the creating body often only has a very limited perception of what it is creating. Consequently the initial commitment of time, space and money may be totally inadequate. While the parent body may want an archives and be most supportive of the concept, few have the resources to commit large areas of space, or large sums of money either as salaries or for supplies and facilities. Educating the parent body as to the nature of an archives and promoting the services of the archives also become part of the archivist's brief.

Typically the salaried 'lone arrangers' are found in schools, small businesses and professional organisations, but they can also be employed in much larger organisations where the management makes clear distinctions between the 'historical' records and those of the day-to-day administration.² Religious orders and organisations may employ archivists, often professionally qualified, but they are often not salaried.

Historical societies and community organisations, while having archival collections, rarely have the resources to employ an archivist and rely on the enthusiasm of individual members to manage the archives. These honorary archivists have the care of important and irreplaceable historical records but usually lack knowledge, money and resources. Local history collections in public libraries provide safe repositories for some of these collections but often the librarian's training is directed to providing an information resource rather than the care of historical documents and while many local history

librarians inform themselves as to the care and management of archival records, this is rarely their priority.

Collecting archives may feel that they are the proper repository for these small collections, but no large institution is ever going to be able to absorb all the records of historical importance or interest to the community. It would therefore seem important to provide support and guidance to allow the honorary archivists and non archivists in charge of historic records to do the most professional job possible with the resources available. All too often their efforts are regarded with disdain by those lucky enough to have professional training or the resources of larger institutions.

The New Zealand survey provided a profile of the typical sole practitioner as 'female, university educated, and have other duties relating to library, museum and record management'.³ While the profile is probably similar in Australia, there may be a higher proportion of sole practitioners whose job is only the management of the archives, though in most cases this is accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the number of days worked. Few small archives would employ a full-time archivist either salaried or honorary.

It is worth recognising that many lone arrangers are in their second, third or even fourth career. It can usually be assumed that the sole archivist is well educated, usually at tertiary level and brings to the job broad experience, multifaceted skills, a high degree of flexibility, and perhaps even more importantly enthusiasm and dedication. It is unfortunate that the means to acquire archival training are limited. The postgraduate courses, although allowing part-time study, are so densely structured as to make it extremely difficult for those in employment, even on a part-time basis, to undertake archival training. Certificate courses are non-existent, and workshops irregular and with little or no follow up or assessment procedures and no accreditation for those taking part. The 'Keeping Archives' workshops initiated by the NSW Branch as its Bicentennial Project went some way to meeting this need with twenty workshops held between May 1986 and September 1988 in outer suburban and country areas. Over 150 organisations participated which gives some indication of the interest in archives in the general community. The program had some grant funding but relied on the enthusiasm and interest of the presenters, who were volunteers. Not surprisingly the workshops have largely fallen into abeyance. Suggestions arising from the workshops for an archival field officer or partly subsidised archival consultant have also succumbed to lack of funds.⁴ In Western Australia, the Bicentennial 'Travelling Archivist' also met with an enthusiastic response from recipients of workshops or consultancies, but the program, limited in both funds and time by the Bicentennial grant, has not been repeated.

It is perhaps worth quoting in full the following from the New Zealand findings:

....given the broader scope of their responsibilities and tasks, the sole-charge professional needs the highest qualification. Of necessity, however, another educational track is needed for those small institutions where the above programs are beyond the reach of staff because of family obligations, the lack of backup staff support, and/or institutional financial resources. For many part-time and volunteer staff, a fully professional qualification is not a realistic possibility. Yet their repositories hold an important segment of New Zealand's historical record. The archival profession will be ill-served if the needs of these smaller institutions for training and assistance are ignored. An educational track for remedial training as well as a system for delivering program and technical assistance to small repositories needs to be provided.⁵

In Australia also, many unqualified archivists would welcome the chance to acquire some training and to receive recognition for this training without necessarily being able to make the commitment to a postgraduate course. There would seem potential for a course similar to that being offered in Museum Studies in cooperation with Sydney University where participants are credited with all units completed and may over two or three years obtain a certificate.

While it may be assumed that the graduate archivist will manage better as a sole archivist this is not necessarily the case. Given the bias of training in archival courses towards government archives, the graduate archivist without previous administrative and management experience may not have the requisite skills to cope in the lone arranger situation. Where collections are established by donation and small runs of records from the office there needs to be a thorough and confident grasp of archival principles to develop a system that works. The solutions for larger institutions will only function in a small archives after the need and nature of the small collection has been considered. Often the smaller quantities of material in small archives lead the inexperienced archivist to process down to the item level without ever forming an overview of the collection and its strengths and weaknesses.

The lone archivist may inherit systems or collections organised in an unorthodox fashion and these errors tend to perpetuate themselves. It is not viable on one or two days per week to reprocess a collection even if it does not follow archival principles. If there are any finding aids in place that allow access to the records with whatever degrees of efficiency, logic demands that they be used.

For those without archival training or contacts there is little help. *Keeping Archives*, while extremely thorough, often proves too dense or complex for those just starting out. Brother Leo Ansell's 1987 text, *The Small Archive's Companion*, while full of valid and useful information, is extremely sketchy on archival theory and practice. As Tim Robinson wrote in his review 'The most disturbing aspect of this publication is that the chapters dealing with traditional archives work seem to demonstrate a lack of understanding of the role, functions and theoretical basis of archives work'.⁶ Without standard procedures, the newly appointed archivist with no archival background is left floundering. Often one of their greatest difficulties is quite simply distinguishing between archival and reference material. Practices, of necessity, will vary from one location to another but without a body of accepted standards and procedures the lone arranger literally has to go it alone, and the archival profession as a whole should not be surprised if some of the solutions are distinctly odd and show little understanding of archival principles.

One advantage that members of the ASA have is the chance to develop networks and talk with others in similar circumstances. These benefits are, however, largely confined to those belonging to active special interest groups or in the main cities where branches are active. National conferences are less useful, for few archivists on a part-time salary can make a case for funding to attend an interstate conference unless it is very topical to their concerns and those of their parent body.

Most sole archivists struggle to find time for the basic archival tasks. Their limited time will be spent on the general administrative tasks, planning, budgeting, report writing and correspondence. They will also be responsible for all reference services, and will usually provide quite detailed research in response to queries. The traditional reference room rarely exists in the smallest archives and lack of space and the manpower to supervise it rarely make such a facility feasible. Inevitably these activities absorb more of the archivist's time than dealing with accessions, arranging and describing records and the preparation of finding aids, and most lone arrangers would be permanently trying to deal with a considerable backlog. Few would achieve or need to achieve complex and detailed finding aids.

Monetary constraints also compound the plight of the lone arranger. In-service training, facilities and supplies are frequently supplied on an 'as required' basis with each need, however minor, having to be negotiated, with no guarantee that funding will be available. This can make forward planning or long term archival programs extremely difficult and often the archivist

will end up being content to maintain the status quo. In commercial organisations it is hard to make a case of budgetary need for the archives; inevitably the archives, as a non profit making section of the business, are low on the budget priorities, especially where the parent body see the archives in a very limited 'historic caretaking role'.

Exhibitions, displays, publications and oral history programs will also form part of the archivist's task. It is easy for those in larger organisations to decry such work as not part of the archivist's brief, that one should call in the outside experts. But with a very limited budget this may not be a viable alternative and it is this public face of the archives that most organisations with a small archives will expect to see. The importance of such public programs in small, local archives is firmly advocated by Hugh Taylor:

while it is perfectly true that the core of our work lies in the disciplined appraisal and processing of our holdings; for convenient use, the smaller archives in particular must, in addition, try to offer a range of services within what American archivists call 'Public Programs'. They are essential for their survival and continuous funding. Such archives are deeply integrated into the heritage nucleus of small communities who see them, for all their limited resources, as essential to their sense of continuity....⁷

Similar sentiments are evident in Glenda Acland's comment on her display for the Department of Medicine at Queensland University in 1986. She wrote of her experience: 'For a "lone-arranger" in a small archives in a large institution such a display provides a much needed opportunity to break out of the mould of a "back-room person" and share one's work as a vital link in the organisation's corporate memory.'⁸

When asked which of the factors—training, time, money or isolation—most affect the lone arranger, it is isolation they most often cite. The value of interaction with other archivists is firmly advocated by Marie McGlynn and Ursula Trower in their article on religious archives.⁹ In part, isolation can be addressed through seminars and other training opportunities, but there is a need for a forum for regular meeting and discussion, the development of networking and standardisation of simple systems and procedures which are within the range of the most untrained 'archivist'. The decidedly idiosyncratic nature of many small archives derives from the isolation in which the archivist works and the lack in Australia of any agreed minimum standards and procedures.

But the plight of the lone arranger is not without hope. The proliferation of small archives is evidence of our faith in their abilities. Many perform at high

levels of efficiency and run innovative and exciting archives. What is now needed is the support, respect and understanding of colleagues in large institutions. It is not appropriate to see the untrained as unacceptable, or small archives as containing nothing of particular importance. They have their place in the preservation of our heritage and most possess the basic equipment for a lone arranger - a belief that they can overcome the difficulties and do the job.

Endnotes

- 1 F. G. Ham, *Towards Career Professionalism; An Education Program for New Zealand Archivists and Records Managers*, ARANZ, New Zealand, 1993, p. 23.
- 2 The challenge of establishing an archives within a large organisation (BHP) is described by Doreen Wheeler in 'Business Records and the sole archivist creating an archives', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 7, no. 3, August 1978, pp. 101-9.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 4 S. McCausland, 'The Keeping Archives Workshop Program', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 17, no. 2, November 1989, pp. 151-63.
- 5 F. G. Ham, *op.cit.*, p. 24.
- 6 T. Robinson, 'Book Reviews', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol.16, no. 2, November 1988, pp. 133-136.
- 7 H. Taylor, 'A Life in Archives; Retrospect and Prospect', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 21, no. 2, November 1993, p. 225.
- 8 G. Acland, 'The Display's the Thing... An Exercise in Archival Exhibitionism', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 15, no. 1, May 1987, p. 39.
- 9 M. McGlynn and U. Trower, 'Religious Archives and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 20, no. 2, November 1992, p. 207.