

PANEL COMMENT ON  
"THE BATTLE OF THE BULK"

By *Lucile M. Kane*\*

It is heartening to take respite from the Minnesota battlefield to confer with generals who are winning the war in their sectors. The strategy they and other members of the profession have devised indicates that our encounter with the enemy may result not in defeat or a stalemate, but in an attack powered by courageous thinking.

In summary, the battle of the bulk has been launched on three fronts of collecting, processing, and staffing.

Our speakers have made it clear that bulk has not made them limit collecting to narrow geographic areas or time periods. On the contrary, their scope is broader than ever before. We cannot but applaud this concept of dynamic expansion. Despite the overwhelming burden it brings to the repository that must furnish the material resources to implement the policy, collectors cannot with conscience abdicate their responsibility for documentation in their chosen fields. They must strengthen the sources in older research areas, as well as follow scholars into newer fields such as science, law, social welfare, and technology. And, though rooted in the present, they must build collections that will be arsenals of new ideas for scholars of the future.

Dynamic expansion readily appeals to most collectors. By nature they are conservators, acquirers, builders. But the battle of the bulk, as we have seen today, emphasizes a second facet of collecting that is less enchanting than the first. The policy must be realistic. More and more, as the campaign has progressed, collectors have exerted efforts to be selective. Out of their studies have come several forward steps: A more critical appraisal of materials before they are accepted. Reduction of collections accepted to the maximum degree commensurate with the nature of the papers. And a considered sacrifice of minutia that, as an historian once stated, lead us to desert the highways for the byways, and the byways for the blind alleys.

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Collectors of yesterday fearlessly accepted records of ongoing business organizations, and preserved them down to the last bill of lading. They accepted papers of tiny cultural associations, such as the Thursday afternoon musicale. Now they ask searching questions, such as: Can we afford to be the archive of a particular business? Is it the just role of a repository to be a community library? What portion of the collection is essential for preservation? Or, what is lost to scholarship if these records are not kept?

Margaret Scriven a few years ago wrote a witty and understanding article that startled, then pleased the profession. It is titled: *THEY'D NONE OF EM BE MISSED*, and bears the alarming subtitle: *MAYBE A GOOD FIRE MIGHT HELP A LOT OF MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS*. Among the types of papers she discusses are *THE LARGE COLLECTIONS*. "We all like them," she wrote, "because they can picture a whole era in business, in politics, in the arts. I have in mind the papers of a Chicago man who was prominent in real estate affairs. He never lost interest in the small college he had attended, and was politician enough to become United States Consul to Ghent. There are good things in the collection. There are — *WERE* — also two or three thousand pieces that read like this: 'The sink in 412 leaks. Can you fix it. The light was out in the foyer last night.' Others concern plastering, painting, and garbage collection; requests for estimates of roofing materials and screens; hundreds of rent receipts and water receipts, month after month. I am happy to report that most of these are no more."

Her conclusions most of us would endorse. "The whole point of it is," she wrote, "that I think we are inclined to make a fetish of the handwritten word and the official document; that we read into manuscripts, because they are manuscripts, importance that is not inevitably there; and that the exercise of a little judgment, a respect for space, and a sympathy with the user, who already complains that more than half his time is wasted, would reduce our collections to a leaner and healthier state."

There is a third facet to collecting that most of us accept in theory and hopefully promote from year to year. The profession informally endorses an enlightened policy of cooperating with one another for an equitable placement of collections. All of us know how difficult it is to act on our subscription to this ideal. Collecting areas overlap, collections do not come in neat units with convenient limitations, institutional pride and the allegiance of donors must be honored, and our expansionist principles warn us

against giving away our tomorrows today. Yet, progress there has been. Though we are far from ready to sign compacts, and probably never will be, we are advancing toward a national view. In furnishing one another with leads, in exchanging collections, and in recognizing claims to materials that are superior to our own, we are leavening the purely acquisitive instinct.

There will always be competition for fine materials, particularly with the development of collections devoted to special subjects. But papers of lesser importance are a different matter. Solon J. Buck, commenting on problems of bulk and competition among institutions, may have made an apt prediction when he stated to a group of us ten years ago: "The time may come when you will ask one another for help in seeing that records are preserved rather than quibbling over which institution will have the privilege of doing it." I confess that it is with considerable pleasure that I now call our new and thriving archives at the University of Minnesota to tell them about papers of professors and administrators we have located. And yearly we receive from the University manuscripts outside its field, as well as assistance in securing collections we prize.

Our speakers have detailed the amazing advances recently made on the processing front. Undoubtedly the greatest time savers that have been adopted are the retention of original filing systems and the concession that we cannot refine organization down to the last digit. Some scholars complain, particularly when they are using a collection laterally for the study of a period. Too, editors checking footnotes from scanty citations raise critical eyebrows when they seek out a particular document. But Josephine Harper has stated the proposition fairly when she claims that most users would rather suffer a few inconveniences than be refused access to a collection because it has not been processed. In many cases, too, the original filing system better preserves the relationship of documents than slavish devotion to the chronological arrangement. Many an important subject matter file has been dispersed through the compulsion of processors to place every manuscript in its proper chronological niche.

Experience with massive collections has made catalogers more adaptable. Pressed by time, they analyze more carefully the potential use of papers before they decide on the intensiveness with which they will catalog them. A cataloger may write a very brief description of a set of business records with probable use limited to a company or industry study. In describing

the papers of an important public man, on the other hand, he may write descriptions isolating units of information by location, and citing individual items of special significance.

Perhaps the front I have left for comment last is the most important, for on staffing depends our ability to wage the war in the other sectors. To collect widely and wisely, to reduce bulk in papers that are accepted, and to provide service to scholars using the burgeoning collections, depositories need far larger staffs of trained personnel than they have.

Edith Fox and Miss Harper have forcefully explained the complexity of modern manuscripts. Decisions on accepting or rejecting collections, or on reducing their bulk cannot be left to persons without subject-matter training, or to harried specialists making judgments on the run. We cannot do less as a profession than to state and restate the problem until it becomes abundantly clear that the battle of the bulk can be won only with a battle-ready army, not with a holding force entrenched to maintain the status quo.