

Museum Archives Section Annual Meeting

Thursday, August 26, 1999

8:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Section Officers Present:

Chair: Ann Marie Przybyla

Newsletter Editor: Paula Stewart

Recording Secretary: Laura Graedel

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS, BRIEF REPORTS FROM THE FLOOR

Section Chair Ann Marie Przybyla (Cleveland Museum of Art) called the meeting to order at 8:00 a.m.

2. REPORT ON NATIONAL FORUM ON ARCHIVAL CONTINUING EDUCATION

Maureen Melton (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) reported on this project, which has been jointly developed by the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators (COSHRC) and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). Maureen is a member of the Program Committee, representing the New England Archivists. The main goal of the project is to further better coordination of archival education. The Forum will be held April 27-29, 2000, in Decatur, Georgia, with over 100 invited participants representing national and regional organizations and state-level bodies that provide continuing education to those caring for historical records or whose constituents are potential consumers of such services, as well as agencies that provide funding for continuing education. Maureen distributed a survey of individual continuing education needs, explaining that the data from this survey will be used to prepare for the Forum. The surveys will be distributed to a wide audience via meetings, newsletters, and the

NFACE Web site, . Maureen encouraged Section members to fill them out.

3. GREETINGS FROM THE 2000 SAA PROGRAM COMMITTEE

Sarah Dashiell Rouse (Library of Congress), representative from the 2000 Program Committee (the 2000 SAA meeting will be held in Denver, CO), outlined the types of proposals the committee is looking for and informed the Section of the October 8, 1999 deadline for submissions. She explained that there is to be no formal theme, but that, in general, the sessions should be “future-oriented” in their approach. The sessions can deal with both traditional as well as “new” archival issues; proposals addressing such issues as diversity in the workplace are strongly encouraged.

Ninety-minute sessions are the most popular. On behalf of the Committee, Sarah requested that proposals not require more than three speakers and a chair.

4. SESSION IDEAS FOR SAA 2000

Ann Marie Przybyla outlined the procedure for turning in session proposals: fill out a proposal form, meet with the speakers and the chair, detail any needs (e.g., audio/visual), give/send proposal forms to Ann Marie (she is the “funnel”).

Ann Marie’s deadline is October 5, 1999, so that she has enough time to forward the proposals to the SAA Program Committee by its deadline of October 8, 1999 postmark. Ann Marie stated that she would really like to continue a museum archives “presence” at SAA conferences.

Suggestions from the floor:

Bernadette Callery (Carnegie Museum of Natural History) suggested: 1. how to handle the varying mandates (public vs. private) to which museum archivists are often held accountable and 2. the variety of “hats” that a museum archivist wears based on the context of a museum environment (e.g., registrar, curator).

Sarah Dashiell Rouse suggested a session topic dealing with the types of restrictions particular to museum archival materials.

Ann Marie Przybyla related what she described as a “ghoulish idea” based on an experience she was currently facing at her institution. A memorial mass was recently held

for the museum's director who had passed away quite suddenly. How does the museum archivist, without seeming rude, attempt to secure the former director's papers? He or she must try to ensure that the grieving widow or widower does not take what really belongs to the museum.

A related idea Ann Marie suggested was a session addressing useful strategies to help archivists cope with the disruption in the workplace that an unexpected event causes. Laurie Baty (NHPRC) questioned whether this idea could be broadened to include catastrophes and/or significant events (e.g., large moves, natural disasters, grand-scale layoffs, deaths). Ann Marie said that perhaps it could.

Members of the floor responded to the proposed session ideas. Bernadette Callery's idea of a discussion of public and private mandates was encouraged by Michelle Whelk (California Academy of Sciences). Maygene Daniels (National Gallery of Art) suggested that this idea offered the opportunity to make a parallel with other not-for-profit institutions (universities, hospitals) who also are accountable to various mandates. Deb Wythe (Brooklyn Museum of Art) said that the idea could even be extended to business archives, since companies sometimes must answer to multiple constituents.

5. MUSEUM ARCHIVES GUIDELINES

[A handout outlining the proposal for adoption of the Guidelines for Museum Archives as SAA standard was issued to attendees upon entrance to the Section meeting.]

Ann Marie Przybyla began the discussion by saying that the final version of the Guidelines is supposed to be approved next year. Deb Wythe stated that if Section members want to review the Guidelines, they can do so by securing the September 1998 issue of the Museum Archivist newsletter. These Guidelines also are posted on the CHIN Web site. Ann Marie noted that it

must be stressed to the SAA Standards Committee that these Guidelines are intended specifically for museum archives.

Maygene Daniels expressed concern that she and others had missed the Section meeting last year and, thus, had not been able to contribute to the revisions discussion. Ann Marie expressed her own concern that if the Section withholds submission to the SAA Standards Committee until after next year's SAA meeting because the Section did not approve the Guidelines at this year's Section meeting, it would add an entire year to the process, which the Section might consider too long a wait.

Maygene Daniels asked what the role of the Standards Committee is? Deb Wythe offered the following: that the Guidelines are considered a “standard” by SAA and, therefore, the Museum Archives Section must submit them to the SAA Standards Committee for comment, after which the Section can vote on them as a “final document.”

Fynnette Eaton (Smithsonian Institution Archives), liaison from the Standards Committee, said the Standards Committee was formerly known as the Standards Board. The Committee is trying to figure out its role: it currently thinks that its role is to review “process” rather than “content.” Fynnette then quickly inserted a “plug” for the Standards Committee: that the Committee wants a contact person from the Museum Archives Section.

For the benefit of the entire Section, Deb Wythe outlined the history of the Guidelines development and revision process. In 1979, a Museum Archives Task Force had originally drafted a set of Guidelines for Museum Archives.

For a number of years, the museum Section had also been talking about some sort of museum archives “brochure” in addition to the Guidelines (similar to the business archives brochure). Finally, the Section decided to focus on the Guidelines as a basic document containing a clear, concise explanation of museum archives that could be handed to resource allocators. In 1998, Polly Darnell (Shelburne Museum Incorporated), Sarah Demb (Peabody Museum, Harvard University), Mary Elizabeth Ruwell (Pikes Peak Auto Hill Climb Museum), Paula Stewart (Amon Carter Museum), and Deb Wythe took the 1979 Guidelines and drafted revised Guidelines. These revised Guidelines were published in the September 1998 issue of the Museum Archivist newsletter and discussed at the 1998 Section meeting.

Maureen Melton commented that there was spirited discussion at the 1998 Section meeting; however, the revisions have not been revisited by the Section as a whole since then. Michelle Whelk asked in which newsletter or newsletters the Guidelines and discussion comments were published as well as how to get these past newsletters.

Judy Turner (Milwaukee Public Museum) then asked if the museum Section has bylaws. Deb Wythe responded yes. Judy Turner then asked whether the bylaws talk at all about guidelines. Deb informed the group that the bylaws indeed do not talk specifically about guidelines. She went on to say that the bylaws do call for a vote at the annual meeting on any business.

Laurie Baty asked if the newsletter containing the draft revised 1979 Guidelines was

flagged in any way on the front cover of the September 1998 newsletter to alert all Section members that they should review and comment on them. She argued that if such a flag had been present, the response to the draft Guidelines and the proposed alterations discussed at the 1998 meeting would have been much greater.

Someone inquired if the Section has a listserv and, if so, could the revised Guidelines and proposed alterations discussed at the 1998 meeting be posted there for comment? Sarah Demb, the museum archives listserv administrator, said that the technical problems related to the listserv from last summer have been solved, so that this would technically be possible. Sarah then told the Section exactly how to subscribe to the listserv.

Polly Darnell and Ann Marie will be waiting for any further comments regarding the Guidelines from the Section between this and next Section meeting. Deb Wythe then stated that she wanted to check with Polly, who was absent from the Section meeting, regarding the approval process and its timing.

Maygene Daniels then brought up the point that she would like the Section to explore a relationship with the American Association of Museums (AAM) regarding the Guidelines. Has any such exploration been done up to this point? It was mentioned that AAM does put together an information packet at their annual meetings. Someone suggested that the SAA Museum Archives Section could ask to have its Guidelines put into these packets. Kathleen Williams (Smithsonian Institution Archives) then asked whether it is part of the AAM accreditation process that museums must have guidelines regarding their archives? If so, this would make the case for partnership between AAM and SAA's Museum Archives Section a stronger one.

Bernadette Callery asked if the Section could have a formalized relationship with AAM (i.e., some sort of representation at the annual meetings). Laurie Baty responded to this by saying that the thought on this matter historically has been that the SAA Museum Archives Section is a better home for museum archives representation than a corresponding Section in AAM. Kathleen Williams said she was more concerned that SAA as a whole might develop a formal relationship with AAM.

Laurie Baty commented that the Research Libraries Group (RLG) had approached AAM to see if AAM would be interested in a collaborative leadership project because AAM represents the "culture bearers." In response, AAM said that SAA should also be involved. Therefore, there will now be a 3-party initiative, and RLG is approaching the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) for funding the effort. Laurie Baty said that the SAA Council should be aware of this desire on the part of AAM that SAA and AAM should have a more formal alliance. In response to this, Fynnette Eaton reported that the Council meeting held on August 25, 1999 included a discussion on political roles: with whom should SAA be strategically aligned? She said this RLG initiative fits in quite well.

Ann Marie made one final comment regarding the Guidelines specifically and where the revisions and approval process stood at that point in time. She will check with Polly Darnell regarding the Standards Committee and ask whether the Guidelines are considered by the Committee at this point to be final and merely awaiting approval by the Section or whether they are considered still in the draft phase and, thus, the Section can still consider input from Section members. This obviously will be critical in determining the next step in the process.

6. DIRECTORY OF MUSEUM ARCHIVES

Judy Turner, the directory's coordinator, reported that she had posted a request for contributions to the directory both on the Museum Archives listserv and in the Museum Archivist newsletter. In total, she received 35 responses, with some of these being from archivists who did not represent museum archives or even a closely related environment. However, Judy felt that without the assistance of guidelines as to whom could/should be included, she could not deny inclusion to anyone.

In response to the low turnout of contributions, Ann Marie questioned whether the Section should be more aggressive through, for example, a mass mailing request.

Regarding the directory's format, Judy said she would like to make an online database directory. Such a method would require much less data entry: she could just edit what people e-mail in. Judy said that the major museums have all been in touch with her. She thinks it would be easier for people to respond electronically than to one more paper survey, except for those who are not online. Michelle Whelk suggested some sort of "flag" in the next newsletter especially alerting Section members to take note to read the request for directory submissions.

Judy reminded the group that this is intended to be a directory of museum archives not archivists. This should make the number of entries more manageable. Maureen Melton countered that actually it would broaden the number, as every museum has some sort of archives, whether or not it has an archivist. Laura Graedel (Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago) brought up the issue that some of the professionals in charge of museum archives (e.g., registrars, curators, librarians) are not a part of the Section. Does the Section want these professionals aware of the existence of the directory, and if so, how would they be made aware of its existence? Furthermore, Sally Brazil (The Frick Collection) commented that sometimes these professionals are so busy with all their other duties they do not want any visitors, so perhaps they do not want to be included.

On the subject of how to reach Section members and get their submissions in the directory, Deb Wythe suggested that perhaps the Section members should divide up the names in the existing directory and systematically call all the names to locate as many Section members as possible. Deb noted that this might be the only recourse, as it appears all Section members cannot be counted on to respond to requests for submissions, even though the requests are posted in various locales, both on and off line.

7. MUSEUM ARCHIVES MANUAL

Working Title: Museum Archives: An Introduction (2nd edition)

Ann Marie Przybyla opened this discussion by stating that a copy of the prospectus for the manual was discussed at the Section's "working group" the previous day (Wednesday, August 25, 1999), which was held at the Andy Warhol Museum. This prospectus was drafted by Deb Wythe, Sarah Demb, and Ann Marie Przybyla in February 1999, submitted to SAA on March 1, 1999, and returned approved on March 31, 1999. The purpose of the "working group" had been to "flesh out" the prospectus, not to overhaul it, since it had already been approved.

Next, Ann Marie summarized SAA's two concerns regarding the prospectus: 1. Since the Museum Archives Section intends the manual to be an edited work, reviewers are concerned that the literary "voice" will not be consistent throughout the work, and 2. some of the topics addressed in the prospectus have been thoroughly covered in other archival literature.

In response to the first concern, Ann Marie said that the prospectus drafters thought that if the manual were not an edited work, but rather the work of just one person, it would not reflect the variety of museum archivists' concerns and environments. It would be nearly impossible to find one author who writes well and could also represent the plurality of experience adequately.

In response to the second concern, Ann Marie recognized that some of the topics addressed have been covered by other archival literature; however, the prospectus drafters thought the topics should not be left out entirely since they are part of the museum archivist's experience. Rather, the topics can simply be addressed more briefly than those particular to museum archives.

Ann Marie explained that the manual will be a basic manual (part of a series), covering

basic museum archival functions. The prospectus drafters envision two “levels of discourse” for each topic covered in the manual. The first level would be in the form of simple statements: descriptive, with informative definitions. The second would be in the form of colorful side-bars, containing graphics as well as observations and anecdotes from museum archivists’ experiences. This second level would complement and enhance the more basic descriptive text. Members attending the working group meeting were enthusiastic about this format.

Ann Marie will arrange to meet with Teresa Brinati of SAA’s Publications Board and David Hauray (SAA’s Publications Editor) following the Section meeting to discuss contracts, etc. associated with the Manual’s publication.

Laurie Baty briefly interjected that the manual will not be part of the SAA’s “basic series,” since this is no longer published, but part of a “special topics” series.

Ann Marie and Deb will be responsible for writing the first two chapters as well as any prefaces. This is the “next big hurdle.” Ann Marie will keep the Section advised as to the manual’s progress. Ann Marie requested Section members to write down and send any experiences they have had which might be relevant to the Manual as well as recommended authors. Michelle Whelk made a point to thank Ann Marie, Deb, and Sarah for all their hard work on the project thus far.

8. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Ann Marie Przybyla, the Section’s current Chair, asked if there were any nominations for Vice-Chair/Chair-Elect. This is the only elected position. Deb Wythe nominated Sarah Demb. Maureen Melton seconded the nomination, which the Section then approved.

9. MUSEUM ARCHIVIST NEWSLETTER

Newsletter editor Paula Stewart told the group that December 15, 1999 is the deadline for submissions for the next issue of the newsletter. She thanked those who contributed to the previous issue, including new assistant editors Kristina Klepacz and Sharon Pullen.

Any new member who has not yet received a newsletter may contact Paula to get the previous issue.

A question about accessing the newsletter on the Canadian Heritage Information Network

(CHIN) lead to a discussion on whether the entire run of newsletters could be posted there. Deb will look into this possibility. Ann Marie thanked Paula and her staff and Bart Ryckbosch (Art Institute of Chicago) for mailing out the newsletters.

10. MESSAGE FROM THE DIVERSITY TASK FORCE

As representative of SAA's Diversity Task Force, Fynnette Eaton stressed to the group that Section members should always try to forward diversity in all Section initiatives.

11. SECTION MEMBER INTRODUCTIONS

Ann Marie asked attendees to introduce themselves and report on developments and/or projects happening at their institutions. The Section meeting was adjourned following these introductions and reports.

Laura H. Graedel
Museum of Science & Industry, Chicago