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First Encounters with Documentary Editing, or, Tales in Training

Amy Speckart

Which of these things is not like the other?
SELECTION, VERIFICATION, ANNOTATION, SEX, ALCOHOL, INDEXING

Asking this question of seasoned editors (at an ADE meeting) might skew the answers a bit. Or maybe I missed something when I attended Camp Edit. At least, that is how it seems having talked to several veterans of the Camp Edit of the 1970s, which had a level of camaraderie that quite exceeded my own, comparatively chaste experience a year ago.

In this and other ways, training programs in documentary editing under the aegis of the NHPRC have changed over time, reflecting changes in the profession. Camp Edit, for instance, no longer requires campers to bring their own typewriters. Now, knowledge of computerized word processors is assumed, and digitization is the new frontier. During a nine-month NHPRC fellowship in historical documentary editing, a fellow is more likely to learn about XML coding than how to prepare a microfilm collection.

Camp Edit and the NHPRC fellowship also mirror the history of federal funding for documentary editing. In 1972, when Camp Edit held its first session, the camp lasted for two weeks and five NHPRC fellowships were awarded. This was a time of optimism about the availability of federal funding for the support of documentary editing, in part because there were fewer projects to support. Since then, though, the number of projects has increased and staffs have expanded. As federal funds have had to stretch further, financial support for training programs has eroded. Camp Edit now lasts for one week instead of two, reducing the amount of time spent on tutoring and drinking—I mean, on sharing experiences with other editors. And the number of NHPRC fellowships in documentary editing has been steadily declining, from an average of five fellows a year in the later 1960s and 70s, to three fellows annually in the 1980s, to two in the 1990s, down to an average of one per year since 2000. This year, the fellowship program is suspended due to uncertainties in the federal budget.  

1A paper delivered at ADE Annual Meeting, October 2005 in Denver, revised 9/13/06  
Given the financial pressures on the NHPRC and the risk that NHPRC-sponsored training programs will continue to erode, I feel that it is worth reflecting on the benefits of training. My original idea for this paper was to collect people's stories of their first experiences with documentary editing—surely there would be fun and foibles in that, I thought. Memories of impromptu cocktail parties in the early days of Camp Edit was a promising start. On the job, however, editors seem to be a serious lot who care about their work and overcome significant challenges, such as cramped workspaces and the necessity for teamwork. Moreover, the people I interviewed extolled the benefits of Camp Edit and the NHPRC fellowship program in their own lives. In this paper, I will give a brief history of these programs, and then highlight some of my own experiences as a fellow.

Whereas there have been historians since the dawn of man, techniques of documentary editing are not as instinctual. Thus the Historical Editing Institute—fondly known as Camp Edit—and the NHPRC fellowship were born to offer training. The founding fathers of modern documentary editing were nearing retirement, and there was felt a need to train the next generation. Camp Edit is a successful outreach program that offers basic instruction in a one-week course. The course is thought to be especially helpful to solo editors, in part for the opportunity the camp provides to connect with other people in the field. In fact, before ADE was born, Camp Edit used to be the only annual meeting place for senior editors who came to teach the course.

Another useful component to Camp Edit is that it provides an overview of the variety of methods that projects use to address common challenges, such as what to do with interlineation or deletion of text. I attended Camp Edit before I started my fellowship, and I sometimes found the variety of available techniques dizzying. There is no one right way to show deletion of text, for instance, and while diplomatic transcription and clear text are easy to tell apart on the printed page, there are various shades of transcription methods in between. One senior editor told me that he likes to send staff to Camp Edit for precisely this reason—so that they learn how other projects address problems, in hopes of improving methods at home.

The NHPRC fellowship, like Camp Edit, offers a valuable opportunity to network and to learn the fundamentals of documentary editing. But it is pre-

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3I wish to thank the following persons for the oral interviews that were the basis of this essay: Elaine Crane, Amy Flanders, Ann Gordon, Martha King, Jim McClure, Barbara Oberg, Elaine Pascu, Jim Taylor, John Van Horne, and George Vogt.

cishly because each project has its own way of doing things that there is a built-in tension in the fellowship experience, I believe, between learning the fundamentals and learning the peculiarities of the host project. For this paper I will focus on two issues that are commonplace in documentary editing but that have a particular twist in the Jefferson Papers office because of the long history of the project: (1) the relationship between annotation and the time it takes to produce a volume; and (2) the selective use of new technologies.

Before I begin discussion of those issues, though, a brief introduction to the office is helpful. The Jefferson Papers began over a half-century ago, in 1943, under the leadership of Julian Boyd, then the Princeton University Librarian. The Jefferson Papers is considered the first modern documentary editing project, principally for the standards of scholarship in the annotation. The project was also ambitious in its scope as the first comprehensive edition of Jefferson's papers, with incoming as well as outgoing correspondence.

Visible markers of the project's history are everywhere in the office. To give you a brief walk-through: the office has an inconspicuous front door in an inconspicuous location: the basement of our host university's main library. Through this door is a central room that leads to three additional office spaces. Eight staff members work in fairly close quarters. In these rooms, the sheer weight of history is impressive. Bookcases along the walls contain books and microfilm reels for handy reference, including the thirty-one volumes of the Jefferson Papers published thus far, standing proudly altogether like soldiers at attention. Art objects collected over the years include a bust of Jefferson sitting in one corner, reproductions of several paintings of Jefferson, and a portrait of Julian Boyd, the project's founding father. Peek around to one of the smaller office rooms and you will see lining the walls the roughly seventy-thousand file folders that contain photocopies of Jefferson-related documents. Nearby is the card catalog that has served as the control system of the Jefferson Papers for over half a century. Here and there are file folders whose contents have long been forgotten, created by editors of previous generations. Also gathering dust is a broken microfilm reader that visiting high school students find curious.

There are ghosts in the office. Julian Boyd seems to give us the most trouble. Boyd left a legacy of over-long annotation in the late 1960s and 70s that slowed the pace of producing volumes. Even though the pendulum has since swung back in favor of minimal annotation in order to keep to a faster timetable, there remains a degree of defensiveness to the question, "why is the project taking so long?" This was evident to me back in March, when The

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Wall Street Journal ran a front-page headline that read, “Why a Life’s Work is Taking Princeton so Long to Document,” and “Unfinished Jefferson Project is Now in Its 63rd Year.” Despite all the positive aspects of being a feature article in a national newspaper, there was a sense of dismay in the office that the project’s past history overshadowed our current pace of production.

And the project’s public image is bound to be affected once again when we produce with Princeton University Press a digitized version of the Jefferson Papers. Right now, a digital edition is in the planning stage, and I can tell that the prospect of a greater internet presence involves a change in our identity. With thirty-one printed volumes behind us, it is difficult for the office to change its priorities mid-stream. For now, our budget priorities are on producing printed volumes, and this alone is enough to challenge us financially.

This brings me to the topic of fundraising, which has been an unexpected part of my education at the Jefferson Papers. From Princeton University’s Development Office I learned how to throw a party—always a useful skill. While attending Humanities Advocacy Day in Washington D.C. last spring, I met several congressmen and their staff to discuss the zeroing-out of the NHPRC in the president’s proposed federal budget.

I had few illusions about the purpose of my presence at the meetings: as an NHPRC fellow, I represented the commission’s commitment to training the next generation of editors who will continue to publish the documentation of our nation’s history.

But are NHPRC-supported training programs necessary to maintain the health of the profession? Certainly many documentary editors have learned on the job, and there are other training programs available, such as a new fellowship offered by Founding Fathers Incorporated. The NHPRC has an important role, though, in providing consistent support for documentary editing, while individual initiatives come and go. Not only do Camp Edit and the NHPRC fellowship provide basic instruction, but they also foster communication between senior and junior editors which, based on the interviews I conducted, went a long way to keep junior editors in the field and get them their next job. Given that the NHPRC has provided so much of the internal structure of documentary editing over the last fifty years, any further erosion of its training programs weakens the profession as a whole.


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