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# PRESERVATION LITERACY: NEEDS AND SOLUTIONS IN NEBRASKA

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## ABSTRACT

Preservation literacy is becoming crucial as Nebraska's collections age and as the body of Nebraska's written heritage grows. Preservation needs in the state have been identified by surveying libraries, historical societies, museums and records offices. Based on these surveys and on a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funded State Preservation Planning Project, solutions to shared preservation problems are being proposed. Goals are to improve housing and care of collections, to preserve key collections in Nebraska, to raise public awareness, and to provide a coordinated preservation program for state repositories.

Preservation literature is ripe with articles about the loss of our cultural heritage and the quiet death of history. An example of this poignant language appears in the Association of Research Libraries **Minutes of the 111th Meeting**, where Librarian of Congress James Billington writes about "The Moral Imperative of Conservation". (1) The paper describes ways in which preservation is particularly important in the United States. According to Billington, as a young country focused as we are upon the present rather than the past, preservation of our history is one of the few ways in which we may stave off barbarism. (2) He states at one point "We must remain at the forefront of the struggle to preserve memory lest we join the ranks of those who live off the laurels of the past rather than its cumulative wisdom. If free people do not preserve and celebrate humanity's memory, others may end up limiting and controlling it". (3)

Though this is highly dramatic language, there is indeed a crisis. As the 21st century approaches in Nebraska, librarians, archivists and other professionals responsible for protecting the state's written heritage are finding a preservation crisis. This becomes apparent in the day-to-day experiences of librarians when patrons bring damaged volumes to circulation points. It becomes apparent as materials are photocopied for interlibrary loan, and book spines crack. It becomes apparent as collections are shelved or inventoried.

Throughout the state, and indeed the world, there are now more books than ever that fall from their covers because of inferior publisher bindings. There are more books and papers that crumble because the paper is acidic than at any other time in our history. There are volumes that can no longer be rebound, and last copies of important historical papers that can no longer be touched because they are disintegrating in uncontrolled environments. And finally, there are simply more books and documents than ever before, which implies that these problems will not simply disappear. (4)

When we see these conditions, librarians don't say "Ah ha! Here is yet more evidence of Nebraska's preservation crisis." We say, "Gee this book is in bad shape. I wonder if it's still in print, and if I can get another copy", or we say "let's send this for rebinding", or we say "this volume needs to be weeded". But in fact, we are witnessing the deterioration of Nebraska's written heritage. Everyday in Nebraska's libraries, choices are being made for treatment, for benign neglect, and for weeding. Often choices are made by instinct or tradition rather than as informed decisions. We need to move from looking at problem volumes as isolated events to seeing them as conditions of a broader dilemma.

*Editor's note: It is an honor to print the winner of this year's College and University Section selected paper competition. The paper addresses a problem that is not limited to academic libraries, but to all libraries not only in Nebraska but throughout the world. (This, too, as the author says of Billington's words, is highly dramatic landscape).*

This broader dilemma has part of its roots in the nineteenth century. In the mid-1800s, papermaking adopted new processes, introducing alum rosin sizing into paper production. This and the trend of using groundwood pulp resulted in papers that are acidic, and which self-destruct in 50-80 years. (5) Since Nebraska became a state during the second half of the nineteenth century, most of our written history has been produced on acidic paper.

### **DEFINITIONS**

**The Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language**, 2nd edition defines "literacy" as "the state or quality of being literate; ability to read and write". The phrase "preservation literacy" then might be defined as "the state or quality of being aware of preservation issues, concerns and solutions; the ability to recognize and apply appropriate measures to preserve collections". To illustrate this in a way that I hope will not be too oblique, I have borrowed a model from management literature and adapted it to apply to preservation literacy.

Gregory D. May and Michael J. Kruger present a "process paradigm for learning managerial mastery" in an article entitled "The Manager Within". (6) In this paradigm, there are four stages in which one passes to reach mastery. The first stage is "unconscious incompetence". This is a stage of mediocrity, in which the individual is satisfied with the status quo and operates from opinions and beliefs. The individual must move from this stage to the next one, "conscious incompetence", in which there is awareness of self-deficiencies, in order to shift from a perspective of reaction to one of proaction. Once this later transformation occurs, the individual moves to a third stage—"conscious competence". In this stage the individual commits oneself to being effective and is empowered to act. The fourth stage, "unconscious competence", is where the individual has managerial mastery. (7)

Adapting this, we might propose that Nebraska's collections caretakers need to progress through similar stages, moving from a state of preservation illiteracy to a mastery of preservation literacy. In a preservation literacy paradigm, the first stage of "unconscious incompetence" can be described thus: the librarian is satisfied with the current condition of collections, and believes that preservation is not applicable to his/her collection. This individual confuses preservation with conservation, and feels that nothing in his/her collection is really valuable enough to preserve—failing to look at the collection as an investment by an institution that needs to be protected.

In the second stage on the road to preservation literacy, conscious incompetence, the librarian realizes that the collection needs to be preserved, and begins to gather preservation facts related to specific individual preservation problems. As facts are received, the librarian begins to treat individual items or to cope with the specific situation that prompted initial interest. In doing so, the librarian realizes the potential for establishing a preservation program within the library.

In the third stage of preservation literacy, conscious competence, the librarian begins to establish preservation policies for the whole collection. The librarian moves from a crisis perspective to one in which planning takes precedence.

In the final stage, unconscious competence, the librarian masters preservation literacy. Established preservation policies are operating smoothly, and preservation is taken for granted to be part of collection management.

How can we in Nebraska begin to move from preservation illiteracy towards preservation literacy? By looking at history, we may be able to see the future.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY**

In 1987, the Director of the Nebraska State Historical Society, James Hanson, contacted Nebraska Library Commission (NLC) Director John Kopischke and the Dean of the University Libraries at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), Kent Hendrickson to propose that monies donated to the Society be used to construct a conservation center in Omaha. He asked them whether libraries in Nebraska would be interested in using the center, and if so, how. As a result, staff members Jacqueline Mundell (NLC) and Katherine Walter (UNL) were asked to gather the necessary information.

(Preservation, cont.)

A survey was quickly distributed to a sampling of libraries in the state. Most respondents indicated preservation education was their primary need. Book repair and preservation microfilming were also considered high priorities. To a large extent these needs were outside the scope of the conservation center being proposed, but were perceived by the Commission and the University Libraries to be complementary to such a center.

As a result of this initial survey, the Commission and the University Libraries, UNL sought key agencies in the state that seemed to have similar concerns, and formed the Nebraska Documents Preservation Advisory Council in 1988. The other members of the Council at that time included the Nebraska Records Management Division of the Secretary of State's Office; the State Archives; NEBASE; the State Historical Society; the Nebraska Literacy Heritage Association; the Nebraska Library Association; the Nebraska Conservation Committee; PICKLE; and the Nebraska Library Systems. Since then, the Council has expanded to include the Nebraska Humanities Council and the Nebraska Museums Association. An invitation has also been extended to the Nebraska Association of County Officials.

To a large extent, the group began as an information sharing body. Gradually, however, as representatives of these diverse groups met, similar concerns were raised time and again. Based on these concerns, a number of projects were undertaken. First, a 1980 survey on disaster preparedness was updated, and distributed to libraries throughout the state, to determine what progress had been made. Second, the Council began to raise the consciousness of key state agencies about the importance of alkaline paper, and began to seek a sponsor for an alkaline paper bill at the state level. Third, the Council offered workshops on preservation at Nebraska Library Association conferences. Through the Nebraska Library Commission representative, the Council recommended additional audio-visual programs on preservation for NLC's AV Loan Program. And, last, but not least, the Council began to pursue funding to develop a state preservation plan.

Funding came in July 1990, from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Preservation. The Nebraska Library Commission served as the designated lead institution in the state, and the Nebraska Documents Preservation Advisory Council functioned as the board. The grant was particularly exciting because Nebraska, Massachusetts and North Carolina were the first states to receive grants for state preservation planning from NEH.

The grant project for Nebraska offered the opportunity to survey populations not reached in previous efforts (e.g. museums and public records offices). Lisa Fox, a nationally-recognized preservationist from SOLINET, Inc., was hired as consultant for the project. To assist in planning, delegates from a variety of different types of repositories were brought together at two conferences to discuss needs and solutions. Publication of an action agenda based on the surveys and the discussions is the final phase of the grant project. Publication will occur in Summer 1991.

#### **WHAT THE SURVEYS FOUND**

The 1987 survey sampled 12% of the 464 public, academic and special/institutional libraries in Nebraska. Services requested by library directors included: educational materials/workshops (71%); book repairs or referrals to conservators (55%); and, preservation microfilming (49%). Other categories chosen included: deacidification (42%); disaster assistance (37%); encapsulation services (33%); disaster preparedness training (28%); reformatting to optical disk (22%); and art conservation (15%).

Some memorable quotes from the surveys were these:

"We are sadly lacking in a disaster plan, what to do and how. The intentions...are good, but we need some leadership to get us started".

"A few staff members have some knowledge and training, but not sufficient to really organize or implement an ongoing program".

"We have old materials that should be taken care of but it will be a new project and we have a lot to learn as to how to proceed".

"We feel that our library's most pressing preservation needs are a general awareness of preservation concerns, more training in proper book repair, and development of a disaster preparedness plan".

and, "The Board felt that at this time, there was nothing they could think of to preserve".

In 1980, a survey of libraries revealed that only 6 libraries in the state had disaster plans. In 1988, the Commission, the UNL libraries and the Nebraska State Historical Society conducted a follow-up survey of libraries and county historical societies to see how many had developed disaster preparedness plans for collections in the meantime. **Nebraska Preservation Newsletter**, v. 6, no. (Fall 1988) reported that 20 of the 271 responding institutions indicated that they had plans. (8) The twenty institutions included two academic libraries, three public libraries, ten special/institutional libraries, two law libraries and three county historical societies. Later, one of the public libraries called to say that they didn't have a disaster plan after all. The plans in law libraries and most of the special/institutional libraries turned out to be written measures for evacuating people rather than for saving collections.

Surveys of museums and public records offices in Nebraska were mailed in September 1990 as part of the statewide preservation planning grant project. These surveys focused on environmental conditions, storage and handling practices. Responses were discouraging. For example, one museum reported its average temperature in summer as "80-90 degrees" and the average winter temps as "whatever the outside temperature is". One public records office reported its average summertime temperature as 100 degrees. A number of respondents indicated that though their facilities had a heating ventilation and air conditioning system, the HVAC was turned off part of the time. Optimum temperature for composite collections is a constant 68 degrees Fahrenheit, plus or minus 2 degrees, according to the National Archives of the United States. (9)

The National Archives recommends 45-50% relative humidity for composite collections. (10) As a further illustration of the environmental problem in collections-holding agencies, 55% of the museums and 79% of the public records offices in Nebraska lacked any humidity controls at all. (11)

Results relating to fire protection and disaster preparedness were also disheartening. When asked what kind of fire detection/suppression system public records offices had near records, the category with the most responses were "none" (47%). 11 reported that they had fire extinguishers. 3 reported having smoke alarms. Museums also fared badly on this question. 61% reported having no fire suppression systems. In spite of these figures, very few institutions reported having disaster plans—13% of the museums and 6% of the clerks offices. (12)

## SOLUTIONS

Survey results were provided to 42 delegates who gathered in Lincoln, Nebraska for the First Nebraska Statewide Preservation Planning Conference, October 3-5, 1990. Delegates represented many institutions or organizations with responsibility for paper collections. Among them were librarians from academic, special and public libraries, records managers from the public and private sectors, elected officials, archivists, museum and historical society directors, historians and binders. As might be expected, the survey results confirmed the fears of many of the participants. Discussions over the course of two days were free ranging, and yet the amount of consensus reached was gratifying.

Delegates felt strongly that a centralized preservation program serving all types of records repositories was the single most important need. They advocated a "Preservation Coordinator" to provide educational programs, as well as information and referral services. Gradually, a "State Office of Preservation" was envisioned, with field services and coordination of preservation projects identified as roles for this office. Delegates decided that the coordinator's position could be in any agency with a state-wide mission as long as the director of the agency had a commitment to serving all types of repositories.

As might be expected, improving housing and care for all documentary collections was high priority. Preservation education programs were considered vital. Delegates concluded that housing and care of collections in Nebraska were unintentionally bad. Librarians, archivists, public records office staff and museums curators were seen as well-meaning, but uninformed. Many ways of distributing preservation information were discussed, such as presenting

programs on preservation topics at professional conferences. One of the more innovative suggestions was to investigate the possibility of using the NEB SAT connections on the UNL campus to deliver preservation programs via satellite to remote sites. Creating model curricula for workshops on "care and handling", "commercial binding", "holdings maintenance" and "book repair" was suggested as well.

Identifying key collections to preserve was another concern of delegates. Collection analysis efforts were seen as important initial steps in this process. "Last copy" alerts were advocated by some. There was considerable concern about providing quality reformatting services in Nebraska for collections deemed important. For example, an expanded role for the Nebraska Records Management Division in providing preservation microfilming services for municipalities was proposed as one antidote to poor quality microfilming from commercial enterprises in the state.

Many legislative initiatives were suggested. These ranged from seeking alkaline paper legislation for state and local government agencies to lobbying for legislation that would authorize county records offices to levy a service fee, to be used for care and handling of the records. Candid assessments of the economic environment in the state helped ground the discussion in reality, as did a presentation entitled "The Legislative Process: How to Make it Work for You" by State Senator LaVon K. Crosby, District 29.

In order to be effective in lobbying, it was suggested that building a strong base of public awareness of preservation problems would be necessary. Public services announcements, preservation publicity packets and speakers bureaus were all touted. Delegates even suggested that special efforts be made to reach out to grade school children, on the theory that kids teach their parents, and that children grow up to be voters.

Many ideas with great potential were raised, and by the end of the first conference, there was a great deal of excitement about the project. A draft action agenda based on the discussions was prepared by the consultant over the winter months, and became the centerpiece of the second statewide preservation planning conference in February. Delegates returned to look at their thoughts on paper, and spent a long, but productive day criticizing, reconstructing and lauding the state plan. As mentioned earlier, the revised document, entitled "A Preservation Action Agenda for Nebraska", is soon to be published, and will be available this summer.

### CURRENT INITIATIVES

The action plan calls for the continued existence of an expanded Nebraska Documents Preservation Advisory Council. In fact, in the plan, the Council is called to coordinate preservation activities until a state coordinator position is secured. This is not anticipated before 1996 due to the timing of Nebraska's biennial budget cycles.

As the challenge of implementing the state preservation plan begins, the Council had had recent cause to celebrate. At the behest of the Council, Senator Crosby introduced Legislative Resolution 45, a resolution calling for the use of alkaline permanent paper in state and local governments. It was unanimously approved by the Legislature on 11 March 1991.

Strategies for educating librarians and other professionals are described as ongoing in the plan. A number of them are already happening or will be happening in the next year:

1. The Nebraska Library Commission's Audiovisual Loan Program now offers videos and slide/tape shows on a wide range of preservation topics. Subjects include brittle paper, disaster preparedness, basic conservation procedures, care and handling, and more advanced conservation techniques. These are available to libraries and other interested organizations or institutions.

2. The Nebraska Library Commission has begun printing articles on preservation in **Overtones** on a quarterly basis. The first one appeared in the January/February 1991 issue.

3. **Nebraska Preservation Newsletter** articles are shared with other newsletter editors, and are being picked up by non-library audiences such as AIIM and ARMA chapters in Nebraska.

4. Nebraska Documents Preservation Advisory Council is collecting informational materials

(such as flyers and handouts) on preservation, which are distributed as needed when libraries or other agencies call with questions. The Nebraska State Historical Society's paper conservator, Cathy Atwood, is a key resource person for the Council and for the Nebraska preservation community at large.

5. The University Libraries, UNL, has agreed to start a cooperative buying program to provide preservationally-sound supplies at a reduced price. A number of models are being considered.

### CHALLENGES

*"The board feels that at this time, there is nothing that they could think of to preserve".*

—Anonymous

In many ways this quote is very humbling. It symbolizes the challenges that preservation educators must overcome to reach the preservationally illiterate, the unconsciously incompetent. In Nebraska, a young state with fewer written treasures of the past than states in the original colonies, the importance of preservation seems remote. It becomes understandable when it is seen as part of the commonplace world of collection management. A good illustration of this is a library's binding program. Librarians throughout Nebraska send materials to commercial binderies, and yet few of them think that binding is a preservation activity. In fact, it is the biggest ticket preservation activity of most research libraries.

The state preservation action agenda lays a foundation upon which preservation literacy in Nebraska can be built. Opportunities to learn will be abundant as the strategies in the document are implemented, but we must learn to apply our knowledge. We must recognize the gravity of the situation and consciously choose to make preservation an integral part of our library programs. To use the words of James Billington, we must adopt the "moral imperative" of preservation. (13)

### FOOTNOTES

1. James H. Billington, "The Moral Imperative of Conservation", Association of Research Libraries. **Minutes of the 111th Meeting**, Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 1988, pp. 5-12.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
4. There are many articles on preservation that refer to these problems. Two articles I recommend are: Jan Merrill-Oldham, "Preservation in Research Libraries, a New Approach to Caretaking", **New Library Scene**, v. 5, no. 6, Dec 1986, p.1+; and, Carolyn Clark Morrow, "Preservation Comes of Age", **Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information**, 34th ed., 1989/90, pp. 71-76.
5. Chandru J. Shahani and William K. Wilson, "Preservation of Libraries and Archives", **American Scientist**, v. 75 (May-June 1987), pp. 240-242.
6. Gregory D. May and Michael J. Kruger, "The Manager Within", **Personnel Journal**, v. 67 (Feb 1988), pp. 57-65.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
8. Katherine L. Walter, "Disaster Preparedness in Nebraska Libraries and County Historical Societies", **Nebraska Preservation Newsletter**, v. 6, no. 4 (Fall 1988), pp. 1-2.
9. Lecture by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Supervisory Conservator, NARA at the National Archives Preservation Institute, San Bruno, CA, Nov. 1, 1990. ANSI standards for environmental conditions are currently being drafted.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Nebraska Documents Preservation Advisory Council, A Preservation Action Agenda for Nebraska, draft 01/29/91, p. 7.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
13. *Op cit.*, Billington, pp. 5-12.

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