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Who We Are as Documentary Editors

Beverly Palmer

When I say I'm a documentary editor living in Los Angeles County, most people assume I'm talking about film, not old-fashioned paper. So I've had to explain myself to the world. That "world" can be a faculty colleague, an administrator, a relative, other scholars, or someone I converse with briefly on an airplane.

I sent Ron Bosco an e-mail asking why I was chosen for this panel, but he never answered (deliberately he later told me). I thus concluded that because all my work has been at small colleges, and I've taken on various identities with each of my projects, I would present a different perspective for this panel. Moreover, unlike Thomas Jefferson or Emerson, none of my subjects is a household name. I apologize if this presentation is mostly autobiographical.

I'll begin with the world of the Claremont Colleges. I have been a non-tenured professor of writing & later director of a writing program at two of these colleges, Pitzer and Pomona. At both colleges, I've had to persuade administrations to provide cost-sharing (and for NHPRC grants, no overhead) for my projects. I've been reasonably successful for several reasons: 1) familiarity with the administrators—we know everybody in these small colleges and I've been around the Claremont Colleges a while—; 2) luck; 3) asking for modest sums in grant applications; 4) knowing that the quid pro quo was my contribution to the colleges as a writing teacher.

The History Department at Pomona has been supportive as long as I didn't ask for much in outright cash contributions. Most of my colleagues there have not expressed especial interest in my work, but have been happy to have the published volumes in the departmental library. Occasionally I've been asked to visit a class to talk about editing. Fortunately, interest has come from the Claremont Graduate University History Department. One faculty member there has wanted students to have experience with documentary editing and seeing a volume through to publication, and so has awarded funds for three different assistants, beginning with the Mott project. I've also lectured to graduate students there. Occasionally a history faculty member at Pitzer has sent a student to look at documents I've gathered.

In the world outside the Claremont Colleges, my subjects have understandably attracted different audiences, but not always the ones I'd expected. It's been fairly serendipitous.

For Charles Sumner project I found that, unfortunately, most scholars are unaware of the treasure trove of letters to Sumner in the 85 reel microfilm edition. For example, I met Louis Menand when he gave a talk at Pomona and told him about letters from Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. to Sumner, letters of which he was unaware. Ultimately he consulted them for his book, *The Metaphysical Club*.

In contrast, Thaddeus Stevens has generated lots of interest in his two home towns in Pennsylvania, Gettysburg and Lancaster. We even had a conference celebrating Stevens's bicentennial in Lancaster in 1992 as Leslie Rowland and Ray Smock, who spoke at the conference, may recall. Currently folks in Lancaster trying to raise funds to restore Stevens's house, along with decaying downtown there, so I'm occasionally consulted for that project. A Stevens fan—and surprisingly, there are quite a few, including Studs Terkel and Bob Dylan!—has started the Thaddeus Stevens Society in Gettysburg and we stay in close touch; I often consult Stevens documents to answer questions.

Of course I'm always glad to see in a biography or study of Civil War when a scholar cites either the published volumes or microfilm editions of Sumner or Stevens documents. And I'm disappointed when these editions are not recognized (do scholars "pretend" to visit archives but only consult our volumes?). I've written a couple of polite letters to authors calling attention to these editions but have received no response.

Lucretia Mott has of course generated interest because of her prominence in the woman's rights movement. I have worked closely with Quakers who enthusiastically supported the project, chiefly the chief curator at Swarthmore who supplied the project with photocopies of all Mott's papers without charge, an enormous contribution. Quakers have also supported the project financially.

Our newsletters for Stevens and Mott generated a bit of money and some interest. I enjoyed this kind of outreach and wonder about newsletters' success in other projects.

Editing the Anna Quincy diary was easier to explain to outsiders. It wasn't necessary to justify the diarist's significance. Instead, I found that the word *diary* triggers a nod of recognition even with an obscure person like Anna Quincy. However, with the letters of Florence Kelley, the first question I get is not about letters but who is Florence Kelley?

At Camp Edit one summer, an intern asked me if I was some kind of gypsy, roaming from project to project. It seems I'm not a typical docu-

mentary editor. I can only conclude that the various figures whose documents I've edited have provided me with a wide variety of ways to explain what I'm doing.