

Plenary Remarks by Raimund E. Goerler, Society of Ohio Archivists, April 5, 2013

SOA at Forty-Five: Reflections and Recollections of Its Past and Future

In 1986, when I had more hair, a trimmer waistline, and a darker beard, I attended the 50th anniversary of the Society of American Archivists in Washington, D.C. At one of the gala events, I listened to a panel of elderly archivists who had been present at SAA's founding in 1936. One remarked, I hope as a joke, that if he had known then what the organization would become years later, he probably would have been elsewhere rather than at the organization's founding!

Unlike the gentleman cited a moment ago, I was not present when SOA began. In fact, I was still a history major at the University of Buffalo who expected to teach at a high school somewhere. Nevertheless, I have been a member of this organization since 1976 and have written a history of SOA. Today, my remarks will focus on the origins of the SOA, and offer both recollections and reflections about its history. In addition, I will comment about some changes in the archival profession that have taken place in the last three decades.

THE FOUNDING OF SOA

February 27, 1968 dawned like many days in February—cold and cloudy. Yet, that cloudy day would prove worthy of celebration by archivists in Ohio today. Then and in Cleveland, five people assembled and discussed creating a professional association for those who worked with or had a direct interest in historical and archival documentation. They were Bruce Harding (who had become the first archivist of OSU in 1965), Kermit Pike, who had begun working at the WRHS when he was a graduate student in 1964; Ruth Helmuth of Western Reserve University, who became the first archivist there in 1964. Also attending were John Reed, the archivist of Ohio Wesleyan University, and Ken Davison, professor of History at Heidelberg College. Certainly, the first three, (Harding, Pike, and Helmuth) were to have a big influence on my career in archives.

All five shared a common interest in archives and history and a concern about the lack of educational opportunities for archivists in Ohio. During the 1960s the archival profession in the United States and in Ohio experienced unprecedented growth. In this period, colleges and universities began to develop archival programs, as they faced centennial celebrations and as their growth in enrollments, staffing and programs quickened the volume of record-keeping and aggravated the challenge of keeping and accessing records. In addition, expanding history departments (yes, they did so once) looked for documentary materials, especially in social history, that students and faculty could use in teaching and research .

When the decade began, Ohio had some 32 historical repositories but only the Western Reserve Historical Society and the Ohio Historical Society reported having holdings of more than one million items. Many collections remained hidden to users because of a lack of trained professional staff to arrange and describe them, let alone protect them and add to them. In this era, there really were historical treasures largely because researchers needed heroic efforts just to find them!

In October of 1966 Bruce Harding organized a workshop for aspiring college and university archivists at The Ohio State University. A year later, Ruth Helmuth organized a second workshop, this time at Case Western University. The success of these workshops led to the discussions in February 1968 about creating a statewide organization that provided educational opportunities every year and at low cost for archivists in Ohio.

By the end of that day in February thirty-five years ago, these five founders, (Davison, Harding, Helmuth, , Pike , and Reed.), young professionals all of them, had agreed to form an organization that included both manuscript curators and college archivists. Although they could not agree on a name for that organization, they did agree that they would work on drafting a constitution and present it and a slate of officers for election in the spring of 1969. First, however, they would plan another workshop of interest to archivists, this time at Ohio Wesleyan University in October of 1968. Registrants at that workshop, and those who attended the previous two, could be the membership of the organization on the verge of creation.

On May 28, 1968 Ruth Helmuth and Kermit Pike met again in Cleveland. Joining them was David Larson, of the Ohio Historical Society. David had been a graduate student at Western Reserve University, worked with Kermit Pike at the Western Reserve Historical Society, and had joined the Ohio Historical Society in 1965. This troika drafted a statement for the founding for “the Society of Ohio Archivists” and issued a press release on July 1. The purpose of the Society included “the exchange of information, the coordination of activities, and the improvement of professional competence in archives in the State of Ohio.” This statement and response cards were sent initially to forty likely members. A second mailing went to members of the Ohio Academy of History, the Ohio membership list of SAA, the Special Library Association, and members of history departments on Ohio campuses.

On October 28, 1968, the third workshop for archivists took place at Ohio Wesleyan University in cooperation with the National Archives and Records Service, which provided the speakers and paid their travel expenses. Topics included restoring archival materials and an introduction to basic archival equipment and supplies.

Although no record of attendance for this workshop exists, the results must have been encouraging enough to spur the organizational meeting of the Society of Ohio Archivists. This took place at the Ohio Historical Society on May 5, 1969. Presented as “New Frontiers for Archives and Manuscripts” the morning session focused on microfilm publication of manuscript collections. In the afternoon, topics were computer applications and oral history. Ninety three people attended the meeting.

At lunch a business meeting took place that led to approving the constitution of SOA and electing of the first officers and the first Council. Gerald Ham, of the Wisconsin Historical Society and Secretary of the Society of American Archivists as well. Not surprisingly, David Larson was President, Kermit Pike became Vice President, and Ruth Helmuth served as secretary.

At the Council meeting of November 14, 1969, SOA Council decided to publish its own newsletter, to appear each fall and spring. Efforts to have a joint publication with the Ohio Academy of History had failed. Kermit Pike would be the editor and the newsletter would be compiled at the WRHS. Not decided was a name. Near the end of the Council meeting “The Primary Source” almost became its title. Historians, after all, outnumbered archivists and manuscripts curators. Sometime before the spring meeting in Heidelberg, the name became “The Ohio Archivist.”

In the Presidents Column of the first issue of The Ohio Archivist, President David Larson summarized the work of the past two years:

“During the past two years since the Society of Ohio Archivists was established, the organization has developed all the official characteristics of other trade and professional organizations . The SOA has adopted a constitution and bylaws, elected its first group of officers and council members, held three regular scheduled meetings (with an average attendance of 80) conducted nine council meetings, incorporated under Ohio Law, adopted a dues provision, recruited a stable membership roster, scheduled meeting sites for the next two years, adopted two special projects, and started publishing a biannual newsletter.” SOA membership in 1970 and 1971 totaled 134 and 141 respectively.

To this point, the history of SOA may seem straightforward, even linear. Young and talented professionals saw a problem, that is educating and training archivists in Ohio. They came together to discuss the challenge, and boldly, even selflessly, agreed to invest time and energy to create an organization to educate, train, and coordinate those who had an interest or responsibility in archival administration and historical collections. However, history—like life itself—is rarely a straight road but includes paths and directions not taken. To say this another way, there is at least one “what if” in the birthing of SOA that has great significance.

As noted earlier, the Society of American Archivists had been founded in 1936 and played an important role in founding SOA. It sponsored a workshop at Ohio Wesleyan that future members of SOA attended. In addition, Gerald Ham, a leader of SAA, presided over the business meeting that adopted the constitution of SOA and elected its leadership.

Yet in the deliberations of the founders of SOA, in the archives of the organization itself, are documents that point to even closer ties that never developed. In 1968 members of the Steering Committee, that is those who sought to organize SOA, petitioned the Society of American Archivists for affiliation. They hoped to receive national recognition from peers and some tangible benefits. In fact, SAA did provide a list of SAA members living in Ohio, whom SOA contacted and asked to join. Also, SAA did announce plans for setting up the Society of Ohio Archivists in the October 1968 issue of *The American Archivist*.

SOA, however, wanted even more from the national organization. Bruce Harding, one of the steering committee members, proposed that SOA would become a formal affiliate of SAA and that the two groups would cooperate in collecting dues. In other words, every member of SOA would also become a member of SAA in this common effort.

Why Harding’s proposal did not succeed is a matter for speculation. One thought is that SAA was uncertain how to deal with regional associations. After all having regional and statewide affiliates presented complexities of membership and organizational leadership to SAA. As an example, there might be a federated structure in which each state or regional association had representation. In the end, SAA encouraged the regionals and statewide organizations but did little or nothing to bring archivists into one professional “tent.” SOA and other state and regional associations developed largely on their own. Not until 1974 did the Society of American Archivists create a Committee on Regional Archival Activity, which expired years ago. Sadly, I think the archival profession and SAA are weaker, especially as advocates for the record and for history, because the national organization did not include the regionals as affiliates. To use an historical comparison, the difference is greater than the difference between the national government under the Articles of Confederation and the government of the Constitution.

Part II: Reflections and Recollections about the history of SOA

Any organization that is forty-five years old, like a person of that vintage, has more history than a presentation of forty-five minutes or so can admit. Rather than bore the audience with a chronology or fact stumbling on fact, I prefer to mention my own history with SOA and offer some comments about the organization.

My connection to SOA began with my first professional position, as manuscripts specialist at the Western Reserve Historical Society in the spring of 1976. The previous spring I received my doctoral degree from Case Western Reserve in history, with a supporting field in archival administration under Ruth Helmuth. As it happened SOA met in Cleveland that year; staff at WRHS, were not only encouraged but expected to attend SOA meetings. This was both for professional growth and a reflection of Kermit Pike of WRHS, my boss, was one of its founders. Apart from this memory, I do recall there was some

crisis about the SOA newsletter being available at the spring meeting. To save money, the Ohio Archivist mailed at less than first-class, with attendant adventures in delivery.

Another of my recollections was that both SOA and the Midwest Archives Conference were about the same age. Even though many archivists in Ohio joined both organizations, there was rivalry between the two. This rivalry became especially clear in softball games that pitted the two organizations against one another at some of the MAC meetings. In one game, I remember that Maynard Brichford a leader in SAA, the dean of university archivists, and a power in the Midwest Archives Conference made an outstanding catch in the outfield against SOA. Some of my team accused Maynard of buying a new pacemaker that much improved his energy for this rivalry alone.

Once a fly ball came to me in left field and drifted foul. I raced after the ball, and took a tumble on the sidewalk. Captain Bob Smith, from the Wright State Archives who usually played shortstop, ran to me and asked how I was. Then he chastised me for not catching the ball! Happily, that game ended when another fly ball came to me in left field and I dove to my left and managed to catch it to save an SOA victory over MAC.

Now, that recollection of a rivalry between MAC and SOA seems quaint. Many members of SOA, including Barbara Floyd and I, reached leadership positions in MAC. Still, no member of SOA living in Ohio has ever been president of MAC. Does MAC still hold a grudge about that one game?

In 1980, I won election to Council of SOA. Two years later, I served as Secretary-Treasurer, a position I held until 1984, when I became President. In those years, I remember there were two significant issues that threatened SOA. One was financial. Inattentiveness to keeping an accurate database of members and collecting dues had created a financial crisis that limited our programming. Because we could not afford to pay travel expenses for speakers, our programs featured only speakers from Ohio. While we know there are talented people in Ohio and the organization should give them a chance to speak, SOA should also keep its programs rich and attractive by bringing to the state distinguished people from elsewhere. Sadly, our finances temporarily limited what we could do for a few years. Nevertheless, I have always judged SOA programs on how well they have mixed Ohio speakers with national ones. Skimping on out-of-state speakers, although understandable, has always seemed a short-sighted economy to me.

Related to the financial dangers of those times was the challenge of the SOA Newsletter. Printing it and mailing it was a significant strain on the already strapped budget of SOA, no matter when it appeared. In 2001 a decision was made to publish it only on-line, with significant savings to the organization.

While digital publishing has become increasingly common in many professional and scholarly organizations as a financial strategy, I do wonder about whether the Ohio Archivist may have lost readership as a result. How many of us read the publication from cover to cover? How many of us even read it? In fairness, the number of publications on the Web and the time spent reading digital pages now makes reading the printed page special. More effort, I think, is needed to publicize the content of our professional publication. Perhaps authors should provide abstracts on the SOA listserv, much like movie trailers in a theater. After all, the goal of the Ohio Archivist should be to educate and inform and this may include more attention to marketing to make sure that our message is both attractive and received.

Another issue that was especially vexing during my presidential administration was support from the Ohio Historical Society. OHS had been a founder and strong supporter of SOA during its early years but from time to time enthusiasm appeared to wane under some of its leaders. In my time, I sensed more interest in MAC and in SAA than in SOA. My own feeling is there needs to be a strong connection

between SOA and the largest historical agency in the state. Happily OHS has done much for SOA, which my good friend Charlie Arp recounted in his article published in 2003. All of us should keep in mind that SOA, and the archival profession in Ohio, cannot flourish without a strong OHS to support the archival effort in the state.

Also in that article by Charlie Arp was the statement, “What the membership needed from SOA in 1968 is different from what we expect from the organization today, and our needs are different from those who will come after us.” I think the founders in 1968 would have been comfortable with the strategic plan put forth in 2009. Nevertheless, I do agree with that statement if Charlie meant that SOA must be in tune with the needs of its membership. To say this differently, I think SOA is challenged to make certain that membership and participation in the organization is of satisfactory value to the membership when compared with what is available at the regional and national levels.

A major difference in the professional landscape between now and thirty years ago is the number of organizations to which an archivist might belong—Special Libraries Association, Rare Books and Manuscripts, ARMA, and more. There is a competition for time, energy, and money on a scale that did not exist in 1968. Too often, I think, leaders from SOA (myself included) have kept membership but have been more active in regional and national organizations. SOA must find ways not only to collaborate with other organizations but also to make membership in the state organization attractive and worthy of time and energy.

The objective of the 2009 plan to increase membership by 20% seems especially bold to me because I doubt the number of archivists in the state has increased by 20% in the last four years. That plan did not point to any actions that might bring about the increase in membership. One idea, which I am testing as Vice President of the OSU Retirees Association, is employing undergraduate students in public relations. They are to develop an analysis of our strengths and weaknesses and develop a plan for strategic communication, especially to those new to retirement or on the verge of retiring. Getting the message out effectively also applies here. SOA might consider bringing in low cost and eager consultants that is students, to bring in a fresh perspective. This could be a “win win” for both the students and SOA.

Such external consultants could also evaluate SOA’s advocacy efforts. How effective is History Day in advancing the concerns of archivists? Could more be done to publicize SOA’s Merit Awards? Are we using social media effectively? While all of us are professionals in archival matters, we are not experts in communication and in marketing. Perhaps we need to spend a modest amount of money to bring in people from our universities in Ohio who study the field of strategic communication in organizations. It would be money well spent, I think.

Part III: Changes in the archival profession in Ohio

In my 34 years as an archivist, much has changed. Rather than list all the nearly countless changes, I will mention only three: the reshaping of archival perspective; the relationship between records management and archives; and advocacy for the archival profession and the historical record.

First, archives and archivists became more user-centered than when I remembered in my early career. An introductory class in archival administration in the 1970s would have stressed that archives had a memory role, both organizational and cultural. Identify the archives as the memory that is necessary for the institution or organization to work and the archives—and archivist—will prosper, or so we thought.

In recent years, books and articles have pointed out that memory, whether cultural or personal, is complex. Using it to advance archives is to oversimplify and to distort.¹ One reason is that there are different types of memory; another is that political forces, ideologies, and other causes can shape cultural memory. More importantly, the memory analogy for archives is essentially passive. It appears only when needed—a legal case, a dispute about the origins of a policy, or the interest of a single scholar. Its emphasis is on preservation and protection, and the archivist stands as the gatekeeper to the treasury of documentation that makes up evidential memory.

Today's archivists differ from their predecessors in that they are more assertive in seeking users and more flexible in working with them. User studies began in the 1980s, as did much of the literature about outreach. Now, it is fundamental for archival programs to integrate themselves with the primary roles of the institutions and organizations that host them. Teaching about and from the archives, hosting classes, posting exhibits on the Web and other work, is primary, not secondary, in the mission of the archives. So, too, is the use of social media such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, Twitter, and more that actively engage potential users and challenge archivists to help and make use of new users, especially as partners in description and administration. Kate Theimer's *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users* (SAA, 2011) is worthwhile reading that presents both case studies and thoughtful essays.

Much of this change to a user-centered model for archives may have developed from the impact of librarianship on archival work. In my early years as an archivist, many more archivists came with degrees in history and selected archival work as a second choice to a dwindling market for the history professors. That was true of me and all of my colleagues at the Western Reserve Historical Society.

In 1976, the task of describing archival and manuscript collections differed greatly from cataloging and managing print collections. A major stumbling block was that cataloging practice looked to the title page as the primary source of information and alas, collections of archives and manuscripts had no title pages. Researchers of manuscripts and archives called, wrote letters, checked lists in professional journals, and consulted the always out-of-date National Union Catalog of Manuscripts. Most historians relied on footnotes in the articles and books they read to guide them to primary sources of documentation.

MARC-AMC led the way in what was only the beginning in breaching the barriers between formats of information by providing common standards for description. After all, users of archives want efficient access to all types of content, preferably in a seamless and help-yourself fashion. Digitization of both print and manuscript collections quickened the pace of change by integrating formats and making finding aids widely available and 24/7.

While archivists took part in and helped to guide this change, library leaders had the budgets to invest and the strategic goals to bring it about. In 2003 the Association of Research Libraries, the largest libraries, officially embraced special collections. In brief, the ARL announced that member libraries should state in their communications that Special Collections were fundamental to the mission of the library, provide suitable funding and staffing, and include them in the overall strategic planning and library development. As more archivists graduated from library schools and held the MLS degree they helped strengthen the professional affinity between libraries and archives.

¹ See Hedstrom, Margaret, "Archives and Collective Memory: More than a Metaphor, Less Than an Analogy." in Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil, eds. *Currents of Archival Thinking* (Libraries Unlimited, 2010), p. 163-179.

Another major change from the 1970s has been the view among archivists of records managers. That generation of archivists referred to records managers as rivals who had different goals. While archivists concerned themselves with long-term value of records for legal, cultural, and historical and administrative reasons, records managers looked chiefly at costs and the less kept the better. Also, archivists dealt with records at the end of their life cycle; records managers took an interest in their creation and management while they existed as active records.

The differences between the professions have narrowed. Especially in Ohio, archivists had a special influence in records management, especially in policies for records retention and disposal. In many colleges and universities and other not for profit institutions, archivists became the records managers because their institutions had no special staff for records management. They took responsibility for compliance with state records laws that mandated that no one could destroy public records except by following approved records retention schedules. Legal concerns aside, the archivists, whether in public or in private institutions, had a vested interest in making certain that the repository did not fill up with useless records. Even curators at historical societies benefited from receiving records of businesses and other organizations that had records retention and disposition schedules.

In the 1970s in Ohio, a state records administrator and a state records commission reviewed and approved all records retention schedules, whether filed by State Liquor Bureau or The Ohio State University. A major development took place in the early 1990s when the State of Ohio exempted public colleges and universities from the state records program but not the requirements of state records laws. College and university archivists worked with the Inter-University Council of Ohio, which represented the public universities of the state, in creating a manual for decision-making about records retention. Based on the work of consultant Donald Skupsky, *Records Retention for Public Colleges in Ohio: A Manual* (1992), changed the basis of records retention policies. The new approach used specific state or federal laws and historical concerns to shape records schedules. Also, the manual focused chiefly on the functions of records—buying, paying, hiring, defending, and more—rather than only on the titles of records series. This made it easier to apply retention rules to records that varied in title from institution to institution.

Eventually, Ohio developed an extraordinary records retention manual, one that some states and institutions copied almost word for word. (I remember that a working group of archivists met in Columbus over a weekend and put finishing touches on the manual. Bottles of home brewed beer sustained a convivial and collegial atmosphere.) Further refinements led to an on-line manual with up-to-date database of laws and regulations. All in all, this was a great improvement over the government driven program of the 1970s and one for which archivists acting as records managers deserve credit.

Concerns about electronic records further moved archivists and records managers together. Because electronic records exist only in ever-changing hardware and software, rather than on static paper, decisions about long-term retention had to be made when creating the record. The life cycle idea that had been popular for so many years became irrelevant and even dangerous. If archivists waited until electronic records became inactive, the hardware and software needed to read them could be obsolete. Clearly, archivists had to work with records managers, administrators, and information technology professionals in the beginning of the design stage of systems that managed electronic records.

In 1998 the Ohio Electronic Records Committee began and consisted of archivists, records managers, and others interested in the topic. Leadership of the state archives, especially Charlie Arp, was critical in its early years. Gradually, the committee created guidelines and made them available on the web. A continuing concern is that the guidelines are statements of best practices and as useful as they are, they are not legal requirements. Such mandates are difficult when jurisdiction for record keeping in Ohio

involves not only state government but numerous counties, municipalities, and other public entities. The relative lack of leadership by the state government in records management further undermines efforts at coordination and compliance.

As an aside, the story of electronic records in Ohio brings one of my happiest professional memories to mind, the creation of an electronic records position at OSU. With the support of the Director of Libraries, I was able to create this position with joint funding from our Chief Information Officer. For neither was the position a high priority when compared to other needs. Yet, as a partial investment from each, it was a modest expense. For the position itself, this joint funding was a strategic success because it meant that the Chief Information Officer had a vested financial interest in making certain that position was effective. As a result, the electronic records archivist had more opportunities to meet with, cooperate, and network with individuals in the Information Technology side of the university than would have been possible if the position had the funding of only the libraries. In retrospect, I thought this model for creating the position of electronic records archivist was the direction that other institutions should take.

I now return to the final theme of this presentation. No account of the last three decades or so in Ohio would be complete without some attention to leadership, especially in advocacy, for the profession in the state. As the largest historical repository, the Ohio Historical Society played a leadership role in founding the Society of Ohio Archivists. In the 1960s and 1970s it led an effort to survey historical collections in Ohio, many of which were not in repositories, and created a network of repositories that stressed cooperation rather than competition. Alas, that spirit of initiative, with some exceptions such as the Ohio Memory project, disappeared as roughly thirty years of budget cutting lessened staff and undermined morale.

I think OHS is on the rebound and hopefully will remain a strong partner in the state's archival effort. Still, it may be worthwhile to consider the nature of archival advocacy in the state. One idea is to re-think the Ohio Historical Records Advisory Board and to fashion it as an instrument for advocacy. Changes in the bylaws have strengthened that organization. A program of re-grants, funded by the perennially threatened NHPRC, has been critical in the revival. Still, the Governor appoints its members and there is no budget, apart from what NHPRC provides and what OHS is willing to contribute in staff time. Besides, it has no presence in Ohio law. Perhaps it is time to consider fixing it statutorily as the coordinating agency and as the leading voice for archival and historical matters in Ohio. Perhaps its membership should be and broadened significantly. It should include SOA, representatives of small and large archival repositories, and the State of Ohio. In addition, there could be representatives of other organizations that protect the historical and evidential record. Sometimes, crises lead to new ways of thinking. Often, it leads to retirement.

Conclusion:

I prefer to close by offering some advice about SOA's history and celebrating its 50th anniversary. Like the proverbial shoemaker who neglected the feet of his own children, SOA has promoted the care of the state's historical record but been inattentive to its own history. A case in point is the otherwise informative website. Anyone looking at the site would not be aware that SOA has a written history that spans its first twenty-five years and another, although incomplete, that adds to that tally. Nor does the site have a listing of past officers and members of Council. Although there is a helpful listing of educational sessions of SOA, it ends in 2001.

Those failings are simple to correct. Perhaps someone should have the title and responsibility of SOA historian who would bring such lists up-to-date. More complicated is the writing of a history that spans the second twenty-five years, from 1993 to 2018. The one essay by Charlie Arp in 2003 refers to another which was not written.. Someone should update our history and I suggest a possibility. It should be someone who is a good writer and who has been active in SOA since 1993. That would exclude me but

there are others who could, and should, step forward. SOA should plan a major article in the Ohio Archivist, perhaps a special issue and one that has a printed version also.

Finally, I challenge you as members of SOA to begin thinking about the 50th anniversary in 2018. Important anniversaries often leave little that is worthwhile. Sometimes we refer to this as the “Cinderella Effect.” When the excitement of celebrating the anniversary ends, there is no enduring accomplishment. (Although when I used this in an archives class, one of my students thought that the lesson of that fairy tale was that no woman should put all her hopes in a man!) One example of the Cinderella story is the 200th anniversary of the State of Ohio which led to the painting of some barns and little more. At SOA’s Twenty fifth in 1993, the organization published a book that contained a set of essays about the future. That, too, is a direction I would not urge as the book represented a significant investment of money with little return. In fact, I wonder how many here are even aware of it.

I encourage you to begin thinking about what a worthwhile project for the 50th anniversary should be. Perhaps a first step would be to challenge the organization to fix parameters and criteria for evaluating proposed projects. This organization has enough talent and energy to do something great. Exactly what that anniversary project should be I do not know except that I encourage you to begin thinking about it. Perhaps that should be a topic for open discussion.

Finally, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about my recollections and reflections.