THE PERSONAL ARCHIVE :

ON RETRIEVING A NATIONAL CULTURAL RESOURCE

by Alfred de Grazia*

Watching friends pass, and seeing their personal archives dissolve into oblivion, are unhappy concomittants of the life of scholars and artists. "Their work lives on," but does it? If as much effort were put into carrying a person's work into the future as is put into keeping him breathing a few days longer, the American cultural heritage would be many times the richer. Not that it is really such an "either-or" proposition. It is more a matter of observing what happens when a member of the intelligentsia dies, and of inventing a new low-cost technology to ease the anxieties of death and survival, and simultaneously to benefit society.

The scenarios are well-known; I shall try to typify them. Professor Waldemar Benfait dies. He has taught at Wisdom University for twenty-five years and has been retired for seven years. He was an authority on African labor movements but was also a man of parts, President of the Mycological Society of Charlestown, it happens. As his executor and family settle down to enjoy his estate, following a period of mourning and letterwriting to his many colleagues, former students, and friends, they view uncomfortably the undisposed remnant -- seven file cabinets of papers going back even beyond his first appointment at Hackensack Community College.

His widow prompts the executor who prompts daughter Lucille who prompts her husband to "Please do something about Waldemar's manuscripts and papers. His whole life is in those files." Her husband urges Mrs. Benfait to call his colleagues who call the President of Wisdom University, who is full of sympathy and turns the matter over to the Dean "for Action."

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* Alfred de Grazia ~~is~~ wrote this article in 1980, when Research Professor of Social Theory at New York University. He draws upon his experience in information storage and retrieval, and as an editor and heavily published author, for ~~this~~ his article, which was inspired by the ~~recent~~ demise in close order of five friends with voluminous archives.

Nobody knows what is really in the files, cannot assess their values if they were to enter them, and, to tell the truth, don't want to do so. It's not only that the good Professor wrote "incomprehensibly," but he didn't interest them; he bored them when he was alive; it is a sad job as well; and his handwriting is indecipherable. Besides, they know nothing of processing and retrieving information, of scholarly networks and outlets, of publishing, or of distribution.

Everybody puts in time, energy, money. Nothing happens. The publisher, who had a contract regarding one formless manuscript, thinks he had a marginal deal at best with the live author, and no deal with a dead one. The President and the new Dean are preoccupied: Professor Goodfellow just died of a heart attack, and, a month earlier, Dean Highrise bit the dust. They, too, had archives. "Can't we let the matter ride and meanwhile store the stuff with the library?" they say.

Not that Dr. Stores, the Librarian, is pleased. He cannot afford to do much with the material. The microform revolution has not stopped the onrush of bulky acquisitions. He will wedge the files into a cranny and list its availability to scholars. Someday a student will come to awaken the dormant archive.

The new Dean does more. He advises the widow to send the manuscript that is almost ready to various publishers, and he hinself calls the University Press. With luck, if all are patient, a special editor is found for the most likely-looking manuscript, and, under some form of direct or indirect subsidy, a book will greet the public several years later.

Professor Benfait's literary estate has cost his family conflict, guilt, and money, and brought small gratification. It has done the same for the University. Something far less than the public value of his testament has been realized.

How typical is this scenario? How large is the problem? I have made some preliminary estimates. A typical archive will contain a) books, articles and clippings, organized topically; b) notes of lectures or on subjects and

discoveries, including in some cases journals and interviews, often containing ideas that break new ground, c) finished or partially finished articles and studies, that are c1) suited for a small circle of specialists, c2) suited for academic publication, c3) can be completed for commercial publication, or c4) books and articles making the rounds of publishers or in process of publication.

Examining them according to their preferred eventual disposition, we would like to see something published commercially, other work printed by academic presses, some put out for a network of perhaps 200 scholars, some material for retention and reproduction on demand, and the balance divided in topical lots and advertised as available free to persons working on the topics.

A purely speculative table can be suggested, as follows, embracing literary archives, but ignoring the important categories of creative art work, aesthetic and engineering designs, and musical compositions, which, pari passu, belong to the discussion. Many art objects, musical compositions, and designs go forever unrecognized or unused, or are destroyed. Publicists, free-lance intelligentsia and politicians can also be fitted to the plan.

It may be a fair guess that only one-hundredth of the cultural heritage represented in the archives of American intellectuals and artists is realized under the existing system of disposition.

The situation invites comparison with the attention and expenditures that go into retaining trivial business, government, and institutional documents. Thousands of acres of space, many millions of files, and many trillions of pages are managed by many thousands of employees. The files are enough to wind around the Earth's equator several times. It is one more bizarre facet of the same society that spends on armaments enough to feed the whole population of the world. Assuming creative work is estimable, the value lost in a decade must reach into the hundreds of millions of dollars. "The wheel will be reinvented" countless times.

ANNUAL HERITAGE OF ARCHIVES

	Average Personal Archive, number of pages		
	Great Archive	Substantial Archive	Small Archive
Published Before Demise (# pages)	3500	800	300
Suitable Outlets for Balance (pages)			
1) Commercial publication	1000	200	0
2) Academic publication	1500	500	150
3) Research publication	2000	800	500
4) Research depot repro.	2000	1000	500
5) Gifts to Workers	5000	2000	1000
Number cases per year (deceased leaving archives for processing)	20	200	10,000
Volume of material for processing	230,000	900,000	25,500,000

(Note: The archives of perhaps 400 artists, composers, designers, and publicists are not included.)

Should one take comfort in scepticism: "Isn't too much being published already?" This argument is easily countered by "Yes, but not the better stuff," and then debate is engaged on who is to say "better"? Often older scholars and artists are less pressed to produce, more modest, and then finally diffident and discouraged. But the work is there, and precisely in their case will a posthumous push be needed. Actually, posthumous evaluation and management are likely to be more straightforward and efficient (use-rational) than those accomplishable in the case of a living person, with whom ambition, fame, and money play hob while the publishing industry, so maladapted to scientific, scholarly, and artistic needs, wreaks havoc.

Let us examine one of the poorest cases, a tiny archive of dear Professor Chips, arriving in a carton at our office, after a call from his department Chairman, accompanied by a grateful note from his widow. It falls to Ms. Zamen to sort it out and proves to contain affectionate letters from former students, course outlines in American history, and a brief manuscript and complete bibliography and a set of notes on the invention of the tricycle. The archive and its inventory comes before a house committee on Thursday, between 11.00 and 12.00 hours, which decides to list as free offerings the letters in relevant bulletins (Is someone studying teacher-student relations?), and the course outlines; further, to assign an editor to get an evaluation and possibly dress up the manuscript for publication; finally, to announce the bibliography and notes in an appropriate listing medium, as available free to some interested scholar. The total cost of handling Professor Chips' literary estate comes to $180 plus 20% overhead allowance. There is no direct dollar income, although for a moment if seemed that American Heritage magazine might buy the article for $800 (half of which would have gone to the widow had she not released the archive free of encumbrances). Five years later, the definitive work on the history of transportation will carry some paragraphs, citing Professor Chips, on the lines of development into bicycles and side-car motorcycles. A cute design among the notes features an early tricycle for an elderly person and via the gift package it makes its appearance in a Department of Energy pamphlet! Thus is knowledge recycled.

At the other extreme there are great archives, like those of Picasso and Freud, which are so well preserved and husbanded that they will achieve full utilisation. Yet even for great archives of distinguished men, such experiences are exceptional. The archive of Charles E. Merriam, leader of the new political science at the University of Chicago, a founder of the Social Science Research Council, an advisor to Presidents, and a great human being, has been quite neglected. His case is of the majority among great archives.

The hypothetical table gives not only some idea of the bulk of the archive problem, but also a conception of its range. The net cost of handling an average great archive may be no more than $6000 plus overhead, that is, some thirty times the smallest archive. Hence it may not be necessary to make different, elaborate projections for the one as opposed to the other; they could be processed similarly through phases of screening, judging, negotiating, announcing, reproducing, and shipping.

There would appear to be little in the system to encourage the useless production of artistic, journalistic, and scientific product per se. On the other hand, the prospect, if such there were, that a person's creation would be ultimately communicated, would lead one to complete more work. If so, the work load of the archives executors would perhaps lessen, rather than increase.

The volume of work involved in all would be considerable. Some 900 commercial contracts might be dealt out by the archives foundation as "literary executors" and published. Even more would emerge from academic presses. (They would add about four per cent to all books published annually.) Most of their costs would be borne by the publishers. The research publications appearing in informal format with distributions in the low hundreds would cost less; but over 30,000 would be produced; perhaps thirty million dollars would be required for duplication and handling. The microform handling of deposits from which reproductions could be obtained would cost nearly the same and pay for themselves. The ten to thirty thousands gifts would require advertising, decisions, and shipping, amounting to perhaps two million dollars. A total budget for an archive operation for the whole country would

then be approaching $150,000,000. But cash outlays of no more than ten millions would be required.

Receipts would come from publishing contracts and cash sales; from institutions of prior connections; from cash gifts of estates and individuals; and from foundation and government grants. If the scheme were conceived in a form of term insurance, premiums varying with age would be paid in by individuals, who would hold the same benefits, payable after death. Possibly, with an insurance system, a person's college or affiliation might divide the cost of his posthumous archival management.

Alternatively one might designate the archival foundation to receive from his estate as a payment or bequest a sum of money to be applied to management of his archive, the sum (as in the case of the premium) to be adjusted to the estimated size and character of the archive. It is possible that senior creative people are more modest, or perhaps more intelligent, than the young and would prefer to spend their lives creatively, leaving professional managers to take up the burden of assuring their gifts to posterity. We ought not underestimate the extent to which the burden of managing one's own creative production reduces morale and production. Our late-lamented Benfait, Goodfellow, and Highrise might have been more creative in their later lives had they not become disgusted with editors, publishers, foundations, and publics.

Let us summarize what might be the balance sheet of an operation offering a sweeping solution to the personal archival problem:

	COSTS (in $ millions)
Commercial publication (assumed here)	40
Academic presses " "	40
Research publication	30
Microform publication	30
Gifts management	3
All other managements and overhead	7
Total	150

RECEIPTS (in $ millions)

1)	Commercial Publishers (more than break-even)	44
2)	Academic Publishers (less than break-even, i.e. with small subsidies)	36
3-4)	Cash sales (research publications and microforms)	60
5)	Gifts of Affiliated Institutions of the Deceased	3
6)	Gifts from estates and individuals	3
7)	Foundation grants	2
8)	Government grants (Foundations and Agencies)	2
	Total	150

The beneficiaries of such an archival plan would be numerous. If we may continue to invent figures for illustrative purposes, we can conjecture benefits to the deceased (15×10^3 per year); their families (10^4 per year); their institutional affiliates (10^6 per year); and the nation (25×10^8).

Employment of an insurance system would reduce the coverage of the creative population. It might be difficult to sell an additional $2000, say, of insurance coverage to an academic employee or independent artist and writer. Not only would some be unable to pay, but many would be characterologically disinclined to subscribe, regarding such an initiative as an admission of defeat, or as egotism.

Term life insurance, which rises annually, and most sharply in late life would appear to be the best model. A glance at the $10 millions required annually (to replace categories 5 to 8), if about 20,000 insured persons were

deceased annually, suggests that a premium of around $800 would be required in the seventieth year. A 10-payment insurance scheme might also be adopted, requiring some $200 per year, at any time of life.

It might seem that an insurance company would be economically inefficient at, say, 10,000 clients. Obviously that would not be true historically. Nor is it true today of numerous special types of corporate insurance, an airline's aircraft, for example. One cannot discount the possibility that many universities and other institutions would decide to pay for archival insurance for their faculty. Thus, if an average of ten members of the faculty die in the course of a year, the university may pay in some $25,000 annually. Putting aside any insurance plan, the same payments could be made as a simple purchase. The archival managers would be obligated to undertake all necessary services for persons leaving archives in the course of the year. Also, the transaction could be on a simple purchase-upon-decease basis.

All of the foregoing makes sense and a system can develop and prosper if the professional archives managers are well-organized, well educated in scientific and humanistic thought patterns, well-audited, and technologically alert. The total system might be "go" with as few as a hundred client archives a year, representing about $100,000 in costs and revenues. This probability brings the operation within reach of a consortium of colleges, or a foundation experiment, or a test by the national endowments for the arts and humanities.

In retrospect, now that the concept is made explicit and its possibilities examined in a preliminary fashion, we may wonder that the creative institutions of the country have never taken systematic action to develop personal archives. It would add too much to analyze this question here, for it has to do with myths about publishing, about age and creativity, and other matters.

We would need to expose the self-delusions and collective illusions in regard to conventional publishing systems and scientific communication networks. We would have

to show how, in this large area, we are, so to speak, using expensive and inadequate dentifrices when baking soda would do as well or better. I think it prudent to leave unsaid such reflections; they can, after all, be published by the professional managers who will be charged with the disposition of my archive.