

APPENDIX 4

PROJECT REPORT:

Special Archives Research Rooms

ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS:

Cartographic & Architectural Branch (NNSC)

Motion Picture, Sound & Video Branch (NNSM)

Still Picture Branch (NNSP)

DATES:

April 23-27, 1990 (NNSM)

April 30-May 4, 1990 (NNSP)

May 7-11, 1990 (NNSC)

METHOD:

Interview researchers who use the reference rooms in each branch during one typical week. Interview findings are supported by observations of staff/patron interactions and interviews with staff.

NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS:

NNSC - 18; NNSM - 30; NNSP - 28

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Questionnaire -- Special Archives
2. Register of Records Requested by Researcher (NNSP)
3. Map of Still Pictures Research Room
4. Codebook -- Special Archives Research Rooms

Archives & Museum Informatics will provide copies of the attachments to the original appendices to any reader upon request. Contact:

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HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS:

- * A high proportion of the people who use the Special Archives Research rooms (73.7%) are engaged in work-related projects rather than scholarly or personal projects.
- * Researchers who use these facilities depend far less on informal word of mouth sources of information to discover the existence of relevant records than people who use textual records, preferring instead to consult guides and other published sources.
- * World War II records in any media are extremely popular with researchers.
- * Researchers tend to seek assistance and advice in three broad areas: routine procedural assistance with equipment and services; obtaining reproductions; and advanced consulting on the content of the records or the structure of agency-produced finding aids.
- * Many researchers use resources in both the Still Picture Branch and the Motion Picture Branch in a single project. Similarly, many researchers who make use of either branch also use textual records in the National Archives in the same project.
- * The fact that most records available in the three branches are in the public domain is a primary attraction for researchers, who claim they will endure many obstacles to avoid having to deal with the copyright law.
- * To a much greater degree than in any other units of the National Archives, the reproduction of holdings is a key access issue. The vast majority of researchers in all three branches cannot effectively make use of the available holdings unless they can obtain reproductions in a timely manner. Similarly, researchers feel that the failure of the National Archives to produce use copies of motion pictures and sound recording or to establish mechanisms for the direct screening original records is a major access barrier.

FINDINGS

The quantitative analysis is presented below under four headings: who uses the research room, what records are used, the research process, and assessments of researcher experience.

Who Uses the Research Room

Researchers were asked to state the purpose of their visit as it pertained to the records they were currently consulting (Q12). The initial question was phrased rather generally to allow respondents some degree of flexibility in responding. Follow-up questions probed for specific occupational categories (e.g., student, retired person, government historian) (Q13) and whether or not the researcher was working for a client (Q13a). Based upon responses to the initial question, as well as the follow-up questions, each researcher was assigned to one of the following four categories: personal, academic, professional, avocational. In some cases the category was assigned after the interview was completed.

Researchers carrying out personal research projects comprise 14.5 percent of the total. When combined with the 3.9 percent of researchers undertaking more extensive projects of an avocational nature (hobbyists), the portion of the people who are self-motivated to consult textual records during a typical week in the summer is less than one-fifth of the total researcher population.

Researchers working in academic environments comprise only 7.9 percent of the total population. This group includes faculty and students in all disciplines and at all levels who are working on any form of scholarly research. The remaining group of occupational researchers comprises 73.7 percent of the overall population and includes all individuals working for a client as well as all non-faculty researchers whose motivation to visit the research room relates to their occupation. In this regard, official government historians are grouped as occupational researchers, along with film producers, professional researchers (one-third of the total population), and self-employed writers who make all or part of their living through the interpretation of historical sources.

A single open-ended question (Q4) sought information on how researchers found out that relevant records were located in the National Archives. Researchers were urged to be as specific as possible and were not prompted with possible examples. Responses were noted verbatim and grouped into categories during analysis. A total of thirteen discrete sources of information were identified, including friends or colleagues, National Archives publications, footnotes in books, and references from other archivists or librarians. The responses appear to fall into five logical groupings: verbal sources, written sources, general research activity, presumption, and direct National Archives sources. As has been demonstrated by user studies in other types of archives, most researchers find out about appropriate sources via word-of-mouth sources or simply assume that the sources exist. Verbal sources, which include such things as comments from teachers, references from friends or relatives, and similar personal contacts were mentioned by 36.8 percent of the group interviewed. Specific written sources, such as newspaper articles, footnote citations, or non-National Archives resource guides were mentioned by 10.6 percent of the group. About one in six people (17.2%) declared that they deduced the existence of appropriate records or simply guessed that the National Archives was the place to visit. A typical response in this category was "Where else would these records be?"

When people who claimed to just know that sources exist were asked to be more specific, 27.6 percent of the total group made reference to general information-seeking behavior that led to the discovery of appropriate records in the National Archives. An example of responses in the category of general research was "Well, I started at the public library and then consulted a guidebook to Washington, D.C., which led me to a general source book on archival records, which finally gave me the right telephone number, so I called."

People who mentioned any type of National Archives source of information, ranging from genealogical classes through published preliminary inventories and the National Archives guide, were grouped separately. Although only 7.8 percent fall into this category, the actual impact of direct National Archives sources and agency outreach activities should not be underestimated. Referrals from colleagues, teachers, and other archivists may be almost totally driven by information provided directly from the agency. The same situation may be true for researchers who make their connections through more general research activities.

The systematic interviews explored the nature of researchers' experience with on-site research at the National Archives (Q5) and their efforts to make advance contact by phone and mail (Q6).

Overall, 25 percent of the group of researchers had never conducted research at the National Archives prior to the day they were interviewed. About 60 percent of this group had called or written in advance; the remainder (about 9 percent of the total) is "fresh off the street."

Of the 75 percent of the population with some previous experience (even a single day), less than one in five had ever called or written before making their first visit to the National Archives on their current topic. The range of actual experience within this group, however, varies greatly. A follow-up question (Q5a) asked respondents to indicate about how many days they had spent in the National Archives in the past six months. For 17.5 percent of the group, the interview day marked the first return in the year, for some after significant absences. Less than a third (29.8%) of the "experienced" group had spent between one and three days on-site, most frequently consecutively. Another group (28.0%) reported 4 to 15 days on-site in 1990. The remaining quarter of researchers with prior experience (24.5%) are the group best characterized as "veterans," having spent more than sixteen days in National Archives facilities in the previous six months.

What Records Are Used

On one level, each researcher's project is unique, requiring a special mix of records applied to a particular historical research question. The study sought to discover the existence of basic patterns that may be evident in the use of holdings or in the definition of research topics.

In the process of each interview in the special research rooms, the questionnaire was annotated to indicate in which of the three reference units the interview took place. Eighteen researchers (23.7%) were interviewed in the Cartographic and Architectural Branch; 30 (39.5%) in the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Branch; and 28 (36.8%) in the Still Picture Branch. In the Motion Picture Research Room, most of those interviewed (26) were in the midst of consulting videotape use copies of records. All but two of the researchers in the Still Picture Research Room were interviewed while viewing original photographic records; the others were consulting agency-produced finding aids. The mix of records used was broader in the cartographic research room, ten people used maps, three used aerial photographs or film, five consulted architectural drawings.

Researchers appear to be blind to existing and potential preservation problems in non-textual records. Almost 95 percent of those interviewed stated unequivocally that the physical condition of the materials was satisfactory for their uses (Q3). Some researchers noted their awareness of the problem of fragile photographs or other visual materials, but felt the issue did not apply in their case. Indeed, researchers as a group expressed far more concern about the physical condition of finding aids in the research room than about deteriorated records. The people who did express concern about the materials were consulting seemingly poor quality videotape use copies of original records.

Researchers in the Motion Picture Research Room were asked to assess the condition of the playback equipment used to consult video, motion picture, and sound recordings (Q3a). Over 70 percent of the group responded favorably. Comments from nine individuals largely concerned perceptions of poor maintenance of videotape playback equipment and a broken monitor. Several

researchers commented independently that equipment maintenance appears to have declined over the years they had been using the research room.

When asked to describe their research topic, researchers tended to be very specific, supplying relevant names, dates, and places. Eliciting the general topic of research may be a much less useful mechanism for identifying records and service needs than gathering detailed information about the components of a specific research question. A simple attempt to categorize researchers engaged in narrowly defined projects by general topic yielded a total of 16 discrete topics. The single most popular topic currently being researched is the Second World War (22), which accounts for almost 30 percent of the total population. Other topics include U.S. social history (12), architectural preservation (8), biography (7), and science and the environment (6). Overall, the special archives research rooms experience a far greater amount of non-traditional research than the textual research facilities.

Only one of the 76 people interviewed in the three Special Research Rooms was engaged in genealogical research of any sort (Q11).

The Research Process

The survey sought information in the following areas: how researchers located the specific records they were using when interviewed; the nature of any assistance sought, if applicable; the intended use of other records in the National Archives; whether or not they expected to make reproductions; their intended end-product; and the status of their research projects.

When researchers were asked to name specific sources of information used to locate the materials they were currently using (Q2), a total of 11 specific answers to the question were logged. Unlike the group of researchers who was interviewed in the Central Research Room, who rely on records specialists to locate material, researchers in special archives materials make significant use of National Archives and/or agency-produced finding aids systems. Sixty-four of the 76 people interviewed (84.1%) mentioned finding aids in either hard copy or microform. Only eight people (10.5%) reported that they depended on staff archivists to locate materials.

Each researcher was asked two questions about the nature of any advice and assistance they may have received; the first question concerned general assistance with their research project (Q8), the second pertained to specific advice or assistance on day of the interview (Q9). Most researchers (77.6%) discussed some aspect of their topics with a reference archivist or staff of the research room, yet the nature of that advice varies tremendously. The type of advice sought on research questions falls neatly into three clusters. About 35 percent of the advice concerns the location of specific items or finding aids--a very routine matter. About one-quarter of the group of researchers needs basic procedural advice on making self-service reproductions and similar matters. The largest group of researchers, over 40 percent, seeks advice from archivists or reference room staff on interpreting the content of the records, understanding the structure of the finding aids, and copyright matters.

About two in five (39.5%) of those interviewed in the special research rooms reported seeking any advice or assistance that day. As with general assistance, specific concerns on the day of the interview may be grouped into three clusters. About 27 percent of researchers needed advice that day on getting started on their research and similar basic matters. Another 40 percent of the group needed help with equipment or reproduction services. The final 33 percent of those interviewed sought what might be called "advanced consulting" on the records or the finding aids. All but two of those contacted in three research rooms were satisfied with the quality of the advice and assistance obtained.

Researchers were asked if they expected to use other types of National Archives holdings on their projects, other than what was available to them in the research room (Q10). Forty-five of the 76 people interviewed (59.2%) of the total interview group mentioned one or more types of records other than the medium of current use. The most striking pattern to emerge from a more detailed analysis of the responses is the close relationship between the use of still pictures and the use of resources in the Motion Picture Branch. Nineteen of those interviewed in the Motion Picture Research Room had already used or intended to use still pictures in their current research project. Similarly, over 55 percent of those researchers who expressed an intention to use archival media other than those being consulted at the time of the interview planned to use textual records. It is clear from the set of interviews in these three research rooms that researchers will seek out relevant information wherever it is located in the facility. The only barrier seems to be information about what records are available and how to gain access to them.

Since the introduction of self-service photocopying services in 1986, researchers have increasingly taken advantage of this convenient form of retrieving information. To learn more about the service, all researchers interviewed were asked a series of questions about their use of reproduction equipment (Q18), their need for self-service copies (Q19), and their intended use of the service order system (Q20). The findings make it clear that the use of personally owned cameras and video-recorders to make reproductions of records is a popular option. Overall, 38 percent of the group interviewed in these three research rooms were using their own equipment on the day they were interviewed; 11 percent in the Cartographic Branch, 35 percent in the Still Picture Branch; and 57 percent in the Motion Picture Branch. Such usage tends to place significant demands on the branch's space and electrical requirements. The Motion Picture Branch is not equipped with self-service photocopying equipment. Two-thirds of researchers in the other two research rooms make use of self-service photocopiers or the copy-on-demand-service in the Cartographic Branch.

The reproduction service order system (SOS) received wildly mixed reviews by patrons. Most complained of slow service. Some complained about limitations on selecting portions of motion picture reels or tapes for reproduction. Conversely, most people who had used the system in the past praised the quality of the final product. The extent to which researchers accept the situation depends upon how important official copies are to the success of the project and the availability of alternatives. In the Cartographic Branch, the copy-on-demand service limits the need to order copies of paper-based records through the SOS system. In the Still Picture Branch, about the only

way to get a usable copy of a photograph is to make one yourself or order copies. In the Motion Picture Branch, the popularity of "dubbing" videotape use copies is in part driven by what researchers feel are unacceptable delays when ordering copies. Nine researchers specifically stated that they would order reproductions, no matter what the cost, if the turnaround time could be substantially reduced from the current six to eight weeks, or more.

Researchers in the special research rooms claim to be project oriented (Q15). Only eight of the people interviewed in these three research rooms (10.5%) failed to indicate a concrete product that would result from their research, and all of these people intended to make self-service copies for personal use. Given the visual nature of the materials available in the research rooms, it is not surprising that almost 40 percent of the expected outcomes are films or television programs. Almost 20 percent of the researchers planned to produce traditional monographs, although one-third of this group was primarily seeking illustrations for the books of others. The remaining 30 percent of the group was planning to use National Archives holdings in a wide variety of work-related projects, including architectural preservation, environmental impact statements, legal briefs, the design of national memorials, and museum exhibitions.

Assessments of Researcher Experience

The value of reference and access services to the public is vested not only in the uniqueness of the holdings but also in the perceptions by researchers that the National Archives contains just the right materials to address the task at hand. When asked directly to assess the importance of the materials they were currently using to the successful completion of their overall project (Q22), the overwhelming majority (89.5%) stated that the materials were either "essential" or "very important." Not a single person indicated that the materials were "only a curiosity" and only 2 percent stated that the holdings were "interesting, but maybe not useful." A small portion (7%) called the archival materials before them "possibly useful, but not important."

Clearly, the people who visit the special research rooms are pleased with the content of the records and consider the agency to be an essential resource for completing their projects, regardless of the nature of the topic. A sensible alternative view, one that will require further research to verify, is that the National Archives attracts only people who must have access to the holdings to complete their projects. Curiosity seekers and those who are able to find alternative sources of historical information choose not to visit or plan their projects in such a way so that they do not have to visit the facilities.

Finally, researchers were asked to estimate how successful they were, on the day they were interviewed, in finding the information they hoped or expected to find (Q23). Such a question is premised, of course, on the assumption that researchers have realistic expectations. Researchers report that they are generally successful in identifying relevant information in the holdings. Many of those who were most successful report that they found much more useful information than they had expected to find. More than half of those who were not successful in finding information were at relatively early stages of their research (Q17), and so may not have had very high expectations.

Of those who did express frustration at not finding the information they were seeking, most placed the blame on gaps in the holdings rather than on the staff or finding aids. An important qualifier of the responses is that most researchers who were interviewed were at the end of the reference process. Success in retrieving relevant information may tend to erase, at least for the moment, memories of difficulties or frustrations encountered earlier in the research process.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

- * The weeks chosen for conducting interviews may or may not be representative of overall use patterns.
- * The process for selecting researchers for interviews during the study weeks was not technically random. It was not possible to select randomly from the base population (discrete individuals who signed the daily research log) because desk space is not assigned by name. Instead, researchers were selected sequentially by moving among tables.
- * The study is biased against people who make very brief visits to the research room, primarily to photocopy a small number of records. Observation suggests that typically this group consists of personal researchers curious about the scope of the holdings.
- * The study was designed to track behavior in the research rooms rather than to elicit information about how researchers perceived the services they received. Observation of behavioral patterns reinforces quantitative findings.
- * A cross-section study through a single research room is incapable of capturing rich information on the overall process that one or more researchers follow to complete a project.
- * This study only investigated the intended or claimed use of other National Archives research rooms and records. Other components of the overall study sought to investigate actual use of multiple research rooms or more than one record medium for a single project.
- * The total number of people interviewed in the three rooms is not large enough to draw a statistical portrait in detail.
- * Even though there are many similarities in the types of materials provided in these rooms and in the types of services provided, a meaningful comparison of researchers across the three different reference settings may be problematical.
- * Because each research room uses a fundamentally different procedure for tracking the use of archival records, it was not possible to portray overall patterns of use during the study weeks. In particular, the Motion Picture Branch regularly disposes of reference service slips on use copies of retrieved records. In addition, much of the videotape use copies are retrieved off the shelves by patrons and refiled by staff, which complicates accounting for use. The Still Picture Branch has developed its own records request form (attached) which does not contain all of the information on the standard request form. The Cartographic Branch uses no forms for logging patron requests for records, preferring to jot requests on slips of paper or retaining the information in memory.

DISCUSSION

Beyond the quantitative patterns identified above, researchers commented extensively on the nature of their research needs and the quality of the services received at the National Archives. The following is a summary of the major clusters of comments received in the course of interviewing patrons over the three-week study period.

- 1) There is a significant number of misunderstandings about the scope of holdings at the National Archives. Some researchers do not realize that the agency acquires only federal records; some have no appreciation for the complexity of the structure and content of the records they must consult; some do not realize until well into their research activity that the files are not necessarily indexed by subject. The fact that these misunderstandings are voiced so clearly in the research room--which theoretically is the point at which all misconceptions about the research process and the scope of the holdings should have been resolved--suggests that greater emphasis needs to be placed on user "training" earlier in the process.
- 2) Satisfaction with the research experience at the National Archives is intimately linked to the successful retrieval of needed information. Patrons appear willing to endure significant procedural challenges if they can reasonably expect to accomplish their task. Apparently most researchers do not expect to be handed their needed information "on a silver platter," but do expect to be able to narrow the range of possible locations of records to an amount they can manage in a single visit.
- 3) Assessing true satisfaction with the personal services offered by the National Archives is significantly complicated by the propensity of researchers to blame everything but the staff for their difficulties. Interviews elicited numerous comments such as the following: "The records I need probably never existed." "The records I need were probably destroyed or are still at the agency." "I don't want to criticize the staff, because they need all the support they can get." "The Archives has never had enough money to do the job properly."
- 4) Because many researchers in the three research rooms are dependent to varying degrees on display or playback equipment (e.g., slide viewers, videotape players, film projectors, etc.), they are highly sensitive to the quality of the equipment, its maintenance level, the availability of workstations, and other issues that directly effect their ability to do their research.
- 5) Researchers need to be able to obtain reproductions of special archives materials in a timely fashion. Poor reproduction services elicited a greater number of comments and complaints than any other issue. Complaints centered on unreasonable delays (over eight weeks in some cases), the unavailability of use copies of motion picture and sound holdings, and the requirement that entire reels of film be ordered instead on specifically identified segments. On the other hand, the availability of copy-on-demand services in the Cartographic Branch was a source of very positive comments.
- 6) For the majority of researchers who use the three research rooms, the cost of reproductions is not an issue. Indeed, because most of the holdings are in the public domain, several researchers in each branch commented independently that they sought out records at the National Archives specifically to avoid the costs of working through commercial information brokers. Public domain status also largely eliminates the copyright law as an issue.

The most significant challenges for the National Archives that emerge from the interviews in the Special Archives Research Rooms are:

- 1) to evaluate the weaknesses and missed opportunities of the full range of reproduction services offered by the agency to researchers;
- 2) to improve the maintenance of all access machinery;
- 3) to assess the feasibility of preparing "meta-guides" that provide researchers with an overview of resources and access tools in the branches;
- 4) to assess the feasibility of screening original motion picture records on demand;
- 5) to unify the logging of researchers and records usage;
- 6) to increase knowledge of records and reference procedures across branches; and
- 7) to develop mechanisms to capture more information on the significance and potential impact on U.S. citizens of the variety of research projects undertaken by researchers who visit the three branches.