

“Just a Bunch of Bigots”

A case study in the acquisition of controversial material

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ABSTRACT: This article is a case study documenting the acquisition of Ku Klux Klan membership records by the Clarke Historical Library and the reaction to the acquisition. After chronicling the facts of the case, the author discusses what the case reveals about contemporary inter-institutional cooperation, the reaction of the general public to controversial archival acquisitions, and the reaction of students, faculty, and university administrators to such acquisitions. The author discusses at some length the impact of multiculturalism upon the debate regarding the acquisition of controversial material and suggests that although multiculturalism can be used to question the legitimacy of placing controversial material in an archives, multiculturalism also contains within it the seeds for a powerful argument in favor of retaining controversial records.

“Just a bunch of bigots”¹ pronounced one reader of the *Saginaw News* in discussing the purchase by Central Michigan University’s (CMU) Clarke Historical Library (CHL) of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) documentation. A CMU student wrote in the campus newspaper, “I am not sure why library officials purchased KKK memorabilia and I don’t care why. I just want to point out that this is an example of how racism continues to exist on this campus.”² A third commentator took a slightly different tact by writing, “more money wasted by government officials.”³

On October 31, 1992 the CHL purchased at public auction approximately two thousand membership cards documenting the Newaygo County, Michigan Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s. This article is a case study that discusses the background that led to the CHL’s acquisition of this material and the reaction that occurred as a result of the acquisition. The article also reflects upon the overall experience of one institution in acquiring controversial records and in dealing with the subsequent public discussion.

Chronology of Events

In 1986 Ledford Anderson, an elderly proprietor of a rural fruit market near Fremont, Michigan died. In 1992 his heirs decided to sell the fruit farm, adjoining home, outbuildings, and surrounding property and to auction off those portions of the estate unwanted by family members. A contract was signed with a commercial auctioneer who began surveying the items to be sold for what appeared to be a typical estate sale. In the process of examining items the auctioneer stumbled upon something unexpected: an outbuilding full of Ku Klux Klan records and paraphernalia. Anderson had been the secretary of the Newaygo County Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. For more than half a century after the organization’s collapse, Anderson had stored thirty-nine

¹ *Saginaw News*, November 16, 1993.

² *Central Michigan Life*, November 13, 1992.

³ *Saginaw News*, November 16, 1992.

sets of Klan robes, various minutes, correspondence, and other organizational records, and a detailed set of membership cards.

The auctioneer likely realized she had stumbled onto something that might prove newsworthy, and profitable. For whatever reason, she called the local newspaper, the *Muskegon Chronicle*, to see if the paper would be interested in printing a story about the items. The reporter who happened to answer the phone thought that there would be local interest and she interviewed the auctioneer at the Anderson property, examined the Klan material, and took a few photographs to illustrate the story. The *Chronicle* printed an illustrated, front page story about the Klan material on October 25, 1992. The wire services picked up the picture and story and very quickly Michigan's major metropolitan papers, including the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Grand Rapids Press*, ran long, illustrated articles about the material and upcoming auction.⁴

Police estimated over 3,000 people came to the auction. Over 1,000 bidders registered and county deputy sheriffs worked with private security police to keep a watchful eye on the protesters organized by the Urban League of Greater Muskegon as well as the numerous gawkers and the registered bidders. Reporters from several papers, including a stringer for the *New York Times*, as well as television crews from several west Michigan stations, descended upon the Anderson fruit market to cover the "event." Given the press coverage, it is not surprising that Michigan newspapers were full of news and opinions about the auction for several weeks after the auction.⁵

When the media blitz about the Klan auction began during the last week of October, the Clarke Historical Library's staff recognized that the material fell squarely into the library's draft collecting policy and complimented existing records within the CHL. The draft manuscript collecting policy defined Newaygo County as part of the geographic region of primary interest to the library and "rural life and activities" as a specific area of interest. Furthermore, the CHL already held significant Klan material, the most important of which was a membership file for Mecosta County, which adjoins Newaygo County. The advantage of being able to make available to researchers detailed Klan records from two adjoining counties was obvious. Because of the materials' relationship to the library's draft collecting policy and because of its close relationship to existing holdings, the Newaygo County Klan material was an almost perfect match with the CHL's mission.

Clarke staff joined in a rapidly developing network of individuals and institutions to identify the specific items that seemed most desirable. An itemized list of "KKK Memorabilia" was obtained from the auctioneer and she happily answered a variety of questions regarding the material. Various experts, including Professor Calvin Enders, a CMU faculty member who had published on the Michigan Klan and is currently

⁴ For examples of the coverage, see the *Detroit Free Press*, October 27, 1992, or the *Grand Rapids Press*, October 29, 1992.

⁵ *Muskegon Chronicle*, November 1, 1992. For additional post-auction coverage see *Detroit News*, November 1, 1992; *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1992; *Morning Sun* [Mt. Pleasant], November 15, 1992; *Saginaw News*, November 15, 1992; and *Saginaw News*, November 16, 1992.

working on a book-length history of that organization, the staff of other archives in the state, and individuals in the Newaygo County area interested in seeing the Klan material placed in a public institution, pooled information. A consensus emerged that of the approximately eighty lots of material available for sale, the organization's core documentation was located in about a half-dozen specific lots.

On one crucial point, however, the auctioneer proved uncooperative. Although most of the Klan material was available for inspection the auctioneer refused to allow potential buyers to examine the membership cards on the advice of her attorney who feared possible lawsuits over invasion of privacy. The auctioneer described the cards as "largely complete," and if the membership records were reasonably complete, the cards represented the most valuable part of the collection. However auctioneers, who in Michigan are compensated by a percentage of the gross sales, have been known to overstate the quality of the goods to improve the selling price. If the cards were less complete than the auctioneer claimed, their historical value would be greatly diminished. The network of concerned individuals and institutions began to contact every source available to them to learn as much as possible about the content of the cards. After a few days of intensive telephoning and sometimes hourly sharing of results, it seemed likely that the auctioneer's description of the membership cards as being "largely complete" was accurate. Those interested in the material agreed that the membership cards, lot 47, was the core of the material.

On the day of the auction four individuals from the Clarke made the hour drive to the Anderson fruit market. Prices tended to be very high, but the placement of lot 47 after the sale of the more collectible and quite expensive Klan robes, was helpful. Private collectors bid large sums for robes, leaving them less money in their pocket for "paper collectibles." Also important, lot 47 was offered as a group, making it impossible for private collectors wanting a sample card to bid up the price per card and then break the set apart by purchasing one or two cards. Bidding on lot 47 started surprisingly low, and very quickly became a two-person race. A rapid exchange of bids and counterbids made it appear that within seconds a private collector would outbid the CHL's pre-established spending limit. But as suddenly as it began, the volley of bids ended when the unidentified party paused, thought a moment, shrugged, and shook his head "no" to the auctioneer's request for another bid. The Clarke had purchased the membership cards for \$750.00.

Reaction

Clarke staff at the auction had made no effort to conceal their presence or their interest in the material.⁶ CHL staff was interviewed by several reporters at the auction and

⁶ The retired director of the CHL, a man with over thirty years experience at auctions, actually bid for the CHL. As a strategic maneuver, the retired director, who has in the past personally collected

thus the library's acquisition of the cards was reported in several papers.⁷ In each interview, both during and after the auction, CHL staff made clear that their interest in the material was based upon the historical significance of the Klan in Michigan. The staff referred to the library's collecting policy and made clear that a broad base of material regarding Michigan history was collected, of which Klan material played one part. To make this point more clearly staff invariably referred to the library's Wilbert Wright Collection, an extensive body of printed documentation regarding African-American and African history. Clarke staff emphasized that their interest lay exclusively in the documentary records of the organization and that the library was not bidding on the Klan paraphernalia being auctioned. Clarke staff explicitly stated that they were not bidding on robes or other "museum" pieces. Virtually every interview given began and ended with a few words regarding the obvious sensitivity of the records because of the racial views advocated by the Klan, a disclaimer that the acquisition of the material in no way implied an endorsement of the Klan's views on race, and a statement that in order to understand the historical development of racism in America it was important that scholars have access to documents created by racism's advocates.

In general reporters heard, understood, and accurately reported these comments, although headline writers sometimes blurred these careful distinctions. For example, an accurate story published by the *Detroit Free Press* on November 2, ran under the somewhat misleading headline, "Auction of Klan Stuff Nets \$29,910; CMU Library Gets Bulk of Documents."⁸

Although reporters understood the library's interests, the auction unearthed deeply felt racial issues. The executive director of the Urban League of Greater Muskegon labeled the auction "morally wrong."⁹ A member of the Muskegon Urban League's board of directors told another reporter that "if this were a find of Nazi outfits, I can assure you these things would not have been sold in auction," and suggested that the whole body of material should be turned over to the Federal Bureau of Investigation to explore past unsolved murders.¹⁰

CMU campus reaction to the acquisition of the Klan material was equally strong. Although the campus newspaper did not report on the acquisition until November 6, student letters to the editor in the campus newspaper documented great anger at the acquisition. "I am highly offended by this decision by the library to do such a thing [purchase the records]," wrote one student. "The last thing I want to see is anything that represents a group of people who caused the destruction and death of so many of

Michigan material, was not identified at the auction as an agent of the library. This maneuver was taken to forestall a sometimes observed phenomenon of rapidly escalating prices when an institution with presumed "deep pockets" is known to be interested in an item to be auctioned and is seen bidding on the material.

⁷ For example, *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1992.

⁸ *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1992.

⁹ *Muskegon Chronicle*, November 1, 1992.

¹⁰ *Detroit News*, November 1, 1992.

my people given any kind of recognition.”¹¹ In a previously arranged meeting between African-American students and CMU President Leonard Plachta in the week after the purchase, students expressed the concern that “CMU was seeming to support the KKK” through the purchase.¹²

The reaction of some members of the general public paralleled the concerns of some students on the CMU campus. On November 15, the *Saginaw News* put before its readers the question, “Should Central Michigan University have purchased the KKK Records?” The question was printed in conjunction with a balanced and thoughtful front page story. In the next day’s “ballot box” the paper reported that of eighty-nine responses, fifty-eight percent had opposed the purchase. Comments of readers quoted in the newspaper included, “They’re still as racist as they were in 1975 when I graduated. Just a bunch of bigots.” “More money wasted by government officials; where will it end?” “They should turn it over to the FBI.” “I wonder if they’d pay that much money for Martin Luther King’s notes?”¹³

As criticism of the purchase continued, the university’s administration came to the library’s defense. President Plachta, in relating his meeting with African-American students in which the purchase was raised to the *Saginaw News*, stated, “I tried to assure them that it is part of an expansion of Michigan history materials. It’s the kind of thing universities do, and was not meant to be political or racial.”¹⁴ The president’s public support was also reflected in private conversations. The university’s administrative leaders offered solid public and private support for the acquisition.

Despite official support, controversy regarding the purchase continued on campus. In December, a student wrote, “I am deeply disgusted and concerned about Clark [sic] Historical Library purchasing Ku Klux Klan memorabilia... The purchase of KKK ‘junk’ just proves how CMU as an institution totally disregards the minorities on campus... A library is supposed to educate, and education is supposed to make you a better person. One is led to wonder what the Clarke Library and this university are trying to educate students about with this memorabilia. Perhaps the lesson we are supposed to receive is a return to the good old days when niggers stayed in their place with the help of the powerfully evil KKK.”¹⁵

The director of the Clarke Historical Library, Frank Boles, attended meetings of the Organization of Black Unity, the student African-American organization on campus, in November 1992 and January 1993. The director also used a fortuitous happenstance to state the library’s case on public television.

The staff of *Editor’s Notepad*, a locally-produced, weekly, half-hour public affairs show aired on public television, had decided to feature a CMU staff member monthly.

¹¹ *Central Michigan Life*, November 13, 1992.

¹² Leonard Plachta as quoted in *Saginaw News*, November 15, 1992.

¹³ *Saginaw News*, November 15 and November 16, 1992.

¹⁴ *Saginaw News*, November 15, 1992.

¹⁵ *Reach!* December, 1992. *Reach!* is a newsletter for students of color sponsored by the Central Michigan University Minority Affairs Office.

Boles had been invited to appear on the show in late October, and after having had one air date postponed when the local congressman became unexpectedly available for an interview, he eventually appeared on the program in mid-January. Friendly interviewers lobbed various softball questions that allowed Boles to make the case for the acquisition of the Klan material. The combination of directly discussing the issues with those students most concerned and using public television to make an extended, public argument for the importance of the records seemingly brought criticism to a close. Unrelated events, however, reignited racial tensions on the CMU campus and led to renewed discussion of the subject.

On April 12, 1993 CMU's men's basketball coach was fired after acknowledging he had used a racial epithet to describe African-American players on his team. Charges of racial bigotry—later disallowed by an arbitrator brought in to investigate the case—were also leveled against CMU's women's track coach. In the upheaval preceding the basketball coach's firing, charges regarding a "culture of racism" were made and protest marches were held. Marchers first went to Finch Field House, home of the Athletic programs, next visited Warriner Hall, CMU's administration building, and ended at the Park Library Building, home of both CMU's main library and the Clarke Historical Library.

At the same time as students were demonstrating, a long simmering undercurrent of faculty concern regarding the acquisition suddenly re-emerged. Early in the controversy a few CMU faculty and staff members had privately expressed a concern that the Clarke staff failed to show sufficient sensitivity to the views of minorities on campus. When Clarke staff became aware of such concerns, they immediately contacted the individual to explain the importance of the acquisition, to discuss the forms of outreach used to reach all members of the campus community including minorities, and to solicit additional outreach ideas. Although Clarke staff believed that they had successfully addressed faculty concerns, in April it became clear that the issue of sensitivity still remained a point of contention. Intermediaries reported continued complaints by some faculty, as well as factual misunderstandings regarding what had been purchased and how much money had been spent. The Clarke staff was again asked to publicly state what had been obtained, how much money had been spent to obtain it, and why the material was important. Primarily in response to concern regarding misinformed faculty and staff, the Clarke staff used a letter to the editor published in the student newspaper to describe again what had been obtained and to state the reasons for obtaining the material.¹⁶

¹⁶ *CM Life*, May 3, 1993.

Analysis

The Clarke Historical Library's acquisition of KKK material and the subsequent controversy regarding that acquisition lead to a variety of observations. Specifically, the episode casts light on the nature of inter-institutional cooperation, the reaction of the general public, the press, and the academe to controversial acquisitions, and opens for discussion interesting questions regarding the validity of the arguments used by special libraries to justify controversial acquisitions in an avowedly multicultural environment.

Inter-institutional cooperation represents one of the bright spots in this study. The Michigan archival environment is highly decentralized and historically institutions have frequently collected in a competitive manner. In this case, however, cooperation proved complete. Archivists from throughout the state freely exchanged information and willingly took on assignments to ferret out additional information to which they had unique access. When it became clear that there were two institutions, the Clarke Historical Library and the Bentley Historical Library, interested in obtaining the papers and possessing sufficient financial means to bid, a face-to-face meeting which focused on collecting policies and current holdings led to a decision by the director of the Bentley to withdraw in favor of the Clarke. In an especially cooperative move, the Bentley Library staff shared with the Clarke staff the name of a financial benefactor who had offered to make funds available to purchase the material for a public repository.

Michigan archivists had internalized a professional ethic that stressed cooperation over competition. It should not be discounted that Frank Boles, the director of the Clarke, had worked at the Bentley for over a decade and there existed a cordial and close relationship between him and the director and staff of the Bentley. The sense of cooperation that grows from working together played a role in the final discussion regarding bidding for the Klan material. However, Michigan archivists of a generation ago had also been friendly, and well acquainted, and highly competitive. The cooperation shown over a major acquisition demonstrated that something more profound than personal friendship was at work. The need for professional cooperation preached at archival conferences, extolled in the pages of archival journals, and lectured into the consciousness of archival students made a difference.

If the news from within the archival community was good, the news from outside that community was less propitious. A significant portion of the general public had not the faintest clue why an archives would want records of a controversial organization. Moreover, the same public was not impressed by any type of argument by authority. Because the archivist said it was historical did not persuade many people that it was historical. An archivist's professional credentials as an evaluator of historical material was of little use in the public debate.

Equally important, in many cases the general public showed little interest in learning the basic facts regarding a controversial acquisition or in listening to rationales for the action. Rather than gathering information and considering arguments, some

members of the public relied upon powerful ideological frameworks that stereotype public administrators, as either, and often both, racist or wasteful.

Surprisingly, the public most effected by the acquisition, the current residents of Newaygo County, had little reaction to the acquisition. Immediately after the acquisition of the material Clarke staff attempted to determine if any of the named individuals were still alive. After discovering a handful of living individuals were named, CMU's university attorney was contacted regarding concerns over potential invasion of privacy. After weighing a variety of issues, it was decided that the legal risks were relatively small, and that there was no strong legal reason to close the collection.

Clarke staff also gave thought to the impact upon the community when knowledge regarding who did, and who did not, join the 1920s Klan became public. Clearly however, if the library argued that history must be served even if the Klan records offended many African-Americans there was no way to lessen the potential for offense among those who might discover their parents or grandparents were Klan members. In point of fact, very few local residents chose to examine the records and those who did were primarily interested in genealogical information. Genealogists approached the records in the same vein they might use a prison record of an ancestor convicted of some crime; displeasure that an ancestor had engaged in a disreputable activity but considerable happiness at finding records that shed information about their family's past.¹⁷ Regarding the broader public, to note that a significant portion of the general population reacted by relying upon stereotypical frameworks is not a novel observation. Despite the failure of the Clarke library staff to persuade some individuals regarding the merits of the Klan acquisition, the educational efforts of archivists and others interested in defending controversial collecting decisions must continue. In the long run, unless a substantial minority of the general population understand and appreciate the need for archives and special libraries to possess controversial material, the archivist's ability to collect such material will be compromised. In a democratic society archivists must educate the population to and advocate the need for the fullest application of the profession's collective documentary mission. Unless this advocacy and education occur, archivists' ability to perform the profession's documentary mission will erode in areas surrounded by public controversy.

The worst action, and one that the Clarke staff was guilty of in the early phases of the controversy, is to "hunker down" to "ride out the storm." Although it is comforting to label critics as cranks who lack any real influence and ignore them, archivists would do well to remember the often repeated premise that if something is said often enough and loud enough people will begin to believe it regardless of the facts. Archivists should publicly respond to criticism even if they realize that the response will have little or no impact upon those making the criticism. Any response should in part be addressed

¹⁷ Perhaps the most colorful reaction of a local resident came when an elderly woman, who accompanied a young friend doing genealogical research came upon the membership card of her divorced, and deceased, husband, who had never shared with her that he had been active in the Klan. Her anger, characteristically, was aimed at the Klan member, not the archivist supervising the reading room.

to the general public to make clear to the public that there is an alternative viewpoint to that expressed by the archives critics. In the case at hand, early on the Clarke library staff was not forceful enough in making clear that they had acted as a result of a reasoned and defensible collecting policy rather than as conscious or unconscious agents of institutional racism.

In responding to the general public, or more particular groups that can become involved in the discussion surrounding a controversial accession, the archivist must be extremely careful not to respond to stereotyping with stereotypes. Again, although it is comforting to label critics as “ignorant,” “uneducated,” and perhaps “uneducable,” in point of fact the criticism leveled at an archivist for a controversial acquisition may be rooted in a premise as logical to the critic as reliance on collecting policy statements seems to the archivist. In the instance of this case study, the acquisition touched on the deeply felt issue of race. From the perspective of a culture that often views itself as a victim of conscious and unconscious racism by white society, the acquisition of material documenting the Klan may appear as one more piece of evidence of the selfabsorption of white society with its own activities without concern for the sensitivity of minority viewpoints and, even worse, as another example of conscious racism.¹⁸

In dealing with the general public’s reaction to a controversial acquisition, this study suggests that forthrightly distributing information and candidly responding to all criticism are in the archives’ best interest. Forthrightness and candidness, however, are not code words for rudeness and arrogance. Archivists must be extraordinarily sensitive to the points of view expressed by critics of a controversial acquisition and should also make a determined effort to look beyond the sometimes inflammatory rhetoric employed by critics in order to respond in a thoughtful way that maintains the support of already sympathetic individuals, helps persuade the undecided to support the archivist’s actions, and does not stand in the way of an ongoing dialogue with the archivist’s critics.

If the reaction of the general public to the acquisition of Klan material was very mixed, the press proved surprisingly informed and sympathetic. Reporters understand the archivist’s viewpoint regarding the acquisition of controversial material much better than the general public. That the press was attuned to the Clarke staff’s concerns regarding controversial acquisitions is, upon reflection, not surprising. Reporters often write about controversial topics and rely on arguments about the free expression of ideas to justify controversial stories. Reporters can readily equate their authorship of controversial stories with archivists’ acquisition of controversial records for research purposes.

¹⁸ The differing perspectives between white and African-American citizens over racism in American society is well documented. One example of the effect of these differing perspectives among college students is reported by Bruce D. La Vant, Charles L. Brown, and Emmanuel Newsome, “Perceptions and Views of Racism: A Student Leader’s Perspective,” published in Melvin C. Terrell, ed., *Diversity, Disunity, and Campus Community* (np: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Inc., 1992), 155-168.

What was important is that reporters were not only sympathetic, but that sympathy subtly colored the stories written in ways which served the archives' purposes. In general the stories published in the newspapers stressed the historical value of the material. Although stories frequently contained a "balance" of quotes from those favoring and opposing the acquisition, the archives was rarely painted in a negative light and usually got the better of the story.

The sympathy reporters showed for collecting controversial records also proved important in evaluating those portions of the KKK material not available for public inspection. Reporters quietly shared information they had gleaned from their sources with members of the historical community interested in the material. While reporters who shared information both requested anonymity and asked that the information be used in a way that would grant them plausible deniability, the best available information regarding the Newaygo County Klan membership cards nevertheless came from reporters who collectively shared valuable observations with members of the historical community.

In retrospect, the sympathy shown by the press proved the value of the Clarke Library staff's decision to be as open and honest in their exchanges with reporters as possible. Honesty, however, was not a panacea that guaranteed favorable articles. One reporter, with whom the Clarke staff spoke for over an hour, asked as part of his extensive interview how a 1920s Michigan Klan member would view himself. In reply Frank Boles discussed how the 1920s Klan portrayed itself first as a Christian organization, rather than as a group opposed to individuals based on race, place of birth, or religion. Looking for a good hook, the reporter or his editor latched onto this concept of how the Klan of the 1920s viewed itself. Ignoring very large sections of context, the reporter's published story opened by quoting Boles as saying "They [the KKK] considered themselves to be a Christian organization" and went on in a tone that portrayed the Clarke library staff as Klan apologists.¹⁹ Despite this disaster, the press was in general sympathetic, helpful, and accurate.

Although it may always be wise to think twice about talking to a reporter, in this instance, reporters were an important source of information and an important vehicle through which accurate and generally favorable information about the acquisition was distributed to the public. The good press may have been caused by the intertwined concerns of reporters worried about censorship of controversial stories and archivists worried about the ability to collect controversial records, but it remained good press.

Some of the most interesting lessons from this case study were in the academe. Administrators, students, and faculty all reacted in ways that were surprising. Administrators, who are often criticized for their short-sightedness and craven disregard for academic principle, in fact demonstrated a fundamental commitment toward the free exchange of ideas. Administrators, from the university's president down, uniformly supported the acquisition in both public and private statements.

¹⁹ *Morning Sun* [Mount Pleasant], November 15, 1992.

The case study results strongly suggest that archivists who frequently worry about potential controversies might have stronger bases of support among senior university administrators than they realize. There is a logical explanation for this base of support. Senior administrators, in general, hold advanced academic degrees and have internalized the traditional values of academic culture. Among the most traditional values within academic culture is a commitment to a free and open marketplace of ideas. Senior university administrators will also likely see themselves as individuals directly responsible for protecting traditional academic values. Therefore, so long as the archivist is capable of framing the discussion among administrators in terms of traditional academic values, the archivist is likely to receive both public support and private sympathy from a university's administration.

The number of students who initially opposed the acquisition of Klan material and who proved unpersuaded by the arguments for the importance of the acquisition was disconcerting. As a result of their contact with higher education, one would expect that students would have internalized traditional academic values and thus support acquisitions that made possible more informed historical studies. Many students had internalized these values and wrote letters to the student newspaper supporting the acquisition. Some students, however, were not concerned with the specific facts, considered dialogue largely a device through which to educate administrators, and did not accept the traditional cultural value of the academe which holds a free exchange of ideas regarding all topics to be necessary. Although disconcerting, this reaction on the part of some students is explainable and when considered from the student's perspective, logical.

If the cultural framework for considering the Klan acquisition is shifted from the archivist's belief in the need to use primary documents for research into controversial aspects of history to that of an African-American student who views himself or herself as the subject of oppression and victimization, the salient facts of the acquisition appear very different. The specific material acquired is unimportant. Klan material represents the virtual embodiment of racial oppression and victimization. Furthermore, the purpose of dialogue is not to listen to the archivist argue for the importance of ideas critical to his or her academic culture, but to show the archivist how his or her cultural perspective fails to appreciate the African-American heritage and thus either consciously or unconsciously continues a long tradition of racism. The student's purpose in entering the dialogue is not to be inculcated in traditional academic cultural norms but rather to educate regarding the African-American cultural perspective.²⁰

Cast in this light, opposition to the acquisition is sensible and logical. A critical lesson to be learned from this case study is that the archivist's belief that students need to be educated regarding the importance of controversial acquisitions has a parallel

²⁰ Attempting to speak for a person of color can, in itself, be interpreted as an usurpation of their African-American heritage and thus an act of racism. However, if the reaction to the Klan acquisition is to be understood an effort must be made to understand the issues and beliefs which motivated those who opposed the acquisition.

belief on the part of many students that archivists need to be educated regarding African-American culture. Archivists must be open to that education just as archivists must hope that students will listen to what we have to say.

Faculty tended to either not react to the acquisition or to react in negative ways. The same commitment to the marketplace of ideas that compelled administrators to support a controversial acquisition makes it intellectually difficult for faculty to oppose the acquisition of controversial collections. But by the very nature of their respective responsibilities, the faculty tend to be more exposed to the cross currents of ideas than administrators. While administrators are sitting behind their desks looking at balance sheets, faculty should be sitting at their desks reading the most current writings in their field. This more current exposure to the marketplace of ideas may make faculty more ambivalent regarding the ascendancy of academic cultural values over the values of others. Furthermore, faculty, unlike administrators, usually do not perceive their position to include a responsibility to defend traditional academic values.

The ambivalence of faculty between the obvious justification for the acquisition in terms of traditional academic beliefs and the criticisms of the acquisition that were made from an African-American perspective manifested itself in the concern over “sensitivity.” If the need for the acquisition of sensitive material must be acknowledged, the acquirers of that material should somehow bear responsibility to assuage the feelings of individuals offended by the acquisition. As a practical matter, no additional suggestions were made as to how to express sensitivity other than those already undertaken by the library staff, but sensitivity remained an issue that lent itself to no satisfactory answer.

The sensitivity issue may well represent an incomplete expression of a more powerful and much more challenging issue that has already been alluded to: multiculturalism. Multiculturalism’s commitment to exploring all cultures on an equal footing creates a seeming opportunity to challenge the historical pre-eminence given to certain values found in academic culture. Traditional academic culture is largely based on ideas and beliefs developed in a Eurocentric, male- dominated society. Within that culture the pre-eminence of ideas such as the marketplace of ideas is well established, but outside of that culture it is not necessarily the case that pre-eminence is given to the marketplace of ideas or any other traditional academic concept that an archivist might use to defend controversial acquisitions. Put more plainly, when a student of African-American heritage expresses dismay over an acquisition of Klan material and expresses his concern in terms of an African-American cultural need to eliminate reference to a painful past, why is the student’s perceived cultural need less important than the perceived Eurocentric cultural value of the seemingly impartial documentation?

“Sensitivity” in a setting where two or more cultures of equal value exist and are each affected by a particular action would seemingly require that a valid argument for the action be constructed within the framework of each culture. However, constructing such arguments would be difficult. The archivist would need to be familiar enough with each involved culture to understand the culture’s values and beliefs. Adherents of

particular cultures may choose to dismiss arguments made by “outsiders,” even when the outsider attempts to place the discussion in the appropriate context. Finally, it does not seem unreasonable that some cultures may embrace values that are antithetical to an archivist’s desire to document controversial aspects of society and that, within that culture, there is no way to persuasively argue the case.

Faced with a situation in which for whatever reason a successful argument for collecting controversial material cannot be made within a given cultural context, the archivist must confront difficult choices. The archivist may attempt to argue that in the instance at hand Eurocentric cultural values are of greater importance than that of other cultures. In the contemporary environment, assertions of cultural hegemony are not likely to be easily sustained.

A second option is to attempt to resolve the problem by referring to a metalevel of values. Philosophers traditionally attempt this process when dealing with problems involving conflicting values. Meta-level values are commonly agreed upon values that transcend the various cultures involved. Although each culture retains its own value system, all agree that a few particular values supersede the practices of their individual cultures. An example of meta-level values within the political arena is the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Whatever the political values and mores of a particular nation, each UN member state has agreed that there are certain basic human rights which are fundamental and transcend local customs and practice.²¹

The difficulty in applying the principle of meta-level values in most circumstances is in discerning the commonly agreed upon values through which to resolve the conflict. However the inherently multicultural nature of American society and in particular the concept of the “melting pot,” create a pre-existing framework through which to shape the needed meta-level values. Although the melting pot is a concept in disrepute, particularly because many see it as little more than a ruse for recasting other cultures in an Anglo-American mold, the basic idea of establishing transcendent American values by drawing from a heterogeneous mix of cultures very nicely agrees with the philosopher’s work in creating meta-level values.

Within a discussion of the values needed to establish and maintain a uniquely American society, it appears quite likely that a compelling argument can be constructed for the archival retention of controversial material as a part of the value-building process. If an American meta-level set of values is to be drawn from a heterogeneous mix of cultures and ideas, somewhere those cultures and ideas must be fully documented. Each component culture must be documented so that the culture’s strengths and shortcomings can be appreciated and incorporated in the development of American values. In the particular case at hand, an understanding of Eurocentric culture should include information about the perceived shortcomings of Eurocentric culture. Thus, as part of a process leading to meta-level American values, it becomes imperative for archivists

²¹ Although he does not use the technical term “meta-level,” see, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 389-403.

to document these shortcomings, including racism and racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.

Creating an argument within a multicultural environment for collecting controversial material is clearly challenging, but it is a challenge worth accepting. When archivists enter the multicultural debate arguing that multiculturalism itself requires broadly based documentation regarding all the component parts of American society, archivists seize the ideological high ground in an important contemporary discussion. Furthermore, making such an argument frees the archivist from accusations that he or she is relying solely on Eurocentric values which, in some circles, are considered suspect. The situation is particularly fortuitous in that the archivist need not abandon those Eurocentric, academic values which support the acquisition of controversial material. Rather the archivist may invoke both traditional values and those developed out of a multicultural viewpoint and point out that from either perspective retaining controversial records is important.

A case study based upon the acquisition of controversial Ku Klux Klan material by the Clarke Historical Library leads to several useful conclusions. First, inter-institutional cooperation among archival institutions can work. The ethic of cooperation which has been preached by archivists for the past twenty years was in this case matched by action. Second, the general public does not truly appreciate the need for controversial acquisitions, whether justified from a traditional academic perspective or from a multicultural perspective. Archivists need to educate the public on this point or be prepared for public opinion to influence archival documentation activities in ways archivists will likely find uncongenial. Third, the press can be an important archival ally. In this case study the press almost always got the story right and almost always was extremely sympathetic to the library's point of view. Fourth, although universities represent a very complex picture, administrators are often the archivist's best friend, faculty are often ambivalent, and some students can express extreme hostility. This case study suggests that an open, reasoned, and broad-ranging discussion coupled with sympathetic listening are the best strategies for dealing with either ambivalent supporters or critics. Finally, multiculturalism is not necessarily the archivist's enemy. Although multiculturalism can be used to challenge basic assumptions that archivists use to justify their acquiring of controversial collections, multiculturalism itself contains the seeds for justifying the acquisition of controversial records. The archivist's challenge is not to oppose multiculturalism but to use it as part of the justification for acquiring controversial material.

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