

Letters to the Unabomber

A Case Study and Some Reflections

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Contents

Abstract	3
Text Begins	4
About The Author	17
Notes	18

Abstract

When the University of Michigan's Special Collections Library acquired the papers of a high-profile person, the standard procedures involving acquisition of archival collections were found to be lacking. This article traces the events leading up to the acquisition of the Ted Kaczynski Papers: detailing the process of negotiating a deed of gift agreement, resolving privacy issues, processing the collection and making it accessible, dealing with the media and a very curious public, handling the administration's concerns, and responding to outside inquiries about the acquisition, as well as practical and theoretical matters affecting the management of controversial and contemporary archival collections.

Text Begins

In April 1996, Theodore John Kaczynski was arrested and charged with being the infamous Unabomber who, since 1978, had mailed or otherwise planted bombs targeting individuals working in the field of genetic engineering, and the airline, computer, and forestry industries. His bombs killed three people and injured 24. The Unabomber had successfully evaded the authorities for nearly 20 years. His manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," was published in *The Washington Post* just a few weeks before his arrest.

For several months during that year, I, along with much of the rest of the country, watched in eerie fascination the story of the lone outsider who had eluded the authorities for so long as he carried out his bombing campaign. As I read the media coverage about the evidence piling up against Kaczynski and the uproar over the publication of the manifesto, I decided to ask him to donate his papers to the Labadie Collection¹ at the University of Michigan Library, little realizing what events this would set in motion.

Kaczynski's 35,000-word essay advocated the destruction of technological society before it destroys humanity and nature. The publication of the Unabomber manifesto and its ideas were greeted with a great deal of interest by the anarchist and left press such as *Anarchy*, *Earth First*, *Fifth Estate*, *The Nation*, and *Z Magazine*, as well as mainstream publications such as *Time*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times*. Kaczynski immediately became a media draw, with everyone wanting to get on the bandwagon by writing about him. Most mainstream journalists and reporters were

¹ The Labadie Collection is named for Joseph Antoine Labadie, who was born in 1850, in the backwoods of Paw Paw, Michigan. His father, a wandering free spirit, taught his eldest son the ways of the frontier and introduced him to the life and language of the native Pottawatami tribes living nearby. With almost no formal education, Jo was trilingual, speaking the native French and English of his family and learning Pottawatami from his neighbors. In his teens, he was trained in the printing trade and went on the road as a tramp printer, working in print shops throughout Indiana, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, joining typographical unions everywhere he went. This experience gave Jo a class consciousness that would stay with him the rest of his life. He became a labor union organizer and an anarchist. By the turn of the century, he had amassed a large collection of correspondence, essays, poetry, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, photographs, broadsides, leaflets, badges, and other materials, and wanted to make sure it was preserved and made available for research. In 1911, despite several offers from the University of Wisconsin, he chose to donate it to the University of Michigan because he wanted it to remain close to his home but also because he felt his collection would give the conservative Michigan institution some much needed balance.

eager to make names for themselves by publishing the latest "inside" stories or trying to get exclusive interviews. They sensationalized the stories, eager to boost their sales.

Kaczynski also attracted freelance journalists to the frenzy. Radical publications, however, were more interested in analyzing and critiquing the ideas in the manifesto; many of their readers saw him as a modern-day personification of Ned Ludd, the fictional, nineteenth-century British machine breaker. To them, these were not original ideas: they were the same ones that had been discussed within the radical environmental and deep ecology movements since the 1980s. What came to be called "anti-tech" theory (also known as "green anarchism") is well represented in the Labadie Collection. Besides his theories, many radical writers also debated the validity of the Unabomber's tactics. The use of violence to overthrow the ruling system or extinguish enemies of the people has been extensively discussed in the radical press for well over a century, and Kaczynski was strongly criticized by some for using such methods. Many anarchists believe in nonviolence, since a basic premise of anarchism is to do nothing that will harm or impinge on the rights of others to live their lives as they choose. It is coercion they abhor. It is also true, though, that some anarchists have engaged in "propaganda by the deed" and, in efforts to prevent further attacks against the oppressed, have taken their beliefs several steps further. Just as with the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, some people were supportive of, or at least sympathetic to, Kaczynski's actions.

Since its inception, the Labadie Collection has had a policy of collecting retrospective as well as contemporary materials that document activists and radical movements throughout the world. In addition to anarchism, the collection's strengths include civil liberties, socialism, communism, American labor history, the Spanish Civil War, sexual freedom, the underground press, youth and student protest, and animal liberation. One of my tasks as curator is to continue documenting contemporary social protest such as the radical environmental, global justice, and peace movements. Like Agnes Inglis, the library's first curator (1924-1952), and Edward Weber, the second curator (1960-2000), I do this by keeping up with current social issues in the radical press and writing to activists and authors, asking them to donate their materials. Collecting materials not only about activism but by activists is one of the hallmarks of the Labadie.

The Labadie Collection, now part of the University of Michigan's Special Collections Library, is recognized today as one of the world's most comprehensive collections of materials documenting the history of anarchism and other radical movements. It is a valuable repository of materials used by a wide range of people, from noted scholars who travel there to do research to graduate and undergraduate students at the university and nearby colleges who use its holdings of current and noncurrent periodicals to study radical movements of the present and past. It is part of my job and my passion to ensure that that tradition continues.

Because of my own links with political activists and protest movements, I have been uniquely positioned to acquire new collections. My position in an academic library in some cases grants me a certain amount of *carte blanche*, while in other circles I am im-

mediately suspect. Occasionally, I have-sometimes boldly, sometimes timidly pursued the papers of some contentious and notorious, elusive and difficult characters, even people I would not want to meet in person, but that is the nature of collection development. Mostly, the donors I work with care deeply about the world and its people and that alone usually gives me an immediate rapport with them.

The Unabomber manifesto, in addition to diaries confiscated from Kaczynski's Montana cabin, were the type of writings acquired by the Labadie Collection from past radicals. There are no known writings of Czolgosz, but if there were, they would certainly belong in our collection. Letters of Russian anarchist Alexander Berkman, who attempted to assassinate industrialist Henry Clay Frick in 1894 during the Homestead strike in Pittsburgh when Frick ordered his men to shoot striking steelworkers, are in the Labadie Collection. Berkman served 14 years in prison for that crime and, in 1919, during the Red Scare, was deported with Emma Goldman and many others. I do not wish to compare Kaczynski ideologically with either Berkman or Czolgosz: the times and methods are different, as were their targets. I mention them only since they all killed or attempted to kill those they believed were guilty of perpetrating heinous acts upon the exploited of the world.

Kaczynski's brother, David, upon reading the published manifesto in *The Washington Post*, recognized the writing style and the ideas outlined in it as being very similar in nature to Ted's. The FBI lost no time in investigating Kaczynski and arrested him at his Montana cabin without incident. Subsequently, the manifesto has been published on the Internet, as well as in print, and translated into many languages, including Spanish, French, Italian, German, Greek, Turkish, Dutch, Japanese, Russian, Portuguese, and Czech.

In February 1997, nearly a year after he was arrested, I wrote Kaczynski's attorney, Judy Clarke. It is always a little tricky writing to potential donors. Without knowing exactly what existed and what was available, I asked for everything, including manuscripts, journals, correspondence, photographs, and legal papers. Four months passed and one day I was surprised by a phone call from Clarke, stating, "Mr. Kaczynski is very interested." Clarke had shown a copy of my letter to Kaczynski. He said he would like more information about our library. It was apparent that, even though he earned his Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Michigan (and won the Sumner-Myers Award in 1967 for outstanding graduate thesis), he had never heard of the Labadie Collection, which is not unusual, especially for someone not studying in the social sciences.

If Kaczynski had not been arrested on suspicion of murder or had not been a notorious figure, I would still have been interested in acquiring his writings, which criticized technology and industrialization, and advocated nature and a return to a more primitive lifestyle, in essence, the kind of writings that oppose the status quo. This is documentation I interpret as being "socially relevant," to borrow Danielle Laberge's

expression.² What I did not know at first was that Kaczynski had a fairly large following. For example, despite the antitechnology theme, there were many Websites, such as Unapac (the Unabomber's political action committee) and electronic discussion groups such as <alt.fan.Unabomber> devoted to him. There were also a number of fans writing letters to him. The fact that we must be able to hypothesize about the needs of future researchers is a well-established part of the appraisal process. In so doing, we have the opportunity to unlock secrets. We can heed the call to document the ways in which people are formed in our society as well as the ways those people have shaped our values as a society.

I wrote a second letter to Judy Clarke, including in it the information she requested. Before long, I received my first letter from Ted Kaczynski. With his name and prison number from the so-called "SuperMax" Federal Penitentiary in Florence, Colorado, neatly printed in the upper left corner of the envelope, it arrived in our department from the library's mailroom with a frank question from the person who delivered it: "Is this for real?" A large manila envelope stuffed with correspondence accompanied the letter. It was six pages long and also neatly printed. The correspondence consisted of letters to Kaczynski since his arrest; they were mostly from people he did not know. We did not yet have a formal deed of gift agreement, or even an informal one. His letter explained that he was not allowed to keep more than 20 letters in his cell and, rather than risk having them confiscated and destroyed, he sent them to me for safekeeping until there was a formal arrangement. He acknowledged the possibility that I would not want to keep this kind of material, but was offering me the option before the prison authorities made the decision for me. This was my introduction to Ted Kaczynski. I found his first letter to be candid, explanatory, direct, and unambiguous. This set the tone for the rest of our communication. Kaczynski did not ask any personal questions about me and kept his communication strictly confined to the business at hand, which was to reach a formal agreement as soon as possible regarding the disposition of his papers.

This would prove much more difficult than I anticipated. As our communication progressed, I realized he was extremely concerned with the potential misuse of the collection and wished to place what I considered unreasonable demands on its accessibility, such as restricting it to "serious scholars only." He was particularly concerned with keeping journalists from using it.

We have a standard Deed of Gift form that every donor signs. For most donations it includes all necessary information. This form was far from adequate for negotiating Kaczynski's gift. When he asked us to draw up a deed of gift that placed restrictions on some of his materials, I explained to him that we would not discriminate among users: it was our policy to allow everyone equal access to the collection. He reluctantly agreed. The problem then was the amount of time his restrictions would remain, "the year 2020

² Danielle Laberge, "Information, Knowledge, and Rights: The Preservation of Archives as a Political and Social Issue," *Archivaria* 25 (1987-1988).

or his death, whichever comes later,” that would have placed a minimum closure of 22 years on the collection. The only materials he wanted to make available immediately, without closure or redaction, were letters to him that were either anonymous or from the media. These misgivings about the media were at the basis of his desire to keep most of the collection closed. Since his notoriety began, he developed such a disdain for anyone connected to the media and others he perceived as trying to exploit him that he either ignored their letters or answered them with sarcasm; sometimes he was even hostile. In his replies to almost everyone else, he was friendly, congenial, witty, and at times even charming.

Although the Special Collections Library does not have an official policy on length of closure, like most institutions, we discourage any restrictions but are willing to negotiate depending on the circumstances. Kaczynski certainly tested our boundaries. Without knowing exactly what he was trying to conceal from the public, it was difficult to understand his reasoning. As one who does not trust much in the mainstream news, I sympathized with his sense of being misrepresented by the media, yet I could not in good conscience agree to close the collection for such a long period without understanding why.

Without a formal deed of gift, I was reluctant to open any of the materials he sent, apart from the letters he wrote directly to me. On the other hand, I did not want to risk losing the materials completely to the prison authorities, so I quietly stored them, unopened, in the boxes in which they arrived and continued with the negotiations. I even asked the mailroom workers not to mention to anyone that I was receiving mail from Kaczynski.

When Kaczynski asked that we seal parts of the collection for 20 years after his death, I immediately rejected the request, citing SAA’s Code of Ethics and our own policy. I gently urged him to reconsider. He then outlined a series of options from which we could choose, creating a classification system based on levels of accessibility. He seemed extremely worried about privacy issues, not so much his own, because by then he was accustomed to intense media exposure, but that of the correspondents who wrote to him. Although he referred to some of the people writing to him as “kooks” and “lonely women,” he was still concerned about their privacy.

A further consideration of ours was that the media would find out about the donation before we were prepared to announce it. The university administration was already very nervous about the collection, since some of the Unabomber’s victims still lived in the Ann Arbor area. The administration did not want to appear insensitive, nor did they want to open themselves up to increased negative publicity. (There was a high-profile negligence case against the university going on simultaneously.) For the first time in my career, I was at the mercy of the university’s general counsel and the provost to negotiate for a new donation. I had spoken to my department head before soliciting materials from Kaczynski; she was very supportive, remaining so throughout the process. But from her superiors I felt some resentment that I had taken it upon myself to seek this donation. They told me that, since Kaczynski’s attorney was involved,

our attorneys should also be involved. My heart sank. I knew then this was not going to be easy. Until then, I had been communicating well with Kaczynski. We both had our ideas about how the collection should be handled, and we were openly discussing the issues, working to achieve compromises. I know he appreciated my honesty and, by conveying to him the ethical standards by which I was motivated, I was earning his trust. I was, however, disturbed by some of the stories I was hearing about him in the media and I was doing my best to stay detached. I tried to see his perspective as a prisoner with few resources at hand and almost no control over the negotiations for the placement of his papers, not to mention his legal affairs, which included possibly facing the death penalty, certainly a life sentence at the very least. I was determined to treat him with the same respect and consideration I would give to any donor. When the administration got involved, I began to realize the process could break down at any time and that would be the end of it. The power I had was wrested from me, and all my hard work was in jeopardy.

The university attorneys requested copies of all my correspondence with Kaczynski. This was another privacy issue altogether. As in most institutions, our donor correspondence is confidential. I had a choice in the matter: I could have refused. Because I was technically acting as an agent of the university when I wrote those letters, the result of such a refusal may have halted negotiations, or at least stalled them indefinitely. I also did not want to make trouble for my supervisor, who was still very much on my side. In addition, having known from the beginning that my letters were read by prison authorities and could potentially be reviewed by university administration as well, I always kept my correspondence with Kaczynski on a strictly business level. My priority was the swift execution of the deed of gift, rather than the protection of my own privacy, so I handed the letters over to the general counsel.

After a series of letters and drafts of deed of gift agreements, an official one was finally signed on July 10, 1999. Although we had decided not to make a formal announcement about the donation, I knew the story would break soon, so I accessioned the collection and immediately began the processing.

At first I thought Kaczynski's privacy concerns about the letters peculiar, but once I had a chance to read them, I was instantly struck by their personal nature. Coupled with the media's attraction to the story, I sensed a dangerous mixture. Hundreds of people from all over the world were writing to the Unabomber following his arrest. The letters covered a wide range of topics, from mathematics to the environment, philosophy to physical or mental illness, depression, and family and job issues. Many wrote as if they were old friends, discussing their personal problems. Each one found some level at which to connect with this man, whom they only knew from sensationalized reports on television or in the newspaper. Some knew of him through the radical press. It was astonishing to me to see the variety of people he touched: housewives, academics, teenagers, grandmothers, secretaries, anarchists, journalists, scientists, survivalists, writers, artists, mental health professionals, college students, teachers, and environmental activists, in addition to many women who were interested in initiating

romantic involvement. Even though correspondence between inmates was not allowed, other prisoners wrote to him, delivering mail through underground prison channels.

As I read through the letters, I was struck with various emotions: sadness, compassion, and pity, and I began to see what Kaczynski saw in these letters. Waves of despondency crept over me for weeks. I struggled with the sense that these letters represented but a microcosm of the people in our society. They wrote on perfumed paper, colored paper, decoupage paper, anonymous postcards, business letterhead, and frayed-at-the-edges notebook pages. Some were very well educated, others barely literate. They sent photographs of themselves, their gardens, and breathtaking scenery. There were many bright and normal people, as well as some seemingly unstable ones, who were merely curious about the intellect and personality of the man known as the Unabomber. A few people sent complex mathematical equations; some simply wanted an autograph. Many offered prayers and salvation. Others expressed their love of nature, their fear of technology, and their alienation. Several people wanted to know what it was like for him in prison, or how he had lived on the outside. Some of the letters were genuinely fan letters. In this age of constant discussion and debate about how to manage electronic records, this collection is unique in that it is all on paper; in fact, some people writing to the Unabomber apologize to him for typing rather than handwriting their letters based on their assumption that, because he is critical of technology, he disapproves of typed letters. Others printed articles from the Web and mailed them to him, seemingly unaware of the inherent irony. That there was such a mix of people and ideas did not change the fact that probably none of the people ever imagined their letters would end up in the archives of a public institution. This is what I was grappling with. I even lost sleep over it. Although I had no idea what I would end up with when I asked for Kaczynski's papers, I was now in the difficult position of being responsible for people's privacy, at the same time making a professional pledge not only to care for these materials but to make them available to the public.

My gut reaction was to close this collection for a long time. I had never dealt with a collection so varied, so personal, and so contemporary. I was genuinely worried about the letter writers. I knew that their messages were being read and possibly copied by the prison authorities, and one could assume they also knew this. What they did not know was that *I* was reading their letters and intending to make sure that many others read them as well. Suddenly, I felt worse than a voyeur. Of course, it was not the first time in my career that I felt I was intruding on something very private, but this time the feeling was much stronger than ever before, partly because these letters had been written within the past two years. The writers were still around, some of them still corresponding with Kaczynski. I felt the weight of the world was on my shoulders. I felt like giving all the letters back. I certainly did not feel entitled to them.

One of Kaczynski's early suggestions was to black out the names and other identifying features of the authors. Initially, this seemed like a bad idea to me, mainly because of the work involved. We discussed other options such as closing the collection but, given the youth of many of the writers, a reasonable time of closure would not

have protected their privacy for very long. Fifty years might do it, but anything less was risky. This would have made no sense and would have violated our own policy of non-closure. There are no hard and fast rules governing the privacy of third parties in archival collections, only guidelines and professional ethics. Typically, archivists prefer not to see restrictions on use because restrictions can inhibit research. The contents of the letters to Kaczynski were of potential interest to researchers, but the names of the writers were irrelevant except to the press, and the press was my major concern. Kaczynski and I discussed these issues at length. I consulted with trusted colleagues. I researched the policies of other institutions. I interpreted the SAA's Code of Ethics.

The letters to the Unabomber were a surprise to me but are a useful element in understanding our society and, after several weeks of research and meetings and discussion and soul searching, I was finally convinced that the content of the letters was very much worth keeping intact. These letters certainly meet Laberge's definition of "socially relevant"; however, revealing the names of the writers served no ethical research purpose and, indeed, in many cases would be an invasion of privacy and could seriously harm the author. One could guess that even if some of them signed their letters, they would want their names kept out of the public eye.

The decision to redact the names from the letters to protect the privacy of the third parties had another result. Third parties retain their copyright (currently, life plus 70 years). Making the names of the writers inaccessible means that no user can seek permission from a writer to quote from or publish any of the letters. One exception to this is letters written by people already in the public eye: their names are not redacted since they are not allowed the same rights to privacy as private individuals. These public figures have been, for the most part, media personalities who have written to Kaczynski in the hopes of procuring an exclusive interview.

Eventually, the media found out about the donation. They began calling. For the first time in my life, I felt I was being forced into the public spotlight and I did not like it. I was able to fend most of them off at first, giving them very little information and telling them that the processing of the collection was expected to take six months and that until that time I could not tell them anything about the papers. That worked with most of them, but some reporters were so aggressive that I began to find Kaczynski's contempt for the media justifiable.

Given the expectations of the donor and the media and the sense that this would be a popular collection, I knew it would require immediate access. The processing took a full six months. I hired an excellent archival student to do most of the work of redacting the initial four and a half linear feet of correspondence. By this time, I had read many of the letters and was certain about what needed to be done. We were preserving the originals but wanted to conceal names, addresses, phone numbers, and sometimes place names for added protection. Envelopes and photographs of people were not copied but were stored with the original letters. The process was very time-consuming; however, it was the only precise method we found. Each letter had to be read thoroughly to catch any possible reference that might lead to an individual. I

certainly do not recommend this method for every sensitive collection. This is an issue that must be carefully thought through and discussed with responsible parties. Relying on your instincts and training as a professional is also an essential tool.

Early in our negotiations in an effort to assemble a more complete record, I asked Kaczynski to send me carbon copies of his own correspondence. He complied. He can read and write German, Russian, and Spanish, so he has international correspondents as well (although he is now prohibited from corresponding in Russian since the prison authorities cannot properly screen Russian-language materials). All his incoming and outgoing letters are read and possibly photocopied by the prison authorities. There are now over seven hundred different correspondents.

We considered creating a special permission form in addition to our regular Application for the Use of Manuscript Material. My experience with the media reinforced my decision to black out the names in the letters. It also convinced me that a special form would not prevent cunning reporters from doing what we were trying to prevent, since permission forms are not legally binding. In addition, there was no need for such a form if we were going to conceal the names. The way the media descended like vultures upon me and anyone else who was in any way associated with Kaczynski was nothing less than barbaric. Once the collection was processed, I could not keep the media out. One local reporter, after an hour's interview, wrote a fair, honest article, even allowing me to review it prior to publication. Everyone else was not only unprofessional but simply looking for a way to disgrace me. An on-line radio talk show host even asked if I considered Kaczynski "attractive." I had the choice not to talk to reporters but I thought this might be worse for me and for the university. Being direct and firm seemed to be my best defense against the onslaught.

Even though several years have passed since the story of the collection became public, every six months or so I get call from a magazine or newspaper reporter wanting to do another article on the papers. The story has been covered in many newspapers across the world, including one in Russia, for which I was interviewed by E-mail. Sometimes, in order to fend off unwanted attention, I remind them that the story has already been covered many times. A few years ago there was a brief flurry of negative publicity about this collection when a conservative radio talk-show host urged his listeners to call the university library and complain about the fact that we were "glorifying" Kaczynski by placing his letters on display (we had not done this). The library's public relations unit requested that I not speak to anyone in the media about this issue and that I refer all calls to them or to the university's News and Information Office. I had a mixed reaction to this, feeling somewhat censored, but overall I admit I was relieved to let someone else handle the calls.

In 1998, Kaczynski pled guilty to murder charges in exchange for a life sentence. He then began an appeals process, asserting that he was forced to plead guilty because his lawyers, in an attempt to avoid the death penalty, insisted on presenting evidence that would have portrayed him as mentally ill. He also appealed on the grounds that the court would not allow him to act as his own lawyer. He represented himself in his

brief to the Supreme Court. On March 18, 2002, his final appeal was denied. Since he has exhausted all his legal channels, he is now sending me the court documents related to his case. The collection now spans nearly 20 linear feet and is still growing.

Part of what is interesting and relevant about Kaczynski is that his views on technology are antithetical to an archivist's work setting, especially my own, given the University of Michigan's reputation for being at the forefront of technological innovation. As Hans Booms believes, archivists cannot "separate [ourselves] from the socio-historical conditions of our existence."³ The technological movement is part of our social context, making it difficult though not impossible to be critical of it. Part of what attracted me to the archival profession in the late 1980s was the scarcity of computers within it. The joke is on me. I still love what I do, despite the fact that technology increasingly dominates much of my archival work. I have resigned myself to the modern methodology and have accepted the role of technology in it.

Kaczynski is in the tradition of those Americans who have been outspoken in their rejection of technology and modernity in their lives, from Thoreau to Scott Nearing. Kaczynski is unique, however, for the methods he employed to make his views known. Also, it is slightly ironic that just as Jo Labadie donated his radical papers to the University of Michigan in 1911 to balance its conservative philosophy so, in 1999, Ted Kaczynski's papers ended up there despite the university's overwhelming commitment to technology.

The fact that I have experience with contemporary and controversial donors puts me in a smaller category of archivists. But if we are to have more complete records documenting social history, this category needs to grow. I would very much like to share this responsibility. Historical societies and other institutions documenting local history should be collecting materials relevant to their communities, *especially* if they are controversial. These materials may otherwise be destroyed or discarded out of shame, embarrassment, fear, or misunderstanding. If we, as keepers of history, collect and protect only what is appealing, socially acceptable, or politically correct, we are hardly doing our jobs. In his article "Mind Over Matter," Terry Cook reminds us that:

... In any appraisal model, it is thus important to remember the people who slip through the cracks of society. In western countries, for example, the democratic consensus is often a white, male, capitalist one, and marginalized groups not forming part of that consensus or empowered by it are reflected poorly (if at all) in the programmes of public institutions. The voice of such marginalized groups may *only* be heard (and thus documented)-aside from chance survival of scattered private papers-through their interaction with such institutions and hence the archivist must listen carefully to make sure these voices are heard.⁴

³ Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (1987): 74.

⁴ Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*; ed. Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992).

Because I am now publicly connected to the Unabomber, people dealing with similar collections call on me. Two years ago, I received a phone call from a representative regarding the placement of Timothy McVeigh's fan mail and last year I was consulted about the placement of papers and artifacts belonging to the Branch Davidians. In both cases, I spoke with an intermediary. I took heart when each of them conveyed the deep concerns of the donors that the materials be protected and made available. McVeigh even had legal documents drawn up prior to his execution that detailed his wishes for preservation of and access to his letters. I did not have to tell these people how important the collections are: they already knew.

It is also important to think about which institution can best care for the materials. Large and well-funded archives have prestige and can appeal to prospective donors, but smaller, local archives, museums, and historical societies are often more accessible and geographically more desirable. I am a strong proponent of collections being properly geographically placed, close to the point of their creation and accessible to the most users. I could argue that Kaczynski has ties to the University of Michigan and, therefore, his papers belong there, but he also has ties to Berkeley, Chicago, and Montana. And nothing in the papers is connected to the time he spent in Ann Arbor, Berkeley, or Chicago. Montana seems to be the closest geographic connection. Being properly cared for and cared about, however, is fundamental. The Branch Davidians's collection most assuredly belongs in Texas; it stands to reason that the McVeigh letters belong in Oklahoma City, but the people of Oklahoma City might disagree with that.

I cannot stress enough the value in collecting contemporary materials. Booms says the appraisal process should include a study of the major events of the times in which the collections were created.⁵ That is easy if we are already living in those times. We have ready access to most current debates and controversies regardless of which side we personally take. We might be appalled and bewildered by some of the events of our era, but we have the resources, the social values, the context, and the perspective to thoroughly document them. Society's reactions to events are just as important as the events themselves. I think about a letter written by Agnes Inglis in 1928, when she was feeling overwhelmed by her work in the Labadie Collection:

... It takes time and constant interest and effort. I realize I have to stay on the job. But sometimes I find it rather hard to do, for after all, that has all been lived. It's wonderful historically but lacks one's present day heart beats. I have to have a life besides.⁶

In his article, "Keeping Archives as a Social and Political Activity," Booms's focus is on appraisal of older documents but, if he had discussed contemporary documents, his argument surely would have followed that archivists are best able to chronicle those collections in which their own social values are summoned.⁷ Recently, I have

⁵ Hans Booms, "Überlieferungsbildung: Keeping Archives as a Social and Political Activity," *Archivaria* 33 (1991-1992): 31.

⁶ Agnes Inglis, letter to Jo Labadie, 6 September 1928, Joseph Labadie Papers, Labadie Collection.

⁷ Booms, "Überlieferungsbildung."

been collecting materials related to the current anti-war movement. These materials are mainly in the form of flyers, buttons, and posters. That the largest anti-war movement in history has been organized across the world to include radicals, liberals, and mainstreamers is truly a historical occurrence. It comforts me to see and touch it, the tangible evidence of a mass movement of social protest, to know that it is being saved, and that, generations from now, people will acknowledge the work we have done and study the materials we had the foresight to preserve from our own time. The better we document our society's transformations, the better we will be able to learn from those transformations.

Another good reason to collect contemporary documents is that archivists are often stuck with collections that someone else first had the opportunity to rifle through. The best time to collect is not years or decades later, after who knows how many hands have touched them, but as soon after their creation as is feasible. Regardless of what those materials consist of, we all know this task of sorting and weeding is best left up to the archivist during the appraisal process.

Frank Boles correctly asserts that we must educate the public about the importance of collecting controversial materials.⁸ This can be done in many ways, the least of which can be to educate them in general about archives: what they are and how they can benefit society. One of the simplest ways is to utilize the resources that are the most accessible. It is true, as Boles states, that "Reporters understand the archivist's viewpoint regarding the acquisition of controversial material much better than the general public."⁹ Reporters also understand (and are often motivated by) the general public's attraction to scandal and tabloid news. The public will not be educated about the value of archives overnight. It is a gradual process; the more archival collections make it into the news, the more people will become accustomed to the ideals we have been putting forth.

It is possible that some patrons or donors or members of the general public may criticize you and your institution for obtaining certain collections. Some prospective donors may even change their minds about giving their materials to you. This again is where education and diplomacy become important. You may not be able to please everyone with your explanations, but placing your mission statement ahead of their attempts to dictate your collection development policy will be liberating in more ways than one. And, like it or not, this is how we get attention in our profession. A little controversy about our collections is better than whitewashing social history.

We are fortunate to be in a profession for which we have a passion and a calling. It may not be a lucrative one, especially these days when most of our cultural and educational institutions are under serious financial strain, but it is a profession that we do not have to worry about being moved to a developing country in order for a

⁸ Frank Boles, "Just a Bunch of Bigots: A Case Study in the Acquisition of Controversial Material," *Archival Issues* 19:1 (1994).

⁹ Boles, 60.

corporation to reap more profits. We will always have the responsibility to practice good ethics and to collect, preserve, and make accessible the papers and records and artifacts of underrepresented communities, unpopular individuals or groups, and marginalized movements. The FBI should not be trusted as the only organization to collect these materials.

Their motives are singular, making their methods much different from our own. We are a richer society for the things from the past we have managed to save, but we have a long way to go in overcoming our prejudices, our biases, our snobbery, and our fears.

About The Author

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Notes

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Julie Herrada
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