

REPORT TO NATIONAL GAY ARCHIVES

by Walter Williams

*the Judy Saunders  
of NGA*

May 16, 1983

When Jim asked me if I would agree to serve on the Archives Board of Directors, I agreed to put myself up for your consideration because (1) of my great admiration for the things that the Archives has accomplished in the past few years, and (2) my faith that, if correct decisions are made now, the Archives can overcome its current problems and go on to even greater accomplishments and larger growth in the future.

In order to assess where the Archives is now, and where it is heading, I want to talk about three things: (1) the major accomplishments to date; (2) the major inadequacies to date; (3) some possible suggestions for things to do to overcome inadequacies.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

1. Jim Kepner Himself. The main resource that the Archives has, and indeed the reason for its creation, is Jim Kepner. I don't have to tell any of you how important Jim has been to the gay movement generally, and specifically to the legacy he has built for future generations of gay people. Now that the Archives is together and operating, Jim's valuable knowledge of gay history should be given top priority in terms of his writing, which I am glad that he is devoting more time to that. His talents are obviously in two areas: (1) collecting archival material, and (2) writing.

2. National Publicity. The National Gay Archives is well known around the country, and even abroad. This publicity has not only been the source for money, but also for many donations of archival materials. Now the name has been established, and the excellence of this effort means that other priorities must now take precedence.

3. Acquisitions. Partly because of this publicity, and Jim's skills as a collector, the Archives collections have grown considerably in the past five years. This is the major success story the Archives can point to from the early 1980s.

INADEQUACIES

There are many other accomplishments that you and I could talk about, but you didn't ask me to speak here just to get a pat on the back, so we must also pay attention to the shortcomings facing the Archives now. As we enter the mid- to later 1980s, what directions must the Archives go in, in order to create more success stories? What are some of these shortcomings?

1. The most immediate is Financial Uncertainty. I'm not going to spend much time on this, because everyone here knows the awful financial situation even better than I do. What I will say is that before the Archives can really be secure, it must free itself from these ruinous monthly bills relating to rent and utilities. It is ridiculous to have

to be paying all the monthly <sup>out</sup> donations on rent and utilities rather than on buying new books and periodicals, or paying the staff. No archives can long survive under such a day-to-day burden. Steps must be taken for longer range financial planning, rather than just surviving month-to-month.

2. Inadequate Security. I'm not only talking about the neighborhood, but also the street-front, glass-windowed, ground-level position of the archives. While the metal gate is good, a "Molotov cocktail" could still be thrown through the front window. True, this might be unlikely, but only once would be required to destroy priceless collections.

Another thing. Any professional archives keeps duplicate copies of books, periodicals, & papers in an entirely separate location. Not stacked together in the same space. Only one copy should actually be here. The others should be stored in labeled boxes in another building, preferably in another city--to protect from fires, civil riots, earthquakes, etc.

Another factor is internal security. There should be a desk at the front where the person staffing sits. If the staff person is not at that desk, then the front door should be locked, with a doorbell for visitors. When a person enters, there should be a shelf to place coats and all briefcases or packages. The only thing taken into the archives should be pencil and paper. The space for entry at the front should be no wider than a space for one person to walk, and each person should be let out individually as they leave, with an inspection of them as they go. These procedures are standard at most archives, and are absolutely necessary to prevent more thefts of valuable items. Not to do this is simply inviting disaster. Every single person who enters is suspect--provide security with this supposition, and theft will be drastically cut.

nobody agreed w/ walter about this

3. Poor Conditions for Research. A library and archives is first and foremost a quiet space for researchers to read, think, and write. The Archives hardly fits this description. Music plays, phones ring, meetings are held, and conversations go on everywhere in the whole building. Since it is all one room, there is no separate area for researchers to work. Steps must be taken to reduce this noise level, and isolate it to the front part.

4. Inadequate Filing and Indexing. New acquisitions are coming in and not being filed, indexed and catalogued. Unlabeled boxes sit in the stacks, or are moved around repeatedly--wasting valuable staff time & energy. Manuscripts have little value to researchers if they cannot be easily located, or if there is not an adequate catalog & indexing system.

SUGGESTIONS

So what can be done about these shortcomings? Let me make some possible suggestions for priorities to be set by the Board or staff.

Bob  
CRAIG  
now

1. Finances. As resourceful as the fundraising efforts so far have been, they have not been adequate. The Board needs to get people on it who have large fundraising potential. Though the Board should consist of persons representing (1) staff (2) professional archivists, and (3) professional researchers, the fourth category, fundraisers, is vitally important. Board members should fit into one of those categories.

no agreement  
on this either

But no longrange finances can be successful unless the Board is freed from month-to-month rent & utility bills. How to do this? There are two alternatives: place priority in getting a major endowment (i.e., a large fund that is invested, and the montly interest will pay the rent while the principal remains untouched) or, more likely, get free space donated: either a major donor buys property outright, or another organization or individual grants space in their property without charge. To continue renting, with no equity building up, and with costly improvements to the rental property necessary, is unwise.

Then, temporary fundraising (benefits, monthly donations, memberships, etc.) can be used for acquisitions and salaries. So, more emphasis should be placed on getting endowment or rent-free space.

2. Improve Security. I've already made suggestions here. No one besides staff should be in the Archives unless they have been approved at the entrance for research purposes (and checked their belongings at the entry), or unless they are being personally escorted on a tour by a staffer. Manuscripts should be especially carefully guarded, with the file cabinets in a restricted areas open only to staff. If a researcher wants a certain file, by looking up topics in a manuscript catalog, the staff should get it. No one besides staff has any business in the files. This is not meant to restrict access to the files, only to carefully control it.

Walter has the  
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& no idea of  
the dangers  
inherent  
(for us) in  
such exclusivity

The front door should be locked at all times, unless a staff is sitting at the front desk. Too many things have already been stolen, so this is not idle paranoia. The front curtain should remain closed as much as possible, and certainly when the Archives in closed. My own feeling is that a first-floor, street-entry location is a mistake, but since the Archives is here, it is good to make the best of it.

3. Improve Working Conditions. Move the staff desk to the front entry, and keep staff workspace as far forward as possible. Then put an area for researchers to work, as far to the rear as possible. There should be at least a couple of desks where a visiting researcher could be assigned an individual carrel, to safely leave their research and writing from day to day. Carrels could be reserved on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. The extent to which this area is quiet and undisturbed, is the extent to which it will be most successful to the advancement of scholarship.

As the Archives now exists, research needs have been neglected in favor of community functions. The Archives has served as a significant community space, as meeting hall, art gallery, and theater production company. But now, conditions have changed drastically: first, the collections of the Archives have grown so much that there is no longer

room for these functions, and second, a revolutionary change has occurred with the opening of the new estate of ONE Institute. Local organizations, artists, and theater groups can now be conscientiously referred to ONE, since it now has adequate space on a much larger scale than the Archives. The Gay & Lesbian Community Services Center should also be encouraged to take on some of these functions, since the Archives is rapidly filling up its available space and can no longer accommodate them. By trying to do too much, the Archives is ignoring the need for a working space for reading, research, and scholarship.

4. Allow Jim freedom to work full time on his writing, on his chronology and his memoirs. Or, if he has time, to focus the rest of his efforts on further acquisitions, using the knowledge and skills he has developed over a lifetime of collecting. These are Jim's obvious strengths, as a thinker, writer, and collector--and they are too valuable a resource to be squandered away on the mundane daily duties of administering the library and manuscript files. I am distressed every time I come in here that I do not see Jim at his word processor, because I know there is that much less time spent in writing down his incredible storehouse of knowledge that we need to have. His knowledge is a necessity for our community, not a luxury, and the Archives needs to get to the point where he can devote his time to that.

5. In order to give Jim this opportunity, priority should be placed on getting a professionally-trained librarian/archivist to handle the cataloging & indexing of the collections. The amount of material is getting so large, that organization cannot proceed on any other basis than standard library format. At this point, the person who is best qualified to take on this role is David Moore. If he could be persuaded to take on these duties, he should be given authority to make the kind of changes necessary to better organize the collections and make them into an effective tool for readers & researchers. The Archives should, simply, concentrate on its major purpose: being a well-organized, accessible, quiet, secure library and archives. All else is secondary.