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The Washington Merry-go-round

FPost
6-22-79

Archives claims, unconvincingly, it's 'not guilty' of neglect . . .



WASHINGTON — Our recent column on the alarming state of decay and deterioration of priceless American historical documents at the National Archives generated an outpouring of letters from outraged readers to Archivist John Rhoads.

The response was swift and productive. Archives officials ordered some of the cluttered shelves and floors tidied up. They installed four new hydro-thermograph machines to monitor temperature and humidity in an annex where some of the precious documents are kept. They began a crash program to lick the problem of deteriorating nitrate film; they also initiated security measures to keep unauthorized persons away from items that might tempt the sticky-fingered.

They even managed to locate a rare document signed by Karl Marx that we reported had been missing for 10 years. (It was found behind a shelf, two days after our story appeared.) Still missing, though, are some wartime telegrams of President Lincoln. In a meeting with us, Rhoads admitted that Archives officials hadn't even known they were lost until they read our column.

But Rhoads insisted that we had wrongfully assailed his stewardship of our national heritage. He and his top assistants gave us a Cook's tour of their domain to convince us we had treated them badly.

Despite the hasty, gratifying cleanup campaign, however, we remain unconvinced.

For example, Rhoads and his top brass conceded that there is a "major preservation problem" at Archives. They merely argued that their inability to solve it can be blamed on lack of money provided by their parent agency, the General Services Administration.

Rhoads pointed proudly to the fact that in his 10 years as Archivist he has been able to wangle \$11 million out of GSA for preservation — a far cry from the \$200,000 a year the agency was spending on preservation when he took over.

We agree that getting money has been a big problem for the Archives. But we must point out that Rhoads knew the magnitude of the preservation work needed — on deteriorating maps, treaties and papers of the Continental Congress — from an internal study he ordered back in 1969. Yet he asked for only \$1.5 million for a five-year period.

It would cost more than that just to neutralize the acid that is eating away at the Continental Congress papers, whose

bindings are also falling apart. If Rhoads had publicized his problem 10 years ago, he might have raised the needed funds.

A more fundamental problem is determining just how Archives handles the money it does get. We have learned that much of the agency's appropriated funds is spent in highly questionable ways.

There is, for instance, the private "trust fund" that Archives operates. Its main function is to reproduce records and sell them to the public; it was intended to be largely self-supporting. But we have learned that public funds appropriated for preservation work are regularly diverted into the trust fund as "reimbursement" for manpower and support costs. Although the fund's operation — with 200 employees and a \$6 million revolving kitty — is almost as big as Archives' total budget of \$10 million, the fund's private employees are often paid out of appropriated funds.

Then the trust fund, according to information we have received, is used to pay for such frivolities as cocktail parties, on which it is illegal to spend public funds. Government auditors are now trying to determine whether a cache of expensive booze discovered in the office of one former official came from the trust fund.

We have learned also that as much as one-fourth of the money shown on Archives' books as having been spent on preservation may instead have gone for

such boondoggles as bureaucratic featherbedding by ambitious Archives empire builders.

For example, the educational arm of Archives, which used to be run by one special assistant and three or four aides, has now mushroomed into an office of nearly 100 employees headed by a GS-16 (salary range: \$44,756 to \$47,500). Its budget is as large as the preservation unit's, if not larger.

Other peripheral branches of Archives have shown similar growth in personnel and budget. These ancillary activities may be important, but they are not vital to the successful handling of the agency's designated function — to preserve documents of lasting historic importance for future generations.

To justify their empire building, Archives bureaucrats have accepted for safekeeping more and more material, some of which hardly qualifies as historic or even temporarily valuable. What is one to think of the audio-visual division's acquisition of old Harold Lloyd movies, "Gone With the Wind," network newscasts and sound tapes of 1930s "Amos 'n' Andy" radio shows?

Or a portrait of Richard Nixon rendered in bottle caps? Or a wax dummy of George Washington with collapsible legs — so grotesque that even Archives' packrat poohbahs sent it back after initially accepting it.

Despite his protestations of injured innocence, we think Archivist Rhoads still has plenty of explaining to do.