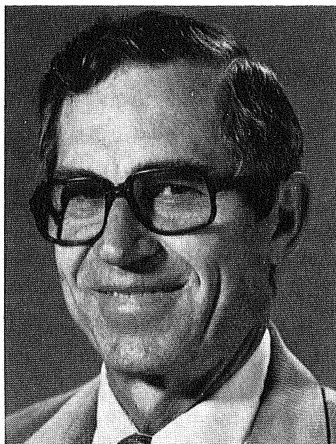


Our Archives: Where and of What Value?

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On a cold night (about 1959, give or take a year), an over-inspired student proceeded to rap the gavel to begin Thursday night seminar in Plant Pathology, University of Minnesota. The gavel seemed to have a rubber handle . . . and the head nigh flew off into the audience. A hasty inspection showed the handle to be almost sawed off near the head.

Laughter was brief, crowded out by an irate administrator who stormed to the floor and threatened the vandal(s?). He gave an inspired history of the gavel—how it had

been fashioned from the first elm in the United States to die from DED ('til then, I thought the student chairman had carved the thing himself!), how it had been presented to the seminar, with precision, bravo, sanctimony, by a famed plant pathologist The student is now a prominent professional, the administrator now belongs to the ages, the vandal(s)? Only God knows who or where. The gavel? I have not seen since but have been told it is preserved with great care.

Some think accumulation of old stuff is instinctive and that a society such as ours should make it purposeful, persistent, and consistent. By definition, archives refer to official documents, but while we are at it we should make a pitch for other relics as well. I have made a couple of trips to Headquarters recently and wish to pass on a few thoughts and observations relative to the collection we have.

Our collection is uncatalogued and hard to browse. Nevertheless, I found a variety of letters (some handwritten) by several of our prominent early members. There are minutes of Council meetings listing statistics on members in the early 30s who could not pay their dues; one of the packets includes a letter appealing to the Council not to cut membership of a student unable to pay. These musty old papers include dialogues on use of proper terminology, reports of the War Commission 1941–1945 summarizing efforts to deal with national emergency, the joint meeting with ASM in 1936 where W. Stanley was awarded a prize for virus research, the original manuscript of J. C. Arthur on rusts (also many letters pertaining thereto), a number of tapes covering speeches given at the APS 50th Anniversary, many references to salubrious chemicals that have since been outlawed

I suspect the collection of archival materials now in possession of departments around the country is considerable and that the total extent and value of these is much greater than what we have at Headquarters. I do not propose that we pursue an archive mentality involving expensive (money, space, time) efforts to centralize and elaborate on our collection at this time. I *do* think we ought to be more conscious of what we have (or can find) and make judgments on what is of real and lasting value.

For the time being, I propose we dispose of nothing without approval of some who have appropriate interest and judgment. I suggest we find enough help to file the things we have so we can, in fact, know what does and does not exist at

Headquarters—perhaps borrow valuable original papers for microfilming. Then we could encourage listings of items elsewhere to place on file there.

Times are changing and libraries are no longer affluent; I have been shocked recently by just what libraries think they cannot afford to keep. The same can happen to archival materials, and it is imperative that we preserve our own heritage. Those who know little of their past can understand little of the present—and will likely have a poor concept of the future.

Once begun, inspiration to judiciously preserve our archives could become cumulative and contagious. I just recently heard that one of our present members found one of Erwin F. Smith's original notebooks—in the trash! Another member reports that “we threw out a lot of things 10 years ago that should have been preserved.” I just found out that my own department has a large collection (more extensive but of a different nature than that at Headquarters) remarkably well organized by our historian. Other collections have been brought to my attention—and it makes one eager to get on with the business of finding out what we really do have stored away!

Perhaps the University of Illinois (which has preserved continuous culture by planting corn on the campus since turn of the century) could be encouraged to find an original manuscript by T. J. Burrill. Since Headquarters has the original manuscript of J. C. Arthur's classic work on rusts, perhaps Cornell University might find something original from his thesis on fire blight—the first thesis submitted for a Ph.D. degree in science from Cornell. Following the thesis, J. C. became most enthused and shortly drifted into errors while in pursuit of elusive bacteria. Original records of his works on bacteria could be most valuable to us. Who possesses today's classic manuscripts? Do our Japanese colleagues have the originals on discovery of MLOs?

Editorials (especially with photo attached) take on an element of unctuousness. Nevertheless, the Chief says its the only way to get something out front before our next annual meeting, and permission to publish brief excerpts from our archival literature in *PLANT DISEASE* over the next several months seemed to be contingent upon preparing this editorial. If the reader is inspired by it, I extend (in advance) a greeting should one choose to attend the APS Archives Committee meeting come August. This annual meeting—in recent memory, at least—has had an attendance of only one, the Chairman.

Would there be perhaps one colleague in each department across the country who would take time from a busy schedule to act as historian and form some link to our archives at Headquarters? Institutions, societies, and nations, like individuals, have a will to live. Records, letters, photos, original manuscripts, notebooks, tools—these represent a living process and are a heritage not to be squandered or dissipated during financial exigency or during the rush to elicit space for genetic engineers (even though they well may profoundly mark for all time the last half of this century).

Discarded items are gone forever, never to be retrieved by a future generation that might long for the opportunity. Sorting out the important relics is a worthy task, especially in a decade when agriculture is scheduled to surpass energy as a national priority. Plant pathology will go on, whether we record its meanderings or not. Credit belongs to those who do it *first*, more than to those *later* who do it *better*; faithful recordings, if preserved, form the basis for perspective in any analysis of progress.