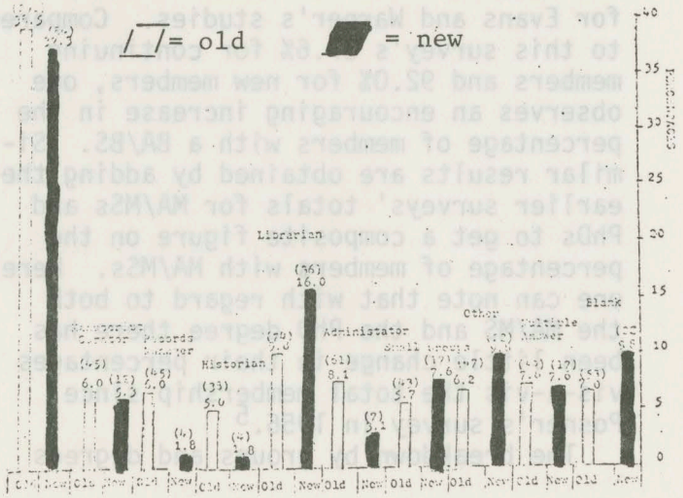
A PROFILE OF A PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY IN TRANSITION: THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS' MEMBERSHIP, 1971-1973

by Michael F. Kohl

One of the continuing questions of the archival profession remains: what are the characteristics of archivists?[1] This report will focus on the responses to an SAA membership questionnaire of October, 1973, in which, interestingly enough, only 40% of the respondents indentified themselves as archivists. The Society used this questionnaire to up-date its 1970 membership directory and to gain a profile of its members. The change in the SAA's secretary from F.G. Ham (1968-1971) to Robert Warner (1972-1973) permitted a differentiation between continuing members (pre-1972) who sent their responses to Professor Ham and new members (1972-1973, Oct.) who sent them to Professor Warner.[2] A recurrent topic of discussion, the SAA members' self-identification was measured by a question asking how members identified themselves to the public.

Graph I illustrates the percentage of continuing (hereafter referred to as old) members vis-a-vis the percentage of new members according to individual self-identification with various groups that comprise the SAA (archivist, manuscript curator, etc.)[3] Several of these choices (oral historian, information specialist, audiovisual specialist, teacher, editor, field representative, and technician) are not individually listed on this essay's graphs because of the small number of members who picked these titles.

GRAPH I: SELF-IDENTIFICATION GROUPS



These minor groups have been combined under the heading "small groups". The group referred to as "other" represents a great mixture of titles ranging from secretary to director. "Multiple answer" is the title for respondents who checked more than one alternative, while "blank" refers to those who marked none.

From examining Graph I, one may conclude that generally new members identified themselves in much the same proportions as continuing members. Several important exceptions should be noted. There is a decline in the proportion of new members who considered themselves to be records managers, historians, and administrators. While two years is a short period of time for making valid comparisons, these findings do suggest an apparent shift by new members away from identification with some of the traditional groups who in the past played important roles in the SAA. The 6.2% increase in members calling themselves librarians, the largest increase among new members, indicates, perhaps, the beginning of a closer relationship between the archival and library professions. It is noteworthy that there were nine times as many new members in the librarian subgroup as in the records manager or historian subgroups.

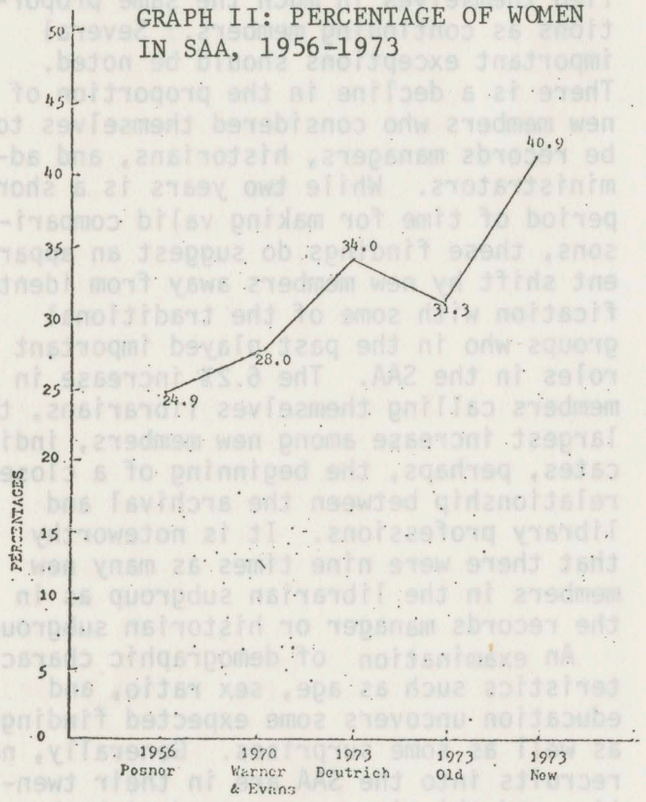
An examination of demographic characteristics such as age, sex ratio, and education uncovers some expected findings as well as some surprises. Generally, new recruits into the SAA are in their twenties and thirties as compared with the continuing membership which is quite evenly spread along a continuum from thirty-one to sixty-one and over. The many variations in age among the Society's subgroups bears witness to changes in the archival profession. Persons identifying themselves as historians and records managers decline in number and recede into the upper age cohorts. Those describing themselves as manuscript curators appear as younger members. The group entitled archivists continues stable, constitutes approximately two-fifths of the Society's membership and is quite evenly distributed along the age continuum for professionals.

Posner, Evans and Warner, and Deutrich all measured the percentage of men to

women in the SAA. Their findings are reflected on Graph II. It should be noted that women comprise 24.9% of the respondents to Posner's survey. Professor Posner, in presenting his data, separated members in the job category "other" from the rest of his survey results, thereby inflating the percentage (33%) of women he claimed were in the SAA.[4] Since none of the following surveys used the exact same subgroups, percentages based on the total sample of respondents are, for comparative purposes, less subject to distortion.

Graph II reveals that the percentage of women in the SAA has constantly risen.

GRAPH II: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN SAA, 1956-1973



This survey's composite percentages for the sex ratio of the membership closely mirror Deutrich's finding (33.5% as compared with her 34%). What is more striking about Graph II is the 9.6% increase in the percentage of female SAA members between the new and continuing members. This clearly indicates that women are becoming an ever larger proportion of the Society's membership and will continue to if the membership trend for the last seventeen years persists.

Differences in the sex ratio among subgroups varied considerably. Men dominated the continuing members subgroups for records manager, administrator, small groups, and multiple answer. Women had a majority in the continuing member subgroups for librarian and manuscript curator. Men also held an approximately 3:2 ratio over women in the archivist, historian, other, and blank subgroups for continuing members. One can observe that subgroups with the highest percentage of men in them tend to be the better paid occupations. The results for new members displayed much the same patterns as for continuing members with the percentage of women increasing in all groups except manuscript curators and historians. The finding that women compose 58.3% of the librarian subgroup for new members indicates that the subgroup with the largest percentage increase in membership is composed predominantly of women.

One can predict, based on the trend indicated on Graph II, that women will become an increasingly large proportion of the SAA. This is due in part to a relative decline in the size of some groups such as records manager which had few women in them, in part to an increase in the size of the librarian subgroup in which women dominate, and finally in part to the increase in the number of women now entering professional careers.

Although direct comparisons between this survey's findings and those of previous surveys on the subject of the SAA members' educational qualifications are hampered by an apparent change in the recording of the respondents' education, one can compare the composite figures of the earlier surveys with this survey's findings. The earlier studies, although not clearly specified, apparently counted only the highest degree which their respondents listed. After adding members with higher degrees to those with BA/BSs, one obtains 77.9% for Posner's and 81.1% for Evans and Warner's studies. Compared to this survey's 87.6% for continuing members and 92.0% for new members, one observes an encouraging increase in the percentage of members with a BA/BS. Similar results are obtained by adding the earlier surveys' totals for MA/MSs and PhDs to get a composite figure on the percentage of members with MA/MSs. Here one can note that with regard to both the MA/MS and the PhD degree there has been little change in their percentages vis-a-vis the total membership since Posner's survey in 1956.[5]

The breakdown by groups and degrees

reaffirms some of the findings of the earlier surveys and provides clues to the education trends among the SAA membership. Members identifying themselves as historians continued to hold the highest percentage of PhDs (60.5%), the librarian subgroup had the highest percentage of BLS/MLSs (85.1%), and the records manager subgroup lagged the furthest behind in the aquiring of an academic sheepskin (only 57.4% held BA/BSs). The percentage of subgroup members holding library science degrees increased among the new members subgroups for archivist (25%), manuscript curator (50%), small groups (17.6%), other (31.8%), multiple answer (29.4%), and blank (18.2%). The steep drop in PhDs (from 18% to 4.1%) between continuing and new members likely reflects the youth of many new members who may pursue in the future or are presently pursuing that degree. Overall, the survey's results exhibit a steady improvement in the educational qualifications of the SAA's membership and an important shift by new members towards library science training.

Ms. Deutrich, in her study, observed that men held 12% more administrative jobs than women, who, conversely, held 12% more professional positions than males.[6] This survey's findings indicate that whether a member is continuing or new also has a large impact on determining whether this member holds an administrative or professional position. Of the continuing members, 42.9% classified their position as administrative as compared with only 27.1% of the new members. This disparity, which is greater than the difference between men and women, is in itself easily understood. Few professions permit new members to start at the top as administrators.

The various subgroups displayed a number of patterns in the type of position held. Members identifying themselves as administrators naturally held administrative positions (91.8%). Members identifying themselves as records managers followed next as the subgroup with the largest percentage of administrators (55.6%). The subgroups for manuscript curators, small groups, and "blank" contained few administrators- a testimony to the specialization of their members, their youth, or their retirement.

The Society's continuing members were almost evenly divided between administrative and professional positions while for new members there existed a 19.5% difference (27.1% and 46.6%). Besides the new members' general youth and inexperience, this difference may be accentuated by the decline in the number of mostly male records managers and the increase in the number of mostly female librarians among the new members.

The type of institution employing SAA members reflected somewhat the members' self-identification. The most significant fact arising from this question, however, is that educational institutions are the chief employers of archivists- seven of the ten subgroups have a third to a half of their members holding jobs in academe. Moreover, the role of colleges and universities as the chief employer of SAA members has increased so that over three times as many new members hold positions there than in its closest competitor, the national government (41.8% as compared with 13.3%). This finding ties the archivists' future closely to that of academic institutions.

The types of work which SAA members perform provides in some cases an important determinate for influencing a member's self-identification. On the whole, there has been little change in primary work responsibilities between continuing and new members. Two notable exceptions are records management and library work. The former has declined among new members while the percentage of new recruits in the latter job almost doubled. The members' response to this question in some cases appeared to determine their self-identification. In the archivist subgroup better than 89% of its members worked primarily with either archives, archives and manuscripts, or archives, manuscripts, and records management. Likewise, most members identifying themselves as manuscript curators or records managers indicated that their major job responsibilities lay in areas connected with manuscripts or record management (86.7% and 95.6% respectively). These findings reveal a pattern in which members identify themselves in terms of the type of materials they primarily work with.

Members calling themselves historians or librarians demonstrated this pattern of functional self-identification to a lesser degree. Over 50% of the librarian subgroup labored primarily in library work not specifically related to archives, manuscripts, or records management. This finding is rather surprising since it

means the most rapidly developing subgroup of SAA members contains many members who do not work primarily with traditional archival materials. In similar fashion, 60% of the continuing historian subgroup either taught or did historical agency work which included a considerable amount of non-archival duties.[7]

This study has revealed some of the trends developing in the SAA membership. Persons identifying themselves as records managers and historians have decreased among the new members, while those considering themselves librarians have increased. New members as a group are younger than continuing members. Women, following a seventeen-year trend, are becoming an increasingly large proportion of the Society. At the same time, they are not as well represented in the better paying occupations within the archival vocation. The members' educational qualifications have continued to improve. Among new members, there is a trend towards obtaining degrees in library science.

In the area of employment, there has been a sizable increase in the proportion of persons working for colleges and universities. This has increased the already close ties and dependency of the archivist on academia. The type of work a member performs largely determines his or her self-identification as an archivist, administrator, manuscript curator, records manager, historian, or librarian. While non-theoretical, this report, it is hoped, will help to further delineate this vocation and illuminate Posner's "new man, the American archivist."[8]

Footnotes

[1] Previous studies on the characteristics of the SAA membership include: Ernest Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist, This New Man?" The American Archivist, 20, Jan. 1957, pp. 3-17; Philip Mason, "Economic Status of the Archival Profession, 1965-66," The American Archivist, 30, Jan. 1967, pp. 105-22; Frank Evans and Robert Warner, "American Archivists and Their Society: A Composite View," The American Archivist, 34, April 1971, pp. 157-72; and Mabel Deutrich, "Women in Archives: Ms. versus Mr. Archivist," The American Archivist, 36, April 1973, pp. 171-81.

[2] There is some overlap between these two groups since Professor Ham received a few replies during the early months of 1972 and there is no certain way of distinguishing new members who joined during 1971. These weaknesses may in part be compensated by the larger number (981) and percentage (about 75%) of the Society's members who returned the questionnaire. As in all previous surveys of the SAA, there is likely a bias in favor of responses from older, more established, better-paid, and diligent members of the SAA , who had the time and inclination to fill out and return the questionnaire. However, for some purposes significant findings can be based on a relatively low survey response if the sample is large enough and if the respondent's choices are largely homogeneous. See: Paul Erdos, Professional Mail Surveys (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. 139-50.

[3] This distinction was chosen with neither malice nor the intention of implying that all continuing, or "old" members were more advanced in years than all "new" members. Rather, it is a short, convenient way of distinguishing between the two groups.

[4] Posner, p. 5.

[5] Posner's survey totals for MA/MSs (including BLS/MLSs) equal 55.4% and for PhDs 18.0%. For Evans and Warner's study, the respective percentages were 52.1% (not including MLSs) and 16.6%. Posner, p. 5; Evans and Warner, pp. 169-70.

[6] Deutrich, pp. 175-6.

[7] Since there were only four new members identifying themselves as historians, that subgroup was too small for purposes of this comparison.

[8] This essay is a condensed version of a seminar paper submitted in Professor F.G. Ham's seminar. Professor Ham provided the encouragement and suggestions needed to successfully complete this paper. One may inquire via the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the expanded copy, which includes detailed tables and graphs as well as sections pertaining to publications and the role of SAA members in that organization and others.

Michael Kohl, MAC member and former part-time worker at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, has accepted the position of Assistant Librarian in charge of Special Collections at the James P. Adams Library of Rhode Island College. His duties will include organizing the college archives and collecting manuscripts.