

History Comes Alive!

by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member



Tales From the City Archives

Preserving Our Past

■ **What is an archivist, and what are the City Archives?**
The office's efforts culminate in release of groundbreaking publication in September.



The door that leads to the Records Management Division in Piper Tech.



The C. Erwin Piper Technical Center, home of the Records Management Division (the Los Angeles City Archives).

As I must admit, the historical records program for the City of Los Angeles, and the City Archives, which house those records, are part of my heart and soul, and will be until the day I die, even though I retired from that part of my employment six years ago.

It occurred to me that, after all these years of writing my column, subtitled *Tales from the City Archives* – which I am delighted you enjoy – I've never defined just what an archivist is, and does. So allow me!

A recent *New York Times* article gave me food for thought and also exuberance that I feel I want to share with all of you.

To begin with, on June 24, there was an article, "A Vice President Without Borders, Bordering on Lunacy," by the nationally acclaimed columnist Maureen Dowd in the Sunday *New York Times*. The article is about Vice President Richard Cheney and his current activities in Washington, D.C. The plot of the article questions what Dowd views as Cheney's deliberate attempt to be above the law.

Dowd points out that California Congressman, Henry Waxman, Congressman Chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, "revealed that after four years of refusing to cooperate with the government unit that oversees classified documents [the National Archives], the vice president tried to shut down the unit rather than comply with the law ensuing that sensitive data is protected. The National Archives appealed to the Justice Department."

Dowd notes that Cheney's lawyer and new chief of staff consider their boss no less than king of the hill. She goes on to say that he could bully Colin Powell, George Tenet, etc., "but when he tried to push around the little guys, the National Archive data collectors—I'm visualizing dedicated 'We the People' wonky types with glasses and pocket protectors—they pushed back. Archivists are the new macho heroes of Washington."

I have never considered myself or any of my colleagues as "wonky types" – whatever that means. I know that in the

past, archivists have been more insular and mole-like. But today we are vibrant professionals out there beating our drums for our cause of collecting, preserving and reintroducing the past to current and future generations, so that history does not have to repeat itself!

How does that relate to the City? Our historical records program has great value to all Angelenos: government employees, scholars and the general public.

But first, some definitions: What is an archivist and what are archives? An archivist is a person who is professionally educated, trained, experienced and responsible for the management or administration of an *archives*. This person's duties include appraising and identifying records continuing value, documenting and preserving these records in their context, and enabling and facilitating their continuing use. "Archives" has three definitions: (1) Those records that are appraised as having continuing value. Traditionally the term has been used to describe records no longer in current use that have been selected for permanent preser-



Michael Holland, Student Professional Worker.

vation. The nature of these records is administrative, fiscal, historical or legal. These records are also referred to as *permanent records*; (2) The place (building/room/ storage area/vault/repository) where archival records are kept; and (3) An organization, or part of an organization, responsible for appraising, acquiring, preserving and making available permanent records.

There are three main types of historical or permanent records archives: *Government Archives*; *In-house Archives*; and *Collecting Various Organizational Archives*. For this article, I will only describe government collections. The Government Archives are part of a government agency, usually with legislative responsibility for providing a centralized archival service for agencies within that government structure. Only that government's records are collected, processed and preserved.

The Los Angeles City Archives became a reality in March 1980, through an eight-month federal National Historical Publications Records Commission grant. Once the grant expired, the City was obligated to fund two permanent

archival positions to continue the project, which included a backlog of 130 years' worth of work. The Archives became part of the City's Records Management Program under the City Clerk's responsibility.

The Records Management Program, the offspring of the archival profession, is an American phenomenon. The National Archives in America was born in 1934, preceded by other government archives, i.e., 300 years after Spain, 200 years after France, prior to the French Revolution, and 100 years after England. The Records Management program evolved out of World War II's government records inundation. With the advent of the War, the federal government needed to separate operational and housekeeping records from those records that had enduring historical value. Thus was born the federal records management program, where laws and mandates were set up to separate and destroy the ephemeral, operational and housekeeping records from those having enduring value. The destruction of records within the City's Records Center program continues to be a detailed and legal process.

As the City's first Archivist, I established the archival program within the City government, which included moving the historical records from the City Clerk's vault in City Hall and the old Los Angeles Warehouse behind the Federal building and into the new archives vault (Records Management Division) in the C. Erwin Piper Technical Center.

Since I was the only person working in the Archives, it was suggested that I look for a student intern from a local university to assist me. Robert (Rob) Freeman was the ideal student. He had a nine-month internship program from UCLA. He was wonderful and eventually became the City's second Archivist when I became the Records Management Officer in 1986.

As the first Archivist, my initial task was on collection development, which had to be accomplished in cooperation with the Records Management Officer. It involved organizing historical records that had been sitting on the shelves in the City's Records Center for almost 50 years. Task number two was to arrange records in accordance to two archival principals: *provenance*, which means that *no* collection can be intermingled with any other collection; and *original order*, which means the collections must be maintained in the order placed by the organization. Task number three was to describe information to be used by government employees, scholars and the general public when researching archival records. Task number four, preservation, was, and continues to be, one the most important aspects of the archival profession. These records must continue to exist for generations to come. Task number five, creating a reference service, is the ultimate goal for any collection. The collecting, appraising, arranging and describing historical records provide the user with infinite possibilities to fulfill the needs for research. Reference, the end result of the process, is the true mission statement of the archival profession.

Being an archivist is also more than what is described

above. There is an obligation to go out into the government agencies to promote the importance of their historical impact on City government. The employees and politicians need to recognize they are a link in the chain of this dynamic force referred to as City government. Also, the archivist must go out into the larger community to introduce, show and teach the magnificent heritage of our City, found in the City Archives from 1828 through the current era. These records belong to all of us, and then we must begin to share them with the rest of the world.

One of these examples of using the records and sharing the information with the world is a publication coming out in September, which I was privileged to have worked on is the *Development of Los Angeles City Government: An Institutional History, 1850-2000*. It is a two-volume anthology with 26 chapters and 32 authors. It is the first of its kind for a major city in this country.

As the first archivist, while preparing for the move to the Piper Technical Center, I became aware that the City had a *complete* set of Council minutes books from 1850 to the present. Later, I discovered that the City Archives had the minutes, taken during the City's Mexican period, in both Spanish and English translation from 1828 to the American occupation of 1847. The City was fortunate in its founding years that many of the early officials had a sense of history and an appreciation of archival traditions.

To conclude, I would like to make two comments on two issues. They are near and dear to me, and cause me great frustration. First, The City Archives is now 27 years old. To this very day there are people who work for the City government who either don't know there is such a facility or, if they do, think that it is housed in the Central Library. If you are one of those people, consider yourself now in the know!

Second, we do *not* have an official archivist. While Jay Jones has been the acting archivist for many years and is extremely capable, it is unfortunate and sad that the City of L.A. cannot have its very own "macho hero."

Therefore, I am asking the Los Angeles City Historical Society, which became the City Council's appointed "Friends of the Los Angeles City Archives" in 1998, to bring energy and fortitude to these problems. We could begin this process by discussing with the City Clerk the idea of having an open house for City government leaders, with the press included. Other ideas can follow, but it is imperative that we begin as soon as possible.

As an addendum, I would also like to mention an article found in the July 7 front page of the

California Section of the *Los Angeles Times*. The article is entitled "A Conservative's Mother Lode." The article discusses the importance and value of archives. The archives discussed are found at the Huntington Library. My reason for pointing this out to the readership is to once again to *reinforce the necessity of understanding the importance of our historical past*. Otherwise, we are nothing more than blank slates with only our imagination to prevail! Or to restate it more succinctly from the old Bard himself, Shakespeare: "Past is Prologue."



Signs inside the massive Piper Tech lead the way to the City Archives.



Jay Jones, Acting Archivist.



In 1917, Grand Central Market opened. This market was on the site of the former "City of Paris," once the largest department store in the City of Los Angeles.

Did You Know is provided by Larry Williams, Bureau of Contract Administration.