

Remarks for ISC Archives Panel – August 28, 2021

by Jeff K, NIA20 Archives Comm Chair

INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Dean, for the introduction and Raymond for starting us off so well. I also want to thank Dick B and the entire state conference planning committee for the job well done and for inviting me to participate in the archives panel. My name is Jeff and I'm an alcoholic who is grateful for the opportunity to serve as Area 20 archives chair.

DISCLAIMER: My comments are mine alone and not those of the Area 20 Archives Committee or AA.

My 2-year rotation as archives chair began in January 2020. I remember meeting with the Area archivist early in 2020 to get familiar with the archives hard copy collection. Unfortunately, a month after that the pandemic started and our plans about improving the hard copy collection went on hold. The good news is that technology and AA resourcefulness allows archives service work to continue and grow anyway. We'll get back to that hard copy collection soon enough.

Land of Lincoln

We all heard as part of our American history lessons that President Lincoln said "4 score and 7 years ago" to begin his Gettysburg Address. That was 1863 and as he said the country was engaged in a "great civil war." President Lincoln put that 1863 present into historical context when paying homage to the 1000s who gave their lives at Gettysburg. "4 score and 7 years ago" referred to the Declaration of Independence signed in 1776. For us in Alcoholics Anonymous, our present day in 2021 is almost exactly 4 score and 7 years after Bill and Dr. Bob made our first Founders Day in 1935. If we carry out our responsibility to maintain and pass on the Traditions our founders passed to us, it is likely that future AAs will be able to view our present just like we look back to Lincoln's time.

Our AA history is not just the musty past. While the past remains important, we also are responsible to preserve an accurate record of what AA does today. It has been well said that "Today's events are tomorrow's history." It's that simple.

IMPORTANCE OF WRITING IT DOWN

What happens today in AA needs to be preserved accurately so others can get the History right tomorrow. Collecting and preserving what is written down is critical.

Memory is funny – events are easily forgotten or recalled inaccurately without intent to deceive.

EXAMPLE: My mom kept my letters written from college. Last week in our weekly Sunday night phone call she said she had been reading those letters and one talked about my freshman cafeteria job in 1974 where I described 2 streakers running through the cafeteria while everyone cheered. Today, I don't have any doubt the stalker event took place, ... but I have zero present-day independent recollection. If I hadn't written the letter, I'd have no record of the event.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – from last year ISC Archives Panel, Gary P from Chicago Area 19 said this: *There was a fellow who often said, “the mind is a great eraser, so write it down.”* Gary recalled being asked to write a brief history of a group that met in a restaurant. When he visited the group, he found there was nothing written down about how the group began. So, he interviewed the group’s early members to find out ... and was told three different versions of the group’s beginnings and how and why it ended up meeting at the restaurant. In contrast, another group had started early on to keep a ledger where they jotted down who chaired, who read how it works, who gave the lead, money collected and spent and so forth. It was much easier to reconstruct that group’s history because there was a written record.

NEW TYPES OF PRESERVATION ISSUES

Written materials remain critical even though the formats and communication media has changed. Just like writing it down is at the core of AA steps 4 and 8, a written record is at the core for AA archives. One big challenge for archives today is collecting and preserving writings that are not done on paper anymore. What is written comes to us as an avalanche of data in electronic form (PDF, Word, etc.). This raises many new issues like:

- Digitization & scanning the hard copy paper files to integrate with current formats
- Organizing & sorting more important b/c of info overload & material avalanche
 - If you thought a box of unsorted paper was bad, imagine going through a flash drive with 5000 unnamed or inconsistently identified electronic files
- Audio & visual becoming more important too
- Transcriptions
- Converting audio types/formats
- Making the electronic database searchable and accessible
- Preserving anonymity in the internet new media age

COMMON QUESTIONS RELATED TO ARCHIVES SERVICE WORK

QUESTION – *Our district doesn’t have an active archives committee, but we do have some boxes with old AA stuff that were saved over the years and those were just passed on to me for safekeeping. What should we do now?*

1. Review and sort what you have
2. Organize by (a) available dates if any and (b) general subject categories.
3. Don’t write on or mark up any of the materials
4. Make notes on other paper or electronically (post-its ok if no damage to original)
5. Don’t throw anything out initially, even duplicates; those decisions may be made later after review with district/area archives committee
6. Once reviewed and sorted, retained material is preserved and organized in ways that fit the material involved (e.g., paper into folders, binders, protective sleeves)
7. After this starting point collection is put together it’s easier to supplement as new material becomes available, both from the past and in the present.

QUESTION – *Does Archives write the history of AA?*

AA archivists and archives committees are not historians. We don't write or add editorial comments to the materials. We leave the storytelling to the historians. It is our job to ensure they have access to an accurate record, so the history told is freed of substantial distortion. Archives provides the material cited in the history's footnotes.

Even though archives work is separable from that of a historian, people ask historical questions to me as a member of the archives committee because I should know the history. After normally saying archives is here to preserve the record so others can study and write the history, my next breath it to enthusiastically give my opinion type answers on the questions asked.

It is difficult to do archives preservation without reading the materials to determine their relevance to our "History." Much AA history is learned through the process. Also, I've read much AA history in the Big Book itself, including the Pioneers of AA stories, plus the Conference-approved literature on AA's early history, such as *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* and *AA Comes of Age*.

QUESTION – *Our archives committee is getting active – what should we look for, what should we keep, how should we organize it all?*

There are many very useful guides available from GSO and Area to help district and local archives committees. There also are useful subject matter lists to help get started with sorting.

Some useful guides include:

- Archives Workbook (GSO pub M-44i)
- The AA Archives Brochure (GSO pub F-47)
- Archives Guidelines (GSO pub MG-17)
- Archives Preservation (GSO Archives)
- Oral Histories Kit (GSO Archives)
- Group history form with guidelines (Area)
- Guide Questions for longtimer interviews (Area)

We are posting links and PDFs for all these and more on the revamped Archives service page within the Area 20 website, which is a project under construction.

Basic subject matter list for sorting and organizing:

- Business **meeting agendas and minutes**
- Service **committee reports**
- **Written communications** from DCM and district service committees to AA fellowship and/or those outside AA (e.g., treatment centers, jails, schools, newspapers, doctors, clergy, etc.)
- **Group/meeting directories/lists** (group name, meeting time/place, etc.)
- Area, District, intergroup and group **newsletters**
- **Flyers/programs** re AA functions such as picnics, workshops, dinners, etc.
- **Articles about AA** in local newspaper
- **Group histories**

Please remember to remind folks to include dates (day, month, year) on written materials that will end up being archived ... that includes all those things listed above

ERR on the side of keeping instead of throwing out. Archives will gratefully consider any old AA material even if you're not sure ... it might fill in a missing piece of our history

Audio Archives – *collecting and preserving audio material* to be filed in a way that is searchable and understandable:

- Longtimer panels and individual longtimer interviews (audio recorded)
- Transcriptions (putting audio into written form)
- Converting content in old formats to new formats (e.g., cassettes to digital)

Visual Archives

- Pictures are welcome – we can protect anonymity (inside these rooms, entries to buildings where meetings held – church steeples and entrance doors)

Archives must be willing to ask other AA members to help

- Asking GSRs to help with gathering updating group histories
- Seeking out the longtimer to get their story and plumb their memory on local history
- Reminder of where to donate any A.A. related materials

QUESTION – How does Archives help with AA's primary purpose and help carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers?

Archives helped this alcoholic because it was essential for my recovery to get cold facts about where AA came from. I wanted to know how the program that changed my life got from New York to Akron to Chicago to a church basement in Naperville. As it says in our Big Book:

“Frothy emotional appeal seldom suffices. The message which can interest and hold these alcoholic people must have depth and weight,” Big Book, p. xxviii (The Doctor's Opinion)

AA archives helps provide that “depth and weight” so it makes sense as being true, as accurate as possible, and not something shallow or just made up. Archives helps uphold the AA traditions by preserving the record of how those traditions came to be in the first place. Our AA traditions were not born in 1935 on the day AA started. They evolved from experience, through trial and error. Archives preserves the record of that collective experience so it can be shared and so the Fellowship can better understand and appreciate the development of AA and its Traditions.

MISSION AND PURPOSE

My understanding of archives committee service work is to keep it simple and do the work at hand. I don't know that much about telling the big picture. Frankly, I'd rather contribute by keeping a focus on keeping an accurate record and let God take care of the rest.

In my view how to do the detail level work of archives begins with a mission and purpose statement to know what's in scope and what's not. It helps keep the committee on the beam.

Here is the Area 20 Archives Committee Policies and Procedures **Mission Statement**:

“The mission of the Northern Illinois (Area 20) is to document permanently the work of Alcoholics Anonymous, Northern Illinois, its districts, groups and members, to make the history of Northern Illinois and Alcoholics Anonymous accessible to AA members and other researchers, and to provide a context for understanding the progression of this work, and the principles and traditions of Alcoholic Anonymous.”

And the Area 20 Archives Committee Policies and Procedures **Purpose Statement**:

Consistent with AA's primary purpose of maintaining our sobriety and helping other alcoholics achieve recovery, the Northern Illinois (Area 20) Archives Committee and Archivist will:

- Receive, classify and index all relevant material, such as administrative files and records, correspondence and literary works and artifacts, considered to have historical import to [NIA20 and AA];
- Provide access to these materials, as determined by the Archivist in consultation with the [NIA20] Archives Committee, to members of AA and to others who may have a valid need to review such material, contingent upon a commitment to preserve the anonymity of our members;
- Serve as a resource and laboratory to stimulate and nourish learning;
- Provide information services to assist the operations of [NIA20];
- Promote knowledge and understanding of the origins, goals and programs of [NIA 20 and AA].

The key takeaways as 3 sets of actions

- **To document permanently** the work of AA (area, districts, groups, members) by **receiving, classifying and indexing** all relevant material
- **To make the history accessible** to AA members and other researchers
- **To provide a context** for understanding AA's progression, principles & traditions

Applying these guidelines

- Old coffee pots normally are out – they may not tell us much about the work of AA.
- Written group histories are clearly in scope, they tell us a lot.
- Those tattered 50-year-old Big Books ... in themselves may not shed any light on the work of AA ... but there may be gold inside like handwritten notes or papers that document the work of an AA group or AA member.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF AA ARCHIVES

The fellowship around the tables of the Archives Room at the annual state conferences have been a highlight for this alcoholic. I am thrilled to hear those who know more tell their stories and to have their friendly debates over which AA meeting was the first in this or that city or county or district. Hopefully we can have some of that in the sharing time portion of this panel.

IN CLOSING, thank you for listening and look forward to the rest of our program.