

A.A.[®] Guidelines

Archives

from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various service areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

PURPOSE

Whenever a society or civilization perishes there is always one condition present; they forgot where they came from.

—Carl Sandburg

Like any other A.A. service, the primary purpose of those involved in archival work is to carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Archives service work is more than mere custodial activity; it is the means by which we collect, preserve and share the rich and meaningful heritage of our Fellowship. It is by the collection and sharing of these important historical elements that our collective gratitude for Alcoholics Anonymous is deepened.

A.A. members have a responsibility to gather and take good care of the Fellowship's historical documents and memorabilia. Correspondence, records, photographs, newspaper and magazine articles from the past need to be collected, preserved and made available for the guidance and research of A.A. members and others (researchers, historians, and scholars from various disciplines)—for now and for the generations to come.

In the mid-1990s, the trustees' Archives Committee developed and approved a mission statement applicable to the Archives of the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, which reads:

Pursuant to A.A.'s primary purpose of maintaining our sobriety and helping other alcoholics to achieve recovery, the Archives of Alcoholics Anonymous adopts the following mission statement: To receive, classify and index all relevant material, including but not limited to, administrative files and records, correspondence, and literary and artifactual works considered to have historical import to Alcoholics Anonymous. To hold and preserve such material, making access possible, as determined by the present archivist in consultation with the Archives committee, to members of Alcoholics Anonymous, and those of the public who may have a valid need to review said material, such access to be provided only during business hours and with a mindful view toward the anonymity of our members.

GETTING STARTED

One of the best ways to get started in archival service work is to obtain a copy of the "Handbook for Setting up an Alcoholics Anonymous Archival Repository," available from the G.S.O. Archives. The handbook contains helpful information gathered from shared experience over many years. It points out that the idea of setting up an archives in a specific geographic area most often occurs to someone who has been in A.A. for a while, or to several oldtimers who realize the need to create local or area archival centers, beginning with a project to collect material for an area history.

Often, after a need for an archives has been identified, the idea is brought to the area or state committee or local central office/intergroup committee, as applicable, for wider discussion. Following sharing and reaching a group conscience, it may then be agreed upon to create an Archives committee responsible to the area or state committee or central office/intergroup committee. Archives committees usually include A.A. members knowledgeable about the early history, who have sources for obtaining historical A.A. material.

THE ROLE OF THE ARCHIVES COMMITTEE

The Archives committee is responsible for establishing policies, budgets and procedures. It undertakes and maintains final responsibility and authority for the use of the archives, and exercises its group conscience in regard to matters of general policy. In all of its actions, the Archives committee needs to be mindful of and guided by A.A.'s primary purpose. Thus, if non-A.A. friends are asked to serve on the committee, which is possible because of interest and special knowledge or expertise, they ought to be people who are thoroughly familiar with our primary purpose, as well as all of our A.A. Traditions.

One of the most important functions of the Archives committee is to establish creative parameters for the selection of material to be collected. These parameters will guide the archivist in gathering material of historical significance and will reduce the time and space of preserving random bits and pieces of dubious value.

THE ROLE OF THE ARCHIVIST

The Archives committee may decide, as its first act, to select a member to serve as a nonrotating archivist, so that there will be a focal person for the collection. From shared experience we know that it takes a considerable amount of time to become familiar with a collection of historical information. Therefore, it is recommended that the archivist not rotate frequently. The committee maintains final responsibility and authority for the uses of the archives, as well as all other matters of policy, through its group conscience.

The archivist is the person responsible for the collection, the documents and artifactual items. He or she takes care of and maintains the physical integrity of the collection, and also develops finding aids, so as to add to the collection. The archivist is also responsible for ensuring the protection of the anonymity of members, and the confidentiality of the A.A. records. It is helpful and desirable that the archivist take at least an introductory course in archival science or library science, and have a membership in a local archivists organization.

The function of the archivist can be considered therefore to be twofold: primarily, a custodial responsibility for assuring the physical integrity of the collection and its availability to persons with a valid reason for

study; and also a parallel and critical role of data gatherer. It is in this latter capacity that service can be rendered to Bill W.'s urging that archives are needed "so that myth doesn't prevail over fact." In a real sense then, A.A. archivists are "keepers of the past."

FINANCING THE ARCHIVES

In keeping with Tradition Seven, the archives ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions. It is better when funding for the archives is derived from an overall budget of the A.A. entity it serves, rather than through separate A.A. contributions. In this way, archival activity can better reflect the support of the membership, and maintain the perspective of the entire range of Twelfth-Step activity.

HOUSING THE ARCHIVES

Over the years it has become clear that, whenever possible, an archives ought to be housed in rented space, rather than in an individual A.A. member's home. Renting space for the archives eliminates both any appearance of there being a "private collection," and any problems that might arise later regarding issues of ownership following the death or departure of a custodian. Additionally, with rented space, displays of all general material can be made available on a regularly scheduled basis.

DEVELOPING A COLLECTION

Books, pamphlets, world directories, local meeting lists, G.S.O. bulletins, Conference Reports, International Convention booklets, newsletters, area and district minutes, written histories, photographs and audiotapes all serve as the foundation of a collection. The archivist might also arrange to audiotape local oldtimers, thus adding historical oral histories to the collection.

Local A.A. historical material, such as letters, bulletins and photographs, need to be sought out and accumulated in an ongoing manner from oldtimers, past delegates, various committee members and so on. It is important to note that whenever a donation is made to an archives, written documentation be recorded indicating that the material has been presented to the archives (rather than to an archivist) to avoid any misunderstanding later on regarding ownership of the donation.

The archivist can contact other local archives for ideas by asking the G.S.O. archivist to forward the list of those archives who have indicated a willingness to exchange information. In addition, archives committees can participate in and publicize local history-gathering efforts, making presentations, and offering table displays at many A.A. events, such as oldtimer meetings, conventions, roundups.

ARCHIVAL PROCEDURES

As soon as an item is received in the archives, it should be added to the inventory list. Next, the conservation and preservation needs of the collection should be evaluated and followed up on. As a general rule, any action on a document or item that is not reversible should never be performed. For example, scotch tape or lamination ought never to be used. Removal of tape, repair, deacidification and encapsulation are some of the steps necessary to protect the integrity of a document. Consult the "Handbook for Setting up an Alcoholics Anonymous Archival Repository" for some conservation and preservation procedures, as well as other resources listed

at the bottom of these Guidelines. Sometimes it may be necessary to seek outside professional help to ensure the integrity of an item.

Once prepared, an archival item should then be categorically classified. The G.S.O. Archives has the following classifications: "Open to all," "Open to A.A. members," "Open with the approval of the Archives committee" and "Closed at this time." This final classification means that it is not available to anyone—sometimes donors request that documents remain sealed for a certain period of time to come. The item should then be entered into a retrieval system, either manual or computerized, in order to provide readily accessed information to researchers. Archival items are indexed by record groups or series, rather than item by item.

RESEARCH IN THE ARCHIVES

Researchers working in the archives ought to be informed that they will be expected to strictly adhere to our Anonymity Traditions—only first names and last initials of A.A. members may be used by them. Further, the trustees' Archives Committee has recommended that there be no photocopying of private correspondence. This recommendation is also designed to assure anonymity protection, and to maintain the physical integrity of archival documents.

In addition to the preservation of the anonymity of the author of the correspondence, the writer's private opinions and observations, some of which might be highly controversial, must be treated with extreme delicacy. It might be remembered that members share these documents with a trust and expectation that their remarks will be held in confidence. No one has an intrinsic right to view another's private correspondence at will; it is essential that the archivist's chief concern of assuring this spiritual wholeness of the collection be understood and supported.

AVAILABLE ARCHIVAL ITEMS

The following items, available from G.S.O. through the Catalog/Order Form, might appeal to those with an historic interest: *A.A. Comes of Age*; "Pass It On;" *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*; "Voices of Our Co-founders," an audiotape cassette of five talks given by Bill and Dr. Bob; "Markings on the Journey," a videotape of A.A. history; and two Scrapbooks, collections of compelling newspaper articles on early A.A. (1939-1942) and (1943).

In addition, the following items may be ordered directly from G.S.O. Archives: a photocopy of a prepublication manuscript of *Alcoholics Anonymous*; and a set of 8"x10" b&w photographs of places and individuals involved in the establishment of A.A. in its formative years.

REFERENCES

For a more detailed discussion of archival matters, please review the "Handbook for Setting up an Alcoholics Anonymous Archival Repository," available directly from the G.S.O. Archives. The handbook contains a bibliography of basic professional literature, and a list of archival supply companies.

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) is a good resource to contact. They have published seven books in their "Archival Fundamentals" series—especially helpful is *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*. SAA also offers a literature catalog, and may be reached at: The Society of American Archivists, 527 S. Wells St., 5th fl., Chicago, IL 60607. Telephone: 1-312-922-0140; www.archivists.org.