
Something to remember us by: The American Memory program

"Vernacular expressions of culture" are vital to scholar's research.

A prototype of an ambitious project to provide nationwide access to the collections of the Library of Congress will be tested at 30 libraries during the second half of 1991.

Users of American Memory will have access to primary materials such as Documents of the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789; Paper Print Films of New York City, 1897-1906; Early Sound Recordings from America's Leaders, 1918-1920; African-American Pamphlets, 1820-1920; and Civil War Photographs, 1861-1865. Along with archival materials, American Memory will offer interpretive introductions to each collection, guides for users, and bibliographies for further research.

Collections in various formats are planned for the program, including photographs, graphic arts, motion pictures, recorded sound, music, broadsides and manuscripts, books and pamphlets. Reproductions of actual artifacts in all of these formats will be placed on compact disks and videodiscs. Whenever possible, American Memory collections will be presented in an integrated system, enabling users to conduct research within a variety of collections and formats. This multimedia resource will eventually be available online.

During the pilot period, which is expected to last until 1995, the Library of Congress hopes to learn through testing prototypes what type of material is most appealing and what kinds of audiences exist for the program. Also being evaluated are the adequacy and appropriateness of the cataloging and the user's guides.

Developers at the Library of Congress envision researchers, students, and teachers visiting an

American Memory workstation at a local library or school. Workstations might include an Apple Macintosh or IBM compatible computer, a CD-ROM player, a videodisc player, and a television monitor. A searcher would be able to do research in a specific collection or within several different collections, view interactive exhibitions related to specific collections, or electronically copy data for further study. Electronic copying for personal use will not violate copyright restrictions. American Memory will respect copyright and other rights inherent in the materials it presents, and the permission of owners will be sought before disseminating copyrighted materials.

That there is a need for resources such as American Memory was brought out at a conference on research trends and library resources held at Harvard last year under a grant from the Council on Library Resources. Co-chaired by Stanley Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, and Lawrence Dowler, Associate Librarian for Public Services at Harvard College Library, the conference met to identify new or changing tendencies in research in the humanities and social sciences and the implications of such changes for research libraries. The discussion of sources of information reflected scholars' increased use of different forms of research materials, including images, ephemera, artifacts, conference reports, popular literature, spatial data, etc. There were frequent references throughout the conference to the value of imagery and what James Ackerman called "vernacular expressions of culture." It was generally agreed that libraries needed to acquire not only the traditional published sources but also

“nontraditional” research materials—images, including photographs and motion picture film, popular literature, even advertising and other forms of ephemera, spatial data, personal papers and archives, raw economic and social data, and virtually anything else that might reflect the attitudes, activities, and culture of society.

On the other hand, there was general recognition that no library or repository could possibly collect everything. There was some discussion about the possibility of using core sampling tech-

cess to a broad variety of cultural evidence, which might be found in a variety of research institutions, and that they all ought to be linked by a common informational network. Conference participants agreed that librarians ought to be able to provide access to research materials regardless of location or form of material. Several scholars at the conference seemed to be seeking local access to collection-level descriptions of primary sources, including material culture, archives, songs, ephemera, film, photographs, and other forms of imagery—indeed, the entire range of material documenting a culture.

The desiderata articulated by the 1990 Conference on Research Trends and Library Resources raise complex issues of cost, cataloging, preservation, and responsibility. However, the Library of Congress’s efforts to make its collections accessible to all through the American Memory program seem to be a step in the direction mapped out by scholars in the humanities and social sciences as useful for their research.

Editor’s notes: The information about the Conference on Research Trends and Library Resources was supplied by Lawrence Dowler, Harvard College.

More information about the American Memory program can be obtained from its coordinator, Carl Fleischauer, at the Library of Congress. ■ ■

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niques for some forms of research materials, and several scholars argued for event- or issue-oriented collecting, such as all types of evidence relating to the “cold fusion controversy,” including communications on BITNET. There was virtual unanimity about the need for libraries to establish collecting priorities. What was also needed, many thought, was cooperative collection development, even regional networks, among research libraries. Participants recognized that the need to collect nontraditional materials could not be borne by libraries alone, and they concluded that what was needed for research was ac-



This satire by Henry R. Robinson, on Andrew Jackson’s campaign to destroy the Bank of the United States and its support among state banks is an example of the diversity of material and formats in the American Memory Project. An individual at a workstation could printout a copy of this cartoon.