

Testimony on the FY-1999 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Presented to the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by Deanna B. Marcum, President, Council on Library and Information Resources, on Behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and the National Humanities Alliance

March 4, 1998

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Deanna Marcum, president of the Council on Library and Information Resources. Today, I am pleased to represent the Association of Research Libraries and the National Humanities Alliance, as well as the organization that I lead, the Council on Library and Information Resources. I speak to express support for the National Endowment for the Humanities and to urge the Subcommittee to recommend a Fiscal Year 1999 appropriation for the agency of \$136 million, the full amount requested by the President. The budget we support includes \$20 million for preservation and access, a \$2 million increase over the current appropriation.

This year marks the eighth consecutive year that three national organizations -- the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance -- have joined together to testify on the value and importance of the preservation and access activities of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Twenty-Year Initiative to Save Brittle Books and Serials

Since 1989, the National Endowment for the Humanities has been implementing a coordinated national plan to save the intellectual content of books, serials, and other research materials that are deteriorating in the libraries and archives of the United States because of the high acidic content of their paper. The plan was drawn to preserve the contents of some 3,000,000 embrittled books over a period of twenty years, through reformatting. The method chosen to reformat the materials was microfilming, because it was at the time the method that promised to achieve the goal of capturing the contents of the books safely and economically. What is more, filming has allowed the option of converting to electronic formats when they are sufficiently developed to warrant their adoption as preservation media.

In response to the brittle-books crisis, research libraries, which hold the largest number of endangered volumes, have taken a leadership role and built a capacity to deal with the widespread deterioration. Importantly, they have acted in the national interest in support of preservation activities. What has been clear from the start of the initiative, however, is that no one library has the resources to cope with the problem in its full dimensions. That is why the leadership of the National Endowment for the Humanities has been so essential. The NEH is perhaps the only organization in the country with the persuasive authority to engage institutions all across America in this massive rescue effort and to coordinate their labor. Eighty libraries and consortia of libraries have participated in the preservation initiative, and the consequences of their united action have been formidable. Further, in the years between 1988 and 1995, the nation's major research libraries increased their preservation programs from 76 to 92, and the number of staff members committed to preservation activities rose from just over 1400 to approximately 1900.

When the preservation filming projects currently funded by the NEH have been completed, some 773,000 embrittled volumes -- across fields of the humanities and the humanistic social sciences-- will have been saved. These are works significant not just to American history and culture and but to the cultures of other regions of the world, and their preservation is an accomplishment in which the nation's libraries and archives can take great pride. And yet, when the figure is soberly assessed, it inspires mixed feelings. The NEH initiative has been in operation for eight years -- 40% of the duration of the originally drawn 20-year plan. Were the plan on schedule, more than a million volumes would have been saved by now. Not only is the initiative well behind that number in absolute terms, but the number of volumes filmed annually has diminished in recent years, to a level much below what was achieved in the early years. The reason for the lost momentum is plain: the amount of money available from the NEH for microfilming projects at the participating institutions has had to be reduced as the Division strives to maintain the full breadth of its program.

Despite this reduced funding, the institutions in the program have developed a superb in-house capacity to cope with the filming needs. The coordinated action of dozens of partners of varied size and character is now a daily reality in America. Institutions have purchased the requisite equipment, and they have hired and trained staff members to perform highly technical, detailed work. The work is efficient and cost-effective, and of an importance we can only begin to estimate. The NEH initiative made possible the building of this infrastructure, which was able to function close to its capacity when sufficient NEH funds were available. The reduction in the amount of Federal money for the brittle-books initiative has compromised the goals of the rescue effort. Although some institutions are ready to double their amount of filming, they simply cannot afford to increase their efforts without additional funding.

The crusade to save 3,000,000 embrittled books has lost some of the momentum that greeted its launching, because the extraordinary commitment has taken on the character of a workaday effort and may even seem old-fashioned at a time when digitization and high-tech capacities are being developed so rapidly. Those developments are bringing new attention to preservation requirements. But digital formats have not yet established themselves as trustworthy preservation media, and digitized systems at their current levels of development will not solve the brittle-books problem, though digitization may one day transform the ease of access to materials that have been saved through filming. So microfilming must continue uninterrupted, in accordance with the twin purposes that have guided the 20-year plan from the beginning: a) to film the books and keep their contents for future generations, and b) to assure scholars and the general public broad access to the filmed materials.

The Need to Preserve the Nation's Audio-Visual Record

NEH is to be commended for its careful and well-reasoned approach to preserving the information recorded on acidic and brittle paper. It is to be commended as well for its growing commitment to the preservation of information on the equally fragile and ubiquitous formats new to the late nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries--photographs, film, television, video, and a large number of recorded sound media, including broadcast radio, cassette tapes, and vinyl disks. We strongly support this commitment to save the nation's audio-visual record. A massive amount of information about the way we lived, the way we looked, and the way we sounded is recorded on some of the most fragile media yet invented -- wax and wire recordings, nitrate and diacetate film, daguerreotypes and glass plate negatives, acetate disks, 78s and LPs, magnetic tape, and compact disks. Some people would argue that on these media are the greatest expressive forms that America has created in her short life -- blues and jazz and rock-and-roll music, animation, and feature films. And there is much more, all of it imperiled: the literally irreplaceable documentary

record of Native Americans' languages and rituals, captured on fragile wax cylinders; the past ecology of the West, captured on thousands of fragile glass-plate negatives; the attitude and voices of Depression-era America, captured on newsreels and radio broadcasts. NEH is addressing the preservation and access needs of this incomparably rich non-textual record of America through grants earmarked for their conservation and reformatting.

The Library of Congress, in two landmark studies of the state of preservation of film and of television and video, has documented the need for immediate action to rescue significant, if still incomplete, portions of these cultural and information resources for generations to come. The Library's survey of the needs of various collections and its development of a national plan to preserve this legacy, done in collaboration with a network of national experts from the private and public sectors, confirm that NEH's commitment to help non-Federal repositories around the nation keep their audio-visual holdings for future generations is, indeed, exceptionally far-sighted.

Addressing the Digital Challenge

NEH's mission to preserve the intellectual and cultural record of America must be expanded through additional support if it is to adapt to the new challenges of the information revolution. Even as the preservation of print-based and audio-visual resources proceeds, an ever-expanding body of knowledge is being created in digital form. The challenge to the library and archival community, the traditional bodies charged with retaining cultural information of enduring significance, is that digitized information is being recorded on hardware and software that guarantee rapid and inevitable obsolescence. Anyone who has a computer knows only too well that, unless great time and care are taken to migrate files from one system to another, vital documents can be lost or corrupted in the constant shuffle to upgrade systems. Imagine that threat on a massive scale, and the challenge now facing information repositories across the country becomes vividly clear. NEH helped to fund a film, *Into the Future*, that explains clearly the perils to both the general public and the scholarly community of having information exist solely in digital form -- for example, the location of toxic-waste dumping sites, medical records, or data from NASA explorations. The information might well become impossible to retrieve because of software obsolescence or the unreliability of a storage medium such as magnetic tape. The film, which aired nationwide this past winter, alerted Americans to the critical need for more research into the requirements for the long-term preservation and accessibility of digital information.

Despite the uncertainty that attends the continued development of digital technology, it clearly offers unprecedented opportunities for reformatting historical materials and making them widely available. Some of the most significant records from the American past -- for example, the Brady and Gardner daguerreotypes taken at the time of the Civil War, or documentary evidence of the California Gold Rush -- are unique and fragile. In the past, scholars had to travel to sites where these primary materials are kept to use them, and every time a researcher handled an original item, no matter how carefully, there was a risk of contributing to its deterioration. Reformatting these items and making them available through digital surrogates on the Internet has the potential to transform both scholarship at the highest level and the education of children throughout their school years.

Moreover, the additional funds NEH is requesting in fiscal '99 to be earmarked for reformatting special-collections materials such as manuscripts, photographs, rare maps, and books will significantly increase access to many items that have already been physically preserved with NEH funds. Digital technology, then, becomes an important strategic partner in the mission not simply to ensure preservation but to guarantee an unprecedented breadth of access. But if the additional funds are not forthcoming, NEH will be unable to embrace the new technological opportunities

without reducing its current commitment to other preservation and access activities that remain as essential as ever.

The NEH Initiative with the National Science Foundation

The library community and the humanities scholarly community applaud NEH's partnership with the National Science Foundation (NSF) in its second round of digital library project grants. Scientific and technical materials are generally created in electronic form and find their way quickly to the World Wide Web. But historical humanities materials, so rich in content for many different research purposes, must be converted to digital form to be widely available on the Web.

Thanks to this collaboration between the NSF and the NEH, scholars, librarians, archivists, and computer scientists will be able to work together on research and demonstration projects directly related to preserving and creating access to humanities collections in electronic form. The goal is to bring the extraordinary advances in computer science we have seen in the past decades to bear on dissemination of the kinds of materials previously accessible only on-site in libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies. Through this new grants program, NEH will contribute significantly to the growing national resources of digital libraries, resources to be shared by all citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to appear before you today. We request that the Congress maintain its commitment to the generous support of NEH activities that help to preserve and make accessible the shared history of the nation.