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From the Selected Works of Sidney F. Huttner

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1990 RBMS Preconference (Minneapolis)

Sidney F. Huttner, *University of Iowa*



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"The 1990 RBMS Preconference (Minneapolis)." Submitted by Sidney F. Huttner, The University of Tulsa.

The theme of the 31st ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Preconference, June 19-22 in Minneapolis, was "The Next Decade: Issues, Strategies, and Opportunities for Special Collections in the 1990s." Preservation, in the general sense of the word, was an underlying concern of the preconference as the mission of the rare book, manuscript and special collections departments and libraries represented by the 160 registrants is the collection, organization and preservation of a central portion of our cultural history.

In the specific sense, preservation concerns were on the table from the opening session: the first group of seminars included a well-attended panel titled "A National Agenda for the Preservation of Books and Documents in Original Form" and coordinated by Cathy Henderson (HRHRC Austin). The speakers were Donald Farren (University of Maryland), Donald Kelsey (University of Minnesota) and James Stroud (HRHRC), and all agreed that it is time to evaluate the assumption that microfilm (and other format transfers) can "replace" the original "without loss." Farren critically explored the forces and politics driving the Brittle Books program and offered a list of reasons why microfilming cannot justify discard or destruction of original formats. Kelsey noted the remarkable contrast with conferences a decade ago which all began, he said, with a testy debate whether "preservation" or "conservation" was the appropriate term to describe the emerging field and an impassioned recounting of the Florence flood. Disputing the existence of an "organized national agenda" and noting the "frightening numbers of embrittled general collections items" (ARL libraries alone may hold 300 million items in their core collections which support immediate teaching needs and which will require item by item evaluation at each institution), Kelsey argued that we must begin to move beyond federal dollars (hard to come by in a time of large deficits) and turn to the variety of funding sources that created academic institutions in the first place: the wide range of individual and institutional donors. He suggested the advantages of matching special collections expertise in fund raising to the needs articulated by the preservation community.

In his closely reasoned paper, James Stroud sketched ways in which Brittle Books microfilming may have delayed other strategies (mass deacidification and strengthening, environmental stability, preservation housing) which may hold greater promise for dealing with much larger numbers of objects than we can consider microfilming. He urged that preservation must come to be seen as a "shared responsibility at all levels of staff" and that "continuous self-evaluation" in the preservation community is "required for the emergence of a national agenda" which he saw as a "coordinated program committed to more than a single goal."

Thursday events were scheduled for the campus of St. John's University, an hour and a half drive northwest of Minneapolis, with tours of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library and a talk by its Founding Executive Director, Julian G. Plante. It is the goal of the Hill Library to microfilm all pre-1600 manuscripts and thus to make them available to scholars: more than 22 million pages have been filmed, including 72,000 manuscripts and 122,000 papyri representing 200 European and Ethiopian manuscript libraries and archives in virtual entirety. John Parker, curator of the James Ford

Bell Library at the University of Minnesota, also echoed preservation concerns in his after-dinner speech by seeing the 1990s as a period of retrenchment in the face of tight budgets. Rather than pursue acquisitions funds, he suggested, it may be a time to seek administrative approval for internal flexibility in the use of funds for acquisition, preservation and publication, allocating scarce funds where most needed to care for what we have rather than acquire more items with new needs.

Preservation was a distinct but subordinate theme in Minneapolis. It will emerge far more forcefully at the 32nd RBMS Preconference scheduled for June 26-28, 1991, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Drawing on the resources of both the University of North Carolina and Duke, that program has been titled "Keeping the Facts in Artifacts: Conserving the Physical Evidence of Special Collections Material and Its Impact on Research."

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