AN EXAMINATION OF THE BRITTLE BOOKS PROGRAM AS A MODEL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONALLY COORDINATED PROGRAM TO PRESERVE RECORDED SOUND.

by
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Since its inception in 1965 the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has served as “an independent grant-making agency of the federal government to support research, education, and public programs in the humanities” (2000, p. 2). To this end, the NEH has funded projects to support scholars conducting research, to create educational CD-ROMs and websites for use in classrooms, and to encourage teachers in their efforts to include the humanities in lessons. To ensure appropriate sources would be available for their mission, the NEH created the Division of Preservation and Access in 1985. Since this time, the NEH has funded projects to preserve resources such as newspapers and books that document the history and culture of the United States. The NEH continues its mission by incorporating several new initiatives under the umbrella of its *Rediscovering America* program outlined in the proposed 2001 budget.

The goal of *Rediscovering America* is to encourage Americans “to discover anew the nation’s history and culture and preserve its rich heritage for the benefit of future generations” (2000, p.3). Among its current initiatives, the NEH includes a request for one million dollars to support the development of a nationally coordinated program for the preservation of recorded sound. Despite the ambition of such a large scale preservation effort, the idea is not a new one for the NEH. With its Brittle Books program, begun in 1989, the NEH implemented a successful 20 year national
preservation campaign to save deteriorating collections of printed materials. Aside from preserving the printed intellectual heritage of the United States, a lasting legacy of the Brittle Books program may be its use as a model for the development of preservation programs for other types of media, specifically, one for recorded sound.

Traditionally, recorded sound preservation has not received the same level of attention as the preservation of other research materials, such as printed matter, photographs, and film. Historical speeches, oral histories, musical concerts, theatrical performances, and recordings of animals--some of which have since become extinct--are among the irreplaceable resources at risk of permanent loss if the current passive approach to these materials continues. With good reason, the individuals responsible for audio collections fear the deterioration of this significant part of twentieth-century American history. Librarians and archivists have expressed several needs that must be fulfilled if the preservation of recorded sound collections is to occur: better training for handling and treatment of these materials, more information concerning standards and the best practices to follow, and additional financial support to conduct preservation studies within institutions. If funding is provided, the NEH will have the opportunity to implement a nationally coordinated program to address these concerns on a large scale.

A potential model for the NEH recorded sound preservation initiative, the Brittle Books program, successfully addressed preservation concerns for printed material on a national level beginning in 1989. When currently funded projects are completed through fiscal year 2000, the intellectual content of an estimated 992,300 volumes will have been preserved as part of a 20 year initiative to microfilm three million embrittled and deteriorating texts in our nation’s libraries (G.F. Farr, personal communication, August
9, 2000). The NEH’s Brittle Books program seeks to achieve two central goals: to microfilm a large number of the most significant volumes considered to be at risk for loss and to provide access to materials through interlibrary loan utilizing a central catalog of microfilmed texts.

A great deal of the success of this program has depended upon the cooperation of participating libraries to achieve these central goals. Institutions have shared resources, expertise, and even funding to accomplish the two objectives. The coordination of microfilm preservation projects has prevented unnecessary duplication of effort in the generation of microfilm master copies. The unified effort also facilitated access to collections, as all participating institutions must comply with a specified level of cataloging standards and provide copies of microfilmed texts for interlibrary loans to receive NEH funding. The NEH requires three copies of the microfilm to be created for each project receiving its support: an archival copy which must be housed in storage facilities with appropriate environmental controls, a print master to provide copies of the microfilmed texts to individuals or institutions at cost, and a positive copy to be used for the purpose of interlibrary loan.

Understanding and applying the lessons learned from the Brittle Books program could facilitate the design of an efficient and effective program for the preservation of recorded sound. Even if the NEH receives the full one million dollars requested for this proposal, the severity of the problem requires the most judicious use of grant funding to benefit the greatest number of sound recordings for future accessibility. To accomplish this, however, designers of the national effort could examine the Brittle Books program itself and determine what lessons might be drawn from this experience. Which issues
involved in the planning of a program to preserve brittle books should be addressed in one to preserve recorded sound? How did the Brittle Books program obtain the required funding and professional support necessary for success? In short, what elements of the infrastructure for a nationally coordinated program are already in place? These are the only a few of the questions guiding this research.

George F. Farr, Jr., the Director of the Division of Preservation and Access at the NEH, participated in an interview to help provide some of the answers to these questions. His experience with the development of the Brittle Books program and initial planning of what is hoped to be an equally successful program for recorded sound, proved to be a unique and valuable contribution to this research. In addition to this interview, a review of the literature describing the current status of recorded sound preservation and the planning and implementation of the Brittle Books program is included in this paper. It is hoped that this examination will provide a background for analysis of both the lessons learned and the types of issues involved in the development of a program to ensure the survival of recorded sound.

Throughout this paper, the professions of archivist and librarian are used to denote those who are responsible for the preservation of recorded sound collections. The use of these terms in no way suggests that librarians and archivists are solely responsible for ensuring the survival of audio materials. Preservation is a responsibility of all those who use the collections. Librarians and archivists determine the policies within their institutions, and therefore have a unique role in the preservation of these items. However, one who cares for collections of recorded sound may or may not be a librarian or archivist by profession. The terms recorded sound collections, audio materials, and
artifacts of aural history are used interchangeably to describe audio recordings present in the institutions described.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

To develop a nationally coordinated program for preserving the aural history of the United States, the scope and magnitude of the issue need to be considered. Gibson (1994) presented statistics from a Library of Congress survey conducted in 1993 that aimed to assess the volume of current audio, film, and video holdings of a representative number of commercial and non-commercial institutions. Although the results included responses from only 159 of the 500 institutions requested to return completed questionnaires (90% of which considered themselves non-profit organizations), the findings can be generalized, with caution, to gain an overall sense for the number and types of holdings that could benefit from a nationally coordinated preservation program.

Through the survey, the Library of Congress revealed the presence of a total of 23,600,379 audio recordings in the collections of the respondents, indicating an average of 48,807 audio recordings per institution (p. 53). Unfortunately, neither the content nor specific conditions of the audio materials reported were identified in the survey. Eighty one percent of the respondents indicated that they contained audio holdings in their collections. The report then categorized the types of recordings that these 81% possessed: 71% hold audio cassettes, 70% hold LPs, and 60% hold CDs (p. 56). Additionally, the report found that among other formats, 7” open reel magnetic tapes were the most
common, followed by 78 rpm disks, 45 rpm disks, 10.5” open reel magnetic tapes, 5” magnetic tapes, 12” acetate disks, and wax cylinders.

The findings in Gibson’s report revealed much about the current holdings of recorded sound collections in the United States. The sheer number of audio materials in the surveyed institutions should merit the attention, if not concern, of those involved with preserving the intellectual heritage of the United States. The number of these irreplaceable audio materials is only growing. A study conducted by the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) (1994), estimated this growth to be between five and ten percent each year (Schüller, p.59).

Gibson’s report of the Library of Congress survey also indicated the wide variety of formats commonly held in these institutions. This raises concerns about the need for training and education programs to assist those responsible for audio recordings in their efforts to provide the best care, handling, and storage conditions possible for this broad spectrum of materials. Finally, through the identification of the formats that are most common, the statistics provide a sense of what preservation problems one might expect to find in an “average” collection. Again, these statistics should be applied with caution as each collection of sound recordings maintains its own unique characteristics, but an awareness of these numbers is critical to the survival of these materials.

Gibson’s report identified the types of materials commonly held in audio collections, but which factors influence or damage the integrity of these audio materials? Paton (1990) identified some of these factors in an article entitled, “Whispers in the Stacks: the Problem of Sound Recordings in Archives”:

Magnetic tape appears to have a “prime-time” life span of approximately twenty-five years, markedly shorter than good paper; less common media such as paper
tape and glass or metal-tape acetate discs may have an even shorter life. Magnetic recordings can be accidentally erased; disc recordings can crack or shatter. Acetate discs will eventually delaminate; soft plastic formats are easily deformed; and some media provide prime feeding materials for fungi. Shellac discs will dissolve if cleaned with solutions containing alcohol; discs containing cardboard filler (which may not be visible to the eye) can fall apart if washed with water. Virtually all sound recordings are degraded by playback; some will exhibit noticeable degradation after only a few hearings. None of the instantaneous formats (e.g. tape, wire, disc, belt) can be shelved for “permanent” storage as paper can; all require regular attention, and will deteriorate fairly quickly to the point where re-recording is necessary. Environmental requirements, important for slowing deterioration, are different from those of paper, and differ among the various formats as well. (p. 277)

In a 1998 article, Paton further reported on the preservation priorities that she and other archivists identified during an inspection of the recorded sound collections of Georgia State University. They found acetate discs, popularly used from the 1930s until the 1960s as a medium for instantaneous recordings, to be the least stable format of audio recordings due to the elements used in its manufacturing. The deterioration of the castor-oil plasticiser coating on the discs causes “progressive embrittlement and the irreversible loss of sound information” (p. 191), making these discs a high priority for copying. Emphasizing the need for timely action, Paton stated that “all acetate discs will eventually deteriorate and must be re-recorded if their audio content is to be preserved” (p. 192).

Magnetic tapes, used beginning in the 1940s, present many problems resulting from components of their chemical composition as well. Accordingly, the two common types of magnetic tape, acetate and polyestarr, are extremely susceptible to deterioration and loss unless institutions take an active approach to ensuring their survival. Acetate tapes suffer from embrittlement and physical distortion with age and are at risk of a condition known as “vinegar syndrome”, which results from the production of acetic
acid. To make matters worse, this condition tends to spread to other nearby acetate tapes in a collection, thus placing otherwise unaffected tapes at risk (St-Laurent, 1996). Polyestarr magnetic tapes, used from the 1960s to the present, have many problems of their own. The binder that holds the oxide to the base of the polyestarr film absorbs moisture from the environment which in turn causes the binder to separate, a condition known as “sticky shed syndrome”. Paton wrote that “When the tape is then played, the binder sticks to the tape transport and begins to peel off, taking the magnetic particles with it” (1998, p. 195).

Paton emphasized the problems facing audio cassettes as a high priority for preservation as well. She stated, “the cassette is an inexpensive, short-lived format that should not be relied upon for long term storage” (p. 196). Further, the experience of maintaining this format in collections has led archivists to believe that any cassette more than two years old is “suspect” (p. 196). This is a startling statement considering the results expressed in Gibson’s report that 71% of the institutions holding audio materials in their collections contain cassette sound recordings.

Identifying the problems affecting the integrity of these materials appears to be just the beginning of the process to ensure the survival of sound recordings. Developing and implementing programs to address these problems has proved to be a difficult task within individual institutions. The Associated Audio Archives (AAA) Committee of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC) conducted a NEH funded planning study in 1991 that assessed the current status of audio preservation in institutions in the United States and abroad. Through this study, ARSC/AAA identified the barriers to effective preservation programs encountered by librarians and archivists in their own
institutions. The report includes the responses of 33 institutions holding sound recordings. When asked the question, “What are your problems and priorities regarding preservation, restoration and conservation of your collection?”, participating institutions identified a number of different obstacles: poor storage containers; an overwhelming amount of re-recording needed; a short supply of competent staff; restrictive budgets limiting preservation, restoration, and conservation programs; environmental control concerns; inadequate funding and equipment; a lack of maintenance programs to insure the integrity of machines and audio materials; the high cost of preservation; insufficient knowledge of how to carry out a successful program; and limited access tools to materials in collections (p. 520-522). The survey also indicated that very few institutions uphold a set of written procedures for staff or conduct a regular inspection of materials. In a dramatic summary of the situation, the report stated, “nearly all of the conclusions reached by the planning study group reflected the lack of coordinated, carefully planned attention given to audio preservation until now” (p. 4).

The final report of the planning study stated, “As with any field of study which is only now moving through the early stages of development, the field of audio archiving is characterized by widely divergent practice, doubt, confusion and a myriad of questions” (p. 39). Sawka’s summary of the planning study highlighted the priorities determined for sound archives at this time: the critical need to develop an archival medium for recorded sound carriers; support the creation of training and certification programs for professional sound archivists; encourage research, “scientific or otherwise”, for the maintenance of recorded sound collections; and establish “tested and agreed upon preservation standards” (1991, p. 7). She concluded her synopsis with a call for action, “We must educate and
convince those responsible for funding and promoting local, national, and international preservation efforts that the task at hand is important and urgent” (p. 9).

The ARSC/AAA report strongly recommended the need for a cooperative effort to address these problems. The association recognized the potential benefits of working collaboratively among institutions for the preservation of recorded sound, stating that “Cooperation among archives can lead to pooling of expertise and resources, sharing of information about archival holdings, division of collecting responsibility, isolation, and identification of important or unique material, and a more practical sharing of the funds which may be available for preservation work” (1991, p. 85). ARSC/AAA is not alone in its suggestion; the overwhelming need for cooperation is expressed in almost every document reviewed for this research.

As stated earlier, this is not the first time that the NEH has developed a large scale national effort for the preservation of materials. In 1989 the NEH requested funding to rescue a carefully selected portion of the millions of embrittled volumes in our nation’s library collections. ARSC/AAA (1991) acknowledged the possibilities of using the experience gained in this effort to further its own cause, stating that:

- The library community in general has been pursuing active cooperation for many years, particularly in preservation projects, shared cataloging, and sharing of collection responsibility. It would seem that the sound-archive community could easily follow these patterns. Many sound-archives are divisions of parent institutions which already have cooperative channels with each other (p. 85).

- How did the library community respond to the problem of the brittle books in our nations libraries? On March 17, 1988, Patricia Battin spoke to Congress on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), the Commission on Preservation and Access (CPA), and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to express the need for a
nationally coordinated program to preserve the millions of acidic volumes in our national collections. She explained to Congress that most of the printed matter produced during the past 150 years was deteriorating in our nation’s collections at an alarming rate. As with many recorded sound materials, the deterioration of printed matter produced in the 19th and 20th centuries is caused by the poor quality of the materials used in its manufacture. Battin argued that this was a widespread national problem that affects such collections as those in the Library of Congress and major research institutions in the United States. Only a large scale national preservation program could adequately address this concern. The NEH needed an increase in federal funding to support libraries in their efforts to participate in this program. Battin concluded, “the operating budgets of our libraries can no longer support this national asset alone” (www.nhalliance.org/testimony/1988/88testimony-pbattin.html, 1988).

Battin’s testimony before Congress to justify funding for the Brittle Books program parallels much of the rhetoric expressed in the literature of the recorded sound community. Battin cited the value of supporting educational initiatives, fostering research and development in technologies that improve preservation quality microfilming and future access, enforcing standards for planning programs, and increasing user awareness. The testimony, however, stressed that the infrastructure for fulfilling these objectives was already in place and that the library community was well on its way to accomplishing these goals. She offered evidence that the library community, including the Commission on Preservation and Access (CPA), the Library of Congress, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), and the Council on Library Resources (CLR), had been considering these issues and developing the means to address them over the previous 20 years. She
offered a clear plan to utilize increased NEH funding, which would include a specific number of volumes to be preserved over a 20 year period. According to Battin, this would “make available to the nation a significant portion...of the most important volumes in our collective heritage, at the same time institutionalizing the preservation process in our libraries and archives” (www.nhalliance.org/testimony/1988/88testimony-pbattin.html, 1988).
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Participant

To understand the lessons learned from the Brittle Books program and their possible application to the preservation of recorded sound, I felt it was important to obtain the perspective of someone who has first hand knowledge of the program itself. I chose to interview George F. Farr, Jr., the Director of the Division of Preservation and Access at the NEH, who has participated in the design, implementation, and coordination of the Brittle Books program. He agreed to the interview without inducement and with full cooperation.

Because the audio preservation program is still pending approval, the discussion focused primarily upon the history and development of the Brittle Books program along with the lessons learned from the initiative without drawing comparisons between the two initiatives at this time. Any comparisons or inferences about parallels between the programs are my own impressions based on this interview and the related literature.

Procedure

I spent 1 hour and 45 minutes speaking on the telephone with the Director of the Division of Preservation and Access at the NEH. In advance of the interview, I sent him a copy of my questions, as well as a brief description of my research topic, to provide him
with a sense of what information I was hoping to obtain. I conducted the interview in an informal manner, asking specific questions, but allowing Farr to guide the conversation towards what he deemed to be most important from the achievements and lessons of the Brittle Books program. I asked him questions based upon the following three themes: (1) stepping stones and significant obstacles, (2) changes in the program and lessons learned, and (3) applying lessons to future initiatives.

Using these themes to guide the interview process allowed me to explore what I felt to be important considerations in the development of a national recorded sound preservation initiative. I wanted to obtain an understanding of the major stepping stones involved in developing the Brittle Books program from the library community’s initial expression of needs to receiving the current level of funding from the federal government. I also felt it was important to investigate how the Brittle Books program has changed since its establishment in 1989. Understanding how the program has been reevaluated and restructured might indicate the lessons learned during the evolution of an efficient and effective program. Taking these changes into consideration when planning a similar effort for recorded sound might save future planners and coordinators time, money, and effort.

The specific questions I asked in the interview were:

1. What were the major stepping stones or significant obstacles in achieving funding, attention, and cooperation for the Brittle Books program?
2. How has the program—and these steps and obstacles—changed over its course?
3. What lessons has implementing this program taught the NEH and the Division of Preservation and Access?
Following the interview, I sent Mr. Farr a draft of the summary and analysis of the interview as it would appear in this paper, to ensure that I captured his perspective on the Brittle Books program accurately. Appropriate amendments were made at this time for inclusion in the final draft of this paper.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: What were the major stepping stones or significant obstacles in achieving funding, attention, and cooperation for the Brittle Books program?

Farr identified five major themes or issues that he views as significant stepping stones for bringing the problem of brittle books to the level of funding and attention currently received through the Brittle Books program. He explained that these five steps, or series of obstacles, are general challenges that must be engaged in the effective development of any cooperative national program and often must be faced simultaneously.

First, Farr identified study and research to define the preservation problem as a critical stepping stone in the development of the Brittle Books program. Study and research included an identification of the problem of embrittled texts, the cost to remedy the situation, and the extent of the impact if librarians do not take action promptly. As an example, he described the NEH-funded study at Yale University, where librarians physically examined their collections to determine the percentage of brittle books found on their shelves. Initiating and supporting this kind of research gave the library community the ability to use actual data to estimate the magnitude of the problem as well as the ability to consider possible means to address it on a large scale.
Farr identified the need for consensus building as a second major stepping stone in the development of the Brittle Books program. Within the library community, agreement upon the nature of the problem it was facing and the proper means to solve it was a major achievement. He especially acknowledged the role of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and the former Commission on Preservation and Access (CPA) and Council on Library Resources in building this consensus.

As a third major achievement, Farr discussed the importance of developing standards and best practices to follow for participants of the Brittle Books program. This included establishing methods for avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort, developing and enforcing standards for preservation microfilming, and determining a standard level of required information in the creation of catalog records. Many of these standards, he emphasized, were already in place when the NEH requested an increase in funding for the Brittle Books program.

Farr described the changing vendor community and specifically its developments in microfilm as an instrument that enabled the library community to establish and enforce standards, thus contributing to the program’s success. He stated that originally, microfilm was not created for preservation purposes and lacked the sufficient quality and standards required for long term survival. The efforts of institutions such as the New York Public Library, Harvard, Yale, and the University of Chicago in developing and operating their own facilities for the creation of high quality microfilm copies revealed a new potential audience. The vendor community began to accept the responsibility of meeting the high standards of the library community at this time, even providing outsourcing opportunities for institutions without their own facilities for the creation of preservation microfilm.
copies. Since previous concerns that microfilm would not be enduring hindered commitments to preservation efforts, new product advancements were a major step in the development of the program.

Additional advances in the development of standards and best practices at this time, Farr stated, included the publication of a Research Libraries Group (RLG) preservation microfilming manual. This manual gave libraries guidelines to follow, established the procedure of creating multiple microfilm copies of items to facilitate access, and contributed to the development of standards for the storage of microfilm copies. Standards and best practices determined by consensus convinced Congress that the Brittle Books program was a sound investment with clear direction.

A fourth important step in the development of the Brittle Books program was the identification of users and their needs from the collections at risk. Farr stated that, ultimately, the beneficiaries of the Brittle Books program are “the scholars and future users for whom a large body of knowledge might be lost”.

How were future users’ needs identified? Farr explained two basic methods libraries might choose to serve the needs of users: criteria of use and significance for research. Although the most utilitarian in practice, preserving materials based on present usage worried scholars. They did not want the process of selection of volumes for preservation to be biased by patterns of acquisition. The process of choosing to preserve collections based upon significance of material for research, thereby identifying and preserving the core literature of specific subject areas, emerged as a more systematic and comprehensive approach to preserving our cultural heritage. This means of selection provided for a whole body of knowledge to be preserved for future generations of
researchers rather than scattered volumes based upon current popular use. This mode of thinking—of what will affect future users at the national level—was critical for setting the national agenda. Scholars became involved in the process of determining which collections were most valuable to save for future generations of researchers.

The creation of a method to fund and implement a national program fairly was a fifth major step in the development of the Brittle Books program. With an absence of standards, he explained that this can be an obstacle. In thinking of solutions to the problem of brittle books in our nation’s libraries, the library community realized that they needed an outside program to administer grants. To illustrate this point, Farr explained that if ARL were to oversee funding, for example, Congress might worry about conflicts of interest. The library community needed “full and fair review”, a means to administer funding that would insure impartiality. Determining who would actually operate the Brittle Books program was a major step in the development of this infrastructure.

In applying this perspective to audio recordings, it seems clear to me that these five major stepping stones—studies and research, building consensus of the nature of the problem and solutions to solve it, development of standards and best practices, involvement of users in a national effort, and the creation of an infrastructure to carry out preservation work to preserve brittle books—cohere with the expressed needs of the community of librarians and archivists calling for a program to preserve recorded sound.

The absence of a consensus on a set of standards and best practices for procedures such as preservation re-recording and maintenance of audio materials seems to be a considerable obstacle to receiving federal grant funding. Farr admitted that, “it becomes
very difficult to fund projects in which the panel of reviewers, consisting of experts in the field of preservation, disagrees on the appropriate standards. Without standards and best practices it is difficult to create the infrastructure to preserve recorded sound. How could a systematic approach to preservation occur in these circumstances? Standards for microfilming showed that the Brittle Books program was a worthwhile investment, and standards for procedure ensured that grant funded projects would be conducted according to accepted guidelines for preservation.

The stepping stone involving the identification and of users and their needs was an issue raised by an audio materials task force appointed by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) (1999). The task force concluded that “the store of audio materials available around the country is, at once, indescribably rich, and for various reasons, underutilized by both scholars and the general public (CLIR, 1999). The task force identified the need for greater bibliographic control and cataloging to build the community of users. Furthermore, research into the use of technology to increase the accessibility of audio materials was suggested.

Because identifying the needs of future generations of scholars was necessary for achieving success in the Brittle Books program, similar needs assessment should be developed for recorded sound. The involvement of scholars who utilize sound recordings for their research could help identify significant portions of aural history as it was with printed material. Placing national goals ahead of local needs might be the key to receiving the level of national funding required to salvage the most significant collections of sound recordings in our nation’s libraries. The benefits of a national program: raising
standards, increasing access to materials through interlibrary loans, and ensuring the preservation of our most significant collections, could be achieved for recorded sound collections. A set of agreed upon priorities would provide federal grant funders with a clear goal for what should be achieved.

**Question 2. How has the program—and these steps and obstacles—changed over its course?**

Farr cited model projects as important facilitators of the development of the program. The NEH was asking librarians, who were presumably already working at a 100% capacity, to begin preserving on a national scale. This was a huge step that required a heavy commitment from institutions. In the past, the NEH conducted yearly meetings of project managers where innovations were encouraged and flexibility was critical. The NEH listened to creative strategies for developing the program to enable libraries to preserve brittle books at the level of quality and standardization that the national program requires. Flexibility enabled librarians to begin outsourcing microfilm projects and bibliographic work and manage groups such as the Southeastern Library Network (SOLINET) to centralize the bibliographic work for approximately 12 institutions.

Farr noted changes to the program since its beginning. As an example, he cited the expansion of the parameters of the period that the Brittle Books program covered. Initially, it was assumed that program would focus solely on volumes published between 1850-1920. Librarians found deteriorating volumes on their shelves both before and after this time frame, however. To respond to the needs of these materials, the NEH expanded the parameters of the program to include volumes published between 1800-1950 and then allowed applicants to argue for special exceptions as needs arose. The NEH also paid for
a certain amount of stabilization of volumes on the shelf. If volumes that were not brittle (and therefore ineligible for NEH funds) or needed repair, the NEH would provide funds to mend them. As scholars expressed needs to view the original, the NEH provided for the re-boxing of pages after filming. The NEH realized that there needed to be flexibility to allow for changes or options as there are issues that arise in the implementation process that must be worked through to achieve the national goal.

This kind of flexibility, from my perspective, would be a valuable attribute of a program to preserve recorded sound. As standards and best practices are developed and applied to actual collections, it will be important to address the issues involved in the implementation and management of programs according to the librarians and archivists. As with the Brittle Books program, the NEH will be asking these professionals to go beyond their present responsibilities to preserve these materials on a national scale. Responsiveness to the changing needs of preservation projects will serve the collections better as those responsible for the materials will provide insight into unforeseen challenges.

**Question 3. What lessons has implementing this program taught the NEH and the Division of Preservation and Access?**

Farr emphasized the positive lessons the NEH and the library community have learned over the course of the program. They have discovered that the nation’s libraries can work together to frame a problem and to provide solutions that will capture national attention and funding. “Historically, it is one of the most striking examples of libraries
working together on such a large and common endeavor,” commented Farr. The Brittle Books program required librarians to attain a significant amount of additional funding to accomplish their goal. Libraries worked together to define and solve a common problem, and regardless of the success achieved, this alone has been a significant lesson. “The library community has learned that if you do it right, there’s a chance you can solve a problem,” added Farr.

Learning the importance of thinking nationally and cooperatively rather than considering only one’s own shelves of books has also been a valuable lesson. He expressed that this is difficult because in any individual library, you have your own set of problems and priorities. Libraries have learned that what is nationally important should be a high priority. This type of thinking is a significant lesson.

Based on Farr’s informed perspective on the lessons of preserving brittle books, I believe that these positive lessons should be encouraging to the community of librarians and archivists who are concerned with the deterioration of their recorded sound collections. The library community has proven the ability to come together to define national goals and solutions to solve them. Thinking nationally, rather than individually, seems necessary to achieve NEH funding. Perhaps the Brittle Books program has already established this mode of thinking in libraries. It seems as though there has already been a paradigm shift in the preservation of materials. If librarians have learned to think nationally about their printed collections, they are hopefully prepared to extend the same type of thinking towards the needs of future users of recorded sound collections on a national scale.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Much like the problem with brittle books, the magnitude of the preservation problem with audio recordings is a national issue requiring large scale attention and funding. The survival of these valuable materials that document the cultural heritage of the United States will enable future generations of researchers to examine and evaluate the sound information of the Twentieth Century.

The five significant steps identified in the interview with the Director of the Division of Preservation and Access at the NEH as critical to the development of a national program to preserve embrittled texts each appear to be linked ultimately to the ability of the library community to establish a common ground. Although considered its own important stepping stone in the interview, consensus was needed for each of the four other critical developments for the establishment the Brittle Books program: for the identification of the problem and basic priorities; development of agreed upon standards and best practices; definitions of users and their present and future needs; the creation of an infrastructure to conduct the work including the identification of who or what organization should assume responsibility for coordinating and conducting the program itself.
Cooperation, a critical need expressed in the ARSC/AAA Planning Study (1991) and throughout much of the literature reviewed for this research, might provide a forum for the development of a similar “common ground” to the one which seems to underlie the major achievements in the development of the Brittle Books program. It is to be hoped that with the leadership and perseverance of professional organizations such as ARSC and IASA to raise awareness and concern for the survival of sound recordings, the audio preservation community will have the opportunity to lay the foundation for an equally successful national program.

Achieving the benefits of cooperation depends upon the participation of those who physically maintain the collections of recorded sound in their institutions, in addition to the involvement of scholars, researchers, financial supporters, and commercial manufacturers and vendors. The participation and enthusiasm of these individuals in the design of a future program will contribute to the creation of a realistic and effective program as each has first-hand knowledge and experience managing such collections. The means to generate the necessary momentum to encourage custodians of recorded sound collections to participate in a cooperative effort might be a complicated endeavor.

Paton’s article (1991) “Whispers in the stacks: the problem of sound recordings in archives” exposed some of the harsh realities that must still be overcome to induce cooperative participation in a national program. Lack of enthusiasm for maintaining recorded sound collections exists due to the problematic nature of the materials and a primary focus on printed matter in many institutions. Additionally, the lack of time available to identify adequately a recording—which needs to be listened to in real time—the number of challenges for housing and storing of recorded sound carriers in a wide
variety of sizes and shapes, the need to maintain the appropriate playback equipment, and the added expense and difficulty of making listener copies for patrons does not lend itself to eagerness for approaching the problems with recorded sound.

The present and future value of preserving recorded sound does not appear to receive the same level of concern as printed matter by the scholarly community as well. As identified by the ACLS and CLIR task force (1999), recorded sound materials are underutilized by the scholarly community. It is easy to anticipate that improvement of current access tools and cataloging will increase the research value of this significant, yet complicated, channel of information. As the scholarly community begins to understand its value, they will prove instrumental for establishing goals and priorities for a preservation program to preserve recorded sound as it was in the Brittle Books program.

Ultimately, the library and archive community has a professional and ethical responsibility to preserve recorded sound. The preservation policy of the American Library Association (ALA) states that “the preservation of library resources is essential in order to protect the public’s right to the free flow of information as embodied in the First Amendment to the Constitution and the Library Bill of Rights” (ALA). It is important to recognize that recorded sound information is information; it is a medium through which history has been and continues to be told. Audio materials, however complicated, must be raised to the same level of concern in library and archives.

The lessons learned from the Brittle Books program should be encouraging for the recorded sound preservation community. Knowing that a large number of institutions have already come together to address a crisis threatening the endurance of our cultural heritage should provide a certain level of confidence to succeed once more.
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