Curating Collective Collections — Agriculture and Rural Life: A Discipline or Domain-Based Approach to Preservation and Access

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Column Editor's Note: *All the authors of this column have affiliations with* ***United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN)****. I was involved with* ***USAIN*** *preservation program from 1991 to 1998;* ***Amy Paster*** *is the current chair of* ***USAIN*** *Preservation and Digital Library Committee; and* ***Joy Paulson*** *is the past chair of* ***USAIN*** *Preservation and Digital Library Committee. — **SD***

What is a "discipline or domain-based" approach to preservation and access? How did one of the nation's oldest and largest cooperative preservation programs get started and how is it operating today? What has it accomplished over the past 22 years? And, what is the future of a disciplinary approach in the age of digital preservation and Google Books?

As the **United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN)** approaches its Silver Anniversary, it is taking stock of one of its longest-standing cooperative programs: the *National Preservation Program for Agricultural Literature,* aka *Ceres*.

Conceived in 1991, this program is now operating as *Project Ceres*, under the umbrella of the **Center for Research Libraries (CRL)** Global Resources program. The program, a collaboration between **AgNIC (Agriculture Network Information Center)**, **USAIN**, and **CRL**, is moving forward as one of two IMLS-funded national demonstration projects of a discipline, or domain, based approach to preservation and access: law and agriculture. This column encapsulates the background and current situation and suggests some possible future directions for this national cooperative preservation program in agriculture.

Selection for Preservation by Discipline (vs. by Library)

Before Google Books — in the era of deep concern about brittle books turning to dust on our shelves and limited preservation funding to save them — it was assumed that we would only be able to preserve a fraction of the record of human knowledge. There was much discussion about methods of selection for preservation.[1] The dominant selection modes were not very imaginative, but were low cost: "use and condition" (focus on materials heavily used and/or in poor condition), and "great collections" aka "vacuum cleaner approach" (focus on preserving the contents of subject collections of selected large research libraries on the assumption that they contain the universe of publishing in a field).

Librarians in the field of agriculture advocated an approach to setting preservation priorities that raised the sights above the level of individual collections to systematically address the literature of entire disciplines. Their premise was that the universe of publishing is in fact scattered among many libraries and that much preservation work had already been done, and that this data could be cost-effectively pulled together with online catalogs and other bibliographic sources. Building on precedents in medicine, classics, theology, and other disciplines,[2] librarians at **Cornell University's** Mann Library[3] developed and applied methodologies based on the following principles and assumptions[4]:

- It is possible to define boundaries and identify the universe of English language publishing in the disciplines comprising agriculture and rural life, and develop a schematic anatomy of the components of the literature.
- The identified universe of publishing in each component of the literature can be prioritized, focusing preservation funding on as much of the top priority literature as possible with available funding and leaving behind a list of what remains to be done in future projects if funds are available.
- It is essential to engage scholars and scientists in the selection process.
- Using a combination of citation analysis and review by scholars and scientists, it is possible to identify both the core historical books and journals of national importance, and published materials of state and local importance.
- Cost-effectively preserving the literature of disciplines will take decades and will require close cooperation among libraries, between collection development and preservation librarians, and between libraries and scholarly societies.
- Media for preservation should both preserve and permit the broadest possible access to the literature.
- A formal national preservation plan can provide a cooperative framework to break the challenge into logical, achievable parts, and thus coordinate the preservation activities of many libraries towards the achievement of a much larger set of common goals than any one institution could accomplish independently.

This approach never caught on in other disciplines, in part because: librarians thought it was too labor intensive, cooperation is difficult, and most granting agencies were more interested in the raw number of items preserved than in thoughtful analysis what was actually being preserved. The national conversation about thoughtful selection for preservation lost momentum with the advent of Google Books. With its deep pockets, Google could afford to use a version of the vacuum cleaner approach, but on a scale unthinkable by libraries reliant on grant funding.

Interest in selection for preservation has recently revived in discussions about curating collective collections. The discipline or domain-based approach, designed to stimulate cooperation and make the best use of limited resources, is now getting a second look in the shared print context. *The Biodiversity Heritage Project* is one recent example of a discipline-based, cooperative approach to preservation and access.

Meanwhile, this approach has quietly flourished in the form of work on **USAIN's** *National Preservation Plan for Agricultural Sciences Literature*.

National Preservation Plan for Agricultural Literature (*NPPAL)*

At a Preconference Program to the **1991 USAIN Meeting**,[5] the community of land grant librarians shaped the outlines of what became the *NPPAL*. After two days of presentations by national leaders in preservation and agriculture libraries, and discussions among the 30 participants representing 15 libraries nationwide, **USAIN** appointed an Advisory Panel on Preservation and hired **Nancy Gwinn** as a consultant to write up the formal national preservation plan.[6] The plan, formally adopted in 1993, builds on previous cooperative microfilming of land grant publications coordinated by the **National Agricultural Library** and

continued on page 80

preservation activity at **Cornell University**, and articulates the importance of the agricultural literature to the nation and the need for its preservation. It outlines the goals of a national preservation program, defines a program structure, establishes a set of preservation priorities, and describes the approach to preservation technologies, access to the preserved literature, and storage and distribution of archival copies. **Figure A** is a graphical depiction of the specific components of the plan.

The *NPPAL* operates under the direction of **USAIN's** Preservation and Digital Library Committee. The current committee members are: **Amy Paster** (Penn State, chair), **Cristina Caminita** (Louisiana State), **Melanie Gardner** (National Agricultural Library (NAL liaison), **Allison Level** (Colorado State), **Joy Paulson** (Cornell, ex officio), **Diana Farmer** (Kansas state), and **Rob McGeachin** (Texas A&M).

Twenty years later the *NPPAL* needs to be updated. However, it has served the community remarkably well as a blueprint for a nationally coordinated preservation effort that has evolved with the times and resulted in remarkable progress in systematically identifying, prioritizing, and preserving the literature of seven disciplines comprising agriculture: agricultural economics and rural sociology, agricultural engineering, animal science and health, soil science, food science and nutrition, crop science, forestry and agro-forestry, and human ecology.

Accomplishments to Date

Over the years the **USAIN** program has secured over $5,000,000 in grant funding to advance the *NPPAL*. **CRL** and **USAIN** are currently compiling detailed metrics on preservation activity in agriculture over the past two decades. Following is a summary overview of the data gathered so far.

1. ***Identifying scholarly monographs and serials*** — With funding from the **Rockefeller Foundation** and the **National Agricultural Library**, **Wallace C. Olsen** (Mann Library, Cornell University) undertook a monumental analysis of the agricultural literature to identify the Core Historical Literature of Agriculture (CHLA), comprising:

   a. the contemporary core literature of agricultural sciences world-wide (363 journals and 8, 400 monographs)[7], and

   b. the U.S. core historical literature of agriculture (5,308 monograph titles and 335 journal titles; combined total of 20,914 volumes).

   Working with agricultural bibliographers, historians, and scientists, **Olsen** and his team determined the scope of each of seven disciplines and used citation studies and review and ranking of lists by scholars to analyze over 85,000 citations to identify the core lists. This work was published by the **Cornell University Press** in a seven-volume series *The Literature of the Agricultural Sciences*. In addition to the contemporary and historical core lists, each volume provides in-depth bibliographic analysis of the literature, surveys the nature of publishing in the field, and discusses the influence of scientific societies and publishers. This work set the direction for the *NPPAL*.

2. ***Digitization of Core Historical Literature of Agriculture (CHLA)*** — Digitization of the core historical literature of U.S. agriculture is a top priority of the *NPPAL*. Thus far, 26 journal titles with 764 volumes and 2,047 monographic titles with 2,116 volumes of the CHLA have been digitized by Mann Library (Cornell University) and made accessible online.

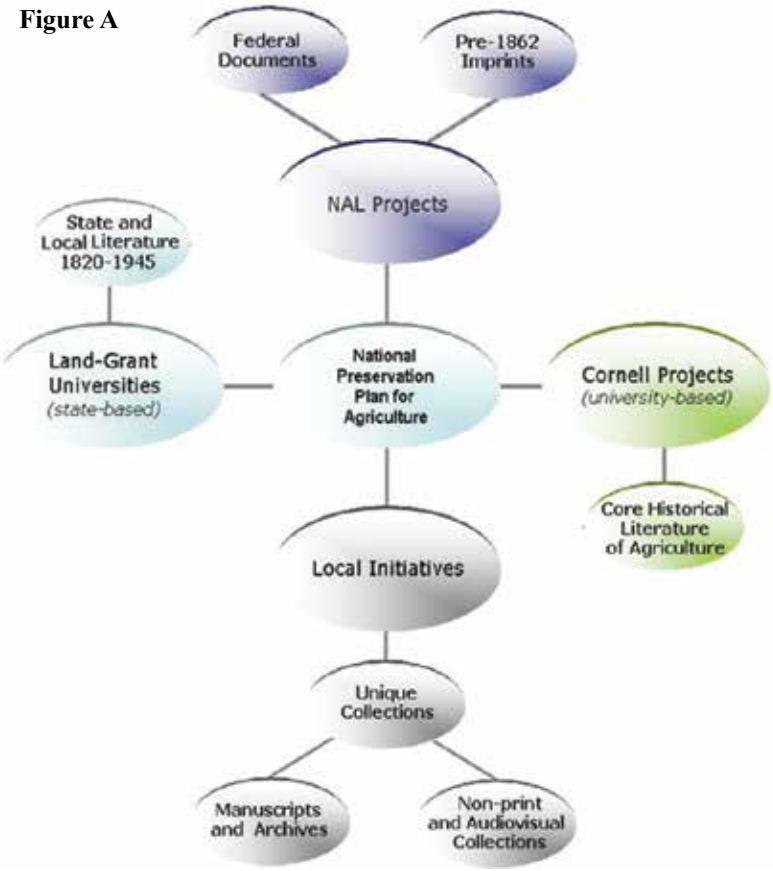
3. ***USAIN State and Local Literature 1820-1945*** — The *NPPAL* calls for each state to take responsibility for preservation of its own state and local level literature. Working through **USAIN**, land grant libraries nationally follow a model developed by Mann Library.[8] Each state systematically identifies the universe of relevant publishing, not just the titles held in each of the participating libraries. In each state a panel of scholars and librarians evaluates and ranks the resulting lists in terms of the importance of individual titles for research in social, cultural, and economic history. Each state then preserves those brittle titles judged by the panel to be most important for current and future research. A series of six NEH-funded projects conducted from 1996-2008 resulted in the completion of the ranked bibliographies by 29 states and completion of the preservation portion of the project via microfilming or digitization by 25 states. NEH only permitted digitization as a preservation option during the sixth phase of the project. Through these efforts, a total of 12,692 titles, comprising 38,964 volumes, have been preserved.

   Work on state and local literature continues under Project Ceres, the IMLS-funded project operating through **CRL**. The purpose of the present project is to support small land grant library projects that preserve print materials essential to the study of the history and economics of Agriculture at the state level, and make those materials accessible through digitization.

4. ***Other preservation projects*** — Data is being compiled on a range of projects that have contributed to advancing the *NPPAL* but were not part of the program. For example, a wealth of agriculture-related materials has been contributed to the **HathiTrust** through the

continued on page 81

Figure A



efforts of a dozen research libraries in their work as Google Library Partners. The ill-fated "Million Books Project" included a sizable number of agriculture materials. The **National Agricultural Library** has conducted considerable preservation activity over the years.

Future Directions

As part of its Silver Anniversary activities, **USAIN** is poised to review its preservation and access program to consider how its national preservation program will evolve to meet the needs of the next decade. Among the topics we will likely address in updating the *NPPAL* are:

- lessons learned over the past 22 years;
- development of a shared print program for agriculture;
- updating our preservation priorities, including preservation of born digital resources;
- exploring the potential for future grant funding;
- producing digital files from a trove of preservation microfilm;
- partnerships with innovative organizations such as the **Internet Archive**, **HathiTrust**, and **Biodiversity Heritage Library**;
- the potential for pairing a prospective cooperative collection development program with our successful cooperative preservation program;
- developing a portal that will make the corpus of historical literature easily searchable and accessible; and
- how best to evolve the *NPPAL* within the **CRL** Global Resources program as a foundation upon which to build international shared print and a systematic international program of digitization, print archiving, and licensing in agriculture and rural life.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, two articles by **Ross Atkinson**: "Preservation and Collection Development: Toward a Political Synthesis" in Journal of Academic Librarianship 16 (2), pp. 98-103, and "Selection for Preservation: A Materialistic Approach" in Library Resources & Technical Services 30 (Oct./Dec.): 341-53.

2. Mann Library's disciplinary approach to setting preservation priorities was influenced by the preservation work of the **American Theological Society** and the work of **Carolyn Harris** and **Roger Bagnall** in Classics (see **Bagnall, R. S.**; **Harris, C. L.** (1987). "Involving scholars in preservation decisions: The case of the classicists." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 13 (3): 140–146).

3. **Jan** and **Wally Olsen** were the inspiration for much of the preservation work at Mann and the NPPAL. **Janet McCue**, **Mary Ochs**, **Stephanie Lamson**, **Walter Cybulski**, **Dorothy Wright**, **Peter McDonald**, **Barbara DiSalvo** and many others contributed mightily to the early work in this arena.

4. Adapted from "Setting Preservation Priorities at Mann Library: A Disciplinary Approach," by **Sam Demas** in *Library Hi TechIssue* 47, 12:3 (1994), pp. 81 -88.

5. For a summary of the Preconference, see: **Demas, Samuel** "National Preservation Planning for Agriculture" in *Agricultural Libraries Information Notes* 17 nos. 11/12: 1-8.

6. A link to a PDF version of the *NPPAL* can be found at: *http://www.usain.org/Preservation/preservinitiative.html.*

7. The contemporary core literature lists became the basis of TEEAL, The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library (*http://teeal.org*), which provides access to agricultural literature to income-eligible countries.

8. See "Cooperative Preservation of State-Level Publications: Preserving the Literature of N.Y.S. Agriculture and Rural Life" by **Dorothy Wright**, **Samuel Demas**, and **Walter Cybulski**, in *Library Resources and Technical Services* 37(4), pp. 434 – 443.