ABSTRACT: This paper reviews a special collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin that documents opposition to the war in Vietnam among the military. Using this as an example the author argues that the value of written collecting policy statements has been overstated.

Few issues have concerned archivists as greatly as the need for a general theory of appraisal, and review of recent literature reveals that the profession has progressed far toward accomplishing that goal. It is time to recall, however, that a theory is just that: an hypothesis meant to explain perceived reality or what archivists would like reality to be. Before any appraisal theory can be generally accepted it must be tested by careful studies of how actual archival collections grow and develop.

A case in point concerns the utility of institutional collecting policy statements, one of a number of tools and strategies that the profession has developed to systematize the selection and evaluation of records. While some appraisal concepts and methods are still being refined, the value of formal collection policy statements has become an article of faith for archivists. In a 1984 article Faye Phillips reviewed the existing archival literature, noting discussions that appeared in Ruth B. Bordin and Robert W. Warner’s The Modern Manuscript Library, Kenneth Duckett’s Modern Manuscripts, and in several articles by David B. Gracy II, all of which advocated the use of collection policy statements in archives. Borrowing heavily from library science, Phillips went on to propose a model collecting policy statement for archives. In 1987 Frank Boles tied these general institutional policy statements to the larger theoretical concern over the selection and appraisal of particular records. Nowhere in this literature, however, was the actual function of formal collection policy statements examined or discussed.¹

A session on Vietnam soldiers at a recent Midwest Archives Conference meeting provided this writer with an opportunity to study in detail how one such special collecting focus developed at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW). Examination of the administrative records of the SHSW Field Service
and Archives divisions for this project indicates that formal collecting policies may be much less important for collection development than is generally thought by the profession. Contrary to the theoretical construct that envisions a model archival universe of planned development and formal collecting policies—their absence leading to inferior archives and unplanned chaos—the SHSW experience demonstrates that collections of quality can develop without written policies. In fact, the evidence suggests not only that good collections can develop without written statements, but also that formal policies are irrelevant and in some cases possibly detrimental to the development of excellence.

Throughout its twenty-five year history, the Social Action Collection (SAC) of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, of which the Vietnam soldier material forms a part, has never had a written collection policy statement. While the relation of the Social Action Collection to the documentation of transitory contemporary events may have special implications for appraisal theory, the evidence suggests that the strength of the collection derives from the absence of rigid policies and from the fact that collecting was allowed to respond naturally to the dynamics of a changing reality.

The most crucial element in the development of excellence in the Social Action Collection has been individual archivists with vision, commitment, an ability to take advantage of opportunity, and a practical approach to solving problems. "It was the people at the Society who made the SAC what it was," former SAC archivist Jane Roth recalls. "Our freedom to let one person lead us to another, and to see how these people and movements were interrelated was much truer to life than a formal policy that dictated what history would be preserved for researchers."  

Especially notable in the development of the collection's special focus on Vietnam soldiers is the fact that it originated and grew in an institution that otherwise gave little priority to collecting on the military. Fascination with the military conflicts of the Colonial and Revolutionary eras sparked the collecting imagination of SHSW's first director, Lyman Draper, during the nineteenth century, but succeeding archivists have not shared that interest. Instead, they turned their collecting attention to organized labor, mass communications, and leftwing social protest and reform movements at the national level. Documentation on Wisconsin's experience in wartime, an area where institutional responsibilities should have been unquestioned, is uneven. SHSW holds many letters and diaries concerning the experiences of Wisconsin's Civil War soldiers, but similar material about more recent military conflicts is limited. World War II, now almost fifty years in the past, is documented by shockingly few personal collections.

Despite the apparent institutional unwillingness to give priority to military collecting on either a state or national level, the SHSW archives has recently developed a strong, focused collection on Vietnam soldiers. Not surprisingly, these collections share the political perspective of many other SHSW manuscript collections; rather than documenting the whole experience of the Vietnam soldier, these materials complement other collection strengths and focus on opposition to the Vietnam war within the military.

These records represent the "GI Resistance," an aspect of Vietnam era history that is still largely unknown. This phenomenon actually encompassed two related but distinct protest movements: general opposition to the war within the
military, and a broader movement dedicated to reforming repressive aspects of the military system. Issues of concern to the second movement ranged from the length of haircuts to the role of women and the undemocratic aspects of military justice. Although the GI Resistance existed among both combat troops in Vietnam and noncombat soldiers on bases in the United States and abroad, records held by SHSW focus primarily on the domestic opposition. The volume of documentation is not large, but given the difficulties experienced by many archives in collecting materials of any kind about Vietnam soldiers and the resulting scarcity of GI Resistance material in archival hands, the society's holdings stand out as a significant research resource.³

The Social Action Collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin began informally in the early 1960s, thanks to the interest of graduate students at the University of Wisconsin who were personally involved with the southern civil rights movement and who feared that documentation about the movement was endangered. Fortunately, SHSW Director Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., shared their concern about the fragility and importance of the historical record. He offered institutional support, and in 1964 SHSW launched a civil rights collecting project. The essential character of collecting during this early period was the passionate involvement of the staff and the sense of immediacy that permeated their activities. This quality was reflected in part in the name given to the collection in 1967, the Contemporary Social Action Collection.⁴

Despite a visionary approach to collecting, from its earliest days the Social Action Collection adopted practical methods for achieving its objectives. A growing network of donor contacts was incorporated into the Field Service Division's already established lead file. The staff concentrated their attentions on records that could be practically acquired, and they appraised potential acquisitions carefully. "Zeal to collect materials," Sarah Cooper observed later, "needs to be tempered by a close scrutiny of the ... documentation."⁵

During the late 1960s social activism increasingly turned to resistance to the Vietnam War, and the SAC collecting emphasis shifted accordingly. This expansion apparently took place without discussion of the impact that it might have either on the overall nature of the Social Action Collection or on SHSW resources. Instead, documenting opposition to the war reflected the evolving concerns of many SAC donors as well as a general acceptance among the staff that documentation about the antiwar movement was important and threatened. As Roth recalls, "it just all fit together."⁶

During the late 1960s SHSW actively and successfully solicited the records of national antiwar organizations and mobilizations. As early as 1967, a time when the general public was still largely unconcerned with the issues posed by the war, SHSW received its first accession from Students for a Democratic Society. About the same time it also received the records of the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam, the first national organization of antiwar activists.

In 1974 the qualifying word "contemporary" was dropped from the collection's title in order to encompass the society's older collections on radicalism, socialism, and the social reform aspects of organized labor. As stated by Sarah Cooper, who served as archivist, visionary, and driving force for the collection from 1974 through 1982, these diverse collections shared a general concern with equality and social justice. However, beyond a strongly held but informally
communicated understanding of this general purpose, no precisely-worded collecting statement was written.

Impetus for collecting material on Vietnam soldiers originated in the SAC's renewed relations with the Old Left. In 1966 staff members who shared either a research interest or a personal political affiliation with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) negotiated an agreement that allowed SHSW to borrow and microfilm the party's historical records. This close relationship developed at an opportune time, for the SWP, which previously had been subject to crippling internal disputes and fragmentation and which had exercised only a minor role within the organized Left, suddenly rose to a position of leadership within the mass movement opposed to the war.

SWP leader Fred Halstead, on whose views and insights this writer has relied heavily, suggests that this influence developed from the SWP's strategic understanding, apparently alone among organized radicals, of the central importance of the Vietnam War. Their view, and that of their youth arm, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), was that the best way to build a mass movement was to focus on opposition to the war and to involve all of the war's opponents regardless of their views on other issues. The SWP's willingness to put aside sectarian differences, together with its well-established organizational ability and discipline, unquestionably contributed to the party's move to prominence. At the same time, YSA achieved a parallel role within the burgeoning campus movement against the war.7

From its offices in New York City, in 1965 the SWP helped to organize and staff the Fifth Avenue Vietnam Peace Parade Committee, an early coalition of local antiwar groups. This organization existed for several years, at times exercising leadership within the national antiwar movement. In order to organize campus opposition efforts, in 1967 the SWP helped to form the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (SMC), possibly the most successful of the national antiwar coalitions. Although it is incorrect to characterize the Student Mobilization Committee as an SWP front, it was disproportionately influenced by its SWP members and their nonexclusionary philosophy. Later SWP held a similarly influential role within the National Peace Action Coalition, a national umbrella organization of peace groups that was active between 1970 and 1973.

From the beginning of its antiwar organizing the Socialist Workers Party was oriented toward winning support among GIs. Unlike many of the war's other early opponents some of whom appeared at demonstrations carrying signs denouncing GIs as savage butchers, the SWP believed that most troops in Vietnam were unwilling instruments of Pentagon policy. Given the predominantly lower-class background of the army of that era, GIs also were seen by the party as a fertile field for political organizing. Some years later Fred Halstead recalled an early encounter with GIs at a demonstration in Times Square that was typical of the SWP approach.

When they first saw us they [were] hostile. They had probably never seen antiwar demonstrators face-to-face before....When we showed them our signs that said "Support our boys—Bring them home now," they were taken aback. A little face-to-face conversation soon revealed that some of them were as opposed to this war as we were—even more angry about it, and the rest were full of doubts and for the most part willing to listen.8
Eventually the SWP came to realize that the involvement of GIs in antiwar actions was also strategically useful. Nothing, they found, could mitigate harassment by rightwing demonstrators like the presence of GIs among the marchers.

As a result of their views on the role of soldiers in the antiwar movement, in 1966 the Socialist Workers Party took a leading role within the Peace Parade Committee in supporting the case of the Fort Hood Three, three soldiers who refused orders to Vietnam. The SWP used this widely publicized incident to encourage educational leafletting among soldiers.

The SWP also constituted a core group within Veterans for Peace, a national veterans organization formed in 1967. In 1968 SWP was prominent in the formation of the GI Civil Liberties Defense Committee whose purpose was to raise funds for the legal defense of troops threatened with court martial for speaking or acting on their antiwar views. In that same year Fred Halstead, then the SWP candidate for President, went to Vietnam to campaign among the combat troops.

Because of its SWP membership, the Student Mobilization Committee also stressed GI activities. In 1968 it launched a military organizing project under the direction of Howard Petrick, a YSA member dishonorably discharged from the army for distributing Socialist literature. In the following year SMC formed the GI Press Service in order to publicize protest demonstrations among soldiers and to serve as an information resource for underground GI newspapers. Local SMC committees also engaged in leafletting near military bases and supported coffeehouses as centers of off-base GI activity. As the number of draftees increased, the number of soldiers in the army who had been influenced to some degree by the civilian antiwar sentiment also rose. SMC tapped this sentiment by calling numerous joint GI-civilian conferences and demonstrations and by taking a strong public position in support of the First Amendment rights of the military. This support was demonstrated most dramatically in 1969 in the case of the Fort Jackson Eight.9

Numerous contacts with SHSW archivists during the late 1960s and early 1970s had a pronounced influence on Fred Halstead’s understanding of the role of documentary material in historical research, and it was largely through his involvement that the records of the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee and some early records of the Student Mobilization Committee were offered to the Historical Society. At the same time, contacts with Halstead gradually broadened the scope of the Social Action Collection to include other dimensions of the SWP opposition to the war.10

During the early 1970s Halstead turned to research for a book on the antiwar movement. Because many antiwar groups had at one time shared offices or staff with the Socialist Workers Party, the party frequently inherited the records of these short-lived groups. Halstead therefore was readily able to acquire possession of these materials for his research; he also began to assemble a personal collection of relevant documents from other participants. In 1974 he promised Sarah Cooper, then on one of her first national collecting trips for the Social Action Collection, that a great deal of material would be coming to SHSW after he finished his book.11

It is unlikely that the military component of the offer seemed important at the time. To that point, SHSW staff had successfully solicited on its own only one collection on the opposition to the war among the military—the records of
Vietnam Veterans Against the War. The VVAW records would eventually become an important collection, but when Cooper first discussed the GI movement with Halstead, the VVAW collection in SHSW hands amounted to only four cubic feet. These records had been received two years earlier in response to an inquiry from Cooper’s predecessor, Jane Roth. Unfortunately the internal records do not indicate what prompted Roth’s inquiry or if she understood this overture marked an important shift from the previously exclusive concentration on collecting campus-based antiwar coalitions.12

Quite possibly Roth was influenced by the dramatic increase in media attention to the internal problems besetting the military and the returning veteran. Typical were such titles as Murray Polner’s No Victory Parades (1971), Larry Waterhouse and Mariann Wizard’s Turning the Guns Around: Notes on the GI Movement (1971), and The New Soldiers (1971) by John Kerry and VVAW, as well as a multitude of newspaper and periodical articles.

Roth also may have been spurred by SHSW’s growing collection of underground GI newspapers. During the war the SHSW library, which traditionally had a broader collecting scope than the archives, expanded its coverage of military history to include underground GI newspapers, recognized as a fundamental source for examining the nature and extent of military dissent. As early as 1971 researcher Lee Preble described the society’s collection of GI Vietnam-era newspapers as one of the best in the country.13 Finally, Roth also attributes her interest in the experiences of soldiers to her friendship with a donor, Wisconsin writer Tere Versace, the mother of a soldier missing-in-action. Roth was similarly influenced by the postwar experiences of other friends and associates who had been in the military.14

In 1978 Halstead published his book, Out Now, and shortly thereafter his personal papers and his collected research materials, both of which prominently documented the SWP interest in GI organizing, began arriving in Madison, dramatically increasing both the quantity and quality of holdings on Vietnam soldiers. Among the accessioned materials were additional records of the Student Mobilization Committee, which contained documentation of numerous GI-civilian actions; Howard Petrick’s early organizing correspondence; several boxes of correspondence of Sp/4 Allen Myers, a YSA member who had founded the Fort Dix Ultimate Weapon, and who later headed the GI Press Service; and a nearly complete run of the Press Service’s publications and a collection of other underground GI papers. Also received were records of the GI Civil Liberties Defense Committee documenting the highly publicized legal defense and civilian support provided by that committee for the Fort Jackson Eight, and inquiries the committee received from many other soldiers concerning their individual situations. Records of the New York chapter of Veterans for Peace contained information on its participation in numerous protest actions and demonstrations. Halstead’s interest brought in a small group of records of GIs United Against the War, the organization that prompted the protest of the Fort Jackson Eight, and correspondence of Task Force, an underground newspaper following the SWP line that was started by active duty soldiers and veterans in the San Francisco area.

Although Cooper wrote to the Socialist Workers Party that the Historical Society was “particularly glad” to receive the GI materials, she had done little independent work in this area since her conversation with Halstead in 1974. It is
likely that she looked on the military protest as yet another, and possibly a less important, expression of the antiwar sentiment rather than as a distinct social justice movement worthy of documentation.\textsuperscript{15}

This view is confirmed by a grant proposal she submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1978, which eventually supported three years of Social Action Collection collecting and processing. In keeping with NEH policy which discouraged competitive collecting, the proposal was designed to complete existing leads rather than to initiate new donor contacts. Although GI opposition materials were by then a developing strength, acquisition of additional GI material appeared as only a minor emphasis in the original project design.\textsuperscript{16}

During the first year of the grant, however, problems developed concerning the initial emphasis on civil rights collecting. Acquisition of GI materials gradually emerged as a major focus. Once again, impetus came from donors, and once again the SAC staff demonstrated an ability to learn from and take advantage of opportunity.

Just as the grant began, author and former GI activist David Cortright proposed that SHSW become the depository for materials about the GI resistance. Although his involvement was ultimately less than anticipated, Cortright provided Cooper with numerous contacts within the GI movement.\textsuperscript{17}

Through Cortright, Cooper learned of attorney Ken Cloke, an early member of the Movement for a Democratic Military (MDM), who had been involved in the legal defense of military activists. From Cloke's California home Cooper carried off several cubic feet of GI newspapers, and she received a commitment from him that his own papers would eventually be deposited. With Cortright's help Cooper acquired the records of the United States Servicemen's Fund, perhaps the most important fundraising and support organization for GI newspapers and coffeehouses, and of Support Our Soldiers, a San Francisco-area support group. Steve Rees, another Cortright associate, donated his papers as founder and editor of \textit{Up Against the Bulkhead}. Other contacts verbally committed their papers to SHSW during this period, although expressing a need to retain their files temporarily for personal writing projects.\textsuperscript{18}

Coincidentally, several major amnesty organizations also approached SHSW during the grant. As a result Cooper was able to complete negotiations with Jack Colhoun for the deposit of the records of AMEX-Canada, an organization of draft resisters and deserters in Canada, and with Louise Ransom for records she held on the National Council for Universal and Unconditional Amnesty and Americans for Amnesty.\textsuperscript{19}

In pursuit of the only Vietnam soldier lead specifically cited in the original work plan of the grant, Cooper renewed contacts with VVAW and accessioned papers from founder Jan Barry, John Lindquist, and Rusty Lindley, a VVAW lobbyist. In the post-Vietnam years VVAW had developed into a multi-issue veteran organization, and these and subsequent accessions reflect their activities with regard to Agent Orange, veterans' benefits, and amnesty within the broader GI Resistance.

Although the evidence suggests that the military protest was originally of less interest to SHSW than the campus antiwar movement, the grant-supported activity had an impact. After meeting Lindley during one of her field trips, Cooper reported sympathetically on his hostility toward participants in the anti-
war movement who gave short shrift to returning veterans, even those who had opposed the war. "Talking with him reinforced my feeling," she wrote, "that it is important to document as much as we can the GI resistance to the war along with the campus and middle-class reaction against it."20

The possibility of expanding Vietnam era military collecting even further was also discussed in 1980 when the Vietnam Veterans Archives Project of the Flower of the Dragon, a community-based veterans group in Santa Rosa, California, considered SHSW as the depository for records of veterans organizations and personal papers of Vietnam soldiers which they planned to survey and collect. At the time, however, SHSW was experiencing severe budget problems, and it declined to finance the project. Lest this incident be interpreted merely as evidence of economic realities catching up with the Social Action Collection, it is important to note that Cooper expressed strong concern about the project's expensive and unsystematic methodology, although she was supportive of the general concept. Viewed in this light, the episode underscores the degree to which the SAC's success linked visionary goals to practical strategies.21

Both social action and Vietnam collecting at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin suffered a major setback in 1982 when Cooper's position was terminated as the result of state budget cuts. During the next six years no new social action initiatives could be started by the hard-pressed collections development staff, but the existence of the lead file allowed the staff to maintain control of established contacts, and some additions to existing collections were received.

The personal commitment of the staff, which had stimulated SAC growth, had an additional benefit that eventually ended the lean years. The strong tradition that had grown up around the Social Action Collection, as well as its reputation as a national research resource, attracted the attention of several Wisconsin legislators who were instrumental in reinstating the position in 1989.

The conclusion of one study of collection development does not mean that previous thinking on the subject of formal collection policies is invalid, but it does suggest a more complex reality than is currently described by archival theory. Archival programs without formal policies do not necessarily produce fragmentary, incomplete results. If applied by enthusiastic, imaginative, and knowledgeable staff, verbally-transmitted policies function equally well, and because they are better able to respond to changing conditions they may be more likely to produce archival excellence. This study suggests other questions needing similar examination: Is competition between institutions actually diminished by the existence of written collecting statements? Does a formal collection policy function differently in an institution with an activist philosophy than it does in one with a more passive approach to collecting? Do formal collecting policy statements serve administrative needs other than collecting? Finally, this study should remind us that the most important ingredient in the development of archival collections is not written plans and policies but high calibre staff to carry out the plans.

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NOTES


2. Jane Roth to Carolyn J. Mattern, 3 September 1990.


4. This history is largely derived from the Sarah Cooper’s introduction to Social Action Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin: A Guide (1983) and the 1978 NEH grant application for social action collecting and processing which she drafted.

5. Sarah Cooper to Larry Hackman, 10 July 1980, Archives Division Collections Correspondence.

6. Roth to Mattern, 3 September 1990.

7. Fred Halstead, Out Now: A Participant’s Account of the American Movement Against the Vietnam War (New York: Monad, 1978); and Halstead’s brochure How GIs in Vietnam View the War. These opinions are also expressed in an oral history interview conducted by SAC collector Chuck Bowden in 1968.

8. Halstead, Out Now, 150.

9. These soldiers, several of whom were SWP members, were arrested for forming the protest organization at Fort Jackson, GIs United Against the War in Vietnam, and for conducting anti-war protest meetings. See also Halstead’s GIs Speak Out Against the War (New York: Pathfinder, 1970).

10. Chuck Bowden to Fred Halstead, 17 April 1969. Field Service Division Collections Correspondence.

11. Field reports of Sarah Cooper, 16-23 December 1974, and James Cavanaugh, October 1977, Archives Division Field Report Files.

12. Roth’s letter to the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, 21 June 1972, was the typical SAC from letter used to appeal to radical groups. The VVAW lead card also fails to indicate the names of any informants.


14. Jane Roth to Tere Versace, 3 May 1973 and 26 December 1973, Archives Division Collections Correspondence; and Roth to Mattern, 3 September 1990.

15. Sarah Cooper to Barbara West, 4 April 1978, Archives Division Collections Correspondence.

16. SAC project grant application and revised draft, 30 May and 4 October 1978; and F. Gerald Ham to Richard A. Erney, 11 September 1979, Archives Division Project Files.

17. SAC project report, March-August 1979; final report, April 1982; field reports, June-July 1979; and Cooper to Patrick Quinn, 3 April 1979, all in Archives Division Project Files. In view of the much touted value of formal collecting policies in limiting competition between institutions it is instructive to note that the problem over priorities concerned the inaccessibility of SNCC records at the Martin Luther King Center. It was for this reason that the grant proposal originally gave high priority to uncovering SNCC records in private hands. When the situation at the King Center improved, Cooper altered her priorities.

18. SAC project field reports April-May 1979, October-November 1979, and March-June 1981, Archives Division Project Files.

19. SAC project field report, October-November 1979, Archives Division Project Files. Mrs. Ransom was the Gold Star Mother who appeared on the Democratic National Convention platform with Ron Kovic in 1976. In addition to excellent organizational records, this collection contains personal papers about her son, whose death in Vietnam spurred her amnesty activism.

20. SAC project field reports, April-May 1979, October-November 1979, and March-June 1981, Archives Division Project Files.

21. Sarah Cooper to John Fleckner, 9 June 1980, Archives Division Collections Correspondence. The Vietnam Veterans Archives Project was eventually accepted by Cornell University where the limited quantity of material accessioned as a result would seem to confirm Cooper’s apprehensions. See Documentation Newsletter, Fall 1981.