

## APPENDIX 5

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**PROJECT REPORT:**

Telephone Inquiry Log

**ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT:**

Consultant Office, Room 207

**DATES:**

January 22-26, 1990

**METHOD:**

Categorize every incoming telephone call to the National Archives Consultants Office by type of call and action taken by using a specially designed log form.

**NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS:** 662 Incoming Calls

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Telephone Inquiry Log Form
2. Instructions
3. Summary of Tabulations
4. Incoming Call Volume

*Archives & Museum Informatics* will provide copies of the attachments to the original appendices to any reader upon request. Contact:

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**HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS:**

- \* 662 incoming calls were received, with at least 850 distinct inquiries.
- \* There were predictable peak times each day of the week.
- \* Telephone book and long distance operators are the primary sources of information for people placing calls.
- \* 52 percent of incoming calls are switchboard calls, half of which are routed to a specific custodial branch.
- \* 30 percent of all inquiries are answered immediately from memory.
- \* 60 percent of all inquiries are referred directly to National Archives branches for further information.
- \* 40 percent of all inquiries about the National Archives as an institution pertain to reference policies and procedures.
- \* 89 percent of all inquiries about records pertain to the holdings; about equal numbers were answered from memory or referred directly to the branches.
- \* 14 percent of the callers identified their research as genealogical, without any further probing.

**FINDINGS****1. Total Volume**

The attached tabulation of all inquiries logged during the study period contains totals for each unit of inquiries received. Rows are totaled at the right margin; columns are totaled below each column. Overall, 662 incoming telephone calls were received, containing 850 distinct inquiries.

- \* Ninety-five callers (14.3%) clearly identified themselves as inquiring about genealogical records or procedures for research. During the study week, the Washington Post listed incorrectly a phone number for a NARA genealogy class, prompting about 30 callers to ask for the correct phone number.
- \* Only 210 of 662 callers were asked about how they acquired the NARA phone number. Of this total, 112 (53.3%) obtained the number either from a telephone book or a long distance operator.
- \* An average of 16-20 incoming calls are received each hour, every day of the week. Monday is the busiest day of the week, while Thursday is the most steady. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon each day are predictably heavy periods of telephone activity. Attached is a chart plotting the number of incoming calls each hour of the study period.

**2. Inquiries About NARA**

Questions about the National Archives as an institution, including routine requests for hours of operation and more complex questions about policies and procedures, totaled 235, or 27.6 percent of the total inquiries. Of these, almost 40 percent pertained to procedural matters, especially the process of obtaining a research card or using archival materials.

- \* The majority of all inquiries about the National Archives were answered from memory by the person who received the call.
- \* Requests for information about publications, including microfilm publications, were answered either by mailing the caller an order form or by referring the caller to the publications office.
- \* Just over 47 percent (52) of the total number of incoming calls in this category pertained to genealogical research.

### 3. Switchboard Calls

Half (331) of all incoming calls during the study week were requests for the number of a specific NARA staff member or branch. Switchboard calls comprised 40.9 percent (348) of all inquiries logged.

- \* On closer inspection, half of all switchboard inquiries were routed to a specific branch (primarily Civil, Military, Still, and Motion), while an additional 20 percent went to specific NARA staff members outside the Reference Services Branch.
- \* About 16 percent of the switchboard calls received during the week concerned the genealogical class described in the Post.
- \* The destinations of the remaining inquiries in this category (14%) are unknown but mostly pertain to genealogical research.

### 4. Inquiries About Records

Questions about historical records held by the National Archives or other organizations totaled 254, or 29.8 percent of all inquiries logged during the week.

- \* 89 percent of these inquiries pertained to NARA holdings.
- \* Two out of five inquiries concerned single items or documents such as a pension file, a patent record, or a photograph of an event; more than half were referred directly to NARA branches for more information.
- \* 28 percent of the inquiries in this category related to specific record groups, such as passenger ship lists, the availability of the 1920 census, or WPA records on a topic; two-thirds of these inquiries were answered in the Consultants Office either from memory or from ready reference sources.
- \* 22 percent of the inquiries were on broad subjects; equal numbers were answered and referred to branches.
- \* 5 percent of the inquiries concerned non-accessioned federal agency records, including NASA flight records and military service records from the Vietnam War.
- \* The final 5 percent of inquiries pertained to non-federal records including birth, marriage, and death records.
- \* The volume of inquiries to NARA on the availability and content of records is undoubtedly greater when the content of switchboard calls referred directly to reference branches is considered.

- \* Logs for individual calls in this category, taken together, suggest a considerable interest by researchers in non-textual records. More information is needed in this area.
- \* There is some indication from the logs that not all referrals to federal agencies and non-federal archival repositories were recorded, especially in the area on non-accessioned federal records. Future studies of telephone inquiries should make a special effort to assess referral activity.

## 5. Other Inquiries

Only 13 inquiries received during the week could not be categorized above. Most were requests for information on upcoming film series at the National Archives. Several calls were from people trying to locate missing persons; a single call was a wrong number discovered by NARA staff only after probing the caller for specific information.

## METHODOLOGY ISSUES

The findings of this one-week study are not necessarily representative of the volume or proportions of telephone calls received by the National Archives overall. For example, it is not valid to claim that the Consultant Office receives 34,424 calls in one year (52 weeks X 662 calls), or that the proportion of calls about building hours is the same week after week.

The study was not designed to describe in detail the topics of each substantive call about records. Further research, planned for later in the year, is needed to assess more fully how incoming calls should be handled.

- \* Systematic logging of incoming telephone calls is feasible on a routine basis if:
  - data gathering instrument is simply conceived and clearly explained;
  - staff has time to become accustomed to new procedures;
  - information seems relevant to those who have to gather and interpret it.
- \* Staff receiving incoming calls are able to log successfully some aspect of nearly every call received. Only a few calls were missed during the study week, mostly by technicians relieving the front desk staff.
- \* Staff are very successful in categorizing inquiries by type, but are less successful in noting referral action. Analysis of the data acquired suggests that many referral actions were not noted on the log.
- \* Staff have significant problems asking callers for any information not absolutely necessary for a reply, especially during peak periods. This kind of activity falls well beyond normal operating procedures.
- \* Genealogical inquiries are difficult to ascertain without specific probing by NARA staff.
- \* Analysis of data is facilitated by forms designed with interpretation and reporting in mind.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR REFERENCE POLICY AND PROCEDURES

- \* What are the central telephone reference service functions of the Consultants Office and how will these functions change as NARA looks ahead to Archives II? What are the separate roles of research process advisors and records specialists? How can balance be maintained between

answering telephone inquiries directly and referring callers to other staff? How can balance be maintained between referring callers to agency staff or to other archival repositories?

- \* How should the National Archives make known to the general public the variety of reference and referral services available by telephone? Some of the many options include:
    - listings in telephone book blue pages (government numbers) and information dispensed by long distance telephone operators;
    - listings in government information source books;
    - staffed switchboard operation at NARA or computerized routing/information system;
    - telephone numbers provided in NARA brochures and publications and in print and film media.
  - \* What is the potential impact of an automated archival information system (AIS) on the Consultants Office telephone service operations? What are the opportunities for gathering and recording of information directly from callers, improving ready reference and referral, and answering substantive inquiries about National Archives holdings in depth?
  - \* What skills and resources are needed to carry out archival ready reference service and referral, and how should these be acquired? Some of the issues involved in coming to terms with the challenge of "front-end" patron service include:
    - knowledge of NARA procedures vs. substantive knowledge of NARA holdings;
    - relationship of NARA holdings to other archival and printed resources;
    - readily available reference sources in an expanded common consultants library;
    - training on availability and use of archival ready reference sources.
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