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Reviewed by Steven Sowards
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An Archive Presents Itself on the Web

In 1973, the American Library Association (ALA) contracted with the University of Illinois to house its archival records in the university archives in Urbana. With the creation of this Web site, researchers now can find descriptions of these materials on-line, along with information about access procedures and policies. This is a review of the American Library Association Archives Web site, rather than a review of the archive itself. <p> From the homepage of the Web site, users can access information about the ALA Archives and policies for using its collections, a list of holdings by ALA unit, announcements about new acquisitions, or a search engine. The core of the site is a set of detailed descriptions of specific subject files in the collection. Researchers can read paragraph-long abstracts which note papers by or about organization officers, other individuals, ALA units, committees, publications, and events by name; dates are supplied where appropriate. The size of each file is shown in cubic feet, and the presence or absence of a Finding Aid is indicated. Finding Aids and box or folder listings currently are not available over the Web, but can be requested. While the archivists would like to make these tools available on the Web in Encoded Archival Description format, such a step is still in the planning stages. <p> The listings can be explored in three ways. Holdings are organized hierarchically into more than seventy record groups, reflecting the organization's committees and major units such as the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD) or the Library History Round Table (LHRT). There are separate collections of historic photographs and materials relating to individual members. Hot links for any of these numbered groups lead to menus identifying specific subject files, each of which has a Record Series Number. At this stage, it is possible to read descriptive summaries for each file. <p> Second, the initial ALA Archives page provides a "Search" option. Users can conduct keyword searches of the descriptive abstract texts: the engine can retrieve multi-word phrases, and it accepts the Boolean AND and OR. In the absence of name authority control, personal names must be searched as entered in the text; thus it is important to try all possible variants. For example, three searches–for "charles brown," "charles h. brown," and "charles harvey brown"–returned distinctly different results. The use of upper and lower case makes no difference during the search process. <p> Third, limited reference assistance is available through the staff of the Archives. By following links through the "Information and Policies" page, one can find explanations of available reference services: some are free and others can be arranged for a fee. Policies for consultation, copying, and publication are presented clearly, and there is a blank user application to be filled out and mailed back to the archive. However, applicants must backtrack to the University of Illinois Archives home page to find the address to which the form is to be sent. This is one of the few missteps on the site, one which can be corrected readily: constituent Web pages within the ALA Archives site provide hot links within the site itself and to ALA's organizational home page, but not directly to the parent University of Illinois Archives home page. This is not a problem for users who begin at the university site and follow its links to the ALA Archives site, but it can affect anyone who connects to the ALA portion of the archives directly. <p> While many library historians know where the ALA Archives are located physically, others do not. Researchers trying to locate the archives by means of the Web should succeed with reasonable efforts. <p> Those who know that ALA deposits its archives at Illinois can simply move from the university Web page to that of the university archives, where they will see "American Library Association Archives" listed on the first screen. <p> If the searcher is aware of ALA's own home page at http://www.ala.org/, she can find links to the archives site, but these are not prominently displayed. The ambiguously labeled link for "Library" leads to fact sheets and a link for "ALA Archives." There is another link from the "Web Resources" por-

tion of the Library History Round Table (LHRT) home page, found among "Organizations/Round Tables" on the ALA page, but only LHRT members are likely to remember such a round-about route. The "Search Web Site" option on the ALA page retrieves too many instances of the word "archives" to be truly helpful. <p> The major Web search engines, on the other hand, do a good job locating the archive. Because the site's main home page is clearly identified as the "American Library Association Archives" using HTML Title tags, Lycos, WebCrawler, Magellan, Infoseek, AltaVista and Excite easily retrieved links to the correct URL. <p> Anyone using the ALA Archives home page should take a few minutes to explore the University of Illinois Archives pages: here they will find complete contact information (by mail and by telephone, as well as over the Internet), a staff roster, and policy guidelines. All pages show when they were "Last Updated" and allow e-mail communication with a Webmaster: an inquiry by this reviewer was answered rapidly, helpfully and at length. A supplementary link to "Library History Resources" leads to the ALA Archives site and also to complementary collections from the University of Illinois Library, Illinois' Graduate School of Library and Information Science, the American Association of Law Libraries, and half a dozen other entities. Taken together, these collections make the University of Illinois Archives a center for research in library history. <p> Viewed as an application of Web design principles, the ALA Archives Web site generally presents itself well. Individual pages include a minimum number of decorative visual elements. There are a few illustrations of moderate size–historical drawings and photographs–which set an appropriate tone. Consistent use of layout, background color, and fonts informs users that they are still within the ALA Archives site while they browse. Links to the site's major divisions appear on the left and at the bottom of all pages, simplifying navigation. There is no use of frames, and minimal use of tables. The site does not offer a text-only alternative for sight-impaired users; a compatibility check using software from the Center for Applied Special Technology at http://www.cast.org/bobby/ detected some HTML elements that may create problems for web surfers using unsophisticated browsers from Lynx or AOL. <p> This is a Web site clearly aimed at a specific audience: potential users of the archives. These researchers now enjoy

a valuable service: the ability to gauge archival holdings with a minimum expenditure of time and money. This benefit can be illustrated using a recent article in <cite>Libraries and Culture</cite> on the "Books for China" program of 1938-1947.[1]<a name="fromnote1"> Entering "books for china" in the search engine on the ALA Archives page rapidly identifies Record Series Number 7/1/51 (coded as 0701051 in the machine retrieval) as the main resource on this topic, and this is confirmed by the endnotes in the article as written. Additional searching points to some related, less significant files as well. Searches by name for the principal architects of the program, such as Charles Harvey Brown and T. L. Yuan, produce similar results. Any investigator visiting the Web site would appreciate the archive's potential as a source for the project, and she could do so in less than an hour without leaving her own office. <p> The future of the Web as a medium for shared access to unique source material is limited only by the substantial investment needed to post marked up documents. The ALA Archives Web site provides access to finding tools at this time, rather than access to archival materials themselves, but its producers already have taken advantage of the Web to present images from a recent acquisition: "Highlights from the Columbia University Library Science Library Vertical Files, 1832-1994." This exhibit, found under "What's New," includes a variety of photographs, floor plans, clippings and colorful posters. Like some larger sites, such as the American Memory Project at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html, this effort hints at exciting things to come. <p> In summary, the American Library Association Archives Web site is a successful use of HTML and the Web to improve communication between an archive and its potential users. The site has a clear purpose, one which is supported directly by its features. Library historians will be doing themselves a favor by taking advantage of this effort. <p> Note: <p> [1]. Yuan Zhou and Calvin Elliker, "From the People of the United States of America: The Books for China Programs during World War II," <cite>Libraries and Culture</cite> 32/2 (Spring 1997), pp. 191-226.

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