



*"Record Protection in  
an Uncertain World"*

WORLD CONFERENCE  
ON RECORDS  
AND GENEALOGICAL SEMINAR

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THE MICROFILMING PROGRAM OF THE GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY,  
SALT LAKE CITY

By

Elder Howard W. Hunter

GENERAL ASSEMBLIES

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It is indeed an honor to address this great audience. You represent not only many nations in the world at this conference, but somehow it seems you represent all mankind, as we come together to discuss the records and the cultures of the world which have been preserved in written form. When we discuss records, in reality we are talking about people, for records are histories and stories of people and their acts in life.

Another reason for feeling honored is that in this capacity, I represent the largest genealogical library in the world located here in Salt Lake City. The Genealogical Society Library is truly a marvelous collection of records from every part of the world. These records are being preserved and indexed as rapidly as time and opportunity will allow so that they can be made available to every person who has reason to search them.

The Genealogical Society was organized seventy-five years ago this very year. I have often wondered if those who had the foresight and vision to incorporate this organization were given the privilege of understanding how far-reaching and effective this Society would become. I quote from the recorded minutes of the first meeting on November 13, 1894. "We the undersigned do hereby associate ourselves together in an organization to be known by the name and style of 'The Genealogical Society of Utah' the purposes of which are benevolent, educational and religious, pecuniary profit not being the object." Further on in the same minutes we read an explanation of what was meant by benevolent. Again I quote, "...benevolent in collecting, compiling, establishing and maintaining

For the seventy-five years of its existence, this goal and objective has always been uppermost in the minds of those who have been in the leadership of the Genealogical Society. The goal has not changed, it constitutes one of the primary reasons for the purpose of this World Conference on Records.

Many years ago we realized that it would not be possible to gather all the records of the world into any one given place because of the number and the various ways records have been and are being preserved. Even though we are literally brothers and sisters in the fullest sense of the word, yet we are aware that there are cultures, nationalities, clans, and ethnic units which possess intense loyalty to their own group and way of life. The records of the world must be preserved -- but preserved in these lines of demarkation.

In the beginning, the work of the Society was slow and the organization moved with some degree of deliberation. It had only a small number of books and they, in most cases, had been donated. A Mr. John Howard presented to the library books such as "Records of the Revolutionary War," "List of Emigrants to America." and "Visitation of Yorkshire." Progress was slow, but from this humble beginning we have been able to collect, during the seventy-five years of our existence, over 80,000 bound volumes.

Books have constituted the principal means of preserving records and we began to look at ways to preserve them so that they could be read and used without destroying the original to the point that it would become unusable. In 1937 we investigated a program of microfiling. We could see where storage space would be reduced and

destruction of the original records would be eliminated. After long and exhaustive studies and experiments in the use of microfilm, the Genealogical Society began to accept microfilm as an answer to the problem of storing and preserving the available world's records.

Actually, the program began by our purchasing a few rolls of developed microfilm. We could see the advantages of such a program. But merely buying a few rolls of film was not the answer. We needed to place some kind of priority on the gathering of records. We gave our highest priority to the accumulation of vital records which were most useful to us in Genealogical research. After many studies, it was finally decided that the Genealogical Society should go into the field with its own cameras seeking permission to microfilm available records. What commenced as a small operation soon blossomed and grew and has developed into what has been described as the most concentrated microfilming program ever attempted by an organization.

Because of the cooperation of people and organization all over the world, many of those in attendance here today being chiefly responsible, we have been able to microfilm and preserve some of the vital records of many countries in the world. The Society has often been asked to supply a reprint of some of the records we have photographed because the original was destroyed by fire or flood or the ravages of time after being photographed, and we have been able to respond to the request.

We are aware of the fact that all of the world's records could not be microfilmed and placed in our large storage vaults for safe keeping and preservation. We do however urge all of those present

to give serious consideration to solving the problem of preserving and storing your own vital records. By such cooperation, and perhaps the exchange of information, the vital records of the world can be preserved in safety and so made available for use.

Here in our Genealogical Library we have placed positive copies of many of the films we have secured. We have made available about 250 reading machines without charge to anyone desiring to use them so that films may be studied and genealogies assembled. We know that some records we have been privileged to gather should not be used in public areas, and we have jealously guarded these according to the directions we have received from the owners or guardians of such records. However, those we have microfilmed for the most part are records available to the public and could be used by the public in the repository of the original record. Hundreds of people come to our library and use these microfilmed records daily in their search for information.

Let me explain how we are permitted to microfilm records. In some cases the owners have requested that we photograph their records and in other cases we have requested permission from the owners to microfilm. Many historians and records officers have seen the value of having the Genealogical Society come to the place where the original records are stored for the purpose of microfilming them for preservation and future use. Whenever we have been invited to do this work, we have always left the original record in the possession of the owner and in many cases in better order than before we filmed it. We always give to the owner one complete microfilmed copy. This permits the owner to use the microfilmed copy instead of the original record, thus preserving the original. As to the records which we have requested permission

to copy, it is our policy to enter into a microfilm contract with the owners so that all conditions are thoroughly understood before microfilming begins. In this case, too, we have given the owners a complete set of microfilm copies of the original records.

Microfilming has been done in many countries in the world and sometimes under some unusual circumstances. For instance, in one country we carried records by burros to places where electricity would be available, and in some places we have had to provide our own power by portable power plants. These are extreme cases, but demonstrate our earnestness in securing and preserving the records of the world. This work is not experimentation for the Genealogical Society, but a full-fledged part of the effort to build and establish a records program for the preservation of important documents and records.

To demonstrate the validity of this statement, permit me to quickly present for your consideration the extent of the program at the present time. We are now filming in about 17 countries in the world and producing approximately 400,000 feet or 122,000 meters of microfilm every month. Translated into figures which can be easily understood, it would be something like this: During 1968 we produced nearly 18,000,000 feet or 6,000,000 meters of microfilm and continuing on into 1969 we will produce about 24,000,000 feet or 8,000,000 meters of microfilm records including the duplicate copies.

These records are from the United States, Mexico, Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Finland, Norway, Canada, Hungary, New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland, Austria, Russia, Iceland, Argentina, Bahamams Polynesia, Italy, Poland, and a few records from China, Japan, South America, South Africa and others.

We would be grateful if we could report that we have many rolls of microfilmed records from all the countries of the world, but unfortunately, we cannot. We do believe, however, that by cooperation among all the countries represented here today we could establish an understanding and arrangement whereby the vital statistical records of every country in the world could be preserved and used by those who have reason to use them. We stand ready to share and aid in every way possible to preserve and make available for use the records of every country in the world.

One of the questions most frequently asked of us is why we are so interested in the records of the world, and why we spend so much time and money gathering and placing them in special libraries and protective structures. People have come from every part of the world just to see how we do this and to ask about the reason for our program. I suppose it does seem unusual for an organization to be so interested in other countries' records and that it will spend its own money to try and preserve the vital documents. But this is a true statement of fact -- we do want to help preserve records.

Perhaps if we were to consider the case of records in their true light we might be led to draw heavily on past experience. Records have been the focal point of every history book that has ever been compiled. History books are not written in the sense that they are created or brought from someone's mind. They are basically a compilation of the written records of a country or the records of individuals within the space of time for which the history is written.

In common usage, the term History refers to the record of the events of man rather than the events themselves. History may be regarded as a record of all that has occurred within the realm of human consciousness. Sometimes the term Prehistoric is used to describe the events of the distant past, but this is not an accurate term unless used to designate that vague and hypothetical period of development of which we have no positive record but only information revealed by legend and archaeological rather than literary evidence.

Egypt is regarded as an archaeological museum. There has been preserved to this day some historical information in the form of architecture, art, remains of engineering feats, inscriptions on buildings, tombs and monuments, but there are very few Egyptian historical writings. The Babylonians and the Assyrians made a greater contribution by the clay tablets, cylinders and the inscriptions giving the names of the kings and their genealogies. The Code of Hammurabi is one of the most important documents in the history of jurisprudence. In ancient Palestine the Hebrews produced the first true historical narrative of any consequence and this was expanded under Saul, David and Solomon. Historical writing was increased under the Greeks and the Romans. Then followed the Patristic period and the Middle Ages and so on down to modern times. Civilizations have come and gone, but history is limited to the fragments which have been preserved. We must find a way to preserve the written records of mankind.

One reason for our attempt to preserve the vital records of mankind is because we believe that we should learn of "things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things



which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and perplexities of the nations, and the judgements which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms." (D&C 88:79) It would appear that the reason for constant mistrust and misunderstanding among nations is that the boundary lines of countries have blinded us to the extent that we have forgotten that each person who lives upon the earth has something in common with another. The Genealogical Society has always fostered the idea that wars would become unheard of, men would beat their swords into plowshares and the earth could easily become a delightful garden for all men if we could only learn enough about each other and something about our origin to understand and appreciate one another.

Another prominent reason for the Genealogical Society to devote its efforts toward the gathering and preserving of mankind's records is the literal belief that men were created by a beneficent Father whose purpose was to create man that he might have joy. The joy we speak of is the joy of family association. With this in mind we seek out our family lines so we may know who our ancestors and family members are. Thus the work goes on until we have identified all our people as far back as records are available. It is not uncommon for a person who is in America to search out his ancestry and find that he has ancestral parents in many, many countries of the world. With the expansion of commerce and representatives of businesses living in many parts of the world, marrying and intermarrying with the people within the country where they live, it would be by no means improbable that future generations of citizens yet unborn in the nations of this world would be a composite of many lineages.

Now, let us discuss for just a few moments what we might consider to be the future of this work and some realistic goals we might reach together. I am confident that the librarians, historians, archivists, genealogists government and private record supervisors here assembled feel that records should be preserved and stored in such a manner that they can be used for research. We could resolve this very day to assist in establishing a real program of record preservation and storage. There are many ways this can be done, but each country and area would, of course, have to decide how it should be done for its particular purposes. It is not necessary that there be uniformity in the way records are kept, but only that they are kept safe and secure. No doubt in the future there will be better ways to do this than at present. At this time we are using computers to index and print out information; but we have not discovered any method that will copy and preserve records better than microfilm. As we progress, we are learning how to store and preserve the negative microfilm copy so that it will last hundreds of years.

If we were all to cooperate and exchange ideas one with another, we could no doubt develop various ways for preserving our records and exchanging them if the need arose so that every person would have access to them. Perhaps it would be well if we were to organize some world committee which could guide us in performing this task. The Genealogical Society would be happy to cooperate in a yearly meeting of some kind to accomplish this purpose. The committee should be a non-profit organization and would require no great expense. With governments, organizations, libraries, and other such groups working together we could devise ways to preserve our cultures by preserving our records.

The Genealogical Society desires to microfilm many records from various countries in the world, especially where large numbers of American people have come from. We in America are all natives of some other country either by birth or by descent, therefore, the vital records of our ancestors are found in records within the countries you people represent.

As you have already learned, we have a large records vault just south and a little east of the City where we have fashioned out of a granite mountain, vaults where we can preserve microfilmed records in such a way as to insure their safety. We desire to cooperate with countries in using this method of preserving records for the use and benefit of posterity.

Again, we are grateful that you have accepted our invitation to attend this most significant conference on records and we deeply appreciate your help and guidance in such a humane duty as preserving and maintaining the records of man's civilization.