

Math Archive in Disarray

For the past 5 years, mathematicians have been donating valuable papers to the University of Texas at Austin, for placement in an archival collection at the university's Humanities Research Center. The center's new director now says he is not interested in maintaining a mathematics archive, however, and the project—the country's only such collection—is in disarray. Even the ownership of the papers is in doubt, since they have been signed over to the center. "This whole thing has been very difficult," says Leonard Gillman of the University of Texas, treasurer of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA).

The idea of establishing an archival collection at Texas originated in the late 1970's with some students of R. L. Moore, a renowned topologist who had been at Texas for most of his career and had bequeathed his papers to the university. The MAA had also been thinking of setting up a mathematics archive, and with Moore's papers as a starting point, Texas seemed a logical place for it. The university's Humanities Research Center, moreover, already had a small history of science collection, along with English, French, and Italian literary archives of the 19th and early 20th century. In 1978, when MAA officials spoke to the director of the center, they were warmly received.

But almost immediately, there were problems. The MAA, which primarily represents college teachers, envisioned a complete archival collection and tried to interest the American Mathematical Society (AMS), which represents researchers, in signing the contract with the center. The AMS, however, had doubts.

"At one point, it was expected that both societies would send collections to Texas," says William LeVeque, executive director of the AMS. "Then some of us began to wonder. It didn't seem that the commitment on the part of the center was wholehearted. What if things went wrong? Could you retrieve what you deposited? The answer seemed to be no—the deposit was an irrevocable gift. We also wanted a clear guarantee of access. We wanted to be sure the material was well cared for, not only indexed but promptly indexed. Overall, we questioned whether the center, which was deliberately named the *Humanities Research Center*, was the best place for mathematics archives."

Several members of the AMS wanted to start an archival collection at Brown University, which is close to the AMS headquarters. "There ensued a bitter battle [among AMS members]," LeVeque recalls, "and in the end the decision was, 'A pox on both your houses.' We won't deposit anywhere."

Despite the AMS' decision, the MAA went ahead and signed the contract. A special curator was hired for the math archives, papers were donated, and, says Gillman, it was a time of general euphoria.

Impressed with what the MAA was doing, the American Statistical Association decided to join in and drew up a similar contract with the university. The statisticians donated the papers of two eminent members, Jerome Cornfield and H. O. Hartley, and the MAA published a notice in its *Monthly* requesting that mathematicians donate papers of their own. The collection began to grow.

Then the entire situation changed. In 1980, Decherd

Turner was made director of the center. "At first," says Gillman, "we heard nothing from him." But, in October 1981, he failed to renew the contract of Albert C. Lewis, the curator of the math archives and made it clear that he did not consider the mathematics collection to be of primary importance. The statisticians, whose contract had never been signed by the board of regents of the University of Texas, quickly withdrew their offer.

Turner told *Science* he does not believe math archives belong at the center. "I look on the math archives as a peripheral item with peripheral interest," he says. "I no longer have the space or the money to carry on a totally peripheral show." If the mathematicians want to move their collection elsewhere, Turner says, "I'll help them pack tomorrow."

Explaining that he is not mistreating the math papers, many of which are still in boxes, Turner says, "The [center] has many archives that are still in boxes, honey. We are behind in cataloging. That is our only sin, dear. The rate of cataloging is slow indeed." He adds that there seems to be little pressing need for the math archives. "I've questioned my staff over and over again on who uses the math archives and I got blank stares. To my knowledge, they've never been used," Turner says. But, since so few papers have been cataloged, it is not surprising that the archive has not been used.

Mathematicians are divided on what to do now but many want the archives to stay at Texas for lack of a better alternative. Alfred Willcox, executive director of the MAA, says, "I don't know if it's a realistic hope anymore but we want to keep our material at Texas." Lucille Whyburn, a former professor at the University of Virginia who helped establish the archive, agrees. "We have a legal contract between the MAA and the board of regents at the University of Texas that establishes the archives in perpetuity. I think we have to force this man [Turner] to better service the collection."

If the mathematicians do decide to reestablish their archives elsewhere, they may find it difficult to find a site. The statisticians are looking for somewhere to put their archives and, according to Fred L. Leone, president of the American Statistical Association, few places are interested. "We have checked a number of places but we don't really have an answer yet."

William S. Livingston, vice president and dean of graduate studies at the University of Texas says that Texas will, somehow, honor its agreement with the mathematicians. "The university undertook to provide a home for the archives. We feel an obligation and we will take care of the archives, not necessarily at the [center]," he remarks.

Meanwhile, some mathematicians are holding onto their papers, unsure of whether to donate them to Texas. Anyone who asks the MAA what to do is instructed not to send anything to Texas just yet. Others still are donating to the center, unaware of the problems. Churchill Eisenhart, a statistician at the National Bureau of Standards, says he recently mentioned the situation at Texas to some mathematicians at Princeton. They looked horrified and explained that they had been shipping valuable papers there. No one had ever told them to hold off.—GINA KOLATA