

# Colorado's County Records— The Syncretic Approach

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THE titles chosen for the papers we hear today may appear to be exercises in sophisticated synonyms for a decidedly grassroots problem. Just what do we mean dictionary-wise by *eclectic*? By *syncretic*? The former connotes a selection or excerption, a gleaning or choosing of the best. *Syncretic*, on the other hand, refers to a reconciliation or union of conflicting beliefs, uniting or harmonizing of conflicting principles. No matter how we “choose up sides” in our approaches to our common problem, we can at least agree that county records (along with those of municipalities, towns, and villages) are closest to us as individuals and therefore are truer reflections than are other records of daily personal experiences and rights. These are the records that have real meaning for the individual whose intellectual interest may be roused by broad national and international issues but whose heart is closer home. Although perhaps the programs discussed by my colleagues may differ somewhat from Colorado's—because their programs have been pursued a little longer with perhaps more personnel and funds—how remarkably similar are our goals! Actually, we are reviewing today three programs much alike in objectives, unusually successful in operation, and all meeting the challenge by their adaptation to the regional and local needs of the counties they serve.

The Archivist of a large Western State (104,247 square miles), which could tuck several of the smaller Eastern States in its vest pocket (a large State in terms of square miles but not in population)—a State with great geographical variations of high moun-

\*Paper read on Oct. 6, 1961, in the course of the 25th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Kansas City, Mo., as one of three papers presented in a session over which H. G. Jones presided; the other two, by Gust Skordas and John Alexander McMahon, also appear in this issue. Mrs. Renze, the Archivist of Colorado and a Fellow of the Society, needs no introduction to readers of this journal. Her annual reports as secretary of the Society since 1956 and her occasional articles in the *American Archivist* and elsewhere reflect concepts in archives administration in general that compare closely with her approach to the county records program of her State.

tainous regions to the west, vast plains to the east, and temperatures ranging from extreme cold to desert heat—the Archivist of such a State will need to differ with Eastern colleagues in approaching a county records program. There are 63 counties and 246 incorporated cities and towns in Colorado, each with at least one rugged individualist from one of the county offices who feels quite adequate to handle his own business without any help from the big city folks from the “capitol” at Denver. And we have our fair share of energetic, well-meaning citizens who regard records as their personal possessions, especially if there are documents mentioning grandma’s or grandpa’s name favorably that would look well in frames. The current exploitation of Western lore by radio, television, motion pictures, and the theater has brought a scourge of field agents and writers, amateur historians, and others who have no more compunction about “scalping” the record than did the red men about scalping our forebears. We should also single out for dishonorable mention those educational or institutional enterprises that approach local records with rapacious intent to carry them off for inclusion in manuscript collections where they may be maladministered, seldom used, or (worse) buried and inaccessible. But saddest of all are records lost or orphaned from the chain of legal custody, perhaps never to be restored to their rightful places.

The Colorado statutes that give authority to the State Archivist for the records of *all* State, county, municipal, town, and village agencies, and for the records of other political subdivisions, do not allow us to engage in selective choosing under an eclectic method such as that followed by my worthy colleagues from Maryland. Rather the statutes stipulate a syncretic approach and require that an attempt be made to unite and harmonize any conflicting or divergent interests, recognizing and accepting such differences as one of our occupational hazards.

Through a long process of education since 1943, when the Colorado program was initiated, we have succeeded in achieving what we believe to be a good county program. It has been favorably received by county officials, who have developed a keen and active interest in the whole archival process. Our system, I am sure, is neither original nor unique, but it has been signally successful and its future is bright. Since increasingly we are being called upon for counseling and programing by our county, municipal, and school district officials, and since one of the objectives of a panel such as this is to present varied ideas for the benefit of all, I offer the following conclusions:

1. Whatever may be the intrinsic desirability of county records work that contributes to its establishment, its status is not assured until those in the counties accept it. Of the specific criteria to be met in bringing a county program to fruition, perhaps the primary one is that of proper State legislation, supported by a sufficient budget and adequately trained professional personnel. It appears inconceivable to me that there can ever be a complete separation of the State and county (or local) record programs—their interests are too intermingled. Not all counties and municipalities can afford to set up separate professional staffs, but they can utilize a central, coordinated staff.

2. Another obvious element of success is the establishment of good local public relations. This is not accomplished overnight. It is a long, tedious process demanding patience, understanding, and mutual respect; it requires not one but many followup visits to a county or community; it requires time and very often willingness to get in and “dig”—to do whatever is necessary to set a program in motion. It also means that many persons besides county officers in the community must be reckoned with—legislators, newspaper editors, heads of local museums, leaders of chambers of commerce, and other influential citizens. Then, of course, one must not forget the local bar association and the title and abstract firms; these may look with suspicion upon any plan that will disturb the status quo of the records—even though the courthouse is bursting at the seams or in danger of burning to the ground.

3. After achievement of these first basic requirements—actually continuing processes—one needs next a long-range program. This must be both general and specific; it must emphasize the need for the permanent preservation of all vital and necessary records and the elimination of the useless; the setting of standards as related to public records; leadership and continued educational work in local records programs; and the satisfaction that will come to county officers who participate in the work.

4. It is most important that the State Archivist work closely with associations—national, State, and local—of which county and other local officials are members. Among such associations are the Municipal League; the County Officers Association; and the Associations of County Commissioners, County Clerks, County Treasurers, County Assessors, and County Judges. The State Archivist and the Archives staff must—and in Colorado does—stand ready to appear on their programs, to give them counsel on records administration, and to conduct workshops for them. The combined support of these associations will make for the success of any county program.

5. The State Archives must be capable of developing a dynamic and imaginative approach to the county records program. Good leadership should inspire county officials to improve inadequate practices, to change with the times, and to better improve their techniques and processes as related to records.

6. Lest we be carried away with the “syncretic” approach of bringing all variants into harmony, we must see that much good—sometimes more authentic good—is shown quietly in a program that has weathered a multitude of difficulties by lending a modest, unobtrusive helping hand.

The common tendency when establishing a records program is to expect too much, too soon. No county program springs full-blown overnight. At best each phase of program development is tedious and can be accelerated only slightly. There are no real short cuts. The work requires the skill of a physician, the knowledge of a lawyer, the patience of a clergyman, and the acumen of a politician—to say nothing about the competence of an archivist—but unless some great force or disaster intervenes, we in Colorado will continue our process of studied growth and development in our county and local records programs. And this will be through coalescence—the “syncretic” approach—the real reward of which comes when a delegation of county commissioners or county officers calls at the State Archivist’s headquarters to say with heartfelt expression, “Let us tell you what your program has meant to our county.”

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