

Minnesota—The State Archives and Records Service Reconsidered

By ROBERT M. BROWN*

*Minnesota State Archives
and Records Service*

A RECONSIDERATION of a program after it has been in operation for some years will show the progress made and may help to point more clearly the direction the program should take. It also may reveal errors in judgment, pitfalls to be avoided, and certain weaknesses in the agency administering or governing the program.

The State Archivist of Minnesota, in a paper read at the Annapolis, Md., meeting of the Society of American Archivists in 1951, traced the movement for an archival program in Minnesota.¹ He noted that, although an interest was evident as early as 1913, it was not until 1947 that the legislature passed an archives act and created the State Archives Commission. The commission still governs the State Archives, and no change has been made in its organization. It is responsible for records of both the State and its governmental subdivisions.

The commission is independent of any other State agency. This has its advantages and disadvantages. Although Minnesota's experience has been limited to a commission as the agency responsible for archives, this type of authority has been satisfactory. At present there is no thought of replacing the commission or putting its duties under another agency of government.

The success of the commission in Minnesota is owing in large part to its composition. The commissioner of administration, the State auditor, the attorney general, the public examiner, and the director of the Minnesota Historical Society constitute the membership. These officials were recommended by the Interim Committee on State Administration and Employment when it reported to the legislature in 1945 and urged that an archives law be passed. Under the archives law enacted two years later they became ex officio members of the commission. The selection was wise.

* A member of the teaching profession before his appointment in 1950 as Minnesota's first State Archivist and Records Administrator, the author is well known to many of our readers. He is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.

¹ See Robert M. Brown, "The Development of an Archival Program in Minnesota," in *American Archivist*, 16: 39-44 (Jan. 1953).

In 1955 and again in 1957 there was a movement to consolidate certain State agencies. It was suggested that the responsibilities of the Archives Commission be transferred to the Department of Administration. It was pointed out by the Archivist that should the archives be absorbed by the Department of Administration the officials composing the Archives Commission should be retained as an advisory body. No changes, however, were made.

The five commissioners have been of continuous assistance to the Archivist in reviewing his recommendations on the value of records. The commissioner of administration, who is chairman of the Archives Commission, is often referred to as "the business manager" of the State and by the nature of his office is in a position to identify records of administrative value. The State auditor and the public examiner (post-auditor) appraise the fiscal value of the records, and the attorney general and the director of the historical society respectively evaluate records in fields of law and history.

The Minnesota Archives Commission is a working group; it does not automatically approve all recommendations brought to its attention by the Archivist. It is not unusual to have considerable discussion before an issue is resolved. The group, however, works together in mutual understanding to promote more effectively the archives program.

Meetings are held when considered necessary by the chairman or by any two members, or when requested by the Archivist. Applications for authorization to destroy records or to transfer records to the State Archives are reviewed by the Archivist and sent by him, with appropriate recommendations, to the commissioners for approval. The commission is not required to approve the transfer of records to the State records center; this can result from an administrative decision of the Archivist.

The major disadvantage of the independent commission in Minnesota has been in matters concerning its biennial budget appropriations. The commission's budget request is separate from that of any department and, standing alone, is vulnerable. Since funds requested in the commission's budget are less than some departmental requests, a cut by the legislature in any area cannot easily be absorbed and the entire program suffers. The commissioners may at their discretion assist the Archivist at budget hearings and press for adequate appropriations for the Archives. The same officials, however, are heads of departments with departmental budget responsibilities that naturally take precedence over other

budgetary considerations. Legislators will first associate a commissioner with the department he represents and the budget request he is defending for that agency. A commissioner may be far less effective in promoting funds for the Archives than for the department of which he is the head. The Archivist may find himself altogether alone in defending the commission's budget.

In 1950, when the writer became the first Archivist of the State, the Minnesota Historical Society provided him with office space. This arrangement was satisfactory until the program developed beyond the initial phase—concerned chiefly with the disposal of nonessential records. Public records of permanent value, for which the society had provided shelter for years before an archival program was established, were crowding the Historical Building's overtaxed facilities. Agencies of government were ready to release records eligible for archival care, and it was imperative that the Archives Commission find larger quarters.

In 1955 the staff was increased from two to five, funds were obtained to buy a Barrow laminator, and space for offices and for the document restoration shop was made available on the top (sixth) floor of the State Office Building. We then could remove a quantity of the archives from the historical society's building, thus helping to relieve overcrowding in the manuscripts division. But in our new premises the archival collection had to be placed under the eaves!

By 1960 another State office building had been constructed to accommodate several State departments that were occupying rented space or were operating in cramped State-owned buildings near the Capitol. As departments began to plan their transfer from their old quarters, it became evident that the new building would accommodate offices and their current records only. Semicurrent and semipermanent noncurrent records would have to be housed in a records center, to be operated by the State Archivist under the jurisdiction of the commission.

The State-owned building selected for the records center is a block from the Capitol. The brick and poured-concrete structure, which before our occupancy had been occupied by the Welfare Department, had been constructed some years earlier as a Ford Motor Co. assembly plant. The three-story warehouse-type building, measuring approximately 150×140 feet, is quite well suited for a records center; it is not, however, designed for archival storage.

In May 1960 the State Archives moved to that location and its

name was changed to State Archives and Records Service. The Archives Commission was given part of the first floor for a receiving area and for a fumigator acquired as the result of a special grant made by the Governor for steel shelving and other needed equipment. Although very little money was available for renovation or remodeling, the second and third floors were painted. All the wooden half-partitions that had divided the third floor into offices were removed, and adjustable industrial steel shelving was installed for the records center. Some existing partitions on the second floor were removed to open a large area for archival shelving. The offices, a document restoration shop, a public searchroom, the State census records, and the microfilming area are also on the second floor.

The 1961 legislature approved funds for a male archival assistant to work in the records center. Before then the archivists themselves had had to spend most of their time in the records center receiving records from departments and responding to reference requests.

Although the Archives Commission was unsuccessful in 1961 in obtaining funds to inaugurate a microfilming program, by January of 1962 (again supported by a special grant from the Governor) a start was made in microfilming. The grant of \$25,500 for a two year period was made only for State records considered to be essential to the continuity of government in the event of a disaster. The amount was sufficient to purchase two cameras and a supply of film and to engage one operator. One person from the archives staff was assigned to microfilming as a second operator.

In its February 1963 report to the legislature the Archives Commission summarized its accomplishments during the past biennium. The records center had been an outstanding success since its opening in the spring of 1960. At the time of the report there were in the center 15,000 cubic feet of records, from 33 departments and divisions, on 3½ miles of the new shelving. There is still room to double this capacity by a rearrangement of present equipment. Most of the requests for records come by telephone. Records are sent hourly by interoffice mail; when an office has finished with a record it returns it for refiling.

The destruction of nonessential records continues to be an important part of the commission's program. Since July 1947, when the commission was established, 250,000 cubic feet of such records have been cleared from State and local offices and storage rooms. The Archivist is in daily touch with the commissioners on matters

concerning records destruction. This service is expedited by circulating disposal applications to the commissioners.

Inventories have been made of records of agencies in the State Capitol, in adjacent office buildings, and in State offices occupying rented quarters in the Twin Cities area. Records inventories have been completed at five State hospitals, two correctional institutions, several municipalities, and some county offices. The inventories will be useful in preparing retention schedules and records manuals for the several units of government. Schedules have been completed for the different sections of the Highway Department and for several smaller agencies. Schedules for the Department of Taxation, State hospitals, correctional institutions, and municipalities are being prepared.

The Archives and Records Service offers a census records search service for the decennial Federal population census from 1850 through 1880, for the census taken in 1857 before statehood, and for a State population census taken at ten-year intervals from 1865 through 1905. A fee of \$1.50 is charged for an original search and certification. The census volumes for 1850 and 1860 were indexed by the Minnesota Historical Society and are the only census volumes that have been indexed.

The document-restoration shop has only one employee. Its services are available on a fee basis to departments and other governmental subdivisions of the State. Privately owned documents may be laminated at the same charge as public documents, provided that such documents are affected with a public interest in their preservation.

There has been too little progress in arranging the records in the Archives. Dating from 1849, the beginning of organized government in Minnesota, the archives have been collected from many sources. Some of the 12,000 cubic feet of permanent records have been neglected for more than a century. Housed in various buildings over the years and subjected to many movings, they are sadly disorganized.

The Archivist, with the support of the Archives Commission, has asked the 1963 legislature for a new position to be added to the staff to assist the present Assistant State Archivist with the task of archival arrangement. It is held that the State Archives Commission has scarcely scratched the surface of its basic responsibility to preserve and make available the permanently valuable records of State government.

The 1963 budget also carries a request for an assistant archi-

vist for records management and two additional microfilm operators and two more cameras. The additional assistant archivist is necessary to relieve the Archivist of many tasks that should be delegated. The new assistant would be responsible for the records center and the records management program in general. This would include records inspection in various parts of the State, records scheduling, and microfilming. The microfilming program has only started. It must be broadened if it is to be effective.²

It is evident that staffing the Archives and Records Service has not kept pace with the expansion of its services. In 1960, between legislative sessions, the commission was assigned additional responsibilities but without adequate provision for personnel to do the work. As a result all phases of the program suffer, for the commission is trying to do too much with too few on the staff.

It might be said that the commission moved too rapidly in some areas without sufficient planning and forethought. There were times, however, when the commission was faced with situations that called for immediate action. The commission was propelled into establishing a records center without adequate personnel or physical facilities. It was projected into a special microfilming program that only in time and with patience can become a program suited to our needs. It is heartening, however, to find that the legislature and the executive departments are now turning to the Archives for solutions to the problems of records administration. Unceasing efforts will be required to improve the records management and microfilming programs. They are means to an end. That end is to preserve the archives of the State and its subdivisions. In that respect the Archives Commission has performed a not inconsiderable service in Minnesota.

² On May 21, 1963, when Mr. Brown's article was already in proof, the Minnesota State Archives Commission's budget was determined by the legislature. As passed, the budget provided for only one addition to the Archives staff—a microfilm camera operator, one of the lowest-salaried positions requested. Neither the assistant archivist for records management nor the additional person to assist in archival work was authorized.—Ed.

POSITIONS OPEN AND WANTED

Archivists And Records Managers

See Placement Register, p. 436