

Wisconsin's Area Research Centers

By RICHARD A. ERNEY

State Historical Society of Wisconsin

THE State Historical Society of Wisconsin currently operates a system of eight area research centers for public archives and private manuscript collections of local or regional character. The Wisconsin system has served as a model for similar ventures in at least two other States; and many more States and archival agencies, including that of New South Wales, Australia, have inquired about its structure and operation.

To understand the organization of the system and make a realistic appraisal of its present role and future potentialities, it is necessary to know something of the needs it was designed to meet and of the history of its own development within the larger framework of the State Historical Society and Wisconsin's system of public higher education.

The legislative foundations of the State's modern archival program were laid in the years from 1947 to 1951. The first and most important act, passed in 1947, designated the State Historical Society as the ultimate depository of the State's archives and created the Committee on Public Records to review State agencies' requests to dispose of obsolete records and to authorize their destruction or transfer to the Archives.¹

The public records act of 1947 applied only to records of the State government, but in 1949 the legislature authorized officials of "any county, city, village, town, school district or other local governmental unit" to transfer to the historical society "such non-current records as in the state historical society's judgment are of permanent historical value and which are no longer needed for administrative purposes." The act also permitted county officers to transfer to the historical society tax rolls and original minutes and other papers connected with the proceedings of county boards of supervisors. If the historical society did not accept title to such records within 60 days, the county was allowed to destroy them after the expiration of retention periods specified in the law.² The legislature extended and strengthened this act in 1951, when it added the originals of court records that had been microfilmed to

The author, former State Archivist of Wisconsin, is currently Associate Director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

¹ *Laws of Wisconsin*, 1946-47, Ch. 316.

² *Ibid.*, 1948-49, Ch. 52.

the list of records that should be offered to the society and made this offer mandatory rather than permissive.³

At the time this legislation was passed the State Historical Society actually had no room to house the records it probably would acquire from State and local sources. For some 40 years the society had shared its building with the general library of the University of Wisconsin. In 1946 the society's director reported, "In both Library and Museum we are now cramped almost beyond belief and almost beyond endurance."⁴ Two years later the director told the 12th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists that "a recent survey by a special Legislative committee came to the distressing conclusion that the Society now has, in its library, museum and archival collections, more than enough material to fill the entire present building even if the University library no longer occupied some forty percent of the total floor space."⁵

Although other factors were involved, the society's space problem was the major influence behind the legislation of 1949 and 1951, which authorized the society to establish depositories outside its own building in Madison. The local records legislation of 1949 provided that the society, "wherever possible, shall place such records in the custody of the appropriate auxiliary historical society, county historian, public library, museum or similar agency or institution in the area of origin, and shall make recommendations to the proper person as to their proper housing, arrangement and care."⁶

This was amplified and clarified in 1951 when the legislature, for the first time using the term "regional depositories," authorized the society "to enter into agreements with the state teachers colleges or such other public or quasi-public institutions, agencies, or corporations as the . . . board of curators of the said society shall designate to serve as the regional records depository for a given area." The law further required that regional depository agreements specify the area to be served by each depository and "the methods of accessioning, cataloguing, care, housing, preservation and servicing" of records "and such other material" as the society placed in the depositories. As in the legislation of 1949, the society was required to compile and maintain a "union list" of the local records transferred to it; and local records could be transferred

³ *Ibid.*, 1951, Ch. 464.

⁴ *Proceedings: One Hundredth Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Held at Prairie du Chien on August 23, 1946*, p. 14.

⁵ Clifford L. Lord, "The Archival Program of Wisconsin," in *American Archivist*, 12: 250 (July 1949).

⁶ *Laws of Wisconsin*, 1948-49, Ch. 52.

to the State Archives at the society only when no regional depository could be provided for them.⁷

In 1951 and 1952 the society negotiated agreements and opened depositories at the Wisconsin State Teachers Colleges in Stevens Point, Oshkosh, and River Falls; and in 1953 it opened depositories at LaCrosse Public Library and Northland College in Ashland. Agreements were signed in 1955 for depositories at the teachers colleges in Platteville and Whitewater, but these depositories were never activated; and negotiations for depositories in Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Kenosha were unfruitful.

Staff of the society's Archives Division worked very actively with county and local officials, particularly in the years from 1953 to 1956, and sizable quantities of county and local records were transferred to the depositories. Records from areas for which no depository yet existed were taken into the society's building in Madison, where some temporary relief from the critical shortage of space resulted when the University of Wisconsin Library moved into its own building in 1953.

Most of the records placed in the depositories were tax rolls and other financial records; records of closed school districts, such as clerk's minute books and attendance registers; and court case files that the counties had already microfilmed. Staff memoranda and reports make it clear from the original proposal of the regional depository idea that the society intended the depositories to contain collections of private papers, as well as public records.⁸ Aside from a few sets of business records, however, no manuscript collections were actually placed in any of the regional depositories during the early years.

By 1961 it had become obvious to the society's administration that the regional depository system needed overhauling and a change of emphasis if it was to continue and serve a useful purpose.⁹ The records in the depositories were seldom used by local governmental officials for administrative reference, nor were they very useful to genealogists, local historians, or college faculty and students. In short, the regional depositories had become places of dead storage for voluminous collections, occupying space that the participating libraries needed (in some instances desperately) for other purposes.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1951, Ch. 457.

⁸ Jesse E. Boell, "Archives Division Annual Report, 1949-50," in *Proceedings: One Hundred and Fourth Annual Business Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin Held at Ephraim, June 17, 1950*, p. 83-84.

⁹ Richard A. Erney, "Report of the State Archivist, Jan. 20, 1962," in *State Historical Society of Wisconsin, "Minutes of Proceedings [manuscript],"* 13: 253-259.

In this situation the society had two possible alternatives. It could drastically reduce the size of the existing collections by destroying large quantities of marginal records in the depositories and bring the remainder to be retained into the society's quarters in Madison, thus closing the depositories. While this would have complicated the society's space problem, it was possible, and it would have been the least expensive solution. On the other hand, the society could attempt to reshape and rebuild the depository collections into useful resources to meet the developing needs of higher education in the state.

The State Historical Society has long served as the library of American history for the University of Wisconsin, and its rich collections of books, government publications, newspapers, archives, and other manuscripts have made important contributions to university research in history and the social sciences. The past two decades have witnessed the establishment of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the conversion of the State's teachers colleges into the present complex of nine State universities. With increasingly heavy emphasis on the liberal arts, the State universities are now offering graduate programs in a slowly expanding number of subject fields and putting increased emphasis on faculty research and publication.

It was clearly the society's duty, as a State agency, to serve not only the University of Wisconsin but the State's entire system of higher education. Many of the society's resources were available to researchers outside Madison through the liberal book circulation policies of the society, established interlibrary loan procedures, and various methods of photographic reproduction. Manuscript materials, however, were not available on interlibrary loan, and microfilming or other photographic reproduction of manuscript collections was too time consuming and expensive to be practical.

In the fall of 1961 the expanding needs of the State universities for original research materials were reinforced by an increased interest in their own archives. Anticipating the centennial of the first State normal school, from which the State university system developed, the Board of Regents of State Colleges authorized a committee to begin work on individual histories of each of the State universities and projected another volume on the history of the system as a whole.

The State Archives at the State Historical Society contained very few records, either of the individual universities or of the central administrative offices of the governing Board of Regents of State Colleges. The Archives Division had segregated records

for preservation and placed them in storage at two of the State universities, but very few of the records had been inventoried and scheduled for disposition. The universities themselves had made no attempts to establish their own archives, beyond preserving in their libraries such materials as scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, college newspapers, yearbooks, and other publications.

Faced with these opportunities and obligations, the society administration chose to reshape the old regional depositories into active research centers that, in addition to preserving local governmental records of permanent research and reference value, would also serve as archives of the participating universities and would provide private manuscript materials for the research activities of college faculty, students, local historians, and genealogists.

The eight area research centers now in operation are located at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee and at the Wisconsin State Universities at Whitewater, Oshkosh, Stevens Point, Eau Claire, LaCrosse, Platteville, and River Falls. In the process of reorganization the regional depositories at Northland College and the LaCrosse Public Library were closed, and the collections were transferred to other centers or back to Madison.

Each center serves a definite geographic territory, varying from 3 counties for the Whitewater center to 16 counties for Stevens Point. The size and boundaries of the territory assigned to each center are the result of several factors. Wherever the territory surrounding a center possessed strong and well-defined regional characteristics, this became the primary consideration. Thus the Oshkosh center serves the highly industrialized Fox River Valley, and the Milwaukee center has the urban, industrial, and commercial counties fronting on Lake Michigan from Kenosha to Manitowoc. The amount of space available for the center also influenced the extent of the territory assigned. This is particularly evident at Stevens Point, where there was adequate space to serve as the center for the entire sparsely populated northeastern section of the State, and at Whitewater, where it was felt that three populous counties would require all the space available. The aim in general was to give each center a territory that would provide a sufficient quantity and variety of collections to support a broad range of research interests and projects. With the society building in Madison serving as the center for one county, the system now covers the entire State.

The establishment and operation of each area research center are governed by a formal agreement between the State Historical Society and the participating State university. The agreements for

all the centers are identical except for the one with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which assigns no responsibility for the university archives to the society. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has recently assigned a member of its library staff to serve as university archivist and to supervise service and use of the materials in the area research center.

The major responsibilities of the universities are to provide stack space for the collections and facilities where researchers may use them and to provide staff to supervise the reading area, make collections available to researchers, answer reference inquiries received by mail, and enforce security measures comparable to those in effect for manuscript materials at the State Historical Society. All the centers are in the university library buildings and are under the general supervision of the chief librarians. In Whitewater and in River Falls a member of the history department has been designated to serve as university archivist and assume primary responsibility for the area research center. The university archivist works with an archives committee consisting of the librarian and other faculty members, primarily from the social sciences. This arrangement has worked particularly well. The university archivist at each school has written the centennial history of his university, and each uses a portion of the center's reading area as a research office, thus enabling him to assist and supervise other researchers. The reading area of the center at River Falls also serves as a seminar room for undergraduate history majors engaged in research projects on local history topics. Thus far there is no indication that the reference and service duties have been more than a minor load on any of the library staffs.

Although the area research centers are designed primarily to contain manuscript materials, the society has encouraged the participating libraries to acquire printed materials useful for research on the regions served by their centers. The university libraries catalog all printed materials placed in the centers, except for publications of local governmental units, which are considered archival materials. When the society acquires local or county histories, county atlases, newspaper files, or other printed materials that duplicate items already in the society collections, they are offered to the area research centers. Recognizing the importance of newspapers in local historical research, the society also encourages the universities to purchase microfilm of the important newspapers within their areas by making it available to them at cost. The center at River Falls has made the most extensive purchases of microfilm, with the intention of acquiring a complete file of at least

one newspaper for each county within its assigned area, as well as a file of one of the major dailies in the State.

Finally, the participating universities agree to help the society collect manuscript materials in their assigned areas. Ordinarily this assistance takes the form of furnishing leads to the society's field service personnel, who then carry on the negotiations with potential donors. This system has advantages for both the society and the universities. University librarians and faculty members are sometimes put under considerable local pressure to accept materials that a donor is anxious to have preserved but that really have little value for historical research. Farther removed from daily contact with the local scene, the society can usually resist such pressures successfully. Moreover, the society has established procedures for accessioning and acknowledging gifts, recording and enforcing restrictions requested by donors, and handling any other details of such transactions. It is possible to maintain unity and control more easily and effectively when all accessions are processed by experienced staff.

The amount of assistance the universities have given the society in collecting materials for the centers has varied considerably. All have forwarded information about prospective donors to the society or have conditionally accepted unsolicited materials. At Eau Claire a student working under supervision of the history department has recorded on tape interviews with leaders in the development of agricultural cooperatives in western Wisconsin. Transcriptions of the recordings will be kept in the area research center.

The university archivist at River Falls has been particularly active in making initial contacts with potential donors, arranging appointments, and planning joint field trips with society personnel. He has helped to acquire, among other things, the records of local churches, the archives of the city of River Falls, the papers of a prominent local attorney and former county judge, several Civil War diaries, and records of local civic and fraternal organizations.

A member of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee library staff has been an exceptionally resourceful and effective collector, particularly of records of such prominent civic associations as the City Club of Milwaukee, whose archives constitute a rich source for students of urban problems.

All manuscript materials collected within a center's assigned territory are placed in that center, with the following exceptions, which are retained at the State Historical Society: (1) collections

of statewide or national significance, (2) collections that are additions to other collections already at the society or are so closely related to collections already at the society that the needs of research would best be served by placing them at the society, and (3) collections that the donors specify shall be placed at the society. In the absence of any instructions from the donor, the choice of repository is made by society staff members who are thoroughly familiar with the collection in question and its relationship to other collections either at Madison or in the centers.

Besides collecting materials for the centers, the State Historical Society assumes responsibility for all processing and cataloging necessary to prepare collections for research use, including the entire cost of such supplies as archival boxes, folders, labels, and catalog cards. Materials assigned to the area research centers receive exactly the same processing and cataloging as those at the society.

Governmental records, or archives, are handled in the standard units of archival arrangement known to the profession as series. In accordance with standard archival practice, a description of each record series is prepared. This description includes the series number and title; provenance; inclusive dates of the records; arrangement of the series; number of boxes or volumes; and a concise statement of the types of information to be found in the series, along with any other information helpful to the researcher such as the relation of the series to other series and citations of statutes that explain the origin, content, or legal status of the records. Additional finding aids, such as folder lists, are prepared when required.

Collections of private papers, or manuscripts, are left in their original arrangement whenever possible; otherwise the processor determines upon a new arrangement to make the collection more intelligible and useful to the researcher. Descriptive inventories are prepared for all collections placed in the area research centers. These inventories contain biographical or historical data on the individual or organization whose papers are contained in the collection; a general description of the contents and arrangement of the collection; a shelf list; and a statement of the restrictions imposed upon use of the collection, if any. One copy of each inventory is filed in Madison, another in the administrative file at the area research center, and a third at the beginning of the collection itself.

The main catalog card for each manuscript collection is filed under the name of the collection. It contains a brief description

of the collection; number of boxes and/or volumes; name of donor; an indication of any restrictions; and a "call number," which identifies the collection and indicates the repository and its location in the stacks. Additional cards are made for major subjects on which there is material in the collection and for prominent individuals with whom there is correspondence present.

The State Historical Society maintains at Madison complete catalogs of all State and local archives and collections of private papers in its possession, whether they are in Madison or in the area research centers. Each center is provided with an individual catalog of all the materials in its own collection, and the society maintains in Madison what is essentially a duplicate of each of these individual catalogs, except that it does not contain the subject cards for manuscript collections. This catalog serves as a shelf list and could be expanded into a full-scale catalog with relative ease should the catalog in one of the centers be damaged, or should it ever be desirable to furnish each center with a complete catalog of the materials at all other centers.

Probably the most remarkable feature of the area research center system is its provision for loans of manuscript materials from the central collections of the State Historical Society to the centers, from the centers to the society, and from one center to another. The society actually retains title to *all* archival and manuscript materials in the various centers, so the term "loan" is not accurate in the strictly legal sense, but is the best word to describe what actually takes place. Collections may be lent by one repository to another for a term of 90 days, with renewal for an additional 30 days at the discretion of the lender. Materials are transported in society vehicles, by society staff members, who check the materials carefully when they leave and return.

The entire procedure is carefully regulated to safeguard the collections, prevent their being out of their assigned repository any longer than necessary, and avoid excessive staff time in transporting materials. Before agreeing to a loan from the society collections, for instance, we ordinarily request the researcher to come to Madison to study the materials he wishes to have lent to another repository. Thus he can discuss his research needs with the society staff and be certain that his use of the collections will be extensive enough to warrant a loan. Collections are never lent to individuals, but only to another repository, which is then responsible for their security and use. Except for the regulations governing security and supervision, no hard-and-fast rules have been laid down regarding the granting of manuscripts loans or conditions applicable to their

use. Each application is handled individually on the merits of the individual request.

The area research centers have now passed through their first stage of development. The voluminous collections of local records that choked the regional depositories have been drastically reduced; at the same time, other local records of value have been added. For example, several series of records of the Brown County Board of Supervisors, consisting of board proceedings, reports and papers, correspondence, election records, agricultural statistics, and many other papers dating from as early as 1798 were acquired, processed, and shelved in the center at Oshkosh. This is probably the most complete collection of county board records in the State, and for one of the State's oldest counties.

The manuscript collections in the centers are also growing steadily and satisfactorily in terms of quality. The Eau Claire and LaCrosse centers have exceptional lumber company records. The Hixon & Co. records at LaCrosse span the period 1856-1928, while the John S. Owen Lumber Co. records at Eau Claire date from 1875 to 1955. Both collections contain correspondence as well as financial records and include the records of subsidiary land, cattle, real estate, and other operations owned by the parent companies.

The center at River Falls contains such materials as the records of the Burkhardt Mills and Willow River Power Co., 1873-1953, one of the first producers of electrical power in western Wisconsin; the Kenneth S. White Papers, 1917-49, containing correspondence on the legal, political, and military career of a smalltown attorney and county judge; records of the First Congregational Church of River Falls (1855-1957) and the First Methodist Episcopal Church of River Falls (1863-1960); the papers of Gertrude Cairns, who recorded in her diaries the details of life in the small western Wisconsin community of Ellsworth from 1885 to 1936; and records of the River Falls Improvement League.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee center contains the richest collection of private papers yet assembled at any of the centers. With over 50 separate collections, the center contains the complete archives of Milwaukee-Downer College (1852-1964), an excellent source for the student of private female education in those years; such business records as those of the Plankinton Bank (1866-1907) and the Meyer & Finck Realty Co., which went bankrupt during the panic of 1893; records of a wide variety of civic, fraternal, and literary clubs; papers of such individuals as Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Jason Downer (1853-83),

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financier Daniel Wells (1811-1904), and labor attorney William Rubin (1908-50); and records, 1853-1955, of the First Methodist Episcopal Church. This is a well diversified and steadily growing collection documenting the growth of the State's major urban area.

Development of the university archives at the area research centers has also progressed satisfactorily. Materials long stored in academic basements and attics have been processed and put on the shelves of the centers. The most extensive and varied university archives are at Whitewater, where the president's correspondence files are practically complete from 1894 to 1946. Whitewater also has such treasures as the minutes of faculty meetings, 1907-19 and 1942-46; personnel records, 1912-50; records of several student literary societies dating from 1868 to 1926; and materials prepared by different classes for the Columbian Exposition in 1893.

The success of the area research centers must ultimately be judged, however, not in terms of administrative techniques or the richness of collections acquired, but rather on the basis of the contribution the centers make to the instructional programs of the universities and the research activities of local historians and university faculty members.

By this standard much still remains to be accomplished, but the center at River Falls has done a great deal to point the way. The annual reports of the university archivist point out that use of the materials in the center increased from 263 patrons in 1963-64 to 446 in 1964-65.¹⁰ Most of this use was by students on the local campus, working on a variety of topics for such courses as American frontier history, senior history seminar, advanced argumentation, labor economics, State and local government, and freshman English. Materials at the center were also used by several students and faculty members of the University of Minnesota and a few residents of River Falls interested in local history and genealogy. In 1963-64 faculty members at River Falls published four articles based on materials in the center; and the university archivist and members of the senior history seminar collaborated on a series of articles on the history of the St. Croix River Valley, which were published in the *Hudson Star-Observer*.

Besides their own research activities, members of the history faculty at River Falls have attempted to stimulate wider interest

¹⁰ John Lankford, "1963-1964 Report of the College Archivist," and James T. King, "1964-1965 Report on the Area Research Center," in *State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Division of Archives and Manuscripts Administrative Files* [manuscript].

in local historical research. They have met with local historical societies in the area to acquaint their members with the facilities of the center. The 1963 annual meeting of the Wisconsin Association of Teachers of College History was held at River Falls and centered its program on the role of local history in the college curriculum. In February 1965 the senior history seminar presented a program of papers on "Western Wisconsin in the Civil War," drawn primarily from the collections in the area research center. Local historical societies, graduate and undergraduate students, and visitors from the surrounding area were invited, and the attendance totaled over 60 persons.

The future development of the area research centers depends on the continuation of the same spirit of cooperation between the State universities and the State Historical Society that has characterized their history to date. The society must and will continue, even intensify, its efforts to build well-rounded, high-quality collections of research materials in the centers. It must also redouble its efforts to acquaint university faculty members with the richness and potentialities of the resources available to them. But the ultimate outcome will depend upon the willingness of university faculties to take fresh paths in their own research and teaching. Twenty years from now, perhaps, we shall know if the heavy investments in staff and space have been justified.

Southern Hospitality

Mrs. Mary Conn Bryan of the Georgia Department of History and Archives not only gave me many excellent suggestions and shared some delightful experiences with me but opened her facilities to me in the evening so that I could make the best use of my time. What a loss Georgia suffered in her passing just at the time the new Archives building was coming into use. Peter Brannon of the Alabama State Department of Archives and History, Christopher Crittenden of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, and Miss Charlotte Capers of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History provided excellent facilities for work and allowed me to impose frequently on their staffs.

—PAUL W. GATES, *Agriculture and the Civil War*, "Note on Sources and Acknowledgments," p. 382-383 (New York, 1965).

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