

# The Wisconsin Historical Records Survey, Then and Now

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IN NOVEMBER 1935 Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a presidential letter initiating the Historical Records Survey. A depression-spawned measure designed to provide sorely needed employment for white-collar workers, the Historical Records Survey (HRS) became the greatest single program in American history for the inventorying and classifying of local public records and manuscripts. Before its demise during World War II, the HRS had produced thousands of inventories and guides in four main areas: public records (especially county records), manuscripts, church records, and American imprints. The HRS also put out a variety of other types of publications including guides to vital statistics, guides to historic buildings, newspaper indexes, and catalogs of historic portraits, to name but a few.<sup>1</sup>

Though forgotten by nearly all except archivists, librarians, and some historians, the HRS deserves study because it was such a monumental event in the history of America's fitful concern for the survey and preservation of its historical records. The HRS merits attention also because, partially as a result of interest in the nation's past generated by the upcoming American Revolution Bicentennial, Congress is presently considering the creation of a national historic records program. This program, if adopted, will almost certainly involve more records surveys.<sup>2</sup> It

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<sup>1</sup> For a very detailed history of the Historical Records Survey, see William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), pp. 751-828. For shorter studies see David L. Smiley, "The W.P.A. Historical Records Survey," in William B. Hesseltine and Donald R. McNeil, eds., *In Support of Clio: Essays in Memory of Herbert A. Kellar* (Madison: State Historical Society, 1967) and "A Slice of Life in Depression America: The Records of the Historical Records Survey," *Prologue* 3 (Winter 1971): 153-59.

<sup>2</sup> A summary of the proposed legislation is presented by Edward C. Papenfuse, "Preserving the Nation's Heritage through a National Historic Records Program," *AHA*

seems appropriate, therefore, to study HRS activities and perhaps prove to skeptics that records surveys are both feasible and desirable.

The Wisconsin Historical Records Survey clearly was one of the most successful of all the HRS state projects. In January 1942, a few months before the war effort required the termination of the survey, Sargent Child, the national director of the HRS, wrote that the Wisconsin Historical Records Survey had completed "not only the largest number of publications of any project of equal manpower," but also more publications "than any survey project regardless of the size of the projects." Child added that no HRS project equaled that of Wisconsin "in the production of publications which have maintained a high standard of quality."<sup>3</sup>

In Wisconsin, interest in a survey of local records antedated the creation of the HRS. One of those who shared this interest was Joseph Schafer, director of the State Historical Society, who saw in the work-relief programs of the early New Deal an opportunity to start a records survey. At various times he proposed such a survey to the Wisconsin Emergency Relief Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Works Progress Administration. Though unsuccessful in his effort to launch a statewide survey, Schafer was able to begin, as a pilot project run by the Historical Society, the survey of records in Dane County.<sup>4</sup>

When the HRS came into existence as a nationwide WPA project in late 1935, Schafer was "relieved" that the survey would at last be done, and "happy" that the entire country would be canvassed.<sup>5</sup> He strongly supported the implementation of the survey in Wisconsin and recommended Alice Smith, the Historical Society's manuscripts curator and supervisor of the Dane

*Newsletter*, 2 (February 1973): 19-23. A copy of the proposed bill is found in the July/October 1972 issue of the *American Archivist*, pp. 374-77. The proposed legislation has been modified somewhat since it appeared in the *American Archivist*, but its key points—accessibility and preservation of records—remain the same.

<sup>3</sup> Copy of letter from Child to Mark Muth, State Work Projects Administrator of Wisconsin, January 26, 1942, Record Group 69, Works Progress Administration, General Project Correspondence of the Historical Records Survey, National Archives. Hereafter cited as RG 69, WPA/HRS.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford L. Lord and Carl Ubbelohde, *Clio's Servant: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1846-1954* (Madison: State Historical Society, 1967), p. 328; *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Wisconsin Historical Society* 5: 11; *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 18 (March 1935): 363; Schafer to Ms. W. D. James, State Historian of the D.A.R., August 29, 1935, Wisconsin Historical Records Survey, Record Group 27, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives. Hereafter the latter will be cited as RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>5</sup> Schafer to Harry Hopkins, October 26, 1937, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

County survey, to serve as the survey's first state director.<sup>6</sup> The WPA approved his choice, and in February 1936 Smith began the operation of the Wisconsin Historical Records Survey. She served until July, when, according to arrangements made before taking the HRS post, she returned to her position in the Historical Society.<sup>7</sup> Smith's successor, and director of the Wisconsin HRS until after it had ceased to function, was Jesse E. Boell, formerly the director of the Wisconsin Federal Archives project. Both Schafer and Smith had recommended Boell, who was also a former University of Wisconsin graduate teaching assistant of American history, for the post.<sup>8</sup>

Administratively, all HRS projects (there was eventually one in every state with several states having two or more) were originally under the control of the WPA's Federal Writers Project. In Wisconsin, this somewhat awkward situation changed in August 1936 when Boell, with the concurrence of the state Writers Project director, assumed full administrative responsibility for the survey.<sup>9</sup> Later that year, the federal government formally made the Historical Records Survey a separate and independent project within the WPA. At the same time, the State Historical Society became the local sponsor of the Wisconsin HRS.<sup>10</sup>

Further administrative changes came in 1939. The Emergency Relief Act of that year mandated that all WPA projects would be locally sponsored. This legislation had little effect on the Wisconsin HRS because the State Historical Society continued to serve as the program's sponsor; after 1939 the state university served as cosponsor.<sup>11</sup> Also in 1939 the supervisory agency for the HRS, the WPA, changed its name from the Work Projects Administration to the Works Progress Administration.<sup>12</sup> In early 1942 the HRS lost its identity as a separate organization when it became part of the War Service Section of the WPA's Service Division, and in April the WPA terminated the HRS by discontinuing all nonwar connected "fact finding, survey, records and clerical services."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Alice Smith, letter, December 4, 1973, to the author; Charles Brown, director of Wisconsin Federal Writers Project to Smith, December 27, 1935, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>7</sup> Lord, *Clio's Servant*, p. 328; *Minutes* 5: 58.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Brown to Boell, June 23, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW; Lord, *Clio's Servant*, p. 329.

<sup>9</sup> W. B. Saunders, Associate State Writers Project Director, to Luther Evans, August 6, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>10</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 765; Lord, *Clio's Servant*, p. 329.

<sup>11</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, pp. 312-313; Lord, *Clio's Servant*, p. 330.

<sup>12</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 309.

<sup>13</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 319, quoting WPA Service Letter No. 3, April 18, 1942.

The Wisconsin HRS began with about sixty employees, but by the time it ended in 1942 it had employed an average of more than two hundred full-time workers at any one time,<sup>14</sup> more than one hundred of whom were fieldworkers.<sup>15</sup> The survey's main editorial office was in Madison, the state capital, and major branch editorial offices were located in Milwaukee and La Crosse.<sup>16</sup> For purposes of fieldwork, the Wisconsin HRS divided the state's seventy-one counties into several districts, with a supervisor in charge of each. The number and composition of the districts varied during the six-year life of the HRS; by 1939 there were four of them, two in the eastern part of the state, one in the central region, and one covering the western counties.<sup>17</sup>

The general procedures used by the Wisconsin HRS to obtain information were the same as those employed elsewhere. In the area of public records, for instance, Wisconsin HRS workers conducting inventories completed specially designed forms. Field supervisors sent the forms to the Madison office where they were processed and eventually used to draw up draft inventories, which, in turn, were rechecked in the field before preparation of a final copy. After the national HRS office had approved and returned the final draft, it was mimeographed, bound, and distributed to various libraries in and out of the state. The procedures used to compile inventories of church records, imprints, guides, and other publications were somewhat different, but almost all HRS volumes were based, either directly or indirectly, on the information contained in the survey forms gathered by fieldworkers.<sup>18</sup>

In 1942 the WPA named the State Historical Society as the depository for all unpublished materials of the Wisconsin HRS.<sup>19</sup> During the same year the government also made the society the wartime custodian of the files of the American Imprints Inventory. In 1946 the society transferred these files to the Library of Congress.<sup>20</sup> The State Historical Society still holds the unpublished materials of the Wisconsin HRS.

<sup>14</sup> Jesse E. Boell, personal interview by the author, Madison, Wisconsin, November 27, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the Boell to Evans letter of October 13, 1938, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>16</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> Boell to Evans, April 4, 1939, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed analysis of HRS procedures see McDonald, *Federal Relief*; also, Edward C. Papenfuss, "A Modicum of Commitment: The Present and Future Importance of the Historical Records Survey," a paper delivered at the 1973 SAA convention and published in revised form in this issue of the *American Archivist*.

<sup>19</sup> Works Progress Administration, Research and Records Bibliography No. 7, "Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications," 1943.

<sup>20</sup> *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 25 (June 1942): 387.

As Sargent Child said, the Wisconsin Historical Records Survey was at the forefront, in terms both of the numbers of publications it issued and of their quality. A detailed analysis of the accomplishments of the Wisconsin project with regard to published volumes confirms Child's statement.

One of the principal original projects of the HRS was the survey of county records. Nationally, the HRS published inventories for about one-fifth of the 3,066 counties which then made up the nation.<sup>21</sup> In Wisconsin, the survey produced inventories for twenty-three of the state's seventy-one counties.<sup>22</sup> Included in these inventories was a brief historical sketch of the county, a statement about the county system of government, a brief essay on the care, housing, and accessibility of the records, short statements on the various county offices, and, of course, a list of the records in each office. Each volume was indexed and contained a table of contents and a bibliography.

In addition to the county inventories, the Wisconsin survey compiled a three-volume study entitled *County Government in Wisconsin* that constituted a pioneer study of county government in the state. It contained a general overview of the organization and functions of county government and detailed essays on each county office, ranging from that of the county clerk to the farm drainage board. These essays covered such aspects as the legislative history of the office (date first provided for, qualifications, term of office, and similar items), powers and duties of the officeholders, and recordkeeping requirements. Wisconsin was one of only three states to complete such a set of "key volumes" relating to county government, and probably the first in the nation to do so.<sup>23</sup> The Wisconsin HRS also published a volume on county boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

The work of the Wisconsin HRS is similarly noteworthy in the area of the American Imprints Inventory. Nearly 15 percent of all the volumes of checklists published, four out of thirty-four, were products of the Wisconsin survey. These checklists contained standard bibliographic data, including the title of materi-

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 797.

<sup>22</sup> These counties were Barron, Buffalo, Chippewa, Clark, Douglas, Dunn, Eau Claire, Grant, Jackson, La Crosse, Marathon, Monroe, Oneida, Pepin, Polk, Rusk, St. Croix, Shawano, Sheboygan, Taylor, Trempealeau, Vernon and Waushara.

<sup>23</sup> *County Government in Wisconsin* (Madison: WPA, 1942), *passim*; Harvey E. Becknell, Director of Research and Records Projects, WPA, to Philip D. Flanner, State Work Projects Administrator, May 10, 1940, RG 27, HRS/SHSW. Although designed to eliminate the preparation of lengthy governmental essays in each of the individual county inventories, the key volumes fell short of this goal because the HRS ceased to operate shortly after they appeared.

<sup>24</sup> It was entitled *Origin and Legislative History of County Boundaries in Wisconsin*.

als printed in Wisconsin between 1837 and 1863, the place in which the materials were printed, by whom, and in which depository copies could be located.<sup>25</sup>

The HRS prepared only twenty guides to manuscripts depositories, one of which was compiled by the Wisconsin survey. *A Guide to Manuscript Depositories in Wisconsin* gave such information as the number of depositories in the state and the nature, size, and condition of the holdings of each. In addition, the Wisconsin project assisted the State Historical Society in the preparation of entries for a guide to the society's manuscript collections. Published by the society in 1944, this was one of about twenty such guides, nationwide, published by or with the assistance of the HRS. No manuscript calendars were issued in Wisconsin although HRS projects in other states issued a total of thirty.<sup>26</sup>

The record of the Wisconsin survey in the field of church archives is quite respectable. The Wisconsin project published seven of the approximately one hundred church archive inventories the HRS compiled. The denominations covered were the Lutheran, Moravian, United Brethren, Church of the Nazarene, Protestant Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, and Assembly of God. In addition to listing church records (there is a separate entry for each church or unit), these volumes contained a historical essay on the background and organization of the denomination and bibliographies of publications relating to the individual churches. Another HRS product was directories of religious organizations. Less than half of the states published such directories; Wisconsin completed two, one on the Catholic Church and one on churches and religious organizations in general.<sup>27</sup>

The HRS also published volumes on other types of public records besides county records. Wisconsin was one of a group of nine states to publish inventories of state archives, and one of nine to produce inventories of municipal archives. In July 1937 the WPA transferred the Survey of Federal Archives in the states to HRS projects. The Wisconsin HRS published twelve volumes of federal records located in the state, eleven of them by 1939. Wisconsin also issued three volumes of nineteenth-century board proceedings from two counties. Here the Wis-

<sup>25</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 813; Wisconsin Imprints volumes, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> WPA, "Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications," pp. 61-70; McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 806; *Guide to the Manuscripts of the Wisconsin Historical Society* (Madison: State Historical Society, 1944), p. v.

<sup>27</sup> WPA, "Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications," pp. 49-60; McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 808.

consin survey was one of about ten states to publish transcriptions of public records.<sup>28</sup>

The Wisconsin HRS was productive in the compilation of guides relating to vital statistics, being one of only two states to issue a volume on vital statistics laws and one of about twenty states to publish guides to church vital records. Wisconsin also prepared, as did almost all the states, a guide to public vital statistics.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, like nearly all the states, the Wisconsin HRS published a variety of miscellaneous volumes: a guide to the newspapers of one county, an index of governor's messages, a history of Galesville University, a style manual, a directory of U.S. government agencies in the state, and a checklist of statutory requirements for county records.<sup>30</sup>

The accomplishments of the Wisconsin Historical Records Survey go far beyond the approximately seventy volumes it produced during its six-year life span. The survey's unpublished materials, comprising field forms, nearly completed volumes, and completed-but-never-printed inventories, represent a greater volume of material than the publications.<sup>31</sup> The survey staff typed eleven volumes in stencil form but could not run them off before the project ended in 1942.<sup>32</sup> In what was to be his last substantial report (January 1942), state director Jesse Boell indicated that he was very close to finishing work on another fourteen volumes, which also were never published either.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the stenciled and nearly completed volumes, the Wisconsin HRS staff completed massive amounts of work for still other proposed volumes. By 1939 the survey workers had completed the initial inventory of the records of all but four of the state's seventy-one counties. Much work was done in Milwaukee's archives; in 1939 Boell described the inventory of that city's records as being 75 percent completed.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> WPA, "Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications," pp. 1-13, 15-17, 40-43; McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 801N. On the state level, there were inventories of the Departments of State and Banking; on a more local level there were inventories of the archives of two cities and one village as well as two volumes on town boundaries.

<sup>29</sup> WPA, "Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications," pp. 43-49.

<sup>30</sup> The Wisconsin HRS also made up a questionnaire on county government.

<sup>31</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>32</sup> "Preliminary Inventory of the Federal Historical Records Survey Archives for Wisconsin," February 1950, Archives Division, Wisconsin State Historical Society, p. 15; Mark Muth to Florence Kerr, Assistant WPA Commissioner, July 27, 1942, RG 69, WPA/HRS.

<sup>33</sup> Boell to Child, January 17, 1942, RG 69, WPA/HRS. The nearly completed volumes ranged from inventories of the city archives of La Crosse and Stevens Point, to more church archive inventories, to a check list of Wisconsin Reports, 1841-76.

<sup>34</sup> Boell to Evans, April 4, 1939, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.



In addition to compiling published and unpublished materials, the Wisconsin Historical Records Survey improved the organization and preservation of local public records. The field-workers often had no choice. Many of the records were disorganized and poorly kept.<sup>35</sup> In the Landglade County Court House, for example, fieldworkers found one basement records vault "in a deplorable condition and dirty beyond description." Behind a conglomeration of "old lumber, screens, windows, old iron, wastepaper and refuse" HRS personnel discovered the records of several county officials. Only after the vault had been cleaned and the records segregated did the officials come forward to claim them.<sup>36</sup> In Door County, many records were "in such disorder" that HRS workers had to rearrange and classify the material according to departments.<sup>37</sup> Many Crawford County records were "simply heaped in piles" necessitating cleaning and reorganization, as did those in Vernon County and in the "several awfully messy vaults" of Columbia County.<sup>38</sup> Field supervisor reports contained numerous other references to this sort of activity by survey personnel.<sup>39</sup>

HRS workers often saved many important records from destruction. While inventorying records in the Manitowoc County Court House, two industrious HRS workers came across several large boxes "of what appeared to be waste paper and other refuse awaiting a time to be removed and disposed of." Local officials told the workers that "there was nothing of value" in the boxes. Nevertheless, the workers opened the boxes and in two of them found census records, tabular statements of crops, manufactured products, domestic animals, and farm implements, as well as an enrollment of militia, soldiers, and sailors from the Civil War.<sup>40</sup> In other counties, survey personnel discovered similar previously "unknown" records, which, while not specifically awaiting destruction, were so buried that they might eventually have been ruined anyway. In Fond du Lac County workers found, "heavily laden with dust," a volume listing marriage permits granted and marriages per-

<sup>35</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>36</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel, covering period March 1, 1936-June 30, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Summary of Work Done in Western Wisconsin on the Historical Records Survey and Survey of Federal Archives," dated September 29, 1936; and "Status of Work on the HRS in Central and South Central Wisconsin," dated October 1, 1936, both in RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>39</sup> See RG 27, HRS/SHSW, for these reports.

<sup>40</sup> Nina Kumbalek and Stanley Pierce (fieldworkers) to Albert Schnabel (district supervisor), September 18, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.



formed between 1844 and 1849 in six Wisconsin counties and a town in Indiana territory.<sup>41</sup> In Shawano and Landglade Counties HRS workers came across courthouse blueprints, much to the surprise of local officials.<sup>42</sup> And in Brown County, the survey turned up the 1905 census and a taxbook which went back to 1822.<sup>43</sup>

Yet many of the gains in the preservation of public records were transitory in nature. Though the workers cleaned up and saved records, and though they preached the gospel of preservation to both public and private groups, no really long-range plans were drawn up to prevent the records from reverting to their pre-HRS condition. Thus, many of the vaults undoubtedly again became "awfully messy" and many of the volumes lost or "heavily laden with dust." This was perhaps the greatest failure of the HRS: to inventory without an adequate preservation program. It was not, however, a problem of which HRS officials were unaware. Wisconsin HRS director Jesse Boell himself clearly recognized the need for better preservation of local records. In a 1938 letter to Luther Evans, Boell pointed out that "the destruction of records" was "universally practiced" by local governments in Wisconsin. "It is an outrage," he continued, "but we can do nothing other than urge that the records be saved."<sup>44</sup> In Wisconsin, as in many other states, money was simply not available either to train custodians or to provide depository space away from the overcrowded and neglected courthouse records vaults. Indeed, the position of the Wisconsin state archivist was not created until 1947, and anything resembling adequate storage space came years after that.<sup>45</sup>

The Wisconsin HRS was able to preserve many of the manuscripts it ran across by sending them (with the owner's consent) to the State Historical Society. These manuscripts included both the private papers of individuals and the records of organizations. Under the former category were such items as the early twentieth-century correspondence of an Appleton judge and the mid-nineteenth-century account book of a Wisconsin pioneer.<sup>46</sup> A particularly noteworthy find was the rec-

<sup>41</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel covering period March 1, 1936-June 30, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel, dated March 13, 1937, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>44</sup> Boell to Evans, March 17, 1938, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>45</sup> Richard A. Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Archivist* 29 (January 1966): 11-15.

<sup>46</sup> *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 21 (September 1937): 116.

ords of a nineteenth-century land speculator and businessman named Daniel Whitney. When HRS workers in Brown County discovered this material, it was mixed in with other records awaiting destruction.<sup>47</sup>

The records of organizations were numerous. In Outagamie County HRS workers noticed, amidst "turpentine, linseed oil and paint cans," the record books of a local cheese company.<sup>48</sup> These were turned over to the Historical Society as were other business records found in Outagamie County and elsewhere, including those of a bank, a logging outfit, a lumber company, and a grist mill. The society received also, through the HRS, the records of some social and religious organizations. Especially voluminous (forty-four volumes and twenty-one boxes) were the records of the Wisconsin Grand Lodge of Good Templars, a temperance organization active in the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>49</sup> Approximately half the manuscript collections which the Society accessioned between 1936 and 1942 came through the HRS.<sup>50</sup>

The three main accomplishments of the Wisconsin HRS, then, were (1) the publication of over seventy inventories and guides; (2) the compilation of great amounts of data for other volumes, some of which were ready to print in 1942; and (3) improvements in the preservation and organization of public records and other historical materials. In addition to these achievements, the work of the Wisconsin HRS had several beneficial side effects. The census records discovered by HRS workers assisted many persons in proving their age and citizenship, establishing their eligibility for old-age pensions.<sup>51</sup> The guides to vital statistics were used during the Second World War to verify age (for draft boards) and citizenship (for defense industry workers).<sup>52</sup> Many Wisconsin historians found the HRS inven-

<sup>47</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel, covering period March 1, 1936-June 30, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>48</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel, dated March 13, 1937, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>49</sup> *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 21 (December 1937): 243.

<sup>50</sup> Alice Smith, letter to the author. In addition to private papers, business records and the records of social and religious organizations, the society also acquired through the HRS a good many local public records. Twenty-five volumes came from the city of Neenah alone. Many of these public records, however, have since been distributed among the Wisconsin area research centers. For more on the research centers, see Richard A. Erney and F. Gerald Ham, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Libraries* 3 (February 1972): 135-40.

<sup>51</sup> George Keith, State Supervisor of Pensions, to Boell, March 26, 1937, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>52</sup> Sargent Child to Mark Muth, January 26, 1942, RG 27, HRS/SHSW; McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 825.

tories to be invaluable finding aids. Merle Curti's history of Trempealeau County, *The Making of an American Community*, was one of the first significant historical studies employing quantitative techniques and computer programming. Curti made extensive use of HRS materials both to define his topic and to research it. Lastly, the survey provided "invaluable" training for Jesse Boell, who later served as the first State Archivist of Wisconsin after the legislature created that post in 1947. Boell recently recalled his experience with local and state records, noting that between 1936 and 1942 he "went through every courthouse of the state at least once or twice." Boell's firsthand knowledge of the poor condition of local records was one reason why he took such an active role in the movement to create a statewide system of regional records depositories in the late 1940's and early 1950's. These depositories were later restructured into a network of area research centers. Boell also learned a good deal about the different areas and people of Wisconsin.<sup>53</sup>

The accomplishments of the Wisconsin Historical Records Survey were made in the face of numerous problems. One was the generally unsatisfactory storage condition of many records; more than a few local records vaults were used for storing everything from lumber to paint, with consequent damage to the documents they contained. The poor state of local archives, however, provided the HRS with an opportunity to bring about improvement in records preservation.

A hostile attitude from some local officials and records custodians constituted another problem. Although HRS workers generally received good cooperation, as field reports make clear, pockets of resistance did exist. The county clerk of one northern county was particularly unresponsive to survey workers' queries. When approached with a question about his records, this clerk's stock answers were (in the words of one field report) "'I do not know,' 'burn it up,' or a statement, that translated into good language, consigned our workers to the lower regions."<sup>54</sup> In Vilas County an HRS worker, a Yale graduate, was the victim of what might be called educational prejudice. The district supervisor for Vilas County noted in a report to the state director that "because our worker has an education superior to that of some of the present county officials, . . . the latter are none too cooperative."<sup>55</sup> Racial

<sup>53</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>54</sup> "Condition of County Records—Langlade County," (n.d.), RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>55</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel, covering period March 1, 1936–June 30, 1936, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

prejudice may also have played a part in this instance: the worker referred to was a Chippewa Indian, and Vilas County was the site of the Chippewa Indian reservation. In still a different county, the register of deeds at first voiced loud opposition to the survey and threatened to make things difficult. After some "brutally frank" remarks by the HRS district supervisor, however, this official became more cooperative.<sup>56</sup> A final example of local hostility to the survey occurred in Lincoln County, where the HRS overcame the political opposition of Republican officeholders by selecting a worker "well acquainted" with them.<sup>57</sup>

Access to records and manuscripts was at times difficult. During its early stages, the survey actually encountered problems of this sort with its sponsor, the State Historical Society. Annie Nunns, the assistant superintendent, at first refused to grant survey personnel working on the imprints inventory and newspaper indexes free access to the society's holdings in the manuscripts department. State Director Jesse Boell tried to resolve the situation but eventually had to call in the national director of the imprints inventory, Douglas McMurtrie. A charming man, McMurtrie, with bouquet in hand, visited the "strongwilled" Nunns and persuaded her to cooperate with the survey.<sup>58</sup>

Securing qualified workers was a problem in Wisconsin, as it was in other states. Because it was a WPA project, the HRS had to draw the vast majority of its workers from those certified by local relief agencies to be in need; destitution rather than competence was the main criterion of personnel selection.<sup>59</sup> In Wisconsin, this situation was ameliorated by the fact that Director Boell enjoyed a good working relationship with the state WPA office. He usually received first notice that a college graduate or otherwise qualified individual was certified and available for employment and was thus able to pick the best of the lot. As a result, according to Boell, about 60 to 70 percent of the Wisconsin workers held college degrees.<sup>60</sup> The apparent stringency of the relief certification requirement was further weakened by the cleverness of some individuals who "managed" to get themselves certified.<sup>61</sup> Still, the Wisconsin HRS had its problems. In

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> District Supervisor Report by Albert Schnabel, covering "June 30, 1936-Present," RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>58</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973; Lord, *Clio's Servant*, p. 330.

<sup>59</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, chapters 11-12.

<sup>60</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>61</sup> Alice Smith, letter, December 4, 1973, to the author.

some areas, especially in the northern part of the state, few college graduates were to be had. And college degrees did not necessarily guarantee good work. At one point in 1939, Boell disparagingly wrote to Evans that the work of the Wisconsin fieldworkers "must be very closely checked and that as a rule they have a rather vague conception of what constitutes accurate work."<sup>62</sup> For Alice Smith, Boell's predecessor, an even greater problem than the qualifications of fieldworkers was finding "capable and dependable supervisors."<sup>63</sup>

Another personnel problem was the seemingly inadequate number of editors and researchers, a lack that Boell frequently referred to in his correspondence with national director Evans.<sup>64</sup> The small number of editors meant a sizable backlog of completed fieldwork. As a result, the number of published volumes did not come close to representing the total amount of work performed by the survey.

Finally, the Wisconsin HRS was not helped by the fact that during the first six months of its existence it was under the control of the Federal Writers Project. According to Smith, "the association with the FWP was a nuisance" because "it meant dealing with an additional agency." Though FWP officials demanded copies of all communications between the Wisconsin survey and the national office, Smith "bypassed" this requirement by sending the FWP "meaningless" copies of monthly reports.<sup>65</sup> When asked recently about his relations with the FWP, Boell stated that he could not recall any conflict, but added, "I'm sure there was."<sup>66</sup> Relations between the HRS and FWP were, however, better in Wisconsin than in many other states (such as Pennsylvania), in which the Writers Project director and the Records Survey director had been unable to cooperate at all.<sup>67</sup> The amity probably resulted from the fact that Jesse Boell and Charles Brown, the state director of the Wisconsin Writers Project, were personal friends. Alice Smith also knew Brown; he was the museum director of the Historical Society while she served as manuscripts curator.<sup>68</sup>

Since 1942, when the State Historical Society became the depository for all unpublished materials of the Wisconsin HRS, very little of a positive nature has been done with these

<sup>62</sup> Boell to Evans, October 13, 1938, RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>63</sup> Alice Smith, letter, December 4, 1973, to the author.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Boell to Evans, April 4, 1939, and Boell's Semi-Annual Report ending December 31, 1940, both in RG 27, HRS/SHSW.

<sup>65</sup> Alice Smith, letter, December 4, 1973, to the author.

<sup>66</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> McDonald, *Federal Relief*, p. 764.

<sup>68</sup> Boell, interview, November 27, 1973; Lord, *Clio's Servant*, pp. 328, 393.

materials. The society did issue two additional volumes, one the 1944 guide to manuscript collections mentioned above, and the other a fifth volume of Wisconsin imprints published in 1953 from a 1942 stencil cut by the HRS. Generally, however, the materials have gathered dust, despite efforts by Boell, while he served as state archivist in the 1950's, to have more volumes published.<sup>69</sup>

The society is presently engaged in processing the survey's files and in issuing a guide to the record group. It has discovered that the completed stencils for nine finished, but never printed, volumes are missing. The final edited copies for two of these volumes have been found and it is hoped that the other seven will be discovered by the time processing is completed. Otherwise, the loss of the stencils, mentioned in a 1950 inventory of the survey's records, will prove serious. Though described as partially spoiled in 1950, most of the stencils could have been recopied, thereby preserving the information on them. Also missing to date are inventories for the World War I Council of Defense and Selective Service Board Records.<sup>70</sup>

That many of the completed drafts were not published is especially disappointing in view of the appreciation many Wisconsin historians hold for the survey's work. To gauge that appreciation the author sent out sixty-five questionnaires to prominent university and college professors of American history. All are listed in the history volume of the 1969 (most recent) edition of the *Directory of American Scholars* and teach at a branch of the University of Wisconsin or at Marquette University, Lawrence University, or Beloit College. Over 50 percent (37 out of 65) replied. Thirty of the thirty-seven respondents indicated that they were "familiar" with the public records inventories of the HRS; thirty-one of the thirty-seven indicated that they were "familiar" with some of the other types of HRS compilations (inventories of church records, newspaper indexes, guides to imprints, and the like). When asked how they rated HRS materials with regard to usefulness, thirty-two of those who answered the question said excellent or good, only two said fair, and none said poor; on organization, sixteen rated the materials as excellent or good, eight fair, and none poor.

The historians polled not only knew but have used HRS materials. Two-thirds (twenty-three of thirty-six) indicated that they have used some of the HRS compilations (other than public

<sup>69</sup> Jesse E. Boell, interview by the author, November 27, 1973.

<sup>70</sup> The society believes it holds all of the fieldworker forms. If this is true, the missing volumes could be reconstructed, though only with a great deal of work. Conversation with Jack Jallings, assistant archivist of the state of Wisconsin, February 28, 1974.

records inventories) in connection with scholarly research on U.S. history topics centered outside Wisconsin. With regard to the public records inventories, two-fifths (fourteen of thirty-six) said that they used them while researching American history topics. Insofar as Wisconsin history is concerned, the usage figures are not quite so high but are nonetheless worthy of attention. One-third (twelve of thirty-seven) indicated that they had "used" some of the nonpublic records inventories in connection with scholarly research on topics centered primarily in Wisconsin. Over one-quarter (ten of thirty-six) of those responding said that they used the public records inventories during research on Wisconsin topics. Given the disparate fields of these historians (a few were specialists in foreign relations) and the possibility that a good many may not be interested in local history to begin with, the usage figures are more significant than they might first appear.

In response to the last question in the poll, "Would you like to see more Historical Records Survey inventories completed and published?" all thirty-three professors answered in the affirmative. Because historians are always desirous of more and better finding aids, such a uniform, positive response was not surprising. Some professors, however, coupled their support for new inventories with realistic proposals such as one respondent's statement that "This would make a good Bicentennial project."

That wish, we hope, will soon be realized. A bill for a national historic records program which would help fund and support both the survey and preservation of records is presently being drafted for Congressional action. Such a program is sorely needed before the amount of local records produced since 1942 grows greater and before more of the excellent work of the original survey is lost or destroyed. Wisconsin, with its network of area research centers to preserve records, and its generally aggressive Historical Society, is better off than most states, but it too would definitely benefit from a national historic records program. Certainly the American historians in Wisconsin are desirous of seeing more published inventories. A records survey, if properly administered, could accomplish a great deal, and if a new survey were established as a Bicentennial project and as part of a records preservation plan, it might avoid many of the problems which plagued the Wisconsin HRS. The public reception of such a project should be better at a time when the 200th anniversary of the nation's independence causes many to look with interest toward preserving America's heritage. The time is right for action, but it will be up to Congress to act.