

The Eyes of Texas: The Texas County Records Inventory Project

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IN MAY OF 1971 THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE commenced a Texas-sized archival project with a name of Texas proportions, the Regional Historical Resource Depository program, or, as it has come to be called, RHRD. Designed to locate noncurrent local governmental records in area repositories, the program first needed to identify existing records, some of which would one day be housed in these regional centers.¹ The necessary vision needed by RHRD was supplied when North Texas State University received a matching-funds grant in 1973 under Title I of the Higher Education Act, for the purpose of conducting the inventory of county records. The Texas County Records project was soon underway.

Perhaps no one fully realized the magnitude of the task in Texas. The state covers a total of 267,339 square miles. The first of its 254 counties was organized in 1836, the last in 1931. The nature, quantity, and type of records in the courthouses varied widely from county to county, depending upon the age of the county, the population, and the toll taken by natural disasters. As a whole, the volume of records within county archives generated by over 12 million Texans is immense.

Conditions under which records were being stored also differed considerably. Larger counties filled warehouses full of records; smaller counties filled basements, attics, and barns. Counties hard-pressed for storage space used any available facility to store records, from sheds to abandoned gasoline stations. Papers and volumes often lay neglected, slowly being destroyed, in storage areas subject to water, vermin, or fire.²

In many instances these conditions still prevail. Texas has no records management program or guide. Thus, county administrations have been operating totally without a standardized system. Historically, records maintenance has been dependent upon each new administration and the individual official's concern and awareness for records preservation.

Records proliferation in county courthouses is not a new story, nor is destruction of records in county courthouses an unusual occurrence. What is unique in Texas is the acceptance, by dedicated and committed volunteers throughout the state, of the challenge to document and control the overwhelming quantity of records.

Those concerned about the preservation of county records early saw the need for such a project. Identification and classification of all records on a county-by-county basis would accomplish several goals: (1) provide a data base for the RHRD

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¹ Legislative history of bill (H.B. 1401) in *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Regular Session of the Sixty-Second Legislature of the State of Texas* 4 (Austin, 1971), p. 6,468, and *Journal of the Senate of the State of Texas, Regular Session of the Sixty-Second Legislature* 2 (Austin, 1971), p. 2,140; *General and Special Laws of the State of Texas*, 1971, 1 (Austin, 1971), pp. 1,731-32.

² Susan Bee, "Regional Archives Seek to Preserve Local Records," *Texas Libraries* 36 (Fall 1974), pp. 135-36.

program; (2) uncover valuable historical research materials and foster the preservation of such materials; and (3) provide a foundation for a records management manual for county officials.

The Texas County Records Inventory Project organized a network of Texas colleges and universities for the purpose of accomplishing the actual survey work. The first step in this process was the production of a twenty-minute motion picture entitled *Texas Bound* explaining the project to prospective faculty supervisors. Henry Kaplan of the Radio-TV-Film Division, North Texas State University, produced the film, using four county courthouses as locations. The film graphically and succinctly demonstrates the reasons the statewide inventory is critically needed, and it features Associate Justice of the Texas Supreme Court and former-Governor Price Daniel in support of the project. Although the primary audience is college and university professors and student groups, the film also serves a very important purpose in demonstrating the reasons for the project to county officials and interested historical groups across the state.³

The project staff developed a handbook of operations, an instructional slide presentation (with accompanying tape cassette) concerning proper inventory techniques, and additional aids for reference during the actual work.

Each county is its own separate project; thus each has its own step-by-step procedures. When a faculty member decides to supervise the inventory of a particular county, project staff and the instructor contact individual county officials to make them aware of the intent of the project and to secure their cooperation. Arrangements are then made for the training session conducted by the project field director, and county officials are invited. This session, held to instruct inventory participants on the proper techniques, is usually held in the courthouse. It is quite intensive and thorough. Participants learn procedures by doing initial inventorying under the supervision of the project staff. Once the training session is concluded, the inventory is continued under the supervision of the professor.

Students receive packets of material to facilitate learning. The student packet contains a set of instructions (the actual script for the slide presentation), a glossary of terms, explanatory material concerning the types of records located in the various offices, and a chart showing the organization of Texas county government, office by office.

Participants take the inventory using standard inventory forms, devised by the project staff. The original form, a three-page set, has been revised to a simple and efficient one-page standard form. The slide presentation used in the training session explains the line-by-line instructions for completion of the form.

Workers list the title and varying titles of the record series, location, office having legal custody, condition of the documents, number and dimensions of the volumes (or cubic feet for papers), volume letters or numbers, form of the record (whether handwritten, typed, photocopied, microfilmed, computer printout), dates, and a summary and description of contents. Also to be checked by the inventory takers are responses relating to arrangement, indexing, and restrictions.

A constant flow of paper moves back and forth from the professor to the project office. The initial set of forms is submitted to the project staff for preliminary editing. This allows the staff to correct any misconceptions at the outset and enables

³ *Texas Bound* is available for viewing by contacting the Texas County Records Inventory Project, Box 5344, NT Station, Denton, Texas 76203. Please send alternate dates with request.

the inventory takers to see how an entire county will be processed. Then as each office or storage area is completed, the forms are sent to the project office for editing. Narrative descriptions are written, questions are attached, and the forms are returned for verification.

Students and professors inventory all the records in each office and all storage areas. When the inventory is completed, the students arrange the forms by office and thereunder by topic, according to an arrangement of records outline provided by the project office.

Rechecking is a vital step, one that is most crucial to the success of the inventory. Inventory takers always return to the courthouse for verification of accuracy. County officials are advised that, should they desire, the copy of the descriptions of records in their custody will be available for their comments and suggestions before publication.

Once the forms are rechecked (and usually several trips back to the courthouse are required), the forms are re-edited at the project office and prepared for publication. The format of each inventory is standard and logical. Records descriptions are arranged by office (beginning with the governing body of the county, the commissioners' court, through the county clerk as recorder, the clerk of the county court, the district clerk, and so on) and thereunder by topic within each office. The professor writes a preface and a brief history of the county. Basic descriptions of the responsibilities of each county official, and explanatory notes, are also added to complete the prefatory material. A listing of titles and dates of records in each office is included to facilitate comparison with records in other counties. An index is compiled and the typed manuscript is sent to the Texas State Library for printing and distribution. Copies of the published inventory are made available to county officials and to proper state officials, deposited in regional repositories, and sold to any person interested in county history.

The physical location of the records or files is omitted from the inventory, but a supplemental listing (including entry numbers and locations) is compiled and deposited with the appropriate county officials and at the appropriate regional depository library. In this manner serious researchers are provided with the means to locate the records necessary for their study.

In the three years of its existence, the project has published thirty county inventories and has an additional fifty in progress. Perhaps the real story of the Texas program has been the dedicated and loyal effort of the inventory participants.

The major source of volunteer work for the Texas County Records Inventory Project is the academic community. Professors approach the work in a scholarly manner, only too well realizing the importance of accuracy to the researcher. The inventory project as part of a class or seminar insures the crucial quality-control which is essential to this endeavor.

For the student, inventory work is an actual laboratory experience in handling primary resource material. For most students, this is their first experience with the raw data from which history is constructed. In small schools, library resources are limited and county archives are storehouses of source material. Students gain greater respect for the writing of history as they use tax and deed records, court proceedings, and estate inventories and appraisements in their term papers on particular topics of interest. A number have indicated that exposure to courthouse operations has sparked for the first time their interest in history and government.

Richard Marcum, whose students worked on the inventory of Nueces County

(Corpus Christi), wrote an article on the project for the *County and District Clerk* magazine. He said:

A student who had just written a paper on one of Corpus Christi's most prominent families was ecstatic when she accidentally discovered a handwritten letter by the first of the family to come to Nueces County. It was dated in 1850 and requested a license to practice law. A short time later she read the oath of office that same man took when he became the first district surveyor in 1850. Still later she examined several maps and tracings, as well as field notes, made by that same individual during the 1850's, 1860's, and 1870's. Most of the students had similar experiences of personal interest because they concerned their own relatives or persons they knew in the community. Records of the sale and purchase of furs, service discharge records, marks and brands, cattle driven to market or registered when slaughtered, and many more, thrilled students and professor alike and furnished topics for many research studies.⁴

One professor commented that the inventory was "an excellent source in historiography because of its emphasis on categorizing historical material and accuracy in evaluating." Marcum wrote that for his students "names became persons" and they gained a "feel for history."⁵ Courses have been offered with the inventory work as practicums in seminars in local history or problems in historical research. Still other faculty members have used the work as the primary course offering with students analyzing the records and delivering papers on methods of local research. Several professors have offered courses in Texas history utilizing records surveys in lieu of term papers.

Courses in public administration and American state and county government involving inventory work and taught by political scientists familiarize students with the varieties of county records and acquaint them with the processes of local government.

Frequently, archives classes have worked on records surveys. Students whose disciplinary expertise will be records work receive excellent training in the field by describing and analyzing records. These students will be the historians, the political scientists, and the archivists of tomorrow. They become personally acquainted with local officials and develop great appreciation of the work and responsibilities of county officials. Indeed, they become better educated as citizens and consequently a more informed electorate.

Professors themselves discover material for books and articles. For some faculty, the inventory itself is considered a publication. Many have shared their knowledge on uses of county records by serving on panels, participating in workshops, or presenting papers at state, regional, and national meetings.

A project such as the county records survey strengthens the ties between the institution of higher education and the community. As county officials learn about the project and assist faculty and students in the inventory process, the result is often that expressed by one county clerk: "I am now more familiar with the work and records of my office because of the inventory. I want you to know I appreciate it."

The innovation and imagination of faculty members in adapting the records survey to their course work are impressive. For example, one university is offering a two-week workshop centered around the inventory, for teachers of Texas history. Another professor teaching a seminar in education will utilize the inventory as a laboratory experience for his students, placing special emphasis on the records of the school superintendent.

⁴ "Marcum Conducts Inventory of Nueces County Records," *County and District Clerk* 3 (March 1976), p. 14.

⁵ Kenneth Durham to Mary Pearson, November 15, 1976; Richard Marcum to Mary Pearson, July 28, 1975.

Twenty-seven colleges and universities have cooperated on the project to date. Sample classes and time on the project are as follows:

CLASS	INSTITUTION	STUDENTS	HOURS
Texas history	Stephen F. Austin State U.	30	360
Texas history	Wayland Baptist College	21	90
Special Problems - County Records	Mary Hardin-Baylor	1	165
Introduction to Public Administration	Pan American University	31	75
Travis County Archives	St. Edward's University	4	60
Seminar in Local History	McMurry College	12	497
Introduction to Public Administration and History of Texas	Tarleton State University	21	236
Historiography	Le Tourneau College	9	163
American State and Local Government	Sam Houston State University	25	115
Problems in Historical Research	Southwest Texas State Univ.	25	525
Texas history	Lamar University	6	90
History of Texas	University of Texas at San Antonio	50	250
History of Texas	UT-San Antonio	20	110
Sources of Local History	Texas A & I at Corpus Christi	17	1140

In addition to the academic community, historical groups have offered to prepare the inventories of several counties. In several instances, groups volunteered because they were anxious to have the inventory taken of their county, but local universities had not yet had an opportunity to undertake the work; in other instances, a school was not located near enough for faculty and students to perform the task.

The project's relationships with historical groups have been beneficial. Those who belong to historical societies or historical commissions have a love of history, and many have done considerable research in county records. Most are extremely conscientious and self-motivating. As with the professors and students, given adequate training and supervision they do a fine job.

There are disadvantages to volunteer staffing of any project. Other activities sometimes interfere. For instance, professors have other classes to instruct, articles and books to write, and committee meetings to attend. Often the inventories take longer than planned, since the entire process, including recheck and verification, must be a painstaking one. However, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages and the use of college classes and seminars, and occasionally historical groups, is the best avenue for the Texas project.

The inventories produced by the Texas County Records Inventory Project are designed to achieve the immediately recognizable goal of providing the researcher with a basic tool. Although historical records surveys were underway in Alabama and Pennsylvania in the early 1930s, the historical precedent for such a program as this was the Works Progress Administration's Historical Records Survey, a nationwide effort to inventory county courthouse records. The WPA project was a make-work project, designed to put skilled men and women back to work. In Texas the program began in 1936, and twenty-four counties were published before World War II brought the entire project to a halt. The WPA project was an ambitious one. Each HRS publication contained a historical sketch of the county, supplemented by maps showing county boundaries, major topographical features, and the like; an

essay on the housing, care, and accessibility of records, with detailed floor plans of the courthouse; an essay on the structure of county government in general based on research into constitutional and legal provisions; an essay on each office of county government describing its creation, organization, functions, and records requirement; a bibliography; and an index. The records entries, of course, comprised the main body of the inventory.⁶

Because the HRS was a relief project, the initial idea was that it be a limited program, restricted in concept. Luther Evans stressed this idea when he said: "I think we still must recognize the fact that more rigid supervision and a less ambitious program are required when one is using relief labor than when one is purchasing labor at a high price on the open market."⁷

The Texas County Records Inventory Project decided at the outset to do an even "less ambitious" project than the HRS with its county inventories, and it hoped to accomplish its task by concentrating simply upon the main body of the survey, the description of the records series. This decision was necessitated by several facts. The Texas project did not have access to professional workers, could not pay even relief labor, and had a very large state to cover. Therefore, a precise and accurate accounting of records that existed in offices and storage areas of each county would be the focal point. The detailed descriptions would be of immediate benefit to researchers and realize a primary goal. General descriptions of county offices, a brief history, a county map, and a title index would be added, but the emphasis would remain on the records themselves.

An additional goal of the current Texas County Records Inventory Project is the records management manual, an idea visualized in 1937 by the national HRS Director, Luther Evans, in a speech to the American Library Association entitled "Next Steps in the Improvement of Local Archives." Although he discussed the problem of what to do with local records following the inventory, no definite plans had been made for actual transfer and preservation of records.⁸ The County Records Inventory Project does have coordination and follow-up with the RHRD program.

Haphazard management of local records, the condition which created the need for RHRD, was a concern to Texas leaders at least a score of years before House Bill 1401 established the RHRD program in March of 1971. The Texas State Historical Survey Committee, reporting to the governor in 1958, stressed the "need for statewide . . . cooperative solutions of problems in . . . the preservation of historical papers in counties and localities in Texas as well as on the state level." Although nothing substantive was done, the necessity continued to be recognized. In 1966 the Texas Legislative Council addressed itself to the problems created by increased local governmental operations and by an expanding population's tendency to proliferate records. Texas counties, the council noted, were faced with "acute shortage of space brought on by storage of records." The report continued,

⁶ William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), pp. 752-53, 761-62, 797-98; *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 1938, WPA-HRS General Correspondence Re: Administration of the Program, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin; *Checklist of Historical Records Survey Publications*, WPA Technical Series, Research and Records Bibliography No. 7 (Washington: FWA, WPA, 1943).

⁷ McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, p. 791. Although Evans initially limited the goals of the HRS, by 1958 he had branched out to undertake a variety of projects, many of which were never completed. See McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, p. 792.

⁸ Luther Evans, "Next Steps in the Improvement of Local Archives," in *Public Documents*, American Library Association Committee on Public Documents, comp. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1937), pp. 276-85.

"The county courthouses of our state have been and are increasingly becoming overridden with ancient, valueless documents which could be microfilmed or destroyed." The council concluded that clearcut guidelines for microfilming documents needed to be developed, and programs of disposal of non-essential records needed to be devised.⁹

Concern about space problems and preservation of valuable records prompted House Speaker Gus Mutscher in 1970 to appoint a Special Committee on Historical Preservation. The following year a special interim Committee on Historical Preservation was appointed to complete the work. Their recommendations formed the basis for the law passed the following year by the 62nd Texas Legislature. The law provided for "an orderly, uniform, state-wide system for the retention and preservation of historical resources on a manageable basis and under professional care in the region of origin or interest." The depositories could accept collections from individuals and nongovernmental institutions, but their primary purpose was to be repositories for valuable public records created by county, city, and other local administrative units.¹⁰

The 1971 enactment charged the Texas Library and Historical Commission with general policy-making responsibilities, and it instructed the state librarian and his staff to formulate rules and regulations to administer the system.¹¹ At present eighteen college and university libraries, as well as the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center at Liberty and the Houston Public Library, act as repositories.

The County Records Inventory Project, in documenting the records extant in the courthouse archives, provides information essential for the ongoing RHRD program. Knowledge of the type, quantity, and condition of county records, as described in detail in the inventory for each Texas county, will enable RHRD archivists and county officials to begin making those kinds of informed decisions concerning the preservation of valuable records that will ultimately lead to the establishment of guidelines for retention and disposal. It must be emphasized that in-depth descriptions insure that an adequate retention and disposal schedule be established.

Although Texas was the first southwestern state to devise a records depository program, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, and North Carolina were already engaged in similar types of programs. Several of the features of the Wisconsin system as it relates to local governmental records have been followed by Texas. The idea of using state colleges as repositories for housing noncurrent county records is the most obvious example. Specifics of the contractual arrangements between the state historical society and the regional repositories have also been studied and followed.¹²

⁹ *Texas State Historical Survey Committee, Report to the Governor and the Fifty-Sixth Legislature*, 1958, pp. 6-7; Texas Legislative Council, *County Government in Texas*, Report No. 59-5 (Austin, 1966), p. 7.

¹⁰ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Regular Session of the Sixty-Second Legislature of the State of Texas 1* (Austin, 1971), pp. 253-55; *General and Special Laws of the State of Texas*, pp. 1,731-32; Biennial Report of the Texas Library and Historical Commission for 1970-1972, 32nd Biennium, Austin, p. 19.

¹¹ *General and Special Laws of the State of Texas*, 1971, pp. 1,731-32. For a discussion of the regulations for RHRD, see Marilyn von Kohl, "New Program Focuses Attention on Local Records," *Texas Libraries* 34 (Summer 1972), pp. 90-93.

¹² See Richard A. Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Archivist* 29 (January 1966): 11-25.

With the establishment of the RHRD program and the implementation of the statewide inventory project, the project staff of the county records program took on the task of determining where Texas stood in relation to local records projects of other states. In the spring of 1976 the staff mailed questionnaires to archival officials in the fifty states to ascertain the extent to which inventorying and record survey projects were being undertaken and to determine the extent to which widespread records management programs had been adopted at the city, county, and state levels of government. As might have been expected, of the forty-eight states that returned the questionnaires by June, only twelve indicated an absence of records management activities. More than one-third of the respondents noted that such programs existed at all levels of government in their states, with twenty-eight of the forty-eight having developed county records management programs. This was the largest of the three categories. State records management programs were noted in twenty-six states, and twenty-two professed some degree of management activities in municipal governments within their boundaries.

Exactly one-half of the state officials (24) indicated that at present inventorying or records survey projects did not exist. Of this number, ten were planning inventories or surveys. Perhaps the most encouraging response was that twenty states had county-level inventorying projects, although these programs differed substantially in nature. Minnesota, for example, was engaged in an effort funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to analyze the records of the district courts, to set up retention and disposal schedules, and to evaluate records keeping systems. North Carolina, on the other hand, using its own financial resources, had begun visits in 1959 to each of the state's one hundred counties, and had inventoried and scheduled records for permanent retention or ultimate destruction.¹³

North Carolina was also one of thirteen states that noted some degree of microfilming activity. Eighty-five counties had had their records assessed and those deemed to be of "permanent value" microfilmed by the North Carolina Division of Archives and History. Many of the states engaged in microfilming activity were availing themselves of the Latter-day Saints widespread microfilming program. For instance, Iowa's reply stated that its American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission was sponsoring, in cooperation with the Latter-day Saints, microfilming of vital statistics records, wills, probate records, district and circuit court records, and administrator and guardian records to 1910.¹⁴

The paucity of city records inventories—only eight respondents indicated municipal records programs—is probably due to the fact that current efforts are being concentrated on state and county level activities. In all, however, the responses to the questionnaire were encouraging, demonstrating as they did a high degree of archival and record management progress in the area of local records maintenance during the last decade.

The uniqueness of the Texas project lies in its adaptability for several ends. The detailed descriptions in the published inventories serve three primary purposes: immediate use by the researcher, immediate use for the RHRD program, and potential use for records management. But equally striking is the fact that hundreds of people have volunteered to do the hard work of inventorying. The sheer size of the

¹³ Lucile Kane to Mary Pearson, April 20, 1976; Thornton Mitchell to Mary Pearson, May 11, 1976.

¹⁴ Thornton Mitchell to Mary Pearson, May 11, 1976; Jack W. Musgrove to Mary Pearson, May 27, 1976.

state demanded an all-out recruiting effort and a tight organizational structure to accommodate the large numbers of workers who wanted to help.

We hope that the Texas inventorying model will be of use to other states. At present, inquiries directed to the Texas County Records Inventory Project indicate that this is becoming the case.



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