

Archival Research Centers

RICHMOND D. WILLIAMS, JOHN KERWOOD,
MARGARET S. HENSON, and LUCILE KANE

Perhaps the most direct attempt to encourage the use of regional and topical archival resources has been the establishment of history research centers. Many of the existing programs are operated as part of state archival agencies, other programs focus on a single historical topic and are sponsored by colleges and universities. This session assessed the impact of existing programs and addressed alternatives to such programs.

RICHMOND WILLIAMS:

The archives of an institution has only one coherent intellectual function and that is to tell the history of that institution. The archives, however, may serve other purposes as raw material for research projects to the extent the institution interconnects with other parts of society as a whole. A research center, on the other hand, is an institutional device to encourage the advancement of knowledge about places, things, people, groups, ideas, products, policy, and much more. The shape and thrust of a research center depend upon the subject matter to be discovered and the ends to be achieved. If a research center is understood in these terms, it can clearly be seen that a center does not necessarily have to be connected with an archives or even an archival institution. In addition, within the last thirty or forty years, research centers have developed initially as ideas and organizations, and then the process of building archival and other research collections has followed. In summary, it is more common for a research center to have a variety of institutional archives to support its mission than for an archives of an institution to develop into a research center.

The basic premise of the research center is to stimulate research in a particular subject area. Some of the more recent institutions to take this form have been interested in immigration, ethnic groups, the American Indian, the family, and regional economic history. Much of the early organizational effort is devoted to defining the field, identifying relevant research matters, and mobilizing interested scholars. As a consequence, the most successful centers are headed by recognized academic experts in the chosen subject. The dispensing of funds for research advances knowledge in a field neglected by traditional organizations and attracts graduate and postgraduate researchers to the fold. In addition to promoting the quest for new knowledge, a typical center provides for the exchange of ideas through proseminars, workshops, and conferences of various sorts, and disseminates information by means of working papers, monographs, and periodicals.

Viewed from a national perspective, research centers provide symptoms as well as possible solutions for the rapid specialization of knowledge with attendant bibliographical difficulties. Most new research interests that have become institutionalized as *centers* have powerful bibliographical and access-to-knowledge compo-

nents. Surveys of appropriate papers, records, archives, periodicals, and monographs are at the very heart of a center's operation. I suggest, therefore, that money spent on certain research centers for ongoing bibliographical projects would be a wise investment for public or private funding agencies interested in national networks of intellectual access to today's variety in learning and knowledge.

JOHN KERWOOD:

Archival research centers have a substantive impact on the health of local historical societies, and archivists need to be more conscious of this important relationship. The Ohio Network of American Historical Research Centers is a good illustration of the kind of cooperation which can exist between the archival research center and the local historical society. The network was created for a host of reasons. First was the desire to discourage the proliferation of independent, egocentric, self-perpetuating, and often competitive research centers throughout Ohio. Second, there was concern that local records in the future might not be available in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of an expanding community of scholars and graduate students resulting from the unstructured growth of new advanced-degree-granting institutions in Ohio. Third, as proponents of the network pointed out, the influence of behaviorism, particularly in the areas of political science and sociology, seemed to suggest a new direction in historical methodology.

Since its establishment in 1970, the network has been very effective in preserving documentary materials which elucidate Ohio's local history. Indeed, the network seems to have taken over the function from the local historical societies. A 1974 survey of local historical societies in the state revealed that only 60 of Ohio's more than 180 societies are collecting local records, and of these only 21 have significant collections. One might logically expect small historical societies to be transferring their collections in ever increasing numbers to the nearest network center. But this isn't happening in Ohio.

Unlike the archival research center, which provides archival materials for scholarly research, the historical society uses local archives and records in a variety of concentrated outreach programs. Its collecting and conservation activities are balanced by equal commitments to research the collections and to impart knowledge of the community to the community through the intelligent use of the collections in the preparation of exhibitions, publications, lectures, tours, historical dramas, and other educational undertakings.

There are also practical reasons for local societies to retain local records. A local historical society whose metal, wood, paper, and textile collections are direct products of the local culture would find it next to impossible to determine the historical significance of such items without the use of local records and archival materials. For these records to be in a central repository many miles away would make their use prohibitively expensive and an obstruction to the effective production of exhibitions and other educational programs which frequently are collective efforts requiring staff members to be on the premises and accessible.

The advent of trained archivists and historians functioning on the local level is at best a partial long-term solution to the question of local records preservation and use. The work of the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History, together with the input and resources available from private foundations, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, leads one to conclude

that local records programs in general are becoming more prolific and more proficient. In analyzing this growth, professional associations and philanthropic agencies should be conscious of the legitimate needs of local historical records societies as well as archival research centers.

MARGARET S. HENSON:

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center is a newly created regional research center devoted primarily to local history, but also structured to aid research in urban topics. The center is the direct result of the two-year Houston Metropolitan Archives Project, an ambitious, interinstitutional undertaking that was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1974. The research center would not, and could not, have been developed without the money provided by the endowment, which stimulated strong local support.

A balanced review of the achievements of the NEH-funded Houston Metropolitan Archives Project shows that the investment was worthwhile. First there is the research center itself, a direct result of the project. It is an ongoing, public-supported, city facility conveniently located to transportation and parking in the downtown Civic Center. By being a part of the public library, the center serves a wider range of users than the traditional university research library, thereby justifying, in my mind, the large sum of federal, public monies that helped to create the facility. Researchers have access to a variety of material, archival on one hand and library-oriented, local history on the other, all under one roof though serviced by separate staffs, trained in their own specialty but acquainted with the holdings of the other. Researchers conditioned to depending on secondary sources may now expand their study with convenient access to primary source materials. Furthermore, the computerized catalog encourages the user to seek other materials housed elsewhere by providing a description of what material is available and where it is located.

In retrospect, the Houston Metropolitan Archives Project was overly ambitious and it is not surprising that all of its goals were not fully achieved. One of its major problems was organizational: primarily an archives project, it was conceived and staffed by historians and, though a conscious effort was made to consult experienced archivists and to absorb basic archival techniques, the staff lacked the experience to predict and project the time, effort, and priorities necessary for completing inventories and processing collections. Ideally no archives project should begin until *after* the archivist who will be working on the endeavor has reviewed the goals and has contributed a professional appraisal. At a minimum, an archivist should help draft archival proposals.

Another weakness of the late Houston Metropolitan Archives Project was its lack of institutional permanence. The project was a cooperative venture involving three local universities and the Houston Public Library, but it was housed in the basement of the Rice University Library, leading many people to believe that it was primarily a Rice University project. Moreover, any university affiliation was more of a hindrance than a help when dealing with public officials who tended to view the academic community with suspicion. Since the project was to create a research center which would become part of the public library, the project should have been located there. Such early affiliation would have eased the work of the project staff in their contacts with public officials and other community leaders.

Even with these problems, the project achieved its stated goals. The primary purpose of the project, the inventory of source materials related to the development of the Houston area, was accomplished. The second goal of the project, the development of a computerized finding aid, was also accomplished. The finding aid is sufficiently compact that a user can scan the printout for subject headings. All in all, Houston researchers now possess a valuable tool to locate previously inaccessible source material related to the history of their city.

LUCILE M. KANE:

The three papers presented here approach their subject in different ways, but each of them examines the role of subject matter collections. In recent years, traditional centers of research have intensified cultivation of subject matter collections, frequently by means of grant funds. Surely there is ample breadth for new centers, in the spectrum of resource needs. To promote a rational expansion of subject matter development, with a certain commitment to equity in documentation, one requirement may be better tools for assessing which institutions are doing what and how well are they doing it.

The Minnesota Historical Society is perhaps unusually aware of the need for resource evaluation as a fundamental step, since a local library with plans to become a research center is now asking us hard questions before defining its area in business history and before raising funds. How extensive and intensive are our business records holdings? To give an answer that would help determine the viability of a new center, we should be able to give the answer in terms of business and chronology to compare desirable documentation against the holdings; to report on the holdings and objectives of other institutions, in-state and on the national level; and, since the library is not yet committed to a time period, geographic focus, or specialization within the field of business history, we should be able to give guidance based not only on the study of existing literature, but on source data which may not be easily available.

Ms. Henson suggests appraisal as another question of prime importance to research centers when she mentions collections of questionable value accessioned during the Houston project. Mr. Williams, too, makes a comment, which, warped a bit, might be applied to appraisal when he expresses some uneasiness about "intense specialization at centers, which sometimes causes scholars to lose sight of context and perspective." With respect to appraisal and research centers, two counter-tendencies may be operating. The enthusiasm and commitment of personnel may lead to overdocumentation; while, conversely, special knowledge opens an opportunity for establishing reasonable appraisal guidelines.

Although subjective elements, factors of noncomparability, and perhaps a certain furtiveness about the contents of our wastebaskets work against the evolution of anything resembling uniform appraisal standards for personal papers and the records of nonpublic organizations, the need to conduct studies and to share the results of such studies is evident. Developing sterner appraisal criteria may be particularly difficult for subject-matter specialists and is complex in view of dynamic public needs. However, in this age of changing source relationships, space limitations, rising processing costs, accelerating conservation requirements, and acceptance of the fact that microfilming is not a panacea, the question deserves continuing study.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

The discussion began with questions about the role of local historical societies in the care and preservation of historical records. Robert Warner observed that many small societies began collecting archives and manuscripts with little prospect of providing proper professional care for these records. He argued that these societies should not collect records but serve as liaisons with regional archival centers. John Kerwood agreed, but offered some advice about relations between the two groups; Kerwood reminded the conference that many local societies would not donate their holdings to regional centers. In such instances, these collections should be microfilmed and the film deposited in regional centers. This would preserve the information in the records without antagonizing local societies.

Gerald Ham also reflected on the relationship between local societies and regional centers. Speaking from the Wisconsin perspective, he observed that the establishment of regional centers often encourages local societies to turn their collections over to the centers. He also indicated that the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has processed several archival collections on contract from local historical societies. The collections were arranged and described, and returned to the local society where they are made available to researchers.

The conference shifted its attention to the recent proliferation of subject-oriented research centers, and the participants expressed a variety of opinions. Richmond Williams observed that there seems to be no pattern to the establishment of these centers, as if every history professor is his own research center. Frank Burke commented that such centers are often extensions of college and university archives, and Patrick Quinn agreed. Quinn argued that the proliferation of subject-oriented research centers is creating duplication and competition among college and university archives. He remarked that there is no justification for establishing such centers and he advised foundations to be circumspect about proposals for establishing subject-oriented archival centers. In contrast, Richmond Williams thought this specialization to be inevitable and he urged those present to accept the trend and shape it to meet professional archival standards.

John Daly expressed concern about the recent tendency of many colleges and universities to solicit the papers of public officials with the idea that such records will not only strengthen their collections but will also help them fund improvements such as, perhaps, a new wing on the library. These institutions assume that the public official will have the clout to raise the money for such improvements. Daly added that this is a false notion.

Ann Campbell noted that the solicitation of public papers by colleges and universities is a serious problem, one that plagues the Public Documents Commission. She remarked that the commission is making progress in this area. If congressional collections are pared to reasonable size, it is conceivable that a federal subsidy would be available for processing. This approach might take care of the problem.

Charles Lee was concerned that the conference participants were identifying problems and solutions but not setting up mechanisms to implement the solutions. He remarked that every state has a problem with local historical societies and with church archival programs, and that the mechanism for solving these problems is the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and its state advisory boards.