

Statewide Surveying: Some Lessons Learned

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THE WASHINGTON STATE Historical Records Survey was undertaken on the recommendation of the Washington Historical Records Advisory Board as a first step in developing a comprehensive records program for the state. Many surveys have operated within a restricted universe of records and institutions. Texas, for instance, has recently been engaged in a records survey in county courthouses.¹ Other surveys have concentrated on business records, or women's history sources, or records management for public agencies.² The Washington state project is the first since the WPA Historical Records Survey of the 1930s to survey

historical records on a statewide basis simultaneously in a wide variety of records sectors.

The WPA precedent was of limited value for planning purposes as its goal was less a records survey than employment of starving white-collar workers.³ As a result the Washington board was for the most part left to its own devices in planning a statewide survey. A review of that process will point up some of the lessons learned in the process.

The need for a records program was apparent. Little work on determining what documentary resources existed had been accomplished in Washington state since the WPA survey had ex-

¹ Mary S. Pearson and Robert S. LaForte, "The Eyes of Texas: The Texas County Records Inventory Project," *American Archivist* 40 (April 1977): 179-87.

² For example, see Robert P. Thomson, "The Business Records Survey in Wisconsin," *American Archivist* 14 (July 1951): 249-56; Julia Voorhees Emmons, "Taking the Man Out of Manuscripts: Atlanta's Pilot Project for the Women's History Sources Survey," *Georgia Archive* 4 (Winter 1976): 35-38; and Thornton W. Mitchell, "The Illinois Record Management Survey," *American Archivist* 20 (April 1957): 119-30.

³ The best analysis of the W.P.A. Historical Records Survey appears in William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), pp. 751-828. A briefer discussion by David L. Smiley appears in *In Support of Clio*, Hesselstine and McNeil, eds. (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1958), pp. 3-28. The *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 201-61, also contains several articles on the subject.

pired, a casualty of World War II. A public records law specifically charged the state archives with responsibility for the preservation of all government archival records, state and local,⁴ but the financial resources allocated were barely sufficient to deal with state agencies in the capital. Private records and papers, especially those of a local-regional nature, were similarly neglected, the staffing levels and storage facilities of university repositories being inadequate.

Yet priorities had to be established in order to "assess the mass of the dinosaur before kicking it."⁵ In other words, a principal element of planning was to have a keen idea of what was to be targeted for survey. It was decided to concentrate on the records sectors of greatest neglect: (1) county governments and incorporated cities; (2) historical societies, libraries, and museums, most of whose materials were neither arranged nor described; and (3) selected other organizations such as businesses, churches, special government districts, and community organizations.⁶ In the last category, emphasis was to be placed on those with significant historical impact on the state or locality and, within that group, on those that would permit access.⁷

Another dimension of the dinosaur was the question of appraisal. Which

records or papers held by an organization were to be considered historical? The expertise of many archivists in the state was drawn upon to solve this thorny archival question. Specific guidelines were provided to surveyors, a final directive being "if in doubt, survey it," pending later editorial review.

Since many misinformed, if well-intended, managers were destroying either the provenance of materials or the documents themselves, also apparent was the need to train records custodians in the rudiments of archival techniques. A limited number of training workshops for records custodians and prospective surveyors was built into the plan.

One other key planning item remained: the design of survey and administrative control forms that would track survey time and costs.⁸ By the use of check blocks in several areas and by limitation of the data collected to the absolutely essential, it was possible to create one legal-size survey form by which the task could be accomplished.⁹ For administrative control, another form was devised that was in essence a daily log of all surveyor activity: time and place of survey work, travel time and mileage, forms review, recheck work, and office public relations.

The planning phase for the state-

⁴ Revised Code of Washington, Title 40.14.

⁵ Sidney McAlpin, state archivist, coined this phrase.

⁶ Discussion leading to the development of the Washington state plan may be found in the minutes and related official files of the Washington State Historical Records Advisory Board, Washington State Archives, Olympia.

⁷ Administrative decisions relative to the implementation of the survey are recorded in the administrative files of the Washington State Historical Records and Archives Project (WSHRAP), Central Washington University, Ellensburg. Hereafter cited as WSHRAP files.

⁸ A helpful guide to forms creation is National Archives and Records Service, Records Management Handbooks, *Forms Design* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960).

⁹ Data collected includes: repository level information similar to that of the NHPRC; records titles; contents; inclusive and bulk dates; quantity; a description of function, purpose, arrangement, and subjects and names as appropriate; some special characteristics for indexing and sorting purposes; restrictions on access; finding aids available; and a section to note biographical data or unusual conditions.

wide survey required, in summary, definition of the survey universe, a review of existing precedents, and careful design and implementation of survey forms, instructions, and procedures.

It was thought wise to begin a half-state survey limited to areas of greatest possible success, areas where existing depositories could lend strong on-site support, with a general plan for expanding the survey statewide if the results of the first phase warranted it. Two tempting mistakes are to begin work before there is real control over the dimensions of the task and to refuse to change procedures on the basis of initial experience. One person must be ultimately responsible for final decisions if an acceptable degree of uniformity and a healthy pace of work is to be maintained, though that person must solicit the advice of co-workers and colleagues if substantial error is not to occur. Finally, the immensity of a statewide survey can become so overwhelming that administrators must guard against losing perspective. It remains a valid dictum to "learn in this business to go after bear and not waste our limited time and energy in chasing rabbits."¹⁰

The time and energy that is so easily wasted is that of the project field workers, a survey project's most valuable resource. The success of a project is highly dependent on the skill of its personnel. Comprehensive instructions for such a heterogeneous group of institutions and record types would probably exceed in length the records themselves, and the number of supervisors required to monitor unskilled workers would be enormous.

In addition to archival skills, the field workers in a survey that includes records held out of custody must have intelligence, self reliance, durability, and dedication. Work with disorganized paper in freezing garages, mildewed basements, and unstable attics is commonplace. Specifically, surveyors should have knowledge of and interest in the history of the state and its localities; some formal training in archives and manuscripts management; previous work experience that required persistence, attention to detail, physical stamina, and goal orientation; and an ability to relate easily and casually with diverse members of the public.

We have learned that a highly professional, decently salaried, long-term surveyor can accomplish over twice as much in the same time as marginally skilled, low paid, short-term personnel. Volunteers for this type of survey are of little use. The variety of organizations and records, and the need for rigorous data reporting make the work too complex. This is not to disparage the fine efforts made by records custodians who voluntarily performed the survey of their own institutions. Rather, it is to caution against volunteers who seek merely to alleviate the stresses of boredom. They do not take direction well and frequently attempt to use the project for their own sometimes bizarre ends. In one case a volunteer attempted to use her "position" as a surveyor to attack a local historical group's directorate, with whom she had a long-standing dispute.¹¹

Beyond recruitment, a solid training program must be designed. All personnel should receive project orienta-

¹⁰ Irving Zitmore, "Planning a Records Management Survey," *American Archivist* 18 (April 1955): 137.

¹¹ Transcript, Central Washington Survey Leaders' meeting, 12 August 1977, WSHRAP files.

tion. Training manuals are helpful to this end. Individualized training can be provided for those with experiential gaps. But all must receive on-the-job training that includes scrupulous attention to the rudiments of survey work.¹² After a month of close supervision, surveyors should be able to work accurately with considerable independence.

A combination of superior personnel and proper supervision can alleviate one of the worst problems that can plague a survey, inconsistency in the collection of data. Surveyors, their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, must be required to submit survey forms and daily logs on a frequent basis. In this way poor legibility and descriptive quality, inattention to detail, and a slow work-pace can be quickly overcome. Close initial supervision and, where necessary, written critiques, can save much time and money. For example, one surveyor in completing the survey of a rural newspaper office that had collected historical files, submitted forms entitled "Scenic Photographs, 1976-" and "High School Photos, 1976-." Another surveyor wrote a ten-paragraph, highly itemized description of one small collection in a local museum. Several surveyors forgot to enter inclusive dates or quantities of materials. Others listed names of correspondents in private papers by last names only, a distressing proportion of which seemed to be Smith or Jones. In public agencies, confusion existed where identical series changed titles at intervals, and one volunteer ran completely amok submitting a public record form entitled "Bones Found on Judson Street."

Attention to detail is a particularly troublesome area, as an excessive display of it can be as harmful to survey consistency as can a failure to display it in sufficient measure. In fact, if a healthy pace is to be maintained, one must avoid at all costs a variety of what Laurence J. Peter calls *fileophilia*: "A mania for the precise arrangement and classification of papers, usually combined with a morbid fear of the loss of any document."¹³ Nothing can slow a survey of collections, record groups, and series more than the precise examination of each item within the type for fear that some crucial particle of information might be lost. Not only does the pace of such a survey approximate the forward speed of a glacier, but an incredible amount of editorial work is required to reduce such writings to permit the publication of a finding aid of somewhat less than a million pages. Checking tendencies toward fileophilia merits the attention of supervisors as much as any other facet of survey supervision. Providing surveyors with sample entries and corrected copy of their own work is one means of addressing this problem, but people seem to exist who are terminally afflicted with the disease and for whom there is no cure.

Of course, latitude also must be allowed in supervision, as surveyors must have the ability to make judgments within the parameters of project instructions if supervisors are not to be overburdened. Further, it is a reflection of our times that workers in any capacity demand a certain degree of personal satisfaction, autonomy, and even idiosyncrasy.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of

¹² A concise step-by-step description of some fundamentals of survey work is in John W. Cross, "Inventorying and Scheduling Records," *Records Management Quarterly* 7 (April 1973): 28-31.

¹³ Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 105.

survey work is gaining prompt access to organizations, a problem that revolves around what may be called the "legitimacy factor." In a comprehensive statewide survey of a wide universe of institutions, considerable effort must be devoted to publicizing and thus legitimizing the survey. Failure to do this properly will result in suspicion and possible hostility on the part of records keepers, exclusion from many places, and will require at the very least an excessive amount of the valuable time of field workers. Before a surveyor enters an organization, that organization should understand and approve the survey effort. This is especially the case in a state, such as Washington, where many important organizations exist apart from the state power centers and are suspicious of any activity originating from outside their regions. Hints of this were observed early in the educational workshop stage by a supervisor who noted that survey workshops had to be directly oriented to the locality because any centralized effort "connotes bureaucracy and intrusion . . . and may be generally offensive to the common social ethic."¹⁴

Numerous strategies can be employed to publicize and legitimize the survey. In many cases, exposure in the mass media equates in the public mind with legitimacy under the principle that "If you see it in the papers, or on the tube, it must be O.K." Perhaps archivists can take a lesson here from those engaged in the marketing of laundry soaps and superfluous widgets. The Washington project received fairly widespread, if not always accurate, television, radio, and newspaper coverage. Despite occasional inaccuracies, media reporting was most often help-

ful as it did serve to identify the project and individual surveyors, and thus did ease entry into quite a number of organizations that had seen the publicity.

Even with fairly good publicity, reinforcement is needed at the time of office entry. To facilitate this process several mechanisms were developed to legitimize field workers. Attractive brief pamphlets explaining the survey, and business cards or official letters of introduction imprinted with the state seal were useful. State business cards provided instant legitimacy, even though they could easily have been privately printed. Other strategies included, for public agencies, a video tape presentation that featured key project personnel and state officials and that emphasized the state law that mandates open access to public records. In the private sector a short slide show and related narrative and a newsletter contributed to public relations efforts.

At the office level though, success at gaining quick access often depends on the persuasive abilities of individual surveyors. Each surveyor has a unique strategy, and it varies with the character of the individual with no one race, sex, or personality type having a particular advantage. One fascinating peculiarity regarding access is that male surveyors more easily gain entry when addressing female custodians, and vice versa.

The most important aspect of a survey are the products that result. For the Washington State Historical Records Survey, these will be guides to inactive deposited records, public records held in agency custody, and a microform guide to all organizations and records surveyed. Computer-assisted indexes will direct researchers of a multiplicity of interests to the insti-

¹⁴ Lawrence Stark, final Region V survey team leader report, Phase I, WSHRAP files.

tutions and particular records that suit their specific research bent. Periodic updates of the guides are planned and efforts will be made for accessioning and use of identified materials through a network of cooperating repositories. As Larry Hackman commented at the Conference on Priorities for Historical Records, "the most valuable lesson to be learned from the [WPA] Historical Records Survey is that such projects

have to have residual operations to insure the use of survey information."¹⁵

That is the central purpose of any survey project, to make more documents eventually available for use. If that happens, it is a tribute to the selfless endeavor and tireless dedication of those who labored in survey trenches with a spirit of those past American "Go-Getters" who "went in search of what others had never imagined was there to get."¹⁶

¹⁵ Reported in Francis X. Blouin, et al., "Surveys of Historical Records," *American Archivist* 40 (July 1977): 305.

¹⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 3.

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