

# Shorter Features

CHRISTOPHER BEAM, *Editor*

The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require full-length articles. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NCWA), Washington, DC 20408.

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## The Wisconsin Machine-Readable Records Project

MICHAEL J. FOX

The Wisconsin Machine-Readable Records Project, conducted by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin between August 1981 and July 1983, was a continuation of the Wisconsin Survey of Machine-Readable Public Records. Both projects assessed the impact of computer technology on record keeping by state government agencies and addressed the implications of contemporary information technology for the archival preservation of public records.

The initial Wisconsin survey identified machine-readable records in several state agencies; evaluated existing records management, disposition, and retention policies governing machine-readable

records; and developed a set of recommendations for improving the management and archival control of these records. The Wisconsin Machine-Readable Records Project sought to implement several recommendations developed as a result of the earlier survey. These recommendations included the incorporation of machine-readable records into existing records management procedures, development of capacities to handle machine-readable records within the archives, and identification of external technical resources for use in processing and preserving data files. Several general observations can be gleaned from the project's final report, which is

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available from the Historical Society's Archives Division.

The project demonstrated that a state archives can successfully develop the internal capacity to accession, process, maintain, and provide access to machine-readable records. The techniques and procedures developed and implemented in this program are described in detail in the final report. They include appraisal guidelines, staff training requirements, use of outside technical support, processing techniques, documentation standards, and provisions for user access.

While development of this internal capacity required only the application of time and personnel, the integration of machine-readable records into existing records management procedures for state public records proved to be a more difficult task. The initial survey demonstrated that machine-readable files were not being adequately handled within the existing system. Records managers responsible for preparing disposition schedules had little experience in the development of automated systems or in the scheduling of their component elements. Existing retention guidelines were the result of internal data processing procedures and lacked any mechanism for regular archival review or preservation. The project staff proposed that machine-readable files be treated like other public records, for example, that schedules be prepared for review by the state Public Records and Forms Board and that records be transferred to the archives whenever appropriate.

The project initially experienced considerable resistance to this approach from both records managers and data processing personnel. Other archivists may well encounter some of the same objections, which reflect the unique nature of automated records and the administrative environment in which they are created. Some agency staff expressed the opinion

that machine-readable records should not be considered records at all, because they duplicate information in source documents and output reports. Others felt that adequate procedures for the orderly destruction of obsolete data were in place through the internal procedures of the data processing centers. This comment often was coupled with the opinion that the approach to scheduling proposed by the project was outmoded and inappropriate for contemporary information technology and that only data processing personnel possessed the necessary technical expertise and knowledge of the records. Doubts were raised about the practicality of the long-term preservation of machine-readable data due to the fragile nature of the storage medium and the need for companion software systems to interpret it. Others questioned whether the state archives had the physical and technical capability to preserve these records. The lack of resources available to records managers was the most common concern raised. Even records managers who fully accepted the principle of developing schedules for these records expressed concern about the amount of time and staff resources required to do the work.

Answers to some of these questions were formulated and strategies for ameliorating others were developed. Doubts about the legal status of machine-readable records were resolved by a new Open Records Law, which defined machine-readable files as public records and required that they be treated like other records with regard to access. As a consequence of this legislation, physical and intellectual control over data files became a responsibility of agency personnel, often records managers, who were charged with preparing access policies in anticipation of public requests resulting from the law.

Concerns about the potential burden

on agency personnel were addressed by the Forms and Records Council, an organization of state agency forms and records officers, working in concert with the project staff. This group helped develop and promulgate a general schedule for processing files (files used to create, correct, reorganize, update, or derive output from master data files), guidelines for schedules which featured simplified, flexible formats, and priorities which focused attention on the scheduling of new or revised systems rather than on retroactive or remedial efforts. The demonstrated ability of the archivist to handle technical issues further reduced anxiety among agency personnel.

Nevertheless, concerns about the handling of machine-readable records by the archives persist. The impermanence of the magnetic storage medium is troublesome. At present, our best solution to this problem is the careful maintenance and periodic recopying of tape files. But these practices only leave us in a holding pattern, awaiting future technological developments. Solutions to the conceptual and technical problems posed by complex updatable database structures were beyond the range of this project. These challenges still need to be addressed by the archival profession in conjunction with other information specialists.

A more perplexing obstacle to the development of a successful program is

presented by the attitudes of archivists, records managers, data processors, and other involved parties. Changes in the nature of records caused by the introduction of the machine-readable medium necessitate more active participation by archivists in the creation and preservation of current data files. An archives cannot effectively preserve these records if it remains a passive recipient of materials created five, ten, or twenty years earlier. Procedural and technical concerns mandate the appraisal and accession of data files and their supporting documentation on a current basis. Solutions to problems of media deterioration, adequacy of documentation, and software dependency, including database design, can only come with the archivist's active involvement as a significant interested party in the initial design of automated systems. Records managers need both continued encouragement to be similarly involved and expanded training to make this involvement possible. Some data processing personnel, however, continue to deny the necessity for, or appropriateness of, such archival intrusion into their operations. To overcome this reluctance, we must either devise new ways to promote our current approach or develop alternative strategies for incorporating archival review and preservation into the procedures of data processing departments.

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Well what is held  
is the Wisconsin  
MRP Project?