

## Case Study

SUSAN DAVIS, editor

# The Oklahoma Historical Records Survey

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**Abstract:** In Oklahoma, there is no systematic approach to the management of local records. Problems with access exist because of decentralization, and because the Works Progress Administration conducted the last extensive survey of local records about fifty years ago. In order to help remedy this situation, the Oklahoma Historical Records Survey of 1989 produced, for the first time in one source, a listing of most early-day county and municipal records, using questionnaires with follow-up telephone contacts distributed to 722 governmental offices throughout Oklahoma. The project produced a *Guide to the Historical Records of Oklahoma*. The author discusses all aspects of the project including the development of a survey instrument, conduct of the survey, findings, response patterns, publication of the results, and implications for future historical records surveys.

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IN 1984 THE OKLAHOMA State Archives conducted a needs assessment study as part of the nationwide effort by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to report on the condition of public and private historical records and archival programs.<sup>1</sup> The study found that Oklahoma had no coordinated program to manage the records of its political subdivisions. Oklahoma state law did provide a listing of retention requirements for specific county records but no comparable statutory disposition existed for municipal records.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, one result of the study was a recommendation calling for a statewide, integrated records management program for local records.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, no action was taken.

Local records from the seminal period in Oklahoma history, 1898-1907, have remained largely inaccessible due to their relative obscurity in municipal and county offices throughout the state. Many respondents to the 1984 study indicated that a guide to early-day local records would make them more accessible to researchers as well as hold their custodians more accountable. But the high price of multi-year surveys conducted by in-person auditors make such projects infeasible. So, in 1988, staff at the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collections began to investigate alternate ways of inventorying the historical records of Oklahoma using low-cost, "impersonal" surveying techniques.

<sup>1</sup>For commentary on the needs assessment projects, see Lisa B. Weber, ed., *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States* (Albany, New York: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1984) and a special theme issue of the *Midwestern Archivist* 14:2 (1989).

<sup>2</sup>Oklahoma Statutes 1981, title 19, sections 155.1-155.6.

<sup>3</sup>*Preserving Today's Records for Tomorrow's Use: A Mandate for Action* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Records Advisory Board, 1985).

## Background

The earliest records of Oklahoma's unique history date back to the period of the Land Run of 1889. Congress established two land offices for filing claims but did not initially provide for territorial government. Thus, for well over a year, what law and order existed resulted from a combination of vigilante action and grassroots democracy. From 1891 to 1901, the federal government opened up an additional ten million acres of Indian lands to white settlement. After the citizens of Oklahoma Territory had pushed for statehood in conventions and in proposals introduced by their delegates, Congress finally passed the Oklahoma Enabling Act in 1906. Following a constitutional convention and an election, Oklahoma was admitted to the Union as a state on 16 November 1907.

The Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Historical Records Survey of 1936-42 attempted to compile a comprehensive listing of records for Oklahoma's counties and municipalities.<sup>4</sup> However, the WPA produced published inventories for just eleven of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties and unpublished field forms for only sixty-four municipalities. Furthermore, the destruction of many records by fire has made the findings of this fifty-year-old survey largely obsolete.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1970s, Patrick J. Blessing of the University of Tulsa conducted another statewide records survey. His *Oklahoma: Records and Archives* covers only vital statistics of birth, death, marriage, divorce, real-estate, and voter registration held by county offices.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, an extensive

<sup>4</sup>Blue Clark, "'To Preserve Local History' The WPA Historical Records Survey in Oklahoma, 1936-1942," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 61 (Summer 1983): 168-79.

<sup>5</sup>*Preserving Today's Records for Tomorrow's Use*, 51.

<sup>6</sup>Patrick J. Blessing, *Oklahoma: Records and Archives* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: University of Tulsa Publications, 1978).

listing of historical county and municipal records still did not exist.

In order to fill this void, the assistant curator of the Western History Collections submitted a grant proposal to the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities in October 1988.<sup>7</sup> The proposal maintained that, since county and municipal records preserve information documenting the lives of people, history of litigations, and growth and decline of places, the project would be significant for studies involving history, geography, sociology, and political science.

The proposal requested a grant in the amount of \$500, with matching funds of \$1,000 from the University of Oklahoma, to underwrite an Oklahoma Historical Records Survey that would identify and describe public records through 1920. The survey would include all county governments and all municipal governments of cities and towns of historical significance or with populations over 5,000. The choice of 1920 as a cutoff date was a practical decision. Inquiries of selected county and municipal record officers indicated that there were not enough extant records from the Territorial Period to justify 1907 as a stopping point. Conversely, the increasing number of post-1920 records might have dissuaded local record officers, who would play a major role in completing the survey, from compliance.

Sixty-eight municipalities qualified for the survey on the basis of population. Thirty-eight additional towns, chosen on the basis of settlement date, key location, and historical importance, completed the survey data set. The inclusion of records concerning Native American habitation of the eastern counties, the land openings into the Unassigned Lands and the Cherokee Out-

let, and the establishment of local governments in the Oklahoma Territory were major considerations in the selection process.

According to the proposal, the assistant curator would act as project director with clerical support provided by Western History Collections staff. The survey of county and municipal officers would take the form of a mailed instrument (questionnaire). Telephone calls and on-site visits would follow requesting series level information as needed. In order to test the questionnaire, a pilot study of a selected county and municipality would take place prior to the statewide survey. The timetable called for completion of the project in nine months. The end product of this research would be a book-length guide.

### The Pilot Study

In December 1988, the foundation approved the grant. From the outset, the success or failure of the entire project clearly depended upon the validity of the questionnaire. The project director consulted with several record officers, archivists, and researchers, including Blessing, regarding the proposed survey in general, and the questionnaire in particular. These discussions and further analysis of the WPA and Blessing surveys resulted in the design of a preliminary questionnaire. Later that month, the project director carried out the pilot study with on-site visits to record offices in Cleveland County and Norman, Oklahoma (home of the University of Oklahoma, where the project was based). The experiences of the project director and the record officers who filled out the questionnaire suggested certain changes in its length and terminology.

The final survey instrument was a one-page, legal-sized questionnaire, adaptable for use by either municipal or county offices, which included blocks of space for entering six series. Each block denoted entries for Type of Record (title); Description

<sup>7</sup>Bradford Koplowitz, "Oklahoma Historical Records Survey," Project Number 88-006RG, submitted to the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities, Oklahoma City, October, 1988.

(information in records); Arrangement (chronological, alphabetical); Volume (linear feet, items); and Date Span. Space reserved at the bottom of the page accommodated information on other storage locations such as local historical societies, museums, or public libraries.

The questionnaire did not request data such as condition of the material because assessments by the record custodians would necessarily be subjective. It also omitted exact physical locations, contained in the WPA survey, because they seemed largely irrelevant to the project aims. The project director rejected the use of a list of series descriptions for respondents to check because he believed it would tend to homogenize the data.

### Conduct of the Survey

On 1 March 1989 a bulk mailing delivered 722 individual survey instruments to 106 city clerks, and to the following offices in each of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties: Assessor, Board of County Commissioners, County Clerk, Court Clerk, Election Board, Sheriff, Superintendent of Schools, and Treasurer.<sup>8</sup> The cover letter provided a purpose statement, list of receiving offices, and sample entry. The mailing included a self-addressed, stamped envelope for convenient return.

The response rate was 20 percent for municipal offices and 25 percent for county offices. Discussions with respondents and non-respondents indicated that the limited rate of return was partly a result of bad timing and confusion with terminology. Local governmental officers were busy preparing budgets for the next fiscal year and had little time to complete "another questionnaire." Another complaint concerned

the meaning of the term, *Type of Record (title)*. The original survey design called that information *series*. During the pilot study, however, it became clear that many record officers did not understand the archival term. Consequently, *Type of Record (title)* was substituted. Unfortunately, this term proved equally confusing.

In order to increase the number of responses, the project director decided to mail out follow-up questionnaires before initiating telephone and on-site visits. The revised questionnaire, mailed on 15 May 1989, substituted *Record Group (title)* for *Type of Record (title)* based upon telephone conversations with a random sampling of municipal and county record officers. The cover letter did not try to explain this change because that might have created even more confusion. Subsequent evaluation of returned questionnaires and contacts with record officers confirmed that they use the term *record group* to describe what archivists call *series*.

In order to alleviate concerns regarding the time required to fill out the questionnaire, the project director modified the cover letter by including an abbreviated version of the sample entry along with the instruction to signify "none" in case of no records prior to 1921. A final modification of the cover letter, which had not originally specified a return date, requested that respondents mail back the questionnaires by 1 July 1989.

The second mailing raised the response rate to 66 percent of the county offices and 33 percent of the municipal offices. As with the first mailing, other local storage sites such as historical societies that respondents listed on the returns also received survey instruments. In addition, respondents indicated that substantial amounts of local records had been transferred to several central archives and manuscript repositories. Subsequent mailings produced questionnaires from the Oklahoma State Archives, State Records Center, Oklahoma Historical

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<sup>8</sup>Preparation costs were held down through the solicitation of free mailing labels from the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Tax Commission, State Auditor and Inspector, State Election Board, and Supreme Court of Oklahoma.

Society, State Election Board, and Western History Collections.

Beginning in July, the project director and a clerical assistant telephoned the 205 county offices and 69 municipal offices that had not returned the questionnaire. In response, an additional 75 county offices and 43 municipal offices indicated either that they had no records or so few pre-1921 records that the data was taken over the phone. In some cases, the process of contacting nonrespondents by mail and then by telephone was repeated up to four times. Since project funding was running out, only the offices involved in the pilot study were inventoried on-site.

This painstaking process did produce results. By late August, 599 out of 616 county offices and 96 out of 106 city clerks had responded to the survey. The telephone message that only a handful of offices would not be included in the published findings seemed to spur a few of the most stubborn nonrespondents into compliance.

### Response Patterns

Although the project focused primarily on the survey of local records, the patterns of response were equally interesting and even helpful in their own right. Throughout the project, analysis of response patterns led to modifications of the questionnaire and the conduct of the survey. Furthermore, the patterns of response to the Oklahoma Historical Records Survey undoubtedly have implications for similar surveys elsewhere.

The questionnaires filed by county officers in the urban centers of Oklahoma County (which includes Oklahoma City) and Tulsa County were surprisingly less complete than those from their counterparts in less populated communities. A records officer from Oklahoma County complained about having "too many records to list." Thus, a gross disparity in the number of record series might explain the variation in results.

County clerks and court clerks, who have the primary function of storing and accessing documents, were more cooperative and provided more detailed responses than did sheriffs, treasurers, and county commissioners. The fact that the offices of county clerk and court clerk are offices of record with strong responsibilities in the areas of public accountability and access may help to explain their receptivity to the survey. Yet city clerks were less cooperative, requiring more contacts, than most county officers. For the most part, the office of city clerk is primarily accountable to other city officials rather than to the general public.

In the follow-up conversations, respondents who indicated a positive willingness to complete the questionnaire stated that the survey gave them an excuse to produce a needed listing of records. Before the survey almost none of these offices had guides to their records. Despite the enthusiasm of some record officers concerning the survey and the forthcoming guide, the impersonal nature of the survey made it difficult to forge many useful associations for the future. The vast majority of respondents showed little enthusiasm for the project and merely acquiesced. Four percent of the offices refused to comply. The most common complaints were a lack of time and/or personnel to process the request adequately; or the records were "none of your business." A statewide, integrated records management program for local records might help ensure compliance with a future survey.

A comparison of responses by the same county offices between the 1989 Survey and the earlier WPA Survey showed many differences in series titles, descriptions, and beginning dates.<sup>9</sup> The most troubling as-

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<sup>9</sup>Historical Records Survey, Division of Women's and Professional Projects, Works Progress Administration, *Inventory of the County Archives of Okla-*



pect of the recent findings was the absence of numerous series listed in the WPA Survey from offices that are still operational as well as some that had been abolished. Records of defunct offices rarely turned up in the inventories of either other county units or other repositories. When the project director queried record officers about missing records, typical replies were that previous administrations had "misplaced" records, or that they were destroyed by fire.

The obvious reasons for the discrepancies between the findings of the two surveys are (1) many records no longer exist, and (2) the WPA survey, which was conducted on-site by trained auditors, was able to inventory more record series than the Oklahoma Historical Records Survey, which relied on mail and telephone contacts. There was no way to deal with the discrepancies other than to accept the limitations imposed by impersonal surveying techniques.

### Publication

The grant did not provide funds to defray the cost of publishing a guide. Consequently, a publisher had to agree to take the project on a commercial basis. Initially, several university and historical society presses turned down the proposal. Heritage Books, Inc. of Bowie, Maryland, a national publishing firm that specializes in genealogical works, expressed interest but also concern about the recent nature of the records described and the appropriate marketing approach. After reviewing some sample pages, Heritage Books offered a contract in late August 1989.

The guide descriptions took information verbatim from the questionnaires with only minor editing changes (see Figure 1). This was a conscious effort to follow custodians' descriptions of their records. Although the survey sought only descriptions of re-

cord series dating before 1921, numerous respondents listed records of a more recent origin. These were included in the guide in an effort to present all of the available data. The introduction to the guide informs readers about the survey and explains this inclusion of post-1920 data.

After compilation and formatting on a word processor, both paper and computer disk copies of the guide were sent to the publisher. This helped to decrease the layout and editing costs. The *Guide to the Historical Records of Oklahoma* was published in the spring of 1990.<sup>10</sup> The publisher handled the advertising, sale, and distribution of the book. Through December 1990, 344 copies had been sold, mostly to genealogists, libraries, and historical societies. Few respondents have purchased the guide.

### Conclusion

Without substantial grant funding, statewide record surveys involving inventories conducted by trained auditors are highly impractical. The Washington State survey in the late 1970s was the only comprehensive, statewide survey of public and private records funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). In recent years, NHPRC has funded major projects dealing with preservation and records management that have included the survey of county records as a primary component. The projects in New Jersey (1978-79) and Pennsylvania (1984-86) fit this description.<sup>11</sup>

The Oklahoma Historical Records Survey exemplifies a low-cost alternative that proved feasible for a number of reasons. The reliance on bulk mail and a least-cost-routing, long-distance telephone system

*homa*, 11 volumes (Oklahoma City: Historical Records Survey, 1937-41).

<sup>10</sup>Bradford Koplowitz, ed., *Guide to the Historical Records of Oklahoma* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1990).

<sup>11</sup>Telephone conversation with Richard Cameron, National Historical Publications and Records Commission, Washington, D.C., January 1991.

permitted a questionnaire to reach 722 offices throughout Oklahoma at a cash outlay of less than \$1,500. This did not, of course, include labor costs. Aside from the assistance of ten hours of clerical help with mailing and phone calling, the project director completed all related tasks under a 20 percent time work assignment. The university allowed this time as part of the research requirements associated with faculty tenure.

It could be argued that since the data was gathered without on-site inspections such as those used in the compilation of the WPA Historical Records Survey, the findings are flawed. Certainly, the *Guide to the Historical Records of Oklahoma* may contain some inaccuracies and incomplete entries. However, it does provide, for the first time in one source, a listing of most early-day county and municipal records of Oklahoma. Besides enhancing access to local records, researchers can infer which records should be in the custody of an office even when unreported. Furthermore, the guide places a burden of responsibility on the county and municipal offices to be able to account for the records they reported.

A new Oklahoma statute calls for the abolition of the office of County Superintendent of Schools. The law does not provide for an orderly transfer of records from the superintendents to other governmental officers.<sup>12</sup> The Oklahoma State Archives and

the Oklahoma Genealogical Society have both proposed using entries in the guide to inform local record custodians of the existence of endangered records, such as school censuses, so that they might be preserved.

Publication of the Oklahoma survey findings succeeded because it was in the interest of a publisher. Since the users of early county and municipal records are primarily genealogists, the marriage of a historical records survey to a publisher specializing in genealogy seemed only natural. State historical societies, which might undertake similar surveys, could rely on their own facilities or a national entity such as the American Association for State and Local History to publish their findings.

The Oklahoma Historical Records Survey is by no means atypical. The conditions that made it possible exist in many states, especially in the West. Only a minority of states have initiated a systematic transfer of local records to central or regional repositories. Furthermore, by limiting the temporal coverage and by concentrating on local governments responsible for smaller population bases, researchers could conduct wide-ranging historical records surveys in other states. These low-cost surveys could provide the basis for future records management programs and selective archival retention efforts regarding local records.

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<sup>12</sup>Oklahoma Statutes Supplement 1990, title 70, section 4-200.