

Editor's Special Forum on Needs in Archival Research and Publication

Archival Issues: Past, Present, and Future

JOEL WURL

IN 1992, THE JOURNAL FORMERLY KNOWN as the *Midwestern Archivist* acquired the title *Archival Issues: The Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference*. The *Midwestern Archivist* was first published in 1976, four years after the establishment of its parent organization. The inaugural issue contained four articles on the theme of college and university archives, along with a handful of book reviews. A brief editorial letter set a tone that has essentially prevailed to the present. The editors wrote,

Sharing new responses to old problems is a major responsibility in any profession. We encourage diversity among articles, topics, and points of view. The journal solicits articles relating to archival theory and current practice. We feel these topics can be explored in a variety of formats including: articles, proceedings of seminars, review essays, accounts of workshops, and progress reports on special archival projects. Above all, we hope to publish articles that reinforce our ability to cope with often perplexing problems facing us as a

profession and as individual archivists.¹

The journal has certainly matured and developed in substance over the years, but it has actually remained quite constant in format, dimensions, and editorial machinery. The editorial board was initially composed of five members; it is now a body of

About the author: Joel Wurl is curator and assistant director of the University of Minnesota's Immigration History Research Center. From 1991 to 1993, he served as chair of the editorial board for Archival Issues: The Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference. A version of this essay was originally presented at the Spring 1993 meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference in Chicago.

¹The journal's current editorial policy statement contains the following language: "Archival Issues . . . is concerned with issues and problems confronting the contemporary archivist. Submissions relating to archival theory and current practice are solicited. Diversity of topics and points of view is encouraged. Material in a wide range of formats—including articles, review essays, proceedings of seminars, and case studies of specific archival projects or functions—will be considered for publication."

seven.² Board members are appointed by the Midwest Archives Conference (MAC) president and are chosen on the basis of publication or editing experience and diversity of perspectives. The board has always functioned as a pseudo-democratic guild, with the chair essentially serving as an executive secretary and a lead contact point.³ It is probably not an accident that the journal has never been tightly linked to a single individual; chairs serve for one-year terms, renewable for only one additional year, and publication decisions are made by approval of a majority of the board (i.e., board members review every submission received). Just what role this kind of editorial system may have played in shaping the nature of the publication itself would be interesting to know but difficult to assess.

What kind of personality has emerged for this publication? In an attempt to get some documentation on this, an informal survey was undertaken in 1991, coinciding with the decision to change the journal's name. Over fifty of MAC's most active members were asked for some general feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the *Midwestern Archivist* and the degree of satisfaction with its contents and format. Among the questions were some dealing with the journal's identity: Has there been and should there continue to be a "regional" (midwestern) purpose for the publication? Are there and should there be characteristics that distinguish this publication from the *American Archivist* and *Provenance*? A slight majority of respondents reported that they believed the journal did manifest a midwestern character

and that this should be retained. For most, this meant simply that MAC members were and ought to be the predominant contributors. But others spoke of a less tangible quality. As someone put it, "There is, I would argue, a certain distinctiveness about American archival traditions emanating from the Midwest. MAC has traditionally been more open, more democratic, more congenial, more controversial, and more flexible than just about any other regional archival organization. . . . This very special, very unique flavor has been and should continue to be reflected in the pages of [the journal]." In comparing the *Midwestern Archivist* to the other American archival periodicals, most of the respondents perceived few significant differences. Those who did note contrasts, however, invariably concluded that the *Midwestern Archivist* had a greater tendency to publish "practical" articles, such as case studies of basic archival functions.⁴

How accurate are these impressions? In preparation for a Society of American Archivists workshop on publishing in archives journals in 1991, the editors of the *Midwestern Archivist*, the *American Archivist*, and *Provenance* gathered some data on the genre and content of articles run in the preceding five years of their journals. In terms of genre, the case study article (broadly defined) was, indeed, by far the most abundant type in the *Midwestern Archivist*—accounting for 20 out of 37 articles. And this ratio was considerably higher for the *Midwestern Archivist* than for the other two journals. Twelve of the 37 articles were identified as commentaries or perspectives, and the scattered few others were research articles or literature analyses.

In terms of content, the *Midwestern Archivist* has, in fact, showed an orientation

²The original board included Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler (chair), Kenneth Duckett, J. Frank Cook, John Fleckner, and Holly Hall; Nicholas Burckel served as book review editor.

³Editorial board chairs have included Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Lydia Lucas, Ann Diffendal, David Klaassen, Anne Kenney, Nancy Lankford, Frank Boles, Joel Wurl, and (currently) Ann Bowers.

⁴The survey was summarized in *MAC Newsletter* 20 (September 1992): 9–10. Further information on specific responses and comments is available from the editorial board chair.

toward basic archival functions, particularly appraisal and acquisition and reference, access, and use. (Interestingly, though, there were only 2 articles dealing with arrangement and description, 1 with preservation, and 1 with outreach, the latter being very weakly represented in each of the journals.) A significant proportion of *Midwestern Archivist* articles also focused on the conditions or concerns of particular types of repositories or sources of documentation—e.g., college and university archives, government records, religious collections, and historical societies. Compared with the *American Archivist* and even *Provenance*, very few *Midwestern Archivist* contributions addressed such administrative concerns as legal issues, ethics, buildings and equipment, or personnel matters, and only 4 of its articles dealt with automation, contrasted with 23 in the *American Archivist* during the same period.

The *American Archivist* was the hands-down winner in number of articles pertaining to the current condition of the archival profession, its historical development, the state of professional organizations, and education and professional development. *Provenance* ran the largest number of pieces concerning librarianship, records management, history, or other related professions. *Provenance* was also the only journal to print an article on oral history during this time, and none of the journals published anything on historical editing, a field that seems to be moving farther away from archival administration.⁵

How much are these outcomes shaped by design? In the case of the *Midwestern Archivist/Archival Issues*, the board's approach to filling the pages has been mainly opportunistic, relying most heavily on con-

ference presentations. Only a few special-theme issues have been intentionally constructed, but even these have come from successful conference sessions rather than from any kind of deliberate publication initiative or "commissioning" of articles.⁶ Thus, the journal's composition has essentially been reactive instead of catalytic. Should a journal's role be to *reflect* the profession's discourse or to *propel* it? As far as I know, the editorial board has never consciously debated this, but the reality in the case of the *Midwestern Archivist* has been oriented more toward the former than the latter.

The current submission level, regrettably, is just sufficient to keep the journal in print. *Archival Issues* runs between 3 and 5 articles per issue and two issues a year. In 1992, 16 submissions were received; of these 10 were accepted, 3 were rejected with encouragement to resubmit, and 3 were rejected outright. No similar statistics for previous years are available, but discussions with preceding editorial board chairs suggest that this rate has been quite constant for at least the past five years. The unsatisfactory condition of the submission pipeline has been and will continue to be a huge challenge for the journal's editors.

To address this problem, *Archival Issues* is considering several measures aimed at expanding contact with the producers of archival information. At present, the major North American archival journals claim essentially the same basic objective: publishing high-quality articles and reviews on archival theory and practice. The distinctions in content between these journals are fairly subtle and inconsequential. On the one hand, this illustrates that the archival

⁵These findings were discussed at the workshop "Writing for Publication," Society of American Archivists 55th Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, September 27, 1991. Raw data furnished by the three journal editors is available from the author.

⁶Theme issues of the *Midwestern Archivist* have included vol. 1, no. 1, 1976 (on college and university archives); vol. 6, no. 2, 1982 (on archival networks, resulting from the National Conference on Regional Archival Networks, Madison, Wis., July 1981); and vol. 16, no. 1, 1991 (on sound archives).

field is mature enough to support (though, again, not always solidly) at least four professional journals of somewhat similar scope and substance. On the other hand, it points to an opportunity for creative exploitation of selected aspects of the profession.

The editorial board believes that regional archival organizations may provide especially fertile ground for new publication initiatives. Most of them are expanding in terms of membership and services and are sponsoring conferences on a regular basis. Some, like the Society of Southwestern Archivists, publish a substantial newsletter with occasional articles, whereas others, like the Society of California Archivists, produce a series of "occasional papers."⁷ By and large, however, these groups generate in their meetings a great deal of important archival knowledge that does not find its way into print for the benefit of colleagues elsewhere. Consequently, the board has begun exploring the prospects of working with the regionals to help get more of their conference presentations or other products into print via *Archival Issues*. The possibility should exist, for instance, to cosponsor an occasional issue of the journal devoted to selected papers from another regional program.

Along with increasing the flow of submissions, the board is faced with a pressing need to get the publication onto a more timely schedule. Actually, these two objectives are codependent: scarcity of submissions makes reliable scheduling more difficult, and delayed publishing discourages new contributions. The informal MAC member survey referred to earlier revealed how acutely concerned readers are about the timeliness of the journal's pro-

duction, and the board is redoubling its efforts to accelerate the editorial process.

No formal consideration has been given to the future of *Archival Issues* in terms of content direction; the title change was not precipitated by any kind of mandate to modify the substance of the journal.⁸ Most likely, at least in the foreseeable future, the journal will build on its perceived strengths. Undoubtedly, case studies will continue to be encouraged. There is arguably still a considerable gap between archival methods that are *prescribed* and those we must actually *do*. The profession continues to need more descriptions of these problems and of the solutions that have been devised. This could take the form of either the traditional account of activities from the perspective of an internal participant or the less common critical assessment by an impartial observer. The key to useful products in each case is a probing, analytical approach that aims to illuminate *why* things were done as they were. A particularly promising source for case studies is grant projects, whose final reports, required by funding agencies, often can and should be modified for publication. In addition, the editorial board is exploring the possibility of a somewhat loosely structured "work in progress" column as a means of encouraging more reporting, perhaps in concise fashion, of important new institutional or cooperative efforts.

Archival Issues will probably also strive to include a more regular diet of archivists' responses to broad professional organization initiatives and standards or to newly declared precepts and prognoses. Archivists have no shortage of firm convictions, but they have rarely shown a proclivity for open debate. Recently, the Archives ListServe electronic bulletin board has provided a ves-

⁷The two examples cited are the *Southwestern Archivist*, a quarterly newsletter, and *Westwords*, an annual periodical featuring major presentations given at meetings of the Society of California Archivists.

⁸Further discussion of this is found in "From the Editor on the Transition from *Midwestern Archivist* to *Archival Issues*," *Archival Issues: The Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference* 17 (1992): 5-6.

sel for divergent perspectives and, occasionally, outspoken agitation. With tolerable effort and care, some of the lengthier, more intriguing opinion messages that have appeared in this forum could also have been transformed into acceptable journal contributions, thereby facilitating broader distribution of ideas.

If submissions to *Archival Issues* are any indication, archivists write intelligently and clearly, but they have a tendency to overlook some of the basics of responsible scholarship. Too often, the journal receives papers lacking clear evidence that the author has considered other relevant literature on the topic. Presenting ideas in a vacuum is a surefire recipe for rejection in *Archival Issues* (and most other journals). The journal has, however, shown an exceptional willingness to work with a worthwhile concept even though significant reconsideration and revision may be necessary. And, in the case of writers who have not previously published in a refereed archival journal, the editorial board attempts to play an especially encouraging role and offers a biannual "New Authors Award" for out-

standing articles submitted to the journal by such individuals.⁹

Archival Issues carries a tradition of success and is a testament to the strength and vision of the Midwest Archives Conference. However, its continued vitality cannot be taken for granted and will depend on the editorial board's response to the dual challenge of encouraging new articles to meet the needs of a diverse readership and of disseminating this information promptly. The journal evolved from a perceived professional need that the editorial board believes still persists—a need for a publication that incorporates contributions on broad issues or theoretical concerns but that *emphasizes* the applied dimension of archival work. As *Archival Issues* develops further, it may serve as an especially interesting medium for viewing the movable alignment of theory and practice in the archival profession in the coming years.

⁹The first MAC New Authors award was presented in 1992 to Brenda Nelson Strauss for the article "Preserving Chicago Symphony Orchestra Broadcast Tapes," *Midwestern Archivist* 16 (1991): 21–30.