

## FOUR NEW REGIONAL NETWORKS: A PROGRESS REPORT

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The Midwest Archives Conference seminar on regional networks was held in Chicago during July, 1974. It was the first of MAC's planned series of special, in-depth seminars on limited topics, and drew twenty-two participants from seven regional systems.<sup>1</sup>

The seminar was organized in response to the growing interest in the use of regional systems to handle both public and private records, thus relieving the sponsoring institutions of total collection and storage responsibilities. The paper explosion of the 1950s and 1960s drastically increased the size of collections received by many of these institutions and made it difficult for them to collect even representative materials from across the regions they serve.

As the size of collections continues to grow, much history - particularly local and regional history - goes uncollected as institutions are inundated by the records of major personages, businesses, and political and social organizations. Although such records are of obvious present and future significance, the risk of losing equally valuable records of local and regional importance is great. Beginning with the 1961 renovation of the Wisconsin Area Research Centers, there has been a steady growth in the number of attempts to form workable regional networks. They have not, to be sure, been tried successfully in more than a few states; but the accomplishments of several of them, most notably the three largest networks in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio, have prompted continued and widening interest in the concept.

Four of the newest regional networks are reviewed here, based on information given by their representatives during the seminar and updated by the author during November, 1975. They are the systems

in Illinois, Michigan, Nevada, and Texas. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio networks were also represented; they are covered by relatively recent articles that document their operations.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in Illinois, Michigan, and Texas the regional centers themselves are concerned solely with local public records, although they are housed with collections of both private and university papers. These two latter areas are kept separate from the public records collections, however, and fall outside the direction of the network programs. Thus all three networks concentrate on public records while their individual centers have further, unconsolidated, resources. This is a distinct departure from the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio networks in which both public and private records are administered by the network. In those instances, of course, the state archives and the state historical societies are parts of a single, coordinated organization. In Illinois, Michigan, and Texas the state archives are separate entities and control the networks.

At the MAC seminar, Illinois was represented by Wayne Temple of the State Archives and by J. Joe Bauxar of Northern Illinois University; Michigan by Martin McLaughlin, Assistant Archivist for Local Records; Nevada by John W. Townley, Director of the Nevada Historical Society; and Texas by John M. Kinney, State Archivist. Additional information on Illinois was provided by John Daly, Director of Archives.

## Illinois

The regional network in Illinois has undergone several important changes during the past year. The network previously consisted of four centers located at Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Illinois Universities. This group has been expanded to include additional centers at Sangamon State University, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and Illinois State University at Bloomington. The network has been named the Illinois Regional Archival Depository System, and the state re-divided into seven collecting areas. The depositories are generally affiliated with the various university archives, although they are concerned only with the acquisition, storage, and servicing of local public records. The program is administered by the Illinois State Archives with minimal on-site supervision provided by the university archivists or other faculty personnel. A number of the affiliated archives include regional history collections as well as university papers. Only the public records are controlled by the State Archives. The regional program is headed by a director in Springfield, with eight field representatives who collect and transport materials, train student interns, and work with local government units.

Acting under a local records act of 1961, the State Archives es-

established a local records commission to handle requests for the disposition of all public records other than those of the state of Illinois. State records are handled by a separate commission. Local records slated for disposal are approved by a field representative of the Archives, who then presents the request, with others, to a meeting of the commission. Records approved for disposal but transferred to a depository because of historical value become the property of the depository. Records which counties and other government units must retain permanently may be transferred and placed on deposit. They are available for research while remaining the property of the issuing organization. At Northern Illinois University's depository a pilot project has tested a refinement of this program, allowing the archivist to choose for retention certain records from a list of those already approved for destruction. The project has proven very successful, and has been adopted as part of the revised program at all depositories.

A major exception to the above arrangements exists with relation to Illinois' court records, which are partially administered by a separate commission. The court records commission is technically bound by the state commission, and must submit all record actions to it for approval. Selection of those records, however, together with initial recommendations on disposition, originates with the court commission.

The Cook County records commission is another exception to general local records commission procedure. As the most populous county in the state, Cook has its own commission which reviews the disposition requests of county offices. The county commission then makes its recommendations, which are forwarded to Springfield. The depository at Chicago Circle is intended to serve Cook County's historical public records.

Local government agencies in Illinois, like those in Michigan, have committed themselves heavily to microfilming records for preservation. The result has been a great quantity of microfilm of widely-varying quality. Both to aid the local units and to establish statewide standards for microfilm operations, the state Micrographics Division provides a specialist to advise government agencies on their programs. This service promises to stabilize microfilm quality at an acceptable level. It is one of a number of similar consultive services available in Illinois.

Each of the Illinois depositories employs student interns to handle its collections, although the volume of work in the network has so far prevented much field activity by the students. Recently the State Archives applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to expand and strengthen the depository staffs. The grant

would be used to employ additional student interns for work with local governments and with records in the depositories. It also includes provisions for an increased number of intern training sessions both in the system and in Springfield. Under grant conditions the system would chiefly concentrate on expansion of its field services.

The Illinois depositories have been established to provide for the systematic administration of local public records. With the additional centers and field personnel now available, the network will be able to greatly increase its effectiveness and service. The success of depositories such as the one at Northern indicates the potential of the entire new Illinois network.

### Michigan

Michigan's regional system, which includes five centers, is actually an updated version of a network which was first planned for operation in 1965. That effort remained largely a paper organization, however, and involved only one active depository of three original members. It ceased operations after a brief time. The present network began in 1972, using the concept and basic organization of the first, but with added members and more central direction. All five centers have contracts with the Michigan State Archives, which is a unit of the Michigan History Division of the Department of State. The Archives has assigned various areas of the state to each of the regional depositories, with authority to collect and store public records within those areas. Four of the depositories are located at universities - Central Michigan, Western Michigan, Michigan Technological, and Oakland. The fifth is housed with the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, and includes only records of the city of Detroit.

The network is headed by the assistant archivist for local records, who does much of the actual field work and collection for each center. The depositories have non-public records as well, although the State Archives controls only the public records. Each depository is headed by a university archivist or librarian who administers the private and university archival collections and the day-to-day activities of the entire unit.

One of Michigan's major new programs is aimed at extending microfilm operations across the state, thus easing storage problems for both local governments and the depositories. Because of the expense of implementing this as a statewide program, it has been undertaken as a series of joint ventures with local government units and the institutions housing the depositories, several of which have in-house microfilm operations. The State Archives provides the film and access to the records, and the depositories or local governments provide film-

ing equipment and staff. One reason for the decision to rely so heavily on microfilm is the fact that many local governments in the state have acquired microfilm equipment and used it widely, with very uneven results. State Archives personnel found much of the microfilm produced to be substandard in quality, and were faced with the need to educate local officials in microfilm procedure and standards. The general availability of equipment does, of course, make implementation of a statewide microfilm program easier. So far the program has proven successful, and will aid in reducing the volume of records eligible for transfer to the depositories.

The work of the local records archivist is largely concerned with creating and maintaining workable relations with local officials and depositories, offering them a service and the means to use it easily and effectively. He is responsible for field contacts, transport of records to depositories, and for the microfilm program. In addition, he supervises the handling of public records in the depositories. Space remains a problem, limiting the ability of depositories to store the potentially vast series of records available to them. The areas assigned to each are large; Michigan has 83 counties for an average of more than 16 counties apiece. All of the depositories collect private manuscripts as well as the public records, although only one (Western Michigan) serves as a university archives.

Recently the State Archives received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to implement an inventory of public records in a selected group of counties and cities. Those selected represent a cross section of the state and include the following: Wayne County/Detroit; Kalamazoo County/Kalamazoo; Isabella County/Mt. Pleasant; Clare County/Clare; Houghton County/Houghton; and Keweenaw County/Eagle River. Teams from each of the depositories are carrying out the inventory under direction of the State Archives. The project is slated for completion during fall 1976, and will give an overview of the situation of local public records in the state. Hopefully, it will also lead to an expanded regional depository network, with additional centers and more space in each of its present components.

Despite its problems (which are common to many other networks as well) and the size of the task undertaken, the Michigan depository network has already made a good deal of progress as evidenced by the strength of its microfilming program alone.

## Nevada

One of the most unique regional systems yet established is Nevada's. The population distribution of the state has a great deal to do with the unusual way in which its regional program has developed. Nevada has only seventeen counties, three major population centers,

and two university campuses. The population is concentrated in the extreme south and west central parts of the state, with nearly ninety percent divided between Las Vegas and Reno. Besides the University of Nevada's two campuses (in Las Vegas and Reno), there are four community colleges (Las Vegas, Reno, Carson City, and Elko), and fewer than one hundred junior and senior high schools. The usual alternatives available for a regional system, such as the university facilities that are used in most of the other networks, are thus limited.

The state's single historical agency of any size is the Nevada Historical Society in Reno. Founded in 1904, the Society contains many collections relating to mining, railroads, and the numerous socio-cultural and economic changes that attempted to make use of Nevada's vast stretches of open land. The Society has 9000 members, a full-time staff of nine persons, and operates from a building on the Reno campus of the University. It is funded by the state, and until 1968 also functioned as the state archives. At that time a separate archives was created, although the Society retained the state records it already held. The Society's materials were, however, unavailable for all practical purposes to the state's largest population centers, and Society personnel found that many of their potential users were simply out of reach. After an intensive consolidation and cataloging program that brought together the Society's materials (which had been scattered among warehouses in Reno) and publication of a guide to the more than 2,500 collections, the possibilities of direct service across the state were considered for the first time.

Because of the unusually few possibilities for use in a regional system, the Society's present director turned to the state's public libraries, in particular the county libraries, as suitable points for supervised use of historical manuscripts. The obvious difficulties presented by lack of an even distribution of population and university-level educational institutions made permanent depository-type regional centers impossible in Nevada. Instead, a system utilizing the county libraries as major points of use was devised and named the "Histo/Share" program. Under the program, user inquiries directed to the Society are redirected to the county libraries, where library personnel request the material for the potential user. Copies of the Society's guide were distributed to all participating libraries, colleges and universities, and serve as the basic reference tool for users in selecting materials. The Society evaluates the requests in terms of the fragility of the material, the reason for the request, and the length of time the material is needed. If, for instance, the material is requested by a high school student for a class paper, the Society may send xerox copies rather than originals. This safeguards the material while still performing a reference function. If, on the other hand, the user has more complex and longer-range needs, the Society will send the material to the library where it can be used un-

der the librarian's care. The materials sent out are delivered and returned by Society staff members on their trips around the state; periods of use currently average sixty days. Each participating library is signatory to a contract with the Society which specifies the responsibilities of each party. Loans are also made to the university and community college libraries under similar arrangements.

The expanse of the Nevada regional program is greater in miles (400 miles separate the Society in Reno from Las Vegas) than in number of requests received - which at present average three to four a month. Of the seventeen counties in the state, only eleven have county libraries, and all of these are under contract as members of the "Histo/Share" program. These eleven, with the two university and four community college libraries, and the Society itself, form the present practical limits of the Nevada regional system. So far the program has worked well, with a variety of requests for collection use. The fact that the Society's collections were so recently reorganized has made the task of monitoring their content much easier. The familiarity of Society personnel with each collection has helped prevent unnoticed loss or damage of documents on loan. The risk is there, of course, but so is the beginning of a remarkable program of public service.

The Nevada regional program is indeed unique, and would probably not be feasible in another, larger context. Within the limits of Nevada's requirements, however, it represents an innovative and highly promising answer to the problem of making historical materials available to an entire state.

## Texas

A regional archives program began in Texas in 1972. Called the Regional Historical Resource Depositories network, it is operated by the Texas Library and Historical Commission, a state agency which includes the State Archives. The program was one of two submitted to the Texas legislature by the state archivist, and was first funded by a special Governor's Office appropriation. (The other program suggested was a statewide public records microfilming program.) Funds for the network are now part of the budget of the State Archives, which has responsibility for its operation.

At present there are twenty depositories, with seventeen located on the campuses of state universities, and one each at Baylor University, the Houston Metropolitan Archives, and the library of former Texas Governor Bryce Daniels at Liberty. The latter will be housed in a new building by mid 1976, and will serve much of southeast Texas. It will also house Governor Daniels' papers, transferred from the State Archives.

Modeled loosely on the Wisconsin network, the Texas depositories are involved exclusively with public records. Little work is done or contemplated with private manuscripts; the depositories are intended as local records collections and service arms of the State Archives. The contracts covering the depositories call for all collecting and processing to be performed by the State Archives, which also undertakes general administration of the system, maintenance of a central catalog of holdings, and funding of a small staff of field representatives to work with local government units throughout the state. Each of the institutions is obligated to supply storage, supervision, reference service and to make its materials available for temporary transfer within the network. This last provision is a prime inducement offered to the various institutions. With the exception of such materials as broadsides, maps, books, and photographs, the depositories loan original materials as requested. The depositories are headed by various staff members of the participating institutions, including university archivists and special collections librarians. They are responsible for day to day activities with the advice and assistance of the field archivists.

A group of five archivists, one clerk, and a research assistant currently compose the staff of the network at the state level. One archivist, the assistant director for local records, serves as head of the program at the Archives in Austin, working with the clerical and research assistants. The other four archivists are assigned to geographic areas of the state where they serve as field advisors for the depositories. An additional person, funded by a local historical society, works for the network in the Liberty depository. In addition to their advisory work, the field archivists have responsibility for working with county and municipal officials, helping them evaluate their records and supervising a gradual inventory of county records holdings. They also provide information on the depository network, emphasizing the benefits of its programs for space-short agencies. County and municipal governments in Texas are not legally bound to cooperate with the depositories by transferring records and participating in inventories; their work with the program is voluntary and thus it must be 'sold' (and, once sold, kept alive) by the field archivists. A particularly important facet of their efforts is the development of retention schedules and records management guides to speed identification of records series for destruction or transfer to the depositories. As the counties are in the familiar position of possessing more records than storage space, this is one of the most valuable aspects of the program. The depositories have no authority to collect or process individually, and the field archivists thus assume a good deal of importance in the network.

The Texas regional network has already published an impressive series of public records inventories for a number of counties, a pro-

gram which was begun by the State Archives and is now headquartered at North Texas State University. Training of inventory personnel is coordinated by the Archives and North Texas, using history department faculty and students from universities throughout the state. The training process includes use of a twenty-minute film ("Texas Bound") which explains the basic aims of the inventory and acquaints viewers with the depositories. The program has been funded by a number of modest grants, including one from the University Coordinating Board, and has proven a definite success.

Coordination of the Texas network is, of course, complicated by the sheer size of the state, which has 254 counties. Several of the depositories are more than 800 miles apart, and the areas served by individual depositories average more than 12 counties each. Given the dimensions of the task, the Regional Historical Resource Depositories network has made an impressive beginning in its attempt to administer the local public records of Texas.

### Conclusion

The four networks briefly examined here provide excellent examples of regional systems built to suit specific situations. Their success indicates that the concepts behind regional network operation can be modified to serve a variety of needs. Nevada's "Histo/Share" program is a particularly interesting example of modified network development in what might at first glance appear an unworkable situation. Texas, too, has created a network to meet certain demands within an unusually large framework. And both Illinois and Michigan are certain enough of the positive potential of their systems to have undertaken major revisions of those operations.

These revisions are interesting in themselves, for they point to the necessity of adequate initial planning and periodic review. Each group of network organizers must look realistically at the limits of its own situation and design (and update) network structures that will fit within them. Undoubtedly this continuing planning factor has contributed to the success of the Illinois, Michigan, Nevada, and Texas networks. Although each exhibits some structural and organizational features that set it apart from the others (and from the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio networks), each is designed to meet the problems presented by the environment in which it operates. As mentioned earlier, all but one of the four networks reflect conscious decisions to build collections based entirely on public records. Only Nevada differs; its system is concerned with making existing material available for reference. Whether the public records networks will eventually include private manuscripts collections remains to be seen; it appears doubtful that such a step would be taken in the near future. The enormity of the tasks already undertaken will probably

prevent it.

The important consideration is that all four networks are in operation, and that each has the potential to make increased contributions as it grows. Indeed, the fact that the two Midwestern networks are in general alignment with the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio systems gives additional emphasis to their importance beyond state boundaries. Their continued successful growth may finally make possible the development of an experimental interstate network.

1. The Houston Metropolitan Archives was also represented.

2. Richard A. Erney, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," American Archivist 29 (January 1966): 11-15; Richard A. Erney and F. Gerald Ham, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," American Libraries 3 (February 1972): 135-140; James E. Fogerty, "Minnesota Regional Research Centers," Minnesota History 44 (Spring 1974): 30-32; David R. Larson, "Ohio Network of American History Research Centers," Ohio History 79 (Winter 1970): 62-67.