

# *Archival Issues*

**Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference**

**Volume 22, Number 2, 1997**

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## EDITORIAL POLICY

*Archival Issues*, a semiannual journal published by the Midwest Archives Conference, is concerned with the issues and problems confronting the contemporary archivist. Submissions relating to archival theory and current practice are solicited. Diversity among topics and points of view is encouraged. Ideas and opinions expressed by the contributors are not necessarily those of the Midwest Archives Conference or its Editorial Board.

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. Guidelines for authors of articles and case studies are available upon request from the Editorial Board chair. Manuscripts should be sent to the board chair, Dennis Meissner, Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul, MN 55102. The Editorial Board uses the current edition of *Chicago Manual of Style* as the standard for style, including footnote format. Decisions on manuscripts will be rendered within ten weeks of submission. Offers to review books or suggestions of books to review should be sent to the book review editor, Nancy Bartlett, Bentley Historical Library, 1150 Beal Ave., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2113.

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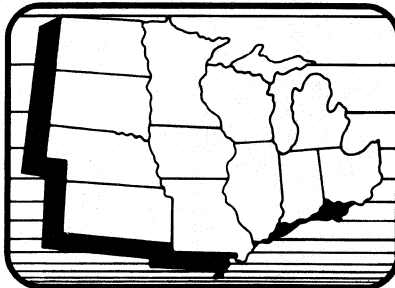
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*To the Editor:*

In "'To Approximate June Pasture': The Documentation Strategy in the Real World" (*Archival Issues* 22:1 (1997), Timothy Ericson identifies several factors which led to the Documenting Metropolitan Milwaukee (DMM) project's failure to produce a documentation strategy. I'd characterize these factors as the "usual suspects": the conflict between the project goal and institutional goals, the participants' lack of training and the poor quality of intellectual control of collections. The potential for conflict was obvious from the very nature of the project, while the training and control issues were known going into the project, not revealed by it.

Where Ericson describes a straight conflict between institution and project goals, I recall the problem mainly as a conflict between short-term institutional goals and the long-term project goal. Such conflicts are normal for archivists; they happen nearly every day. In the case of DMM, this conflict was exacerbated by an unrealistic project timetable. Participants had been recruited without much information about the time commitment they would have to make. Partly, this was a result of a situation where the DMM project was not only attempting to produce a strategy, it was attempting to delineate a methodology to test a theoretical construct. As in many multi-institutional projects, participants could not proceed at their own pace; things regularly slowed to a halt while everyone waited for one participant or another to finish something up. Even the most committed participants ran into problems as the project timetable went further and further out of line.

Contrary to Ericson's viewpoint, I doubt this project would have proceeded any more quickly or effectively had participants been better trained or had their collections under perfect control. With more extensive archival experience collectively, this project would most likely have been rejected before a proposal was sent in to NHPRC. As it turned out only four (of the 13) repositories were headed by the same individuals by the time the grant was awarded, and none of the individuals who wrote the proposal were working in the area by the time it began. This personnel turnover was/is highly uncharacteristic of the Milwaukee archival community.

I agree that the topical analysis framework was valuable, but I don't understand the author's criticisms of the participants in this context. Who would be likely to have a collection policy written along these topical lines, let alone a collection organized along them?

Unlike the majority of participants, I had used the collection analysis technique previously, when the LCOMM Coordinated Collections Committee surveyed Milwaukee area library holdings. Using a library shelf list with topics keyed to appropriate sections of the Dewey Decimal or LC classification schemes greatly facilitated that process. Then, too, the library analysis was spread over a long period so that it could be fit into busy schedules and the results of the analysis have guided the Committee through years of acquisitions decisions. In contrast, archivists must believe in miracles.

Analyzing the collection from an inventory organized by the records-creating offices was mostly a process of elimination of the non-Milwaukee materials for the Museum Archives. Ericson points out that "none of the newly written individual statements were approved by the governing bodies of individual institutions..." (p.10). Well, for other than repositories with large manuscript collections and a Milwaukee collecting focus (perhaps three of the 12), why would anybody want to give these topically-oriented statements to anybody other than the project director?

From a practical standpoint, before most of the participants could get to their governing boards, they would have to go through several internal layers. Yet, DMM proceeded as if the participating archivists were the sole decision makers in their organizations. This oversight might have been remedied in the topical panel discussions, if the convening archivist was responsible for a topic that correlated with his/her organization's mission, so that various organizational decision makers could have been included, but this correlation wasn't always feasible. Nor was a concerted effort made to include the appropriate decision makers from organizations other than one's own.

Eschewing any serious discussion of where we wanted to be in ten or 15 years, we analyzed existing collections, wrote policy statements justifying those collections, and then had to comply with the fifth element of the proposal which NHPRC had funded: the creation of a database of holdings. I am unclear why Ericson omitted this phase; it was clearly part of the proposal as written. It was also the phase that absorbed the most energy, dragged on the longest, and revealed the greatest need for participant training.

Midway through the project, the separate database idea was jettisoned in favor of entering records into the OCLC database. The attraction was twofold: the LCOMM Archives Committee would not have to maintain its own database of records and more than half of the participating repositories were units of OCLC libraries. Remember, this was 1990 and Web pages wouldn't be around for a while, let alone EAD or HTML.

Ironically, this fifth phase was the one which the records collectors subsequently identified as the most critical need. Yet Ericson characterizes this work as being motivated by sets of cards to put in catalogs (p.11). There are much easier ways to generate card sets than doing MARC-AMC cataloging, with name and subject authority control, to the APPM standard which OCLC required from us. Several participants called me to ask what they were supposed to do with the packs of card. The archivists might have come to the workshops to learn certain techniques, but they participated in the OCLC records creation phase in order to let outside audiences know what they had.

The LCOMM project was trying to work out a viable methodology to test the theory of documentation strategy and I think we simply never came up with a methodology. Given that the purpose of the Milwaukee documentation strategy was to foster a cooperative approach to acquiring historical records in the future, DMM mired itself deeply in the past. Like a mastodon who'd wandered into the La Brea Tar Pits, it died of exhaustion.

Think about it for a minute: why remind participants (actually, make them go over and over) how much they've already invested in any given topic so that they will cede

future collecting to another? Why create cataloging records and enter them into a national bibliographic database for collections that would be ideally transferred elsewhere in the future? And why go out on a limb to sell the CEO and the Board on a collecting policy that describes and/or justifies what has been done up to now, only to decide to stop collecting in certain areas? Sure, Ericson is right about training and education but the most frustrating part of the project was that we ought to have been a whole lot more reasonable about past and present practices and said, at some point during the two years, "What's past is past, let's talk about what the situation should be like in the year 2000."

Ericson concludes with some examples of archival cooperation for which he credits the project, but similar activities were going on in Milwaukee before anybody coined the phrase "documentation strategy." Projects were undertaken and completed, and a regular schedule of workshops and other continuing education activities had been in place since the early 1980s. (Turner, "History of Archival Cooperation in Milwaukee," presented at the Wisconsin Library Association Annual Conference, Milwaukee, 1991.)

Far from expecting a documentation strategy to generate cooperative activities, I'd recommend undertaking one only in the presence of a solid history of cooperation that was strong enough to survive some serious fraying.

For the record, there was one additional participant in the Documenting Metropolitan Milwaukee project: the Milwaukee Art Museum (see list of participants in Endnote 6, p.18).

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