

THE MIDWEST ARCHIVES CONFERENCE: A RICH HISTORY REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: This article will recount the origins and evolution of the Midwest Archives Conference (MAC) from its birth in the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago on May 5 and 6, 1972, through its development into the largest and one of the most dynamic regional archival organizations in the United States. Although this article is grounded in the extensive records of MAC held by the Northwestern University Archives, it is more a personal memoir of a founding member and two-decade participant in MAC than a formal history. Such a history, well-deserved, will come, no doubt, in due time, crafted by another author with a less-prismed lens and sufficient distance from the events described below.

The central purpose of the Midwest Archives Conference is, and always has been, to confer, to get together, to exchange ideas and viewpoints and solutions to archival problems. Indeed the very name of the organization was deliberately chosen by the founders to convey this purpose. MAC is not the Society of Midwestern Archivists or the Midwest Archives Association or the Midwest Archives Organization—it is the Midwest Archives *Conference*. MAC has held forty meetings to date; one each Fall and one in the Spring. Every Spring meeting has been held in Chicago at the Bismarck Hotel, and each Fall meeting has been held in a different city in the MAC region—nineteen different cities in all. The very first Fall meeting was held in Chicago in 1972, but, beginning in the Fall of 1973, MAC hit the road, stopping first in Madison, Wisconsin on an autumnal odyssey that has taken it to eight states in the twelve-state MAC region. MAC has been to Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, and Wisconsin three times each; to Indiana, Ohio, and Iowa twice each, and to Minnesota once. MAC has yet to visit North and South Dakota, Nebraska, or Kansas, although its Kansas City meeting brought it to the Kansas state line.

An extension of MAC's mission to *confer* is its mandate to *communicate*—to communicate with those of its members unable to attend the two annual meetings and to communicate with the larger archival community outside the MAC region. This mandate led to the development of MAC's two publications—the *MAC Newsletter* and the MAC journal, *Archival Issues*, known until recently as *The Midwestern Archivist*. To date MAC has published seventy-five issues of its newsletter and thirty-two issues of its journal.

In addition to its annual meetings, MAC has sponsored other conferences and seminars, has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and has had, from its inception, an active and prominent presence at the annual meetings of the Society of American Archivists.

While its meetings, publications, and other activities are at the center of MAC's existence, the essence of the organization is, and always has been, its members. MAC began very modestly in May 1972 with 111 founding members; today it has over 1,000 members. And it has been the energy, enthusiasm, and commitment of its members that has been the engine that has driven the organization throughout its existence. MAC has had twelve Presidents and twelve Vice-Presidents. It has had six Secretary-Treasurers. There have been seven editors of the *MAC Newsletter*, eight chairs of the editorial board of *Archival Issues* and four production editors of *Archival Issues*. Sixty individuals have served as members of the MAC Nominating Committee, over forty members have chaired program committees and over forty have chaired local arrangements committees. Hundreds of others have served as members of these and other committees, have been participants in MAC program sessions or have otherwise contributed to the organization. To call MAC a membership-driven organization is to understate the obvious.

What, then, was the genesis of MAC? What was its impetus? Why was it founded? To answer these questions one must turn to the situation in the American archival profession at the close of the 1960s.

During the last half of the 1960s, the American archival profession was undergoing a rather significant demographic change. The first generation of American archivists—those who had come to the profession in its infancy in the mid-1930s and during and shortly after World War II were retiring or otherwise passing from the scene. A second generation of archivists, albeit much smaller than the founding generation, was just beginning to achieve prominence, and yet a third generation, much larger than its two predecessors, was just entering the archival profession. The basis of this third generation was the significant expansion in the number of archival employment opportunities that had occurred during the 1960s, particularly in newly-established archival repositories in institutions of higher learning. Unlike most of the first two generations of American archivists, many members of this new generation of archivists had arrived at the archival vocation by choice instead of circumstance.

While there existed in the United States a scattering of small state archival organizations, for all intents and purposes the only "ball game" in town was the national professional organization for archivists—the Society of American Archivists. Founded in 1936, the SAA had, from its inception, held relatively small annual meetings in various cities. Many younger archivists either could not afford to attend the SAA meetings or were left home to tend the shop while senior archivists went off to the meetings. Many of the younger generation perceived SAA as a rather closed, elitist organization run by an "old boy" network. SAA meetings were regarded as stuffy, boring affairs, not at all congenial to newer or younger members. The SAA leadership was elected on uncontested slates and it was not easy to secure an appointment to the committees where SAA activities and projects were carried out.

At the same time the United States was experiencing one of the most turbulent periods in its history. The civil rights movement, the movement against the war in Viet Nam, the women's rights movement and a host of other movements for social, economic, and political change had created a climate that also fostered change in a great variety of cultural endeavors. The American archival profession was not immune from this climate. Within the SAA, movements to democratize the organization and to improve the status of women in the archival profession emerged, reflecting a growing sentiment across the country among archivists that not only did the SAA require reform, but something beyond the SAA was needed to meet the myriad archival needs not adequately addressed by the SAA, particularly the needs of those archivists unable to attend the annual meeting. These circumstances provided the crucible and formed the context in which MAC was founded.

No one really knows who originally came up with the idea of starting a regional archival organization in the Midwest. As there are numerous possible claimants to this honor, it is perhaps best to say that MAC was born of a collective effort on the part of a dozen or so archivists who perceived, for a variety of reasons, the need for such an organization. The idea was discussed informally at the 1971 SAA meeting in San Francisco. Among those receptive to the notion of starting some kind of a regional organization were Mary Lynn McCree and Mary Ann Bamberger of the University of Illinois at Chicago, Phil Mason of Wayne State University, Father Thomas Elliot of the Holy Cross Fathers in South Bend, Indiana, Archie Motley of the Chicago Historical Society, J. Frank Cook of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and F. Gerald Ham of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. These individuals, along with several others, held a meeting in December 1971 at the Hull House Museum on the University of Illinois campus in Chicago to plan a regional meeting of archivists in Chicago in the Spring of 1972. Through telephone calls and correspondence, planning continued over the next four months, resulting in the founding meeting of MAC on the first Friday and Saturday in May, 1972. In addition to attending program sessions, participants in the founding meeting decided to hold a second meeting in the Fall, adopted the name Midwest Archives Conference, elected a provisional steering committee of twelve, and delegated a committee to draft a constitution. Of the 111 founding members, thirty-six were from Illinois, thirty from Wisconsin, fifteen from Indiana, eight from Michigan, four from Iowa, three each from Minnesota and Missouri, and one each from Ohio and Maryland. As these figures reflect, the original geographical area that MAC encompassed comprised the states formed out of the old Northwest Territory. Although a handful of founding members were from Iowa, Missouri, and Minnesota, the founders of MAC did not envision an organization whose terrain extended west of the Mississippi.

The second MAC meeting, on September 29-30 in Chicago, was the only MAC Fall meeting ever held in Chicago. At this meeting, a constitution, drafted in the main by Phil Mason of Wayne State University, was adopted following a series of amendments proposed by J. Joe Bauxer of Northern Illinois University. After adopting the constitution, MAC members elected their first officers and Council members. Archie Motley was elected President, Father Tom Elliot, Vice-President, and Mary Ann Bamberger, Secretary-Treasurer. Six Council members were also elected, as were two members of a Nominating Committee.

In January 1973, MAC took its next step forward with publication of Volume 1, Number 1 of the *MAC Newsletter*, edited by J. Frank Cook with myself as assistant editor. Three more issues of the *MAC Newsletter* appeared in 1973, thus establishing it as a quarterly publication.

On May 4-5, 1973, MAC held its second annual Spring meeting at the Bismarck Hotel, and it was clear by that time that a very solid organization had been established. Already several now-legendary MAC institutions were in place, having been initiated the previous year, including the MAC mixer, for which MAC gained fame throughout "archivaldom." The idea for the mixer was simple: find someone willing to offer a hotel room for an evening, a room with a big enough bathtub to accommodate ice and beer—make sure that the beer was free and sufficient to last the evening, informally publicize the mixer, and let midwestern conviviality do the rest. Although this style of mixer is perhaps now obsolete, having fallen victim to the perils of our litigious times, twenty years ago there was only one problem to surmount. The Bismarck did not allow organizations meeting there to bring their own beer into the hotel. That problem was solved rather ingeniously by enlisting the assistance of the archival sisters from religious communities in attendance at the meeting. The sisters marched west down Randolph Street to Zimmerman's Liquor Store, secreted the purchases under their habits, and thus, with the most beatific of smiles on their faces, smuggled the beer past the Bismarck's ever watchful desk clerks and bell boys. Indeed, the MAC mixer proved so popular from the start that MAC began holding mixers at SAA meetings, where they quickly became highlights of these meetings. Its social function aside, one can assert that it is very likely that more MAC business and exchanges of ideas occurred at MAC mixers than at many Council and committee meetings.

While the first issues of the *MAC Newsletter* seem stone-age primitive compared to the issues being published today, they nonetheless included many special features that are still carried—the President's letter, Institutional Spotlight, News of Our Members, and "Dear Archivist, I Need Help," the predecessor of the "Midwestern Inquirer" column. "Dear Archivist" was based upon the "Dear Abby" syndicated newspaper advice column. There were several occasions when Jackie Haring, the all-around answer woman who wrote the column, was unable to submit text. The newsletter editorial staff, forced to concoct both the questions from readers and the answers, probably contributed greatly to the flow of archival misinformation to the membership.

In 1973, MAC made a decision that would have lasting consequences for the organization. It decided to take the show on the road. Since many archivists could not afford to attend two MAC meetings each year in addition to the SAA's annual meeting, it was decided that, as well as bringing the masses to Chicago for the Spring MAC meeting, MAC should be brought to the masses in the hinterlands each Fall. The first MAC Fall "road" meeting was held in Madison, Wisconsin, on September 7-8, 1973. Over the years, occasionally amidst heated discussion, MAC reaffirmed its commitment to meet twice each year. By holding Fall meetings in different parts of the MAC region, MAC would reach constituencies that otherwise would not have access to the organization.

The Fall meetings were not without their dangers. Such meetings offered opportunities for cooperation between MAC and the various state archival orga-

nizations within the MAC region, but they also created the potential for conflicts. Indeed, some members of state organizations saw MAC's coming onto their turf as a form of archival imperialism. The first few MAC Fall meetings went very well—held, as they were (with one exception), in states with no state archival organization. The 1974 St. Paul meeting brought a trainload of archivists from Chicago to the Twin Cities, cementing a strong bond between MAC and the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society which greatly strengthened MAC in the years to come. Prior to this meeting, MAC was primarily an Illinois/Wisconsin-based organization, with mere outposts in surrounding states. Under the leadership of Sue Holbert, Jim Fogerty, and Lydia Lucas, the Minnesota Historical Society quickly became a bastion of loyal MAC supporters. Likewise, with Nancy Prewitt, and later Nancy Lankford, of the Western Historical Manuscript Collections at the University of Missouri-Columbia providing another firm base of institutional support, MAC-land expanded to the south as well as to the west across the Mississippi.

The 1975 Fall meeting in Detroit strengthened ties with the hardy band of MAC supporters at Wayne State University. Although the Detroit meeting was relatively small, it was nonetheless memorable. Just a few days before the meeting, the hotel in which the meeting was to be held went bankrupt. Fortunately, Dennis East quickly secured a new host hotel, emergency notices went out to all registrants, and the meeting proceeded as scheduled.

The Fall 1977 meeting moved across the Mississippi to Iowa City, where MAC was royally entertained by its Iowa colleagues, led by Toby Murray, Pat Wildenberg, and Dale Mayer. In 1978, the falling leaves found MAC in Indianapolis where its first dust-up with a state archival organization occurred. The meeting was jointly sponsored by MAC, the Society of Indiana Archivists, and the Society of Ohio Archivists. Being the first such joint venture, it was perhaps understandable that some rough edges should develop in relations between the three organizations—edges that were eventually smoothed over, but not before a coterie of MAC archivists attempting to enter the SOA mixer at the meeting were barred at the door by a phalanx of burly Ohio archivists. From that moment on, the leaders of MAC made every effort to develop close collegial ties with the state and local archival organizations in the region to the mutual benefit of all. Once or twice since then, frictions between MAC and state organizations have surfaced, but, on the whole MAC has worked hard to erase the monster reputation it may once have had among the ranks of the state and local organizations. Much of this good will may be due to the fact that MAC's membership largely overlaps with the memberships of these organizations.

In 1976, MAC made another significant stride forward with publication of Volume 1, Number 1 of *The Midwestern Archivist*. *The Midwestern Archivist* was largely the child of Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, who, along with editorial board members Ken Duckett, Frank Cook, John Fleckner, Holly Hall, and later, Nick Burckel, labored long and hard to develop a high quality archival journal. Succeeding chairs of the editorial board—Lydia Lucas, Anne Diffendal, Dave Klaassen, Anne Kenney, Nancy Lankford, Frank Boles, and Joel Wurl—have shepherded the journal, ably assisted by the unsung heroes of the process—the production editors who actually put the journal together: Frank Cook, Chuck Elston, Frank Mackaman, and Marion Matters.

It was also in 1976 that MAC held its first uniquely formatted meeting. The Fall meeting that year, held in Springfield, was organized around a series of seminars that replaced the traditional program sessions. This format proved highly successful. A second experimental meeting, held in the Fall of 1983 in Champaign-Urbana, was organized around tracks of sessions devoted to specific themes. During this period MAC also sponsored several seminars apart from the two annual meetings, including processing seminars at the Newberry Library in Chicago and at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and a national conference on archival networks held in Madison.

By the end of the 1970s MAC was becoming a truly regional organization, with its membership increasing significantly throughout the twelve-state region. Faithful stalwarts like Anne Diffendal and Joe Svoboda championed MAC in Nebraska, while the notorious "Ohio Gang," led by Dennis East, Paul Yon, Ann Bowers, Marge Haberman, and Bill Meyers brought the Buckeye State into the fold. Supported by Phil Mason, the Walter Reuther Library staff of Dione Miles, Warner Pflug, Pat Bartkowski, Valerie Gerrard Browne, and Marge Long carried the MAC flag in Michigan. Veteran archivists like Ken Duckett, and later Dave Koch, at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and Maynard Brichford at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana encouraged their staffs to become active MAC members. Meetings in Milwaukee in 1980 and St. Louis in 1981 strengthened MAC's presence in Wisconsin and Missouri, while the 1982 Ann Arbor Fall meeting reinforced MAC's strong links with the staff of the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan.

During MAC's first decade, it was clearly the active and enthusiastic energy and commitment of both its officers and members that propelled the organization forward. During those formative years, perhaps three individuals deserve particular credit for shaping MAC into the organization that it would become. Each in his or her own way imposed a personality on MAC, to its very good fortune. The first of these is Archie Motley of the Chicago Historical Society, MAC's founding president. It would not be an overstatement to say that if MAC has a collective personality, it is Archie Motley's, marked by warmth, openness, good humor, and gregariousness. Archie always seemed to know every member of the organization, and he spent countless hours talking to them on subjects varying from the prospects of the Chicago Cubs to whether one should use legal or letter size Hollinger boxes. He was especially good at greeting new MAC members and making them feel welcome and comfortable in the organization. Never at a loss for words at MAC's business meetings, Archie also served as the spirited captain of MAC's intrepid softball team.

If Archie personified the spirit of MAC, two other individuals were its heart and soul. These were the two people who got things done during those early years. One is Mary Ann Bamberger of the University of Illinois at Chicago, MAC's first Secretary-Treasurer and its third President. In those years, there were, of course, local arrangements committees, but it was Mary Ann who shouldered the main burden of such work. She devoted countless hours of her own time on MAC's behalf, ensuring that the organization got off the ground. She left a solid foundation upon which her successors could build.

And then there was J. Frank Cook of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, MAC's jack-of-all-trades. Council member, Vice President, founder of the

MAC Newsletter, production editor of *The Midwestern Archivist*. Whenever a tough task had to be done, Frank was always there to volunteer, and without exception, he accomplished these tasks in an exemplary manner. Beyond his hard work, Frank's wisdom on numerous occasions cut through and resolved a thorny problem at a business meeting and frequently saved the organization from a potentially disastrous course of action.

Many others played key roles during MAC's first decade and deserve mention. Several come readily to mind. MAC's second and fourth Presidents, Jackie Haring and Nick Burckel were instrumental to MAC's success. Nick also served as a member of *The Midwestern Archivist* Editorial Board and was engaged in a wide variety of other activities on MAC's behalf. Joanne Hohler succeeded Mary Ann Bamberger as Secretary-Treasurer and was in turn succeeded by Jim Fogerty. Both did superb jobs keeping the MAC ship afloat.

Hard as it may be to believe, program committees in the early years had responsibility for planning *both* the Spring and the Fall meetings. Many MAC members chaired or served on those committees, but two deserve special mention—Jack Jallings and Steve Masar. As early program committee chairs for both the Spring and Fall meetings, Jack and Steve set the high standards that future MAC program committees had to emulate and MAC is very much in debt to them for their efforts.

In the mid 1980s, MAC set new records by reaching a membership of over 1,000 and an attendance of almost 400 at the Spring meeting. These figures suggest that MAC must have been doing something right—and that something was being responsive to and meeting the needs of its members. Excellent articles were being published in the journal, the newsletter was becoming better with each issue, program sessions were timely and informative, and MAC members, as they had from the beginning, were going on to play important roles in the Society of American Archivists.

Each year, MAC continued to celebrate the rites of Spring at the Bismarck in Chicago and highly successful Fall meetings were held successively in Kansas City; Columbus, Ohio; Hudson, Wisconsin; Columbia, Missouri; Cincinnati; Lansing, Michigan; Des Moines, Iowa; and Bloomington, Indiana. The innovative Hudson meeting, organized by Tim Ericson and his colleagues, was another of MAC's successful experiments, being based on three campuses of the University of Wisconsin system in three different cities.

MAC was very fortunate to have during its second decade a succession of highly capable leaders. Under the direction of Presidents Jim Fogerty, Mary Janzen, Bill Maher, Nancy Lankford, and Valerie Gerrard Browne, MAC continued to grow, and the quality of its meetings, publications, and other activities was greatly enhanced. The increasingly-demanding position of Secretary-Treasurer was very well served by Bill Maher, Dennis Meissner, and Kevin Leonard. Over the years, *MAC Newsletter* editors Frank Cook, Tom Elliott, Vicki Irons Walch, Dean DeBolt, Nancy Lankford, David Haurly, and Tom Rick honed the newsletter into a fine publication, filled with useful information.

Of course, setbacks also occurred during this second decade, the most glaring being the series of defeats administered to the MAC softball team, usually by the Society of Ohio Archivists. But in its second decade MAC also broke new ground by establishing a Public Information Officer, a Development Coordinator, and the Program Innovation Fund.

This article has scarcely given justice to the history of MAC's second decade, and one hopes that whoever writes the definitive MAC history will make amends. Over the past two decades, MAC has striven consciously to keep its yearly dues and meeting registration fees very low in order to make it accessible to archivists of every scale of pay. It has taken its mission of providing archival education and training very seriously by offering a wide range of innovative workshops and program sessions. It has made every effort to retain an open and friendly collective demeanor, a demeanor conducive to welcoming and embracing new members who quickly learn that there are no strangers in MAC. It has retained its twice yearly meeting format and peripatetic Fall meeting venues in order to reach as many archivists as possible. It has contributed to the enrichment of the American archival profession through its journal, newsletter, program sessions, and the involvement of its members in the Society of American Archivists. It has provided a forum for discussion of the most salient and pressing archival issues of our times, and has, when appropriate, acted on those issues. It has honored those who have contributed to or supported, in a distinguished manner, the preservation of our documentary heritage through the awarding of Emeritus membership status and by bestowing the President's Award. It has preserved the traditions that it has generated over the past two decades, while being flexible and open to the creation of new traditions.

What will the next twenty years bring? What challenges will MAC face in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st Century? Can MAC sustain the collective energy and vitality that has characterized its first two decades? These are indeed difficult questions that defy easy answers. Few archivists are adept at crystal ball gazing, the author not excepted, yet one might nonetheless offer some provisional observation.

With all due humility, it is clear that the new, younger generation of midwestern archivists which, over the next decade or so, will replace the founding generation, will prove quite as capable as their predecessors in meeting whatever challenges the archival profession in the heartland will face. By and large, the future health of MAC will depend in large measure upon the value that society attaches to the preservation of its documentary heritage. If archival programs are considered cultural luxuries or frivolities and financial support for them diminishes, then MAC's well being, too, will be diminished. During its first decades, at least, MAC had the good fortune of riding an ascending wave of societal support for archival endeavors in the context of a relatively vibrant economy. The possibility of these circumstances being replicated in the coming decades, however, seems somewhat problematic.

Another danger facing MAC as it anticipates the new century is a discernable (and unfortunate) trend toward becoming too formal, too bureaucratic. MAC has thrived upon its informality and its tradition of members providing voluntary services. It should never attempt to mechanically emulate the SAA, nor should it price itself out of the range of its constituents by frequent dues increases and increases in annual meeting registration fees. It must also continue to emphasize the merits of grass-roots, democratic governance and a highly participatory membership. While these modest considerations will not, of course, guarantee that MAC will survive or prosper, they are necessary preconditions for the continuation of MAC's robust health.

The Midwest Archives Conference, what is it? It is a group of archivists from the heartland who come together twice yearly to confer about archives. MAC has indeed had a rich history—and if Shakespeare's immortal words from "The Tempest" emblazoned on the portico of the National Archives building in Washington, "What is past is prologue," have any meaning, the future would seem to hold much promise for MAC.

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