

**THE RECORDS PROGRAM  
OF THE NHPRC:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
COMMISSION MEMBER  
RICHARD A. ERNEY**

INTERVIEWED BY JOHN A FLECKNER

Federal legislation in 1974 redesignated the National Historical Publications Commission as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). The new law and subsequent budget appropriations expanded the seventeen-member Commission's ability to assist in important projects to preserve archival materials and to make them available for public use. During fiscal year 1979 the NHPRC will award about \$2 million under its records grants program. The Commission meets three or four times each year to consider grant applications and conduct other business. Historical records advisory boards, appointed by state governors, are now in place in forty-eight states to assist the Commission by reviewing proposals from their areas. The Commission staff also contributes to the evaluation process.

Richard Erney, Director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, was appointed to the NHPRC in 1975 to represent the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). He also is the state coordinator and chairperson of the Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board.

The following material is edited from an interview on November 29, 1977, between Mr. Erney and John Fleckner, Area Research Center and Statewide Extension Services Archivist at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Erney: *The thing that ought to be said in the beginning of this interview is that I don't speak for the whole Commission. I only speak as one member. This is only my observation of the Commission and the directions it has been going, and my own views. I think for the most part they accord with the mainstream of the Commission's thinking, but I don't want to presume to be speaking for the Commission.*

Fleckner: *You strongly favored the state advisory board structure when it was being discussed. What benefits do you see coming from it?*

Erney: *The state advisory board set-up is something that was urged by many people in the states. It was based essentially on our experience with the historic preservation program, which hadn't been without its trials and its growing pains, but nevertheless has been a pretty successful format for a federal-state cooperative program. Those of us who used this as a model of sorts were thinking that if the records program was going to be something more substantial than a grants program — which is important and useful enough in its own right — if it was going to have the kind of long range benefits we hoped it would have, we thought there should be some kind of mechanism in the states to stimulate broad planning and take a more searching look at archival needs. I hope it is going to work out that way, and I think there is considerable evidence that it is. Maine and Wyoming have not named Boards but the rest of the states have and there seems to be evidence that it is helping. I think in Iowa there is some prospect that it will improve the archival program; it looks like there is a prospect of considerable help in Massachusetts and there may be other states where what we had hoped for — the broader benefits beyond the simple getting of grants — is beginning to have some effect.*

Fleckner: *Will some consideration be given to providing some kind of direct assistance to the state boards?*

Erney: *This has been discussed by the Commission. I guess at this point it may be hung up on a legal question as to how they can provide some assistance for all the costs that are going into administering the Board. I don't think there is any immediate prospect that there will be any help along these lines.*

Fleckner: *It seems that the state boards vary a good deal in how much the parent institutions of the members are willing to contribute.*

Erney: *Yes, that's right. The states vary considerably archivally and I assume the Boards vary considerably too. So far, for instance, in*

*Wisconsin I don't think this has been any great burden to us. However, I am sure we could do some things if we had a modest amount of funds to help us with the administrative costs, and I suspect there probably are a good many other states that could benefit from some modest assistance.*

*Fleckner: As a member of the National Commission you see both sides of the program: records and publications. How do you split your time between the two?*

*Erney: Basically I split my time according to the agenda. I think when the Commission was enlarged and representatives of the SAA and the AASLH were put on the board, it was probably because of the records part. I think my own background as a former state archivist makes me more competent in the records program. But I am very much interested in the publications program also. Basically, I try to understand the entire program.*

*I've shared some of the concern about the extensiveness of the letterpress publications, how long they're taking, and the costs they are generating. I don't have any serious quarrel with any of the projects — with one or two exceptions — that have been undertaken; I think they're all worthwhile. As many people pointed out, at one time we were very heavily committed on nineteenth century political leaders. I think that was a valid criticism, but the Commission is trying to balance up its list of projects.*

*I have been inclined to push for more microfilm projects, and one of the things I have particularly tried to do is to get some kind of criteria for determining what should be published on microfilm and what is going into letterpress. I realize that it's a difficult problem to set such criteria, but it does seem to me that we would benefit in our discussions by having some kind of guidelines. I think it would help people making applications if they had some idea of what standards are used to judge whether we're going to let it go into letterpress or whether we're going to support a microfilm publication.*

*Fleckner: Is there a possibility of tension or conflict between these two sides of the program?*

*Erney: I don't think so. The people on the Commission at the time the four new members came on were most generous in recognizing the necessity of quickly starting the records program and they allocated \$200,000 for this purpose from funds originally provided for the publications side. At the November [1977] Commission meeting,*

*because the funds for publication projects were all committed, the Commission voted to "return" that \$200,000. There is a fairly clear understanding among members of the Commission that X amount of dollars is for publication and Y amount is for records.*

*Actually what we must do is get the appropriation increased for both because they're both worthwhile and they're both necessary. My own thinking is along these lines and I would guess that the other Commission members look at it that way. The major problem is to get the entire program increased without doing any more damage to the National Archives. All the increases thus far have come out of existing funds allocated to the National Archives and Records Service (NARS). The first such increases NARS absorbed with relative ease. The second time appropriations to the records program were increased — by half a million dollars — it really hurt because NARS had to cut back on personnel and programs. It's a puzzle to know quite how to deal with this. I think one of the things that bothers one is that the amounts of money we're talking about are so puny compared to the amounts of money spent by the federal government. To take a half million dollars out of the National Archives to increase the funding for the records program is kind of unrealistic I think, not to say almost ridiculous.*

*Fleckner: Do you suppose that more grants applications and similar evidence of need will be factors favoring enlargement of the program?*

*Erney: I would think so, when it is evident that the money is accomplishing some worthwhile things in the states. The state coordinators and their boards ought to let their Congressmen know what the program is accomplishing in their states and what it could accomplish if it were better funded. The problem is that both times the appropriation was increased the increases came at the expense of the National Archives. Well, we want the National Archives to be strong, too. It is one of our great institutions and one of our great research centers. There's talk about making the Archives independent of the General Services Administration. In the long run I would favor that, but I don't see that it would help this particular problem.*

*Fleckner: One of the things that may be less obvious about the program is the role of the Washington staff, how they help the Commission members, and their assistance and other work with grant applications.*

*Erney: I think for a small staff they do an amazing amount of very high quality work in analyzing the grant requests that come in, and*

*in getting them clarified and presented by the potential grantees so the Commission can understand what the grant will accomplish, and be assured that the project will be a success. The staff analysis of each request generally is searching and on target and I think it helps a great deal to understand what is being requested and how it fits into the program. We don't always agree with the staff recommendation because some of us may have additional information, or because we look at things somewhat differently. But that is just one of the routines of a Commission and a staff working together. I think for the most part their recommendations have been well-founded. In the November [1977] meeting I think we followed the staff recommendations for the records grants eighty to ninety percent of the time, perhaps a little higher; and we followed almost one hundred percent the recommendations for not funding because they all seemed to be well considered recommendations.*

*Fleckner: You represent the AASLH on the Commission. Does that affect your activities on the Commission? Do you see yourself as a representative of the body?*

*Erney: Well, I consider myself a representative not so much of the AASLH as of its constituents. Of course there is a very able second representative of the AASLH, Dick Williams of the Eleutherian Mills Library and before him Tom Vaughn of the Oregon Historical Society. When AASLH has a grant request neither of us takes part in the discussion or voting on that request.*

*Fleckner: As you look over these grant applications yourself, what are some of the kinds of things you are looking for in a good proposal?*

*Erney: I look for things that promise some kind of solution to some of the more general problems we face in the archival world. These are the pilot projects — ones that seem to offer some promise that what is learned in the course of doing a project will be useful in other places. One of the things I look for in these is: how are people going to learn about the results of the project? It doesn't make much sense to fund a pilot project when there is no provision for making the information gained widely known. The other thing I look for is whether the project will play an important role in assisting the state broadly in its archival program. Will the proposed project be a key element in improving the whole archival program in the state? Things that might not be particularly innovative in one state*

*might be quite necessary in another, and might have a key role in helping that state improve its archival program.*

*I feel negatively about projects which a state or an institution ought to have been able to do on its own if it had appropriate priorities — the routine microfilming of records just to save space, or the routine processing of records which have been around a long time at an institution which presumably should have been able to process those records a long time ago. These kinds of things the Commission just doesn't have funds to support to a very great degree.*

*Another thing that we look for is whether or not an institution really has promise of being able to do the thing successfully and whether or not it has professional staff capable of handling the project. This is something of a problem in some places and we have to recognize that some places probably will have to hire staff from outside. In that case we usually like to know what the process for getting competent staff is going to be. Who is going to select the staff?*

*We also try to demonstrate that this grant program is for large and small institutions throughout the states. We try not to favor the large institutions although they often have the capability of writing better grant requests. And of course we try to see whether the budget is realistic and what the institution itself may contribute.*

*One final thing I might mention in talking about what we look for in grants. We try to make sure people understand that there are many forms of documentation and that the Commission is interested in all of them. Probably the machine-readable problem puzzles all of us most, and so far there doesn't seem to be much coming in that promises any breakthrough on that. We are receiving many requests about photographs — converting photographs from nitrate to safety negative, from glass plate to film negative, and this sort of thing — in order to preserve them. Generally, these applications have fared pretty well. Our questions about them usually relate to the importance of the material documented. We are all aware of the physical problem and of the necessity for doing something if the material is important enough. Of course this is often difficult to determine and we have to rely heavily on the state boards to make that determination because they know — or should know — the documentation in their own states better than anybody on the Com-*

*mission.*

*Fleckner: One of the things the Commission mentions in its literature is cooperative projects; it seems to favor them. What falls under that term?*

*Erney: I think the Commission would like to see a greater degree of cooperation among archival institutions within the states and also across state lines. This might include things like documents conservation centers — New England has had one for some years — or perhaps a regional approach to other problems like reference guides and records control.*

*Sooner or later archival institutions will have to think more in terms of cooperation in documenting certain fields. Modern documentation has become so complex and so voluminous that institutions must become aware of what others are collecting and perhaps even plan ahead so there will be distribution of wealth, so to speak, in terms of collections. That's a great open field where nobody's really done very much; Jerry Ham (Wisconsin State Archivist) has done as much thinking about it as anybody at the state level that I am aware of. This will be a long time coming, if ever. But even if we make some moves along that direction it will be very helpful. I don't know to what degree the Commission can or should encourage this.*

*Fleckner: The Commission has been drafting a statement of priorities and preferred approaches for the records program. Is that going to be helpful?*

*Erney: Yes, I think it will be. The shape it has taken is quite broad and it will help states understand the kind of things the Commission wishes to foster. It's in the final stages of preparation now and there will be a request for the states to make a response about their own needs by the end of 1978. When we originally started there was talk about statewide plans. The situation is so chaotic in some states and so unknown in others that they cannot plan intelligently. I think the approach of getting statements on the needs of each state, and on priorities as the state sees them, is much more fruitful than attempting to conceive an elaborate state plan.*

*Fleckner: Is there anything of a dilemma in trying to develop national and state priorities simultaneously?*

*Erney: Well, the way this has finally come out is that the states*

*will develop their own priorities; the national needs as seen by the Commission are broad enough that state priorities can fit into them quite well. I am sure there will be some areas in which a state will have something it thinks is very important, while the Commission may feel it is not of sufficient national concern, given the limited amount of funds available.*

*Fleckner: Well, the statement should provide a common vocabulary.*

*Erney: Yes, at this point I think we simply will have to give it a try and see how it works out. The idea now is to have the statement of broad national needs and then to indicate from year to year what things may be emphasized by the Commission depending on various circumstances, including the amount of funds available and the kinds of things the states feel are of high priority. There may be some changes in the emphasis from year to year.*

*Fleckner: The guide program is a major Commission project; what are your views on it?*

*Erney: I am very enthusiastic about it; I'm not as knowledgeable about the relationship of computer technology to archival control as others actively working in the archival profession, but the whole guide program ought to be very productive and will provide a much better picture of what things are like nationally. The last report indicates that there exist far more repositories than were recorded in the Hamer guide. The first step will be a directory to repositories and then later on a more detailed guide to collections at these repositories. I felt much more enthusiastic about the guide project after this last Commission meeting than I ever had before and I hope they make progress as now planned. That would be a great boon to researchers and also to people in the archival profession.*

*Fleckner: Earlier you compared the historical preservation and the NHPRC programs; can you carry that comparison further?*

*Erney: Historical preservation has prospered and large amounts of funds are in sight for it compared to the NHPRC, both the records and the publications portions together. I don't see parallels other than trying to set this up as a state-federal undertaking with a mechanism in each state.*

*It would be nice if the NHPRC obtained some kind of designated funding. The preservation program money comes from oil leases on public lands. The money goes into the treasury and it is held in a trust fund for preservation. It would be encouraging if some sort of compar-*

able situation could be established for preserving other parts of the nation's "patrimony" as the preservationists keep saying.

Preservation has taken on a special sort of meaning in recent years, but after all we have been engaged in historic preservation in this country since its beginning. It's just that for a long time we emphasized the preservation of documents, records, books, and other cultural resources; and now preservation has come to mean preserving whole buildings, whole neighborhoods — all of which is worthwhile and important to the quality of life in the country — but in some ways part of the same piece. It's like conservation — historians should have been the best and most interested conservationists. Likewise, conservationists should be interested in the conservation of human-made resources as well as natural resources because they have so much to give to each other and so much of a philosophy to share.

Fleckner: *It has struck me that historic preservation rests on a great deal of documentary research; buildings don't tell their stories all by themselves.*

Erney: *Yes, and that is going to be even more true as we go along. For instance, the state preservation survey we are doing now is largely an architectural survey, because it is visible. You can go up and down the streets and pick out the buildings that have something about their architecture or construction that indicates that they should be considered for the National Register. But to pick out the buildings that are important because they are associated with some important person, movement, or event of history is much more difficult and can't be done by mere visual inspection of the building. So as we seek to identify buildings that are more important historically, library and archives research becomes increasingly important and the resources for performing that research will also become increasingly important.*

Fleckner: *In terms of the long range view for the records program, what can we realistically expect it to achieve? Do you see that it will stimulate additional support?*

Erney: *It is my hope that this program will accomplish specific things that are worthwhile in themselves, but in the longer range I hope it will stimulate states and institutions to analyze their problems; to plan more intelligently for them; to approach them on a cooperative basis more often; and to obtain more support from within the states.*

*I think it is a fairly good bet that some of this will be achieved. However, the amounts of money available for the records program are extremely modest. The archival problems of the states will not be solved by this records program alone. However, it can point the way, stimulate, and encourage self-help in the states.*

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Additional information on the NHPRC is available in its published annual reports, its "Suggestions for Applicants," and in Larry Hackman, "A Progress Report on the Records Grant Program: The Future Belongs to You!" *The Midwestern Archivist 1* (Number 2, 1976) 21-27.