

MINI-CLASSES: A WAY TO INTRODUCE RESEARCHERS TO RESOURCES

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“The census microfilms are located..., The card catalog..., Photocopies cost..., The inventories..., Calendars are..., The State Archives include....” These or similar phrases are well known to any archivist working anywhere at any time in reference service. Archivists make available to researchers a repository’s thousands or millions of pieces of paper — letters, tickets, scrapbooks, diaries, journals, ledgers. After all of these pieces of paper have been collected, cleaned, arranged, described; and sorted, their ultimate importance rests with their use by the researcher and historian of today and tomorrow. Reference service is the point in the archival process at which these discrete materials make contact with a user. The user imposes an historical perspective, a subjective theory, an open questing search, or a preconceived conclusion on these myriad paper objects and produces from this research an article, a book, a government agency report, a school paper, a dissertation, a newspaper article, a family history, a children’s novel, a drama. The culmination of all the archival processes of collecting, preserving, and preparing is the use of the materials by an individual.

Gleaned from bits of reading and conversations and formal sessions at archival and historical conventions, I have the following picture of the archives and manuscripts researcher of the not-so-distant past and of the reference assistance he or she received. The traditional user of manuscripts and archives was the academic scholar — one who, beginning with dissertation research and continuing with the publication of articles and books, would dutifully check for his or her topic in whatever manuscripts guides were at hand. He or she would write to an archives, announce an imminent arrival, and often produce a letter of introduction from a recognized scholar. Once at the archives the

researcher would meet with the archivist. Researchers were few (for few knew of the sources), so the archivist would spend a great deal of time in the preliminary interview, continuing later with conversations over coffee. The pace was slow, the atmosphere congenial, the tone that of scholarly restraint. Prize bits of information, from the archivist's years of experience as collector, cataloger, and fellow historian, would be offered to the scholar. The archivist would sit back in satisfaction at this handmaiden's role in the scholar's production of knowledge. A bit overdrawn, perhaps, but I have heard lingering nostalgia for such good old days.¹

My more recent experience with manuscripts research, both as a researcher and as a reference archivist, gives me a much different picture of the reference function. In the 1970s a great many Americans developed an historic awareness. The Bicentennial and "Roots" played their roles; even Gothic romances may have aided this growth of an interest in history. Researchers who did not necessarily have any background in the use of primary sources (or even of libraries) were using manuscript records to write church and community histories, to trace their families back through the years and across America to other continents, or to document the history of a building in order to restore or recycle the structure with historic integrity.

When I was a beginning researcher, I did not know of the basic guides to manuscript sources, nor did I realize the scope and usefulness of inventories. I wanted to have the papers in my hands and proceed to read. This approach was derived from research in published sources — with the book or journal in hand, on with the research. From this experience, I understand the initial hesitancy of many novice researchers in exploring finding aids and other reference tools. The reference service truly must be one of outreach.

A new outreach program in the Division of Archives and Manuscripts of the Minnesota Historical Society grew from a variety of factors: the increasing number of researchers, the knowledge that researchers have many unasked questions, and the problems resulting from having only a small reference staff to service a large collection of both private papers and public records. These provoked questions of how to provide the introductory reference aid that researchers need and deserve, how to lead the individual to the tools needed for digging into the masses of sources, how to serve both the professional and the lay historian.

The Minnesota Historical Society holds more than 55,000 linear feet

of papers and records. Research use has grown from less than 400 in-person researchers in 1958 to more than double that figure by 1965, to 2800 researchers in 1975, and to almost 4000 in 1978. Minnesota history, recent U.S. political history, immigration, settlement, the fur trade, genealogy, lumbering, and railroads across the northwestern United States are among the topic areas of research available.

As the number of patrons grew, the number of questions and the need for all kinds of assistance grew as well. The number of reference staff did not increase proportionately. An efficient and effective way of providing basic information about research materials to the various users of the collections was needed, as well as a way of continuing to give in-depth assistance beyond the traditional entrance interview and one-to-one conversation.

In the spring of 1978, the Division of Archives and Manuscripts instituted the first in a successful program of mini-classes. They proved easy to implement, and could be adapted to almost any repository. Offered at a set time weekly or biweekly, they provide researchers with some of the background information necessary for successful use of the rich primary sources available. Because more than 50 percent of our researchers were working on family histories, the first mini-class was "Genealogy Research in Archives and Manuscripts." Originally aiming at 15 to 30 minutes for presentation and discussion, we quickly learned that 30 minutes was a good length but that care must be taken to keep within that time span. Within a year, we were offering five to six classes weekly.

Classes are held informally in the reading room. There is no registration, no fee. They meet around a table next to the card catalog and the other finding aids, so that these tools will be ready at hand for show-and-tell and explanation. On occasion no one appears for a class, but presentations have been given to one or to fifteen people, with an average attendance of five or six. (The reading room holds 29 people.) A class is offered at the same time and the same day of the week for at least two or three months. We then re-evaluate and if necessary reschedule in order to tap the busiest periods of use. At present there are six regularly scheduled mini-classes: "Introduction to the Manuscripts Reading Room," "Genealogy Research in Archives and Manuscripts," and "Introduction to Railroad Records," all offered weekly; and "Guide to Resources in the State Archives," "Research in Manuscript Collections," and "Genealogy Research in the State

Archives," offered biweekly. The teaching of these classes is divided among the three professional reference staff members. The classes, and their content, are keyed to the interests and expertise of the staff, and reflect the needs of our patrons and the research strengths of the collections.

Mini-classes can be held with a minimum of cash outlay. The major cost is in staff time, but this time is quite cost-effective. Rather than repeating the same information in individual interviews, basic information, plus more, can be presented to a group. Questions sparked by the group can broaden the individual researcher's perspective on the sources. Individual guidance is not eliminated, but is supplemented by these more general introductions. A researcher who cannot attend a mini-class will still receive needed information through one-to-one consultations with the reference staff.

The staff member responsible for developing a new class has to take some time to prepare a presentation and gather examples, usually one to four hours. Since the mini-classes draw on the existing knowledge of the reference staff, the preparation process mainly involves organizing a systematic approach. A course preparation outline (Figure 1) is made for each mini-class. The outlines are kept on file so that another member of the reference staff can take over a class if necessary. The information imparted in a mini-class is that which each reference professional should be able to provide to an inquiring member of the public. The class merely institutionalizes this process. Equivalent information is made available to all, not just to a favored few, or not just to those who happen to catch the reference person in an unhurried moment.

Whether in a public or private research facility, mini-classes such as these can ease the repetitious work in reference while enabling the staff person to provide more in-depth aid to the researcher who requires it. The genealogist may not need to know all the ins and outs of state archives arrangement; a mini-class on genealogy records in state archives will answer his or her preliminary questions. More time is then available to assist the researcher who is searching, for instance, for documentation of earlier legislative activity, such as the formation of the highway department, and requires some special aid.

There have been some interesting offshoots of the mini-classes. The common reference procedure is to have a researcher fill out a registration form, provide identification, state the research topic, and give the

FIGURE 1**Guide to Resources in the State Archives****Development Schedule:****1. Goals of session**

Review the holdings of the state archives, give a brief history of the archives, show examples of materials from such offices as Sec. of State, Governor, Territorial archives, and local records

2. Preliminary research needed

Show the archives notebooks, checklist, and call slips
Give history of archives (outline on back of sheet)

3. Outline

1. Secretary of State- election abstracts
2. Territorial Archives-enrolled laws
3. Local records, Dakota Co., Eagen township
4. Governor records

4. Illustrative material

- a. Actual items: Sec. of State., 58-I-3-6F, Governor 56-B-4-3B,
Dakota Co. 46-A-5-6F, Mn. territorial archives 58-C-9-9B
- b. Good verbal examples: 22,000 linear feet. Records range from
Athletic comm., to Bicentennial Comm., to governors records
AA 16(Jan. 53: 39-44) "The Development of an Archival
Program in Mn."
AA 26 (July 63: 355-360) "Mn-The State Archives and Records
Service Reconsidered"
- c. Specialized speakers:
DPS on acquisitions and accessions. MM on arrangement

Time of presentation _____ Frequency offered _____

First offered _____

research purpose, such as a book or article. A hypothetical patron comes to do family research. She attends the genealogy mini-class and proceeds to search the census and church records. She is in the reading room when "Introduction to the Manuscripts Reading Room" is offered. Curiosity sparked, she attends this second class. It turns out that she is a high school American history teacher, whose hobby is genealogy. She now discovers that this repository has materials that can be adapted for use by her senior class, and that there are materials that some other students could use in an upcoming project. The traditional entrance interview and the registration form would not necessarily reveal this identity and interest of a genealogy researcher. As another example, an experienced research historian comes to work on his latest study, the settlement of a Montana town. He feels he knows all there is to know about this repository. But since he was last here, years ago, there have been changes. He attends the "Introduction to Railroad Records" class on the advice of the archivist, and discovers that these records might provide data on the early settlement of the community under study. In addition, he can pursue his model railroad hobby through use of steam locomotive drawings. Or a state government employee comes to use records in the state archives and discovers that the "Guide to Resources in the State Archives" class facilitates his dive into regulatory agency records. But he also discovers that this repository has more than state archives, and later returns to research the history of his church for a centennial publication.

A new addition to the program is subject-oriented mini-classes. Each is initially offered only once, but may be repeated from time to time if researcher interest seems to justify doing so. The first topics covered were business records, church records, and family papers. Descriptions of the types of materials available in the collections and the research possibilities inherent in the materials are emphasized.

The cash outlay for these classes comes in producing publicity materials. We are fortunate in having a bimonthly historical society newsletter that is mailed to all members. Announcements of the mini-classes appeared in this, but only after they were off to a successful start through hand-drawn announcements posted in the four historical society research rooms (library, newspapers, audio-visual, and manuscripts/archives). A quarterly calendar of historical events also lists the classes. People often come, calendar in hand, specifically to attend a class. After the hand-lettered signs, we daringly expanded and made

thirty photocopies of a flyer. These were distributed to the various MHS buildings and to some libraries in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. When we received phone calls requesting more copies, we decided that a larger “printing” and distribution might be useful. For the next series we sent commercially photocopied flyers (at a total cost of \$7.00 plus postage) to libraries, regional history centers, local historical societies, and history departments of area colleges and universities (see Figure 2). We do not know which publicity draws our audiences. But people do come specifically for a class; others come to research, hear or see an announcement for a class, and attend one or more.

One of the initial ideas was to produce reference leaflets that would summarize and reiterate the core information of each mini-class. These would be handed out at the sessions, they would be available to researchers who could not attend the class, and they could be used in mail responses. This idea is yet to be initiated.

Mini-class information can also be supplemented by less formal handouts; photocopied or mimeographed sheets are appropriate. Lists of significant collections in a given area, descriptions of basic financial records for the subject talk on business records, a summary sheet of suggested citation formats for differing forms of collections, a list of the available census records — these are only a few examples of handouts that can be inexpensively produced and provide useful information for the researcher.

The basic requirements for a mini-class are: information sources, a person with specialized knowledge of these sources, people who want to use the sources, a table and chairs, a flyer, 30 minutes a week, and initial preparation time of one to four hours. Whether in a large or small repository, the mini-class could prove a useful addendum to the reference services. All repositories have their publics, and most repositories wish to increase use of their resources by these publics. Outreach of this type, which requires little time and expense to prepare and carry out, can aid in attracting people to the resources by explaining them in a nonthreatening manner, can be adapted for use with college-level classes seeking an introduction to the tools of primary research, and can aid the archivist in providing relevant research assistance.

Teaching is part of the reference archivists’s service. All reference archivists instruct, whether formally trained to do so or not. If an archivist can explain the sources and provide guidance for the project

FIGURE 2



December 1978
January 1979
February 1979

MINI - CLASSES

at the Minnesota Historical Society Research Center
1500 Mississippi Street, St. Paul, MN

Weekly Classes

INTRODUCTION TO THE MANUSCRIPTS READING ROOM

Tuesdays, 10:30 to 11:00

GENEALOGY RESEARCH IN ARCHIVES AND MANUSCRIPTS

Tuesdays, 2:30 to 3:00

INTRODUCTION TO RAILROAD RECORDS

Wednesdays, 10:30 to 11:00

Other Classes

GUIDE TO RESOURCES IN THE STATE ARCHIVES

Thursdays, (Dec. 14, Jan. 11, Jan. 25, Feb. 8, Feb. 22); 10:30 to 11:00

RESEARCH IN MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Thursdays (Jan. 4, Jan. 18, Feb. 1, Feb. 15); 10:30 to 11:00

GENEALOGY RESEARCH IN THE STATE ARCHIVES

Fridays (Dec. 8, Dec. 22, Jan. 5, Jan. 19, Feb. 2, Feb. 16); 2:30 to 3:00

for further information, call Reference Services, Division of
Archives and Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society (612)296-6980

of one researcher, she or he can do the same in a small group situation. There need be no cash outlay for the classes, if the budget is limited. A sign in the reading room announcing regularly scheduled classes will inform the researchers, intrigue them, and attract them. Mini-classes do not remove the opportunity and need for one-to-one reference guidance, but do provide more opportunity for this. Because most researchers will receive the basic information in a group situation, there is more time to work with individuals on specific problems. When a researcher cannot attend a mini-class, the archivist can provide the information on the one-to-one basis, as in the past. The group dynamics of a class situation enable researchers to learn more from the interaction of their questions; both neophytes and veterans can ask questions in a nonembarrassing setting.

Within the first year we heard that another manuscript repository was interested in the mini-class idea and has instituted classes for its patrons. Even in our world of copyright concerns, imitation can be flattering.

FOOTNOTE

1. An interesting discussion of "archival atmosphere" is found in Laurence R. Veysey, "A Scholar's View of University Archives," in *University Archives*, ed. Rolland E. Stevens (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1965), pp. 82-93, especially pp. 88-93.

