REACHING OUT: THE PLACE OF RECORDS SURVEYS IN ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

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OVERVIEW

Not since the Historical Records Survey of the depression years have American archivists devoted so much time and energy to records survey projects. In recent years they have surveyed materials in Ohio archival repositories and institutional archives; in Atlanta churches, businesses, and local organizations; and in Michigan courthouses and city halls. Aided by funds from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), archivists currently are surveying records of defunct East coast railroad corporations and Pacific Northwest public utility districts. At the same time the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is underwriting surveys of archival sources for the study of women and for the history of American music. Federal support for archival surveys is not confined to the NHPRC and NEH: the National Science Foundation has joined NEH to fund a Survey of Sources for the History of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and the United States Office of Education is backing a survey of sources in American repositories for the study of Russian and Soviet history.[1]

This proliferation has been so rapid that very little information about survey projects has reached the professional literature. We have no general discussions of the relationship of the records survey to general archival practice and theory and only a few descriptions of

completed survey projects. Indeed, no one has prepared even a simple list of recent archival surveys.[2]

In the absence of such writing, several definitions and a brief look at recent archival theory may provide some common ground for discussion. A records survey is a systematic procedure used by archivists, records managers, and others to gather information about records and papers not in their immediate custody. Records surveys, ordinarily, are parts of larger archival projects: to produce finding aids for researchers, to identify new acquisitions, to foster preservation of historically valuable records, or to gather data for program planning. They are not ends in themselves; rather, they are tools which archivists use to accomplish these larger ends. The first consideration, then, in every discussion of records survey projects must be the uses to which the survey-gathered data will be put.

Three types of surveys can be conveniently distinguished:

(1) Records management surveys examine a well defined body of records, those over which the surveyor has administrative authority and responsibility. These surveys are recognized as basic steps in records management procedures and they precede scheduling and disposition of records.

(2) "Repository surveys" describe materials in more than one archival agency or institution. They usually focus on materials in a locality or region or in a subject area and produce published guides describing the materials they locate. *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) and Philip Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* are products of national surveys of historical records.

(3) "Non-repository surveys" aim at records with a subject or geographic focus which are not in archival custody. They are conducted by archivists who have no formal records management responsibilities for the materials they survey and who examine materials in many agencies or organizations. The History of Atlanta Project, for example, contacted 2,364 organizations about their noncurrent records and a survey of Wisconsin business records approached some 4,000 firms.

Obviously the availability of outside funds has encouraged today's wave of survey activity. Records surveys appeal to federal and foundation grants programs for many reasons: survey projects can confidently promise some tangible product at the end of a specified time; survey techniques are relatively simple; surveys can be self-contained,

creating little disruption to other ongoing programs; and survey overhead and operating costs can be kept low. With the exception of the project director, institutions can draw survey staff from the large pool of trained and able, but inexperienced, people willing to accept limited term employment in archival work.

The resurgent interest in records surveys rests not only on the inclinations of today's grant-givers, but more importantly, on basic changes in the professional outlook of American archivists. Many archivists now acknowledge that they must adopt a vigorous role in consciously choosing records and papers for archival preservation. This acknowledgment reflects their growing sense of professional identity and confidence. Equally important, the sheer mass of modern documentation has hastened the transformation of the archivist from a passive custodian of antiquities to an active participant in the process of documentary selection and preservation. An important corollary is the concept of a universe of documentation of which the holdings of the archivist's own repository comprise but a small portion. Archivists must know something of this larger body of documentation if they are to select their archival sample with competence, to provide the fullest assistance to researchers, and to plan sound archival programs.

Closely related to these ideas is another familiar strain in recent archival thinking. Some members of the profession argue that it is the fundamental responsibility of the archivist to select materials which faithfully reflect our culture. The Society of American Archivists 1974 annual meeting, organized around the theme "Documenting American Culture," explored this proposition in an opening plenary session. In that forum, the late Herman Kahn presented this argument for the archivist's responsibility to document culture:

> "I have gradually been forced by experience to acknowledge that if the archivist is going to be of maximum use to society, the word 'archives' must be broadened to include any unique record of human experience or thought, regardless of its origins, provenance, or physical characteristics. In other words, reluctantly and uncomfortably one has been forced to accept the fact that if archivists are not to wither on the vine they must learn to embrace within their discipline all unique materials which contain

> a valuable record of human experience, even though such materials are not the by-product of organized institutional activities."[3]

Traditionally, archivists have focused their concern on records and papers already (or almost) in hand: on acquisitions of discrete series or collections, description, physical storage and preservation, and research use. If, however, the primary mission of archivists is to preserve a representative archival sample — and this is by no means a unanimous professional opinion — then they require a new perspective. This broader view reveals a wide spectrum of documentation about which the archivist must be knowledgeable and from which he or she will choose a small sample for preservation. The records survey is a primary means by which archivists develop this view.

SURVEYS AND PRIORITIES

From this vantage point we can begin to develop criteria for evaluating new records survey proposals. The following discussion examines, first, some areas in which survey-gathered information is especially needed and, second, some critical elements in designing successful survey projects.

(1) Because they can provide comprehensive data, records surveys may be valuable initial steps in developing acquisition strategies. Information about the quality and location of documentation — both in and out of archival custody — will contribute to informed judgments about collecting in previously ignored subject areas; about areas in which collecting is not likely to be successful; about areas which require immediate action to preserve endangered materials; and about areas which are over-documented. In particular, records surveys can contribute to redressing what Gould P. Colman has called "the studied preservation of unrepresentative indicators of. . . culture."[4] With sustained and systematic effort archivists can discover and acquire documentation for those people and subjects which now elude the archival record. Surveys of entire communities, of selected social and cultural groups, and of unfamiliar subject areas are all needed. Finally, in addition to empirical data on which to base collecting programs, surveys also permit firsthand examination and appraisal of potentially valuable materials and an introduction to their custodians and potential donors.

(2) In addition to encouraging transfer of historical records to ar-

chival custody, records surveys may contribute to the preservation of these materials in other ways. Sometimes identifying and reporting poor records storage conditions may motivate custodians to adopt simple, remedial action. In other instances, survey data provide the basis for comprehensive records management procedures. These procedures may be the only means to protect large bodies of corporate records from poorly conceived records creation, filing, storage, and disposition practices which reduce or destroy the informational value and physical integrity of important materials before they reach an archivist's hands. For example, a major rationale of the survey of Texas County records survey being conducted from North Texas State University is its contribution to developing better legislation, records scheduling and disposition, appraisal policies, and other elements of a records program for Texas counties. Surveys of large bodies of records — for example, those produced by major businesses or large local governments — also may demonstrate that in-house archival programs, not transfer to an outside repository, are necessary. Again, the survey data can aid in encouraging establishment of such programs.

(3) Surveys of records in archival custody are a logical extension of the archivist's internal descriptive systems (card catalog, registers, guides, etc.). By locating and describing materials outside their immediate custody, archivists can fulfill their fundamental professional commitment to increasing access to research materials. Because of this vital role in producing research tools, the records survey undoubtedly will continue to receive substantial financial support from our cultural agencies. What is seriously debated, however, is the form such support should take.

Some archivists, appalled (or overwhelmed) by surveyors' demands for information argue for a simple two-level descriptive system for American historical records and papers. This system would consist of intra-institutional finding aids and a national program composed of NUCMC and NHPRC's repository directories and guides to collections. Proponents of this system claim it will provide research tools cheaply and effectively by using automated data bases, common formats, high editorial standards, and federal money.

The weakness of this approach is that the task is too large and too complex to accomplish entirely from Washington. First, American collections and repositories are far too numerous and diverse to main-

tain direct, regular contact with Washington. Far better to proceed with a carefully planned combination of regional, state, and subject area surveys and to integrate them into a coordinated national descriptive program. This strategy would capitalize on, and enhance, existing strong institutions and current patterns of local and regional cooperation. After initially favoring a two-level descriptive system, the NHPRC seems to have accepted this strategy. At its February, 1977, meeting the Commission recommended funding for a project in the state of Washington which, among other things, would gather data for direct input to the NHPRC's collection level guide project.

A second weakness of a two-level descriptive model is that it is inadequate to deal with the complexity of archival description. Changing research interests and shifting perceptions of the use of our collections preclude reliance on descriptions which stand forever without re-examination. A strong national descriptive program can strengthen, but cannot eliminate, the need for special subject area repository surveys.

The success of any records survey project turns on the manner in which it is executed as well as on an adequate conception of the project's ultimate goals. Extensive planning before data gathering begins is crucial and two important but often neglected aspects of planning — pretesting and cooperation — deserve special comment.

Pretesting survey forms and procedures is a common feature of social science survey research which can strengthen all records survey projects. As surveyors in the Texas county records program gained experience in local courthouses they modified their procedures; similarly, the results of a small pilot project improved the Women's History Sources Survey at the University of Minnesota. The pretest can determine if the project will produce the expected level of consistency and comprehensiveness. It also can discover difficulties in editing and compiling returns into usable form and provide a better estimate of the time the project will require. The pretest, of course, should be scheduled to allow sufficient time to modify the project in light of its findings.

Cooperation is a crucial factor in every records survey project. Surveys using questionnaires rely on the willingness (and ability) of the respondents to reply; those using field workers depend on records custodians to permit access to materials. Recent survey projects have demonstrated that cooperation does not come automatically. The

Houston Metropolitan Archives, an NEH funded project with multi-institutional sponsorship, faced many difficulties in gaining access to local government records it hoped to survey. Other projects have been hindered by the refusal of archivists to respond to their colleagues' mail survey questionnaires.

Every survey project must develop ways to secure the cooperation necessary to success. Tactics may range from scientifically designed questionnaire forms to assertiveness training for field workers. At various times generous measures of public relations, good will, professional courtesy, and political influence may be needed. Two approaches, as yet infrequently used, may be of value: the joint project and direct financial incentives. The former involves formal institutional commitments of staff time and, sometimes, money. This requires patient effort to negotiate, but it may permit projects beyond the scope of a single institution and may have lasting benefits for future cooperation. Both the *Guide to Historical Resources in Milwaukee Area Archives* (available from the Milwaukee County Historical Society) and the *Bibliography of Sources Relating to Women* (published by the Michigan Department of State) are the products of joint projects. The Newberry Library's project to catalogue pre-1900 maps of the Midwest also is a joint effort, relying on participating institutions representing each state to provide data about maps of their state. The Newberry map project is notable because it provides direct reimbursement on a per-piece-cataloged basis from an NEH grant. Direct financial incentives such as this might convince otherwise overextended archival institutions to participate in a national descriptive system.

CONCLUSION

The use of records surveys will expand as more archivists take an activist view of their profession. For archivists taking this perspective, well designed records surveys can contribute to reaching important goals, particularly in the areas of acquisition strategies, program planning, and intellectual control over large bodies of sources. Such surveys inevitably require careful attention to technical details, but more basically they demand that projects be designed to put the survey-gathered data to productive use. In evaluating proposals for records surveys archivists and records program administrators must

insist that data-gathering not become an end in itself, set adrift from its larger purposes. Only when data-gathering furthers broad archival goals can records surveys merit a portion of our scarce archival resources.

FOOTNOTES

1. The action of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission at its June, 1977, meeting was characteristic of its grants-giving activities since the beginning of the records portion of the NHPRC program. The Commission recommended twenty-five new grants totalling $416,049; surveys of archival materials were a central part of four of these projects and a fifth involved a state surveys of archival depositories. Together these five proposals totalled $103,585.

2. There is a substantial literature on the Historical Records Survey. Two good sources are William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* Columbus, 1969) and several articles in *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974):201-61. On more recent surveys see: Dale A. Somers, Timothy J. Crimmins, and Merl E. Reed, "Surveying the Records of a City: The History of Atlanta Project," *AA* 36 (July 1973): 353-59; Robert P. Thompson, "The Business Records Survey in Wisconsin" *AA* 14 (July 1951): 249-56; Steve Gurr, "Collecting for Clio: The Perspective of an Historian/Archivist," *Georgia Archive* 3 (Winter 1975):30-37; and sources cited in Frank B. Evans, comp., *Modern Archives and Manuscripts: A Select Bibliography* (Society of American Archivists, 1975). The author's manual on records surveys will be published in 1977 as part of the Society of American Archivists' manual series. It examines the several uses of records surveys and offers instructions on carrying out a survey project.

3. Herman Kahn, "The First Generation: The Autodidact," *AA* 38 (April 1975(:147-51. Two other discussions touching on these points are F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *AA* 38 (January 1975):5-13 and Lester J. Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," *AA* 39 (October 1976):429-435.

4. "The Forum: Communications From Members," *AA* 35 (July/October 1972):483-85.