

INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDWESTERN ARCHIVIST ISSUE ON ARCHIVAL NETWORKS

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The Conference

The National Conference was planned over a period of more than two years by a committee consisting of James E. Fogerty and Richard A. Cameron (Minnesota Historical Society), John A. Fleckner and F. Gerald Ham (State Historical Society of Wisconsin), Dorothy Heinrich (University of Wisconsin-Green Bay), Tim Ericson (University of Wisconsin-River Falls), and Glen A. Gildemeister (Northern Illinois University). In some respects the conference was a sequel to a smaller, shorter, and more informal seminar on regional archival networks sponsored by MAC in July, 1974. That meeting is described in James E. Fogerty, "Four New Regional Networks: A Progress Report," *Midwestern Archivist* (Vol. 1, no. 1, 1976, p. 43-53). In 1974 most archival networks were only a few years old and their activities were relatively few and uncomplicated. Since then several new networks have appeared;

but, more importantly, archivists and others involved in network programs have gained a wealth of experience in network operation. The conference provided an opportunity to analyze and reflect on that experience and to examine future directions for network programs. The conference planning committee identified several major problems and issues in network programs which have emerged during these years. These included network governance and administration, cooperation in acquisition efforts, administration of increasingly bulky local government records, and building patron use of network holdings.

The planning committee also recognized the changed environment in which today's network programs operate. The fiscal crisis of the 1980s has increased the attractiveness of inter-institutional cooperation as a strategy to conserve and extend existing resources while at the same time it has prompted network programs to examine their directions and to evaluate their effectiveness. The conference enabled archivists struggling with these issues in their own institutions to share their insights and their skills and to compare varying experiences across the country.

More than sixty people attended the conference. They came from a wide range of geographical locations (from Washington state to Washington, DC and from Minnesota to Texas), institutional affiliations, and professional backgrounds. Participants included individuals associated with existing network programs as well as those considering the creation of a network in their regions. The conference planning committee set four objectives for the meeting: information-sharing; analysis and assessment of current networking and related cooperative activities; problem solving for specific networking issues; and planning for the future.

The conference format provided formal and informal opportunities for the exchange of ideas and information among participants. Conference papers were written and distributed beforehand and the formal sessions generally consisted of brief summary presentations followed by extended, and often lively, discussions. Each conference participant also attended two smaller working groups from a selection of eight such sessions. Through directed discussion and the use of role playing and similar teaching techniques, these groups offered active and often exciting learning opportunities. The scope of these working group sessions

is suggested in the following summary descriptions.

Glen Gildemeister's session, "Intellectual Control of Holdings: Data Bases and Networks," addressed a recurring conference topic and although the meeting reached no definitive conclusion, participants seemed agreed that linking or coordinating data bases and archival networks would contribute to the greater effectiveness of both.

Anne Diffendal (Nebraska State Historical Society) led participants in her session on "Initiating a Network" through a "strategic planning" exercise which examined major issues in planning and methods for undertaking a planning study.

In considering a "Network Approach to Public Records," Michael Fox (State Historical Society of Wisconsin) focused discussion on the administration of public records in large urban areas, a major weakness of the network approach in most states.

Richard Cameron discussed "Network Planning and Management" for established programs. His group considered mission and role definition, evaluation of network structures and systems, and network planning.

Taking a regional center director's perspective, George Bates (Winona State University) directed participants through the many steps required in planning for effective "Collection Policy Development."

Edwin Hill (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse) presented "The Regional Center as a Community Resource," with an emphasis on developing a continuing program of public information, publicity, and community assistance services.

Anne Kenney (University of Missouri-St. Louis) considered "Evaluating a Regional Network Center's Program." She probed the problems of network administration from the perspectives of the network as a whole and of the individual network unit.

The basic costs and requirements for a microfilm program and the coordination of programs at various regional centers within a network were among the topics considered by Patrick Nolan (Wright State University) in the session, "The Place of Microforms in a Network Setting."

Further opportunities for discussion occurred during several informal conference events. An "information fair" followed the opening luncheon and permitted a convenient exchange of

brochures, reports, and other publications brought by participants. The State Historical Society held a late afternoon reception on the first day of the meeting and a tour of its facility after the closing luncheon. Many participants enjoyed the mild summer weather and Madison's casual atmosphere at a picnic in nearby Vilas Park on the second day of the meeting. These events all contributed to a relaxed and congenial atmosphere throughout the entire three days.

Not surprisingly, most conference participants agreed that archival networks are useful mechanisms for accomplishing many goals of archives programs. They recognized that inter-institutional cooperation was necessary and beneficial, especially in times of fiscal stringency. By centralizing certain management and archival functions and providing a structure for communication and collective decision making, networks can reduce duplication and competition between programs and help to share scarce human skills and other limited resources.

The general tone of the conference, however, was more critical than celebratory and most participants stressed the promise which archival networks seem to offer rather than their accomplishments thus far. Jerry Ham noted that networks provide a natural framework for coordinated acquisitions policies and procedures although few have exploited this potential. During the same session, Larry Hackman observed that because networks are based on cooperation among several institutions and because they serve broad constituencies, they offer great potential as advocates for increased resources to operate their archival programs. Unfortunately, networks have not capitalized on this strength. Networks also should be a means to coordinate and deliver specialized services which cannot be provided efficiently by each network member. These might include conservation services, assistance to developing archival programs, and administration of outreach programs. Most networks have not systematically coordinated such specialization, although, as Hackman concluded, such coordination "should make for stronger programs than would be possible outside of a network system."

Most conference participants agreed that network administration and governance structures need to become more sophisticated and that successful network operation requires

considerable effort and skill. This becomes all the more apparent as programs at participating network centers mature and highly centralized control, often necessary in the initial phases of network operation, is no longer suitable or acceptable.

Many speakers urged archivists to devote greater attention to the planning and evaluation of network programs, including rigorous quantitative analyses of network costs and benefits. Archivists, like other program administrators competing for public funds, must provide convincing evidence that the resources they request are necessary and will be utilized effectively. At the same time archivists also must step back from the narrow technical problems which confront them and articulate the larger cultural and social significance of the work for which they seek public support.

Many of the problems and issues facing archival network programs are the same as those facing the profession as a whole. Conference participants agreed that despite the college and university base of most networks and the initial expectations of many network planners, scholarly research alone is not sufficient to justify network programs. Encouraging broader use of collections, through traditional means such as descriptive guides as well as through more innovative outreach techniques, has become a vital archival function. Once again, the cooperative nature of network programs can be expected to enhance such efforts.

The Conference on Regional Archival Networks was organized with the conviction that, in hard times as in fair, inter-institutional cooperation (a basic concept on which archival networks are built) is the right way, the most effective way, for our institutions and our profession to proceed. The interest and participation in the conference reaffirmed that conviction, and despite the challenging questions which the conference raised about networks, most participants felt that the meeting also produced real progress in an area critical to the future administration of the historical record. A great deal of information about current programs was drawn together for the first time and some central concerns and problems were articulated and explored. The case study of Houston's urban archives program, for example, should prove immensely helpful to archivists considering this very difficult aspect of archival administration. The publication of the

products of the conference in this issue will create a record and a resource for future cooperative efforts by archivists. The Madison meeting also established lines of communication among individuals throughout the country concerned with similar issues. Finally, the conference has spurred additional writing and discussion—a session at the Fall 1981 MAC meeting in St. Louis, an informal meeting of archivists concerned with cooperative programs planned for the 1982 SAA meeting in Boston, and proposals for additional sessions at future SAA meetings.

Looking to the Future

As is often the case in archival matters, it is instructive to look to the experiences and ideas of our Canadian colleagues when considering the topics of archives and cooperation. A recently published study, *Canadian Archives*, a report of the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives chaired by Ian Wilson and prepared for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, offers some startling and challenging recommendations. First and most important is “that all public archives reevaluate their overall programs to achieve an appropriate balance between their traditional institutional programs and new programs designed to provide leadership to a cooperative system of archives in their region.” The report further recommends “that the archives in each province form a coordinated network to establish common priorities and to develop services, facilities, and programs of benefit to all.” The Wilson report does not hedge in presenting its view of the critical situation in which archivists now find themselves: “Canadian archives stand at the crossroads of choosing between continued institutional isolation and self-reliance or the deliberate evolution of a coordinated archival system with increased institutional interdependence.”

All Canadian archivists do not agree with all of the Wilson report, but its major conclusions about inter-institutional cooperation seem to reflect a consensus of Canadian opinion. Archivists in this country probably are not ready for such a statement and the network conference was not the appropriate body to issue such a call. But that meeting did become part of the groundwork, the foundation, for building a framework of ideas, values, trust, and hope which will eventually sustain a more

extended cooperative and systematic approach to administration of the historical record in this country.

Along with inter-institutional cooperation, archival networks have been built on a second underlying idea—a holistic and inclusive view of the past and of what constitutes history. This view recognizes the need to study the past at the local and regional level in order to understand our national history. This view has informed much of the “new” social history, which has sought an historical perspective on “forgotten” groups such as women, minorities, workers, and immigrants and on facets of human experience, such as work life, community, sexuality, and the social role of the law, previously ignored by most historians.

This new, or redirected, interest in the American past has not been confined to scholars. The celebration of the bicentennial and the phenomenal success of *Roots* are the best known manifestations of a resurgent interest in virtually every aspect of the past. Of greater long-term significance is the booming interest in genealogy, the marked increase in local historical society activity, the emergence of the historic preservation movement, and the growing audience for public interpretive historical programs and activities, such as museum exhibits and media productions. Like the scholarship in the “new” American history, these interests have fed upon and now demand more original source materials grounded in common human experiences—not the papers of presidents and millionaires but the records of small towns and school districts, the naturalization papers of immigrants whose lives left little other documentation, and the records of small, and not always successful, businesses and organizations.

Our belief in preserving a record of this past, to support this kind of history, has fostered the creation and growth of most archival networks. Our task for the future is to insure that our network programs accomplish this goal by thoughtfully and systematically collecting, preserving, and making accessible a usable historical record and by doing so with the highest level of professional competence.