MANUSCRIPT COLLECTING IN ARCHIVAL NETWORKS

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Manuscript collecting has traditionally been carried out by a relatively few, centralized archives. Many of these exist within larger institutions, including historical societies, state archives, and major universities. Their collections have, for the most part, focused upon the papers of prominent men and women, and the records of major civic, cultural, or scientific organizations. A few have also collected the records of major corporations. Most have collected widely on a state or regional scope, but a number have further refined their collecting activities to include only a few, specialized areas of concentration, and have collected in those areas on a national scope. Most other archives have mandates to collect in an unlimited number of subject areas within a designated geographical region, such as a single state. In each instance, however, collecting has usually focused upon an elite of both persons and organizations, rather than upon a sample of papers and records from a wider and perhaps more representative group of potential donors.

It is easy to moralize on the virtues of developing collection breadth and depth, of course, and relatively difficult to implement a policy that effectively mines the vast collecting possibilities beyond the easily identified elite. Major archives have collected widely, and if their collections reflect an emphasis upon an elite, it is the reflection of a pragmatic policy that has served them well for many years. Archival resources have never been equal to the task of complete documentation, and the volume of records collected, processed, stored, and made available for use has had to be selected with an eye to maximum use by a wide public. There is little doubt that the papers of the movers and shakers of society are usually important resources, and that such people have generally wider

influence than less prominent individuals. The decision to document them and the organizations in which they are involved is understandable, particularly when one seriously considers the provisions for donor relations, adequate space, preservation, processing, and public use that must be a part of any active collecting program. Viewed in this light, the seeming limitation of collecting scope practiced by many archival institutions is rational, and their actual accomplishments commendable.

There is a larger question, however, than whether or not the collecting decisions of the nation's major archives have been valid and have served researchers well. The needs of those researchers have expanded, spurred by a new interest in the complexities of American government, economics, and society. While the need for consistent documentation of major figures and organizations remains, it has been joined by a growing demand for information on women, social welfare, labor, ethnic minorities, and immigration history. The resources documenting these research areas are often scattered, bulky, and difficult to obtain—all factors placing an added strain on the staffs and facilities of archives. In many cases response to the demands of the "new" history has come with surprising speed; there are numerous instances in which re-evaluation of existing holdings has yielded remarkably rich caches of information already held in American archival institutions. But despite the successes in meeting emerging research needs, many of these institutions have not been able to respond as quickly and completely as they would like. Some have met the demands by redefining their collecting foci and committing their finite resources to a narrower collecting base. Others have tacitly abandoned certain collecting areas and entered others that promise to generate greater research use. Still others have entered a relatively new experiment in document collecting—the archival network.

Information networking is hardly a new concept. Librarians have operated variations on the network concept for many years, and have refined them considerably through practice. For archives, however, the network concept is both new and the object of some skeptical review. The newness is attested to by the fact that there are only nine fully operating archival networks in the United States in 1981, and that, with one exception, their creation and

period of major growth date from the decade of the 1970s. The skepticism arises from the nature of archival documents themselves, and the generally accepted dicta surrounding their control and use. The documents are usually one-of-a-kind materials, and their placement in network centers entails the dispersal among many locations of materials that would normally have been housed in a single location. Unless the materials are reproduced or physically transferred between locations, a researcher may have to visit several archives to complete research. Reproduction by microfilm or paper copy is a costly process, and transfer is complicated by the logistics involved in operating with adequate security, consistency, and environmental control. Since many researchers prefer to use as many materials in one location as possible, and since archivists question the level of effective professional control that can be exercised over scattered regional archives, it is perhaps not surprising that, despite growth in overall numbers during the last decade, there are not more regional archival networks in the nation in 1981.

The fact that there has been growth, of course, argues that—skeptics aside—there must also be advantages to participation in and operation of a regional archival network. If the possible problems of archival networking seem apparent, the advantages seem much more so.

The benefits of archival networks lie in their greater ability to collect materials in depth in defined subject areas. Advantages of proximity to new audiences, and expanded opportunity for public service programming are also important, but without the collections there is little opportunity to gain the benefits of expanded service and outreach. As in any archives, the collections are the keystone of a network.

It would appear, however, that the benefits of expanded collection, use, and outreach could be gained by any institution, either through judicious expansion of existing operations or through the establishment of new, independent archives. Why, then, has so much attention been given to collection development through archival networks? The benefits are not surprising, and have been announced widely by the proponents of the various networks now in operation: coordinated planning; cost-efficient provision of supplies, professional training, and outreach services;

elimination of duplication; and the ability to gain access to the holdings of more than a single institution.

Of all these laudable objectives, cost-efficiency is perhaps the most important. Prospects for development of new programs, particularly costly archival programs, seem bleak in light of current and projected economic conditions and the realities of declining university enrollments. These and related difficulties make institutional competition and duplication seem unusually wasteful and extravagant. This is especially true of archives, which unfortunately are seldom viewed as central to the missions of many educational institutions. They are esteemed as long as they cost little, and archives are expensive operations.

Archival networks offer the opportunity for cooperative development of collections on an intra-state, inter-state, and even national basis. In so doing, they can effect highly significant economies of scale and provide for development of a single, carefully structured collection with the benefits of central administration and decentralized operations. The resources of all participating institutions are thus extended, and each may accomplish more than would be possible by independent operation. In most of the existing networks this is especially true for the network centers, many of which would have difficulty building and maintaining full-scale archival operations within the budgetary constraints of their institutions and in competition with larger, established archives. Many network centers have wished to improve upon the often haphazard manuscript collections available in county and local historical societies, and have seen networking as one way in which to escape some of the problems common to such small organizations. As individual operating entities, many network centers would offer little more than the larger local historical societies, and would eventually be subject to many of the unfavorable perceptions of such organizations. For the existing network centers, advantages accrue from the ability to stretch resources and to participate in coordinated programs on a statewide basis. Each center is freed from acting in a vacuum, and its collecting decisions become an integral part of a much larger unit.

In order to effect economies of operation, a network must have a collecting plan. If collections are central, then their coordinated acquisition is of key importance. If this fact is obvious to those

investigating archival network operation, an additional fact quickly becomes apparent: there is no single blueprint for successful collection development in a network setting. Major existing networks have quite different collecting policies for manuscript materials, and further significant differences in their treatment of public records.

Development of public records holdings will not be treated here, but it is useful to note that three of the existing networks hold only public records. This includes major networks in Illinois and Texas, which were established by state archives solely to help manage local public records in those states. Of the remaining networks, five hold both manuscripts and local public records, and Missouri holds only manuscripts. These differences have obvious significance to the programs and clientele that can be developed by each network.

Network collecting programs for manuscripts have developed in line with the varying bases upon which they were created. Ohio's network was built upon a number of operating archives, each with more or less well-defined collecting priorities. These have been incorporated into a flexible statewide plan under the leadership of the Ohio Historical Society. Wisconsin, with the nation's oldest archival network, pursued expansion of existing university archives, which were fashioned into its system of area research centers. Minnesota, on the other hand, created a network of eight centers in institutions without any operating archives whatever. The same is largely true of Illinois and Texas, while Missouri's network holds the University of Missouri's Western Historical Manuscript Collection, and the manuscripts of the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Whether creating a network or incorporating a series of existing archival collections, central planning is imperative if the benefits of networking are to be realized. In many instances planning has begun with the simple division of a state into collecting areas, each served by a single member of the network. This division has usually followed county lines, and is thus somewhat arbitrary. It may also occasion some amusement, as happened in a Midwestern network during discussion of the assignment of a particular county to one of several network centers. One participant remarked, "This is incredible. I feel like Catherine the Great at the partition of Poland."

Central to the development of any collecting policy, of course, is an analysis of the audiences one wishes to serve. Since network archives are often asked to follow library practice in justifying their operations (at least in part) by tabulation of use statistics, this analysis must include an evaluation of the most readily available groups of users. The greatest number of existing network centers are located on university campuses, and thus potential research uses by students and faculty are important collecting considerations. Local historians and genealogists are another group of likely patrons, whose use of network facilities may generate helpful publicity for the parent institutions.

Once collecting regions have been demarcated, it is necessary to outline a few basic subject areas that will be common to all centers. Since the ability to create complementary collections is a chief rationale for network development, these core subject areas should be geared to the assembly of a statewide (or regional/national) body of information on specific topics. Examples of such collecting objectives might be the papers of state legislators and politicians, and the records of local and regional businesses. By exploiting such opportunities, a network will create collections of considerable depth and the chance for comparative research.

Beyond the complementary core collections lies the less well-defined area of individual center specialization. Since each network center serves a geographic region with some unique characteristics, each will have opportunities to gather documentation in that region. Rational development of such individual subject specialities is not quite as simple as it appears, because collecting on a geographic basis is never as logical as it might be. It is in such circumstances that the network format is a special strength, and is largely a guarantor of realistic collecting programs. In Minnesota, for instance, the centers jointly determined that only one of them would document the activities of the Farm Holiday Association (a Depression-era group formed to protest low farm prices and mortgage foreclosures), while another operated a regional project to document retention of ethnic customs among Scandinavians. Similarly, in Wisconsin, centers serving adjacent regions of the state have agreed to complementary collecting across center lines. With limited resources to spread over an archival operation, such efficiencies are not just common

sense—they are imperative. Because collections are gathered systematically, without expensive competition, the interests of both the eventual researcher and the archives are served.

Development of a collecting policy based upon geographic regions has other benefits through the prevention of costly competition. The policy development process itself serves to pool the resources and knowledge of network representatives from various geographical regions and with different perspectives and collecting interests. A policy drawn by such a group is likely to be far stronger than one formulated without that variety of input.

Elimination of duplication is yet a further benefit of networking, as libraries have found for many years. In an archival network, for instance, it is neither necessary nor sensible for every center serving an agricultural region to document the same aspects of that agricultural economy. One might specialize in grain marketing cooperatives and companies, another in local merchants, and yet another in the collection of farm records. With complementary specialties and resources directed in depth at narrower fields of documentation, each center is likely to develop collections with significantly greater research value. Duplication and competition seldom produce anything but a veneer of resources that will quickly frustrate any serious researcher.

In framing a network collecting policy, the institutional objectives of the major participants must be taken into consideration. Virtually all of the existing networks have been launched under the auspices of a state historical society or state archives and a group of colleges and universities. Large county or regional historical societies have also been involved as network members on occasion. The objectives of universities and state historical agencies are usually complementary, and a good many faculty members already use the collections of the latter. Collecting priorities of network centers will have to be constructed with reference to teaching and research specialties at their respective institutions, and with an eye to promoting use among the general public as well. This last objective, while not a primary concern of many universities, is nonetheless important and the object of increasing attention. In an era of declining enrollments, few university administrators are adverse to the promotion of their institutions as community resources.

The interests and expertise of individual center directors is also an important factor in determining the collecting specialties of network centers. As long as those interests draw upon the available resources of the areas served by each center, they will strengthen the network and add important elements of depth to the collection.

Collecting policies are only as effective as the mechanics for carrying them out. Field work and donor relations are time consuming activities, with results that may not be fully evident for years. Patience, persistence, and prescience are useful qualities in a manuscript collector. Though difficult to recognize at a glance, they are key elements in any successful program of manuscripts acquisition.

Patience: Donors do not always wish to give their papers or records at the first moment they are asked. Many people are genuinely modest, and have some difficulty understanding why their papers are important to a manuscript repository. Even those who well recognize their importance and the value of their papers for research may not wish to part with them upon first request. The manuscript collector who believes that a simple explanation of his priorities and objectives, a tailored statement of the donor's importance, and a sincere mien will lead to quick collecting success is doomed to frustration and disappointment.

Persistence: Though some collections may be given at first asking, the majority will require perseverance. An attempt by the collector to psychologically occupy the donor's position will help ease the frustration of waiting. People do not often part easily with papers that document their life's work and perhaps that of several generations of their forebears.

Prescience: Perhaps the most elusive and valuable of all desirable traits in a manuscript collector is prescience. Today's research interests are not necessarily those of tomorrow—witness the vast growth in women's and American Indian studies—and the important barometers of research use will remain most favorable for those institutions whose collecting staff can at least partly forecast future research trends.

In many networks collecting is a joint effort of the network centers and the coordinating institution, though in some the central institution does virtually all of the collecting for the network. Direct involvement of the centers in collecting is

probably advisable. The personal interests of center directors are valuable in forming collecting projects, and their knowledge of local personalities, businesses, and other organizations is likely to be deeper than that of personnel at a central agency. That statement must be qualified with the observation that full-time field representatives of central institutions are likely to have wide contacts throughout a state, and will thus be able to contribute substantially to a center's collecting program. Since centers collect on a regional basis, affiliation with a network and its central historical agency is a point of considerable persuasion for donors. Such potential donors as legislators and many business people usually serve more than a single town or county, and are likely to view a regional affiliate of a statewide network more favorably than an independent and purely local repository.

The role of oral history is unfortunately seldom considered when building a regional network center's collections. Only two of the networks represented at this conference report major oral history holdings, though several others hold oral histories developed outside the network collection. A number of those collections are small and peripheral to the basic manuscript collections and public records.

The chief arguments against planning and building an oral history collection are its celebrated expense and the considerable effort involved in producing research-worthy interviews. Both are valid considerations. Oral history is expensive; its execution and preparation for research use are costly even in comparison with the considerable expense of building and operating a manuscript collection. Preparatory research—the most vital component of any oral history interview—is similarly expensive, and its neglect is chiefly responsible for the criticism that has been leveled on occasion at even major oral history collections. If oral history is employed as a collecting and resource-building tool, then it must be used with commitment and dedication to quality regardless of cost. Repositories cannot afford the collection, processing, and storage of manuscript materials with only vague, peripheral research uses; neither can they afford the considerable expense of creating oral history with severely limited interest for research.

The seeming simplicity of oral history is perhaps responsible for the disagreements and criticisms it has generated among

researchers who have attempted to use its product. An interviewer and a narrator, a tape recorder and some tape, seem all that is needed to produce an oral history interview. To be truthful, the scholarly critics of oral history must lay some blame on their own colleagues for its occasional disappointments, for among them are those who appear to believe that their professional expertise obviates the need for further research on specific topics and narrators before an interview. Interviews created without such additional preparation are almost certain to disappoint, resulting in what Barbara Tuchman has termed "over-documentation, or what has been called, less charitably, the multiplication of rubbish."

Despite its problems and expense, oral history is a valuable adjunct to a manuscript collection. It may frequently be used to supplement the papers of individuals, deftly filling the inevitable gaps in the collections. It may also be used to create a major body of information in an area poorly documented in manuscript form. The Farm Holiday project in Minnesota and the International Women's Year project in Missouri are examples of such information-building. A less frequent use is the documentation of current events—exemplified again by Minnesota and Missouri projects—the Powerline Construction Oral History and the St. Louis Teachers' Strike projects respectively. The oral history of current events demands more intensity and expense than retrospective projects, which may explain the relative infrequency of its production.

In an age of disposable computer tapes, microwave communications, and the omnipresent telephone, oral history is likely to assume a position of increasing importance. A similar and important factor is that, despite a dramatic increase in the quantity of paper generated today, the level of substantive interpersonal communication it contains has declined. Individuals no longer write long, news-filled letters; many communicate in writing only with their holiday greeting cards. The written view of lifestyles and events is seldom found in modern personal papers. Oral history provides a major opportunity to set down personal views and reminiscences, thus providing a further, much needed perspective on our fast changing world.

The collecting of manuscripts through archival networks has, to

this point, been presented as a venture of nearly unalloyed benefit to all concerned. There are, however, a number of persistent critics of archival networks, whose views should be considered by both existing and prospective network participants.

The charge has been made that networks fragment manuscript and public records holdings—leading to often arbitrary and unworkable allocations of similar collections. This is represented as a serious disservice to scholarly research, and an unnecessary burden upon researchers who must travel between repositories to gain access to collections that would otherwise be in a single, central location.

A second charge, one given considerable force by network critics, is that network centers seldom have the scale of resources and capabilities of larger, centralized archives. Their frequent location in institutions for which archival services are not priority obligations is seen as a signal weakness in their makeup. The stability of network centers, with their occasional lack of full-time professional archival staffing, is viewed with alarm by some archivists and scholars. Even those employing full time professional archivists are often thinly staffed, leading to the charge that neither materials nor researchers are well served.

These criticisms are serious, and seriously made, by professionals who genuinely distrust the dispersal of manuscript materials throughout a network of relatively small archival centers. As one might expect, there is enough justice in such criticism to merit the careful attention of network planners. It may be argued that without networks, the collections they hold would have come to a central archival agency. It seems obvious that the reverse might also be true; that many of those materials would have gone uncollected without the activities of various network centers.

The materials in network centers are indeed dispersed geographically, but certainly less so than they would be in the hands of the county and local historical societies that blanket every state. Although several networks permit transfer of manuscript materials, all have central catalogs or guides to network holdings, and all offer easy exchange of information on their collections. It may be argued, then, that the disadvantages of geographical distance are more than offset by the availability of collections and information on their content.

The question of the staffing of network centers is more troubling, carrying as it does the implication of unwitting mismanagement of collections. The problem of training network staff is given considerable attention in every major network, and the content of that training is the subject of ongoing evaluation in nearly all of them. A number of networks control the problem of operating with inexperienced staffs by providing considerable expertise and management from the central archival agency. In some cases this may include virtually all of the processing and some of the collecting. In any case, with proper control the network format is specifically designed to blend complementary resources, and to ensure competent management of the collections in each center.

Despite such safeguards, the criticism of collection management in archival networks should not be dismissed lightly. The growth of network centers may be accompanied by a concurrent rise in independent decision-making outside network control. A certain degree of such independence is both natural and healthy, but all participants must remember that the advantages of cooperation and independence cannot always be achieved simultaneously. The benefits of networking will not be realized without adherence to archival standards and careful attention to the details of the inter-institutional enterprise. Those who choose independence over cooperation may lose the *raison d'etre* for their center operations, and suffer the consequences of lessened professional credibility. The descent from archival network center to local historical society may be both swift and difficult to reverse.

What is the bottom line on collection development in archival networks? Given the persistent interest in networking and the slow but steady growth in the number of networks in recent years, it seems clear that the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. Although the fiscal realities of the next years may impose additional burdens on networks, those difficulties seem likely to promote further attempts at cost-efficient cooperation. As long as network participants realize that cooperation is ongoing, and that the forces of growth and changing circumstances demand firm basic standards of operation as well as flexibility in meeting them, the future of archival networks seems assured.