THE HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY: AN OUTSIDE VIEW

by

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Occasionally the number of letters of inquiry from members of our profession on my desk has led me to feel that, in preparing papers to be read before learned societies, archivists conduct their researches by long range questionnaire bombardment--a tactic often used by authors of books and theses in that euphemistically termed and frequently maligned branch of the service called "education." In the present instance, I must plead guilty to the charge. Several of the conclusions which are hereinafter tentatively presented were reached following a study of replies to inquiries sent to manuscript custodians and librarians who have had opportunities to observe the work and development of the Historical Records Survey. In this sense, this paper may be regarded as a composite outside view, compiled from the personalized viewpoint of a single individual. The replies unite in approbation of the Survey's labors, and evidence a belief in many quarters that it is conducting the most significant work of its kind ever attempted. At the same time, they also indicate that thoughtful evaluation is in progress.

In addition to the helpful ideas of outsiders, I have been provided with several hundred pages of copies of letters and speeches in the files of the Survey, which include the type of self-laudatory propaganda that every Federal enterprise must disseminate in justifying its existence. Contacts have been maintained with the Survey's national headquarters,

its Southern regional office, and several state offices, where an examination of editorial procedures has been conducted. Likewise, observation of individual workers and supervisors has been made in the manuscript and archival records repository at Louisiana State University, and in connection with several months' personal research in Texas and Louisiana courthouses.

The major objectives and methods of the Historical Records Survey are known to most of you, and will not be here detailed. In accordance with the general subject of this session and the emphasis placed by the Survey on local and state records, the publications in that field--particularly the county inventories--constitute the primary interest of this paper. It is recognized that an outside view will probably not make sufficient allowances for the internal complexities of the problem, and that criticism "looking back" may be as iniquitous as Sunday morning quarterbacking is to a football coach.

What do outsiders, who are in positions to evaluate in a balanced and thoughtful manner, find wrong with the Survey's program and methods? Four general criticisms are most often advanced. Let us examine the validity of each.

Within the past year the most common question raised has been whether the Survey has broadened its scope unwisely, whether it has departed too far from its primary purpose of inventorying local and state records. One typical statement by a well-known archivist makes this observation:

"The chief danger, as I see it, is the possibility that the work may be stopped or curtailed within the near future, leaving a large portion of the program incomplete and in such a state that the results are worth little or nothing. I wonder if it would not be better for the Survey to concentrate on one thing at a time and to proceed so that if the Survey should be stopped at any given time, there would still be something important completed. I realize the difficulty of carrying on work of this type . . . but at the same time I believe that a definite effort should be made. This seems especially true now, in view of the present political uncertainty." Criticisms of this nature originate, in part, from the entry of the Survey into such fields as inventorying church records and private papers in both public depositories and in private possession, the imprints survey, and the transcription of commissioners' courts minutes at a time when personnel increases were not appreciable.

In general, the expansion of the Survey's activities has not been allowed to retard the preparation and publication of inventories of county records. It has merely made provision for the further employment of workers who have completed county records forms or who could not profitably be used thereon. The services of a former preacher sometimes can best be utilized in assembling data on church records. Furthermore, there is a limit to the number of workers who can be assigned to any one office. In addition, the number of relief workers is much greater in some localities than in others. What objection can there be to using the surplus on secondary though worthwhile

projects?

Yet there is considerable soundness in the suggestion as to future policy quoted above, and the Survey's administrative officials are the first to admit it. All of the alphabetical agencies have had to face the necessity of unit production within designated time and expenditure limits. However, two inescapable factors in the situation have heretofore prevented rapid production of county inventories. In the first place, intensive research on the constitutional and legal provisions governing county offices has been absolutely essential before the records of those offices could be inventoried. In addition to the general laws that have been state-wide in their applicability, many offices in individual counties have been subjects of special legislation. Any researcher who has had the experience of finding the same types of records set down in sharply variant forms in adjacent counties as well as three or four entirely different kinds of records in a single volume can appreciate the necessity of a knowledge of the laws concerning those records before they can be clearly identified and inventoried, especially by workers who need explicit directions. It is a commentary on the status of the history of local government that many months have been required to establish even the bare legal framework into which the records should theoretically fit.

Incidentally, the criticism has been made that the legal essays themselves are deceptive, because provisions of the laws were not always immediately put into effect. This has

been realized, and in some of the recent essays instances of deviations have been specifically noted; while (if the records have not been lost) comparison of the laws and the inventory entries can be made by students interested in failures to obey the statutes. It should be remembered, also, that an open criticism of present day officialdom for not obeying statutory regulations might result in withdrawal of permission to examine the records of an office, past or present. The primary objective is to survey, not to criticize. Education of county officials (like that of other archivists) is a delicate matter and must result from suggestion and example, rather than from direct imposition.

A second reason for the slowness in production of inventories has been rigid Work Projects Administration regulations that prohibit the employment of a large percentage of supervisory and skilled editorial workers, who must thoroughly and interminably re-examine inventory data.

Curtailment of production has not been in field work, but rather in the state office editing of information secured by field workers and the mimeographing of inventories with comprehensive essays on governmental organization and functions. The field work for more than two-thirds of the county inventories has been completed, and in nearly every state the legal framework has been established. We may, therefore, expect accelerated production in the near future. In this connection, two variations from the present form of inventories are receiving serious consideration. One is "the issuance of county inventories without essays, and with only title line information

on the individual series of records. The essay material would be taken care of by the preparation of a key volume of essays on all of the county offices existing in any county in the State, with information as to the counties in which they had existed and for what periods of time. This system would make it possible to produce inventories much more rapidly, but it would cause each of the county or town books to lose some of the value which they have as now organized." Another possible alternative is the use of the essays in a single specific inventory as a master volume, with details in essays of each subsequent inventory confined to variations peculiar to the individual county. However, the standard which has been set is such that only recently in many states has a single inventory been judged worthy of designation as a master volume.

The weakest section of the inventories of county records is the historical essays. An official statement concerning them, made in June of 1938, follows:

"Let us examine briefly each of the sections of the inventories. The historical sketches occupy about 3 percent of the total pages, and range from two or three pages in most of the inventories to 11 1/4 pages, plus five pages of maps showing the evolution of counties, in the Washington County, Ohio, book. The tendency of the historical sketches is to expand by the inclusion of information taken from the county archives. In a number of States we are now systematically taking notes on the basic facts of the county's history as revealed by the minutes of the county commissioners or supervisors. How far this procedure will lead us in expanding the historical sketches

we are not in a position at present to determine. It is clear, however, that most of the information will relate to the development of the agencies and functions of county government, the history of courthouse construction, and similar matters. We are not attempting to produce well-founded and complete county histories, but we are attempting to make a considerable contribution to the available mimeographed and printed material on county history by exploiting to some degree the resources contained in the archives. I believe that even this contribution will result in a significant correction of and addition to the present published materials on county history. The contribution will be of added significance because of the fact that each statement will be well documented. To date most of our documentation has been inserted parenthetically in the text of the sketches. We are moving in the direction, however, of placing this material in footnotes so as to render the text less difficult to read."

Despite the determined efforts that have been made to improve the historical essays, it is clear that usually they are not equal in quality to the inventories to which they serve as introductions. Furthermore, many of them contain divergences into such matters as religion, education, the press, industry, agriculture, racial backgrounds of settlers, emigration, transportation, mail routes, mineral resources, tavern prices, apprentice contracts, military movements, ghost towns, tornadoes, a recent flood, and other acts of God. Both subjects treated and sources vary widely, and the latter are of uneven quality. Some cite deed records, more do not. One very valuable source,

the probate records, is rarely used, perhaps because the research abilities of courthouse workers are limited. It is true that transcriptions of one basic source--the minutes of county commissioners courts--are being rapidly filed in the state offices, where much of the actual writing is done. Certainly the writing of historical studies that are partly based on primary source materials and diverge into the subjects mentioned above is a more intriguing task than editorial work which is being reduced to assembly-line efficiency. Doubtless the county histories, though none exceed thirty pages in length, are in many instances the best yet written and will be of value to local school teachers. But the task of the Survey is manifest in its name. The present speaker is convinced that the historical essays should not venture from "the development of the agencies and functions of county government" into a miscellaneous assortment of topics that cannot be compactly integrated and completed. The adoption of such a policy would result in a much higher standard of footnote citations, and might facilitate the issuance of more inventories.

A second common criticism, related to the first, is that entries are in many instances unnecessarily detailed and that perfectly obvious entries are repeated in successive inventories. The director of one important university library and research center writes: "Everybody expects to find a Register of Deeds of some sort in the records of every county, and it seems to me quite unnecessary to give two to four pages to somewhat minute statements of the location, record, etc., of the deeds of each county. This criticism is probably beside the point,

as the chief purpose of these records seems to be furnishing work to deserving people who are unemployed. I should myself feel that the volume of county surveys could profitably be reduced by at least one-half, particularly when I consider the job of trying to store them in a library already greatly overcrowded." This librarian may find himself buried under a mass of mimeographed compilations if the Survey continues its recently inaugurated policy of using courthouse workers, who have finished inventory forms, in making transcriptions of the minutes of commissioners courts and similar bodies. The police jury minutes of one Louisiana parish are being published in thirteen volumes.

It has been indicated that title line entries are under consideration. Another obvious possibility is condensation of entries, subject, however, to the force of the opinion held by some Survey officials that competent condensation will require higher caliber editorial labor than is now available in most state offices. Also, if the existence of the Survey is prolonged, the compression of the material in a complete set of the county inventories of a single state into a publication of two to five volumes may be expected.

Although condensation of the entries of county inventories should receive serious consideration, no reasonable person would oppose the transcription of such inherently valuable historical materials as the minutes of county commissioners' courts and police juries. On the contrary, it is suggested that the thousands of personal letters now intermingled with official county records, particularly those of probate courts,

might eventually be transcribed in the same manner. This would amount to the rescue of a large number of "lost manuscripts.

The perishable nature of the paper and bindings of most of the publications is a matter of frequent unfavorable discussion. Some of the bindings are torn as they are unwrapped. One critic believes that "certainly a few copies ought to be run off on rag paper of a permanent character." Admitting the validity of the criticism in general, several comments are appropriate. (1) The Survey has been largely dependent on sponsors for publication funds, and will be even more so under recent legislation. (2) Support had to be gained by showing what could be done, though an impermanent publication form was used. (3) Most of the early publications have been regarded as subject to revision. (4) Libraries can provide permanent bindings for volumes most often used.

A fourth general criticism is obvious: that local personnel is too often incompetent. The director of one southern archives concluded: "I think the Historical Records Survey is a very important project and has been fruitful in the counties where it has been undertaken, in spite of the fact that the workers have been inexperienced and untrained and the county officials with whom they have to deal are in a worse way." Such a statement is frequently linked with the expression of a belief that the Survey's supervisory personnel has not been granted sufficient travel funds. All of us doubtless have had experiences with Survey workers who could provide anti-New Deal cartoonists with materials for fascinating, phrenetic compositions. I have

seen and heard three Survey courthouse workers asleep in the same room, but my only emotion was gratification because I knew that these particular persons were doing less harm in somnolence than they would in their waking moments. I have talked with others who were apparently psychopathic, which does not necessarily mean that they were incapable of performing competent archival work. I have seen three courthouse workers--two men and a woman--patiently gazing at a single manuscript volume day after day. Since the woman was facing the back of the volume, from an angle that gave her an upside down view of the writing, one of my stenographic assistants commented in all earnestness that the female worker must be the wife of one of the men and was engaged in checking up on her husband in his working hours. I have talked with dozens of workers who had only a very sketchy idea of the value and ultimate uses of their labors. But general condemnation on the basis of such observations is dangerous. Results count, and the Survey has developed a method of factory-like use and re-checking of the results of clerical labor that has produced progressively improved county inventories.

This question of the competency of personnel naturally has been the greatest obstacle faced by Dr. Evans and his associates. It was responsible for most of the objections to the Survey raised at the outset of the program. After slightly more than three years and a half of operation, the administration of the Survey must be given full credit for firmly and persistently improving personnel in the choice of both state directors and persons for positions in lower brackets. And a

situation has been created in many states wherein the Survey has been given preferential treatment by Work Projects Administration personnel directors. Finally, a system designed to assign laborers to work consistent with their talents has been constantly refined. The increased amount of support by professional bodies and scholars evidences the conviction that the system is in successful operation.

Recent Congressional legislation requiring all Work Projects Administration certified workers who had been continuously employed for eighteen months to take an enforced furlough of one month before applying for recertification was a severe blow. Key workers were replaced by inexperienced persons. Furthermore, recent reclassification of typists that tends to place expert typists at the same pay rate level as those less proficient has tended to reduce efficiency and is obviously unfair. Fortunately, many eighteen-months white collar workers are already regaining their jobs on Survey projects which have been granted sponsors' contributions, whereas unskilled day laborers may have to wait many months for re-employment.

What of the accomplishments of the Survey? The former librarian of Columbia University went on record as follows: "These [county] inventories are going to be as important to American scholars as Medieval Inventories are now to students of the Middle Ages in Europe." Similar laudatory statements are heard on all sides. The inventories will be valuable to the legal profession, to teachers of local and state history, to historians and other social scientists. Thousands of cubic

feet of manuscripts have been arranged, and local officials aroused to a realization of their importance. Rare newspapers, manuscripts, and books have been located in unlikely places. And the imprints survey, as it moves toward the creation of a union catalogue, has aroused admiration.

The State Librarian of Florida gives credit to the Survey for stimulating an interest in state history on the part of "the man in the street." Membership in the Florida Historical Society and local historical societies has accordingly increased. And there are strong reasons for believing that an act establishing a state department of archives will be passed at the next session of the Florida legislature. Florida's experience has been repeated with variations in other states.

The Historical Records Survey has further succeeded in training, in a practical, hard-bitten school, a group of archivists and archival administrators in a land where opportunities for theoretical training are all too rare. It has brought different types of minds to bear upon archival problems. While this "new blood" has had much to learn, it has contributed practical answers to some of the pressing questions of archival science. In this connection, the speaker has recently made an analysis of the past work and educational records of fifty supervisors in five states. One holds a doctor of philosophy degree; ten the master's degree; nine the bachelor of arts; and three are bachelors of law. Several had been high school and college instructors, and their number also included six former clerks; five bookkeepers and accountants; two ministers; two social workers; a county treasurer; a credit manager and editor of a business journal; a sports editor; an assistant superintendent of a

state tax survey; an army pilot and county attorney; a radio script and free lance writer; a fur buyer; a bus driver; an actor; a theater manager; and an army sergeant. More than two-thirds were less than forty years of age; and only two past sixty. These men have been the backbone of the Survey and deserve much of the credit for its accomplishments. They are not allowed vacations under Work Projects Administration regulations, but this is offset by their contemptuous disregard for the time clock. This attitude, coupled with a fanatical belief in the righteousness of their cause, has brought some of them to the verge of nervous collapse--all on behalf of "the show," as many of them, in their own vernacular, refer to their project. I know one state director who for twenty of his thirty-odd years had been able to quote the batting average of nearly every leading baseball player in the major leagues. Today, after two years with the Survey, he does not even know who won the World Series. He and all of his associates talk, sleep, dream, eat--and drink--historical records. There has been nothing to compare with it in the annals of historical bibliography.

What of the future of the Historical Records Survey? If the relief problem is to be with us more or less permanently and Congress in its wisdom sees fit to maintain the organization at approximately its present status, we may expect--in addition to the bringing up to date of the projects already mentioned--the completion of other subsidiary endeavors. These include "an annotated bibliography covering the entire field of American history"; a substantial revision of the

Union List of Newspapers; a nation-wide guide to personal manuscripts; and an inventory of the records of labor organizations. Other possibilities are guides to the records of fraternal organizations, business firms, and educational institutions.

It is also noteworthy that all historical records are not on paper. The National Park Service--operating with trained but limited personnel under the clear mandate of Congress as expressed in the Historic Sites Act of 1935--is attempting to inventory and classify historic sites. This survey is not confined to sites of national importance, and both Civil Service and relief employees are engaged thereon. In like manner, the location and classification of objects of historic interest--some in museums but more in the hands of private individuals--would be enormously helpful to social and cultural historians. The experience of one investigator is worth quoting:

"A number of years ago [he states] I proposed to make a scientific and exhaustive study of the history of firearms manufacturing in this country, both by private manufacturers and by government fabricators of one sort and another. An hour's conference with the proper persons convinced me that the data I wished, if it existed at all, was scattered in a thousand attics and cellars, not only as regards data on private manufacturers, but public arsenals as well. I was assured that government data existed almost by the mile, utterly un-indexed, and what was worse, stored in damp cellars and inflammable attics, scattered all over Washington, D. C., and existing in

indeterminate quantities and with equally uncertain facilities for examination, in a dozen arsenals all over the country. In short, it was a task that called for a small army of finders and systematizers and indexers, before I could possibly hope to scratch even the surface of this very important and timely subject."

Only one comment on this case should be added: the historian also needed to know the nature and location of dozens of scattered firearms collections.

Finally, in the interest of the maintenance of a common standard of compilation and scholarly quality, it is self-evident that federal guidance of any governmental project involving the surveying of historical records--whether paper or physical sites and objects--is essential. Yet Congress has taken progressive steps toward the curtailment of nation-wide direction of projects of the Work Projects Administration, and complete abolition is a possibility. The time has come when this Society should go on record in favor of the continuance of the Historical Records Survey under federal supervision. The Society's individual members should actively and continuously propagandize to that end.

I am also convinced that the inventorying of current local and state records should become a recognized, permanent function of the federal government. Why? Because that is the only way that it can be done in an orderly, uniform manner; and the production of accurate and reliable guides to factual data is indispensable to understanding in every field of human endeavor. The promotion and survey of every field of state

and local recreation has become a permanent activity of the federal government, subject to expansion with relief funds in periods of economic distress. It is more imperative that inventorying the basic records of a complicated society should receive comparable attention.