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An Odyssey Through Local Public Records Programs: Experiences of a Journeyman Archivist

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Most people familiar with the creation and content of local public records would agree that these records constitute an essential primary source for the study of the evolution of local government and community and family history. The demand for effective management and preservation of the most valuable series of local records is increasing annually. Several state archives have recently expanded existing local public records programs or have instituted for the first time a variety of measures ranging from regional depositories to selective microfilming in order to preserve the most important records generated by local governments.

For approximately three and a half years, I have been involved in efforts to establish or expand local public records programs. When the Illinois State Archives established the Illinois Regional Archives Depository system (IRAD) in 1976 with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), I secured a ten-month appointment as a student assistant-intern at the Northern Illinois University Depository at DeKalb. The following year I went west to become project archivist for the Iowa County Records Inventory Project, a two-year pilot project funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). After completing that project, I was hired as an archivist for the New York Local Government Archives Program, which is also funded by NHPRC.

This experience in three different programs, two in the Midwest and one in the East, has given me some perspective to speak to the topic of local records programs. Because of the difficulties of condensing three years of work into a brief article, my analysis here is confined to the foundations, scope, and goals of the three programs with which I have been associated.

The local public records program in Illinois is based upon statutes making all public records below the level of the federal government the property of the state and creating in 1961 a Local Records Commission composed of the director of the state archives, the state historian, and local officials or their representatives. The Commission approves or disapproves disposition requests filed by field representatives of the state archives, who in turn receive requests from the local officials. The disposition requests are made after consulting retention-disposition schedules issued by the state archives and revised by the Local Records Commission. This Commission does not have jurisdiction over state court records and records generated by
Cook County (Chicago).

In 1976 the state archives obtained a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to establish a regional depository system only for local public records. The state archives leases storage space at state universities, hires on-campus supervisors, and employs graduate students appointed by history and political science departments as student-interns. The state archives trains the interns and their supervisors, formulates acquisition policies, conducts all of the field work, provides forms and procedures to be followed by the interns, and monitors the descriptive inventories at each depository.

Each depository serves a multi-county region. Records released by local officials and approved for transfer by the Local Records Commission are delivered to the depositories. The public has access to records at depositories.

Student interns receive orientation and instruction during a training course held by the state archives in Springfield. The course includes sessions on Illinois history and local government, the research value of local records, the operations of the Local Records Commission and state archives field representatives, archival theory, and records inventorying procedures. State archives staff also visit depositories periodically to clarify procedures or provide additional instruction.

Interns work a twenty-hour week for ten months and perform the following duties: accession records delivered at the depository doorstep; perform basic conservation measures; write descriptive inventory sheets; research administrative histories; and provide reference service. The interns are responsible to the on-campus supervisor and the program's director.

Two observations about IRAD in its formative stages are perhaps applicable to other regional systems. First, when graduate assistants serve as part-time archivists, well-planned initial training, consistent supervision, and adequate checking of the work produced are essential to ensure the uniformity and accuracy of the work. In an attempt to offer thorough instruction, IRAD has modified its procedures manual and instruction program several times. In the first year, however, most of the training was on-the-job and in response to situations that arose unexpectedly. Interns, for example, were not prepared to accession and describe records that lacked proper authorization for transfer to a depository but which nonetheless appeared in the deliveries.

Supervision was both direct and indirect. The presence of on-campus supervisors who often were not archivists and frequent contacts with the state archives resulted in some confusion about the lines of authority. The state archives screened inventory sheets sent through the mail by the interns. Most of the first sheets produced by interns were returned for corrections or clarifications. Only recently have
state archives personnel begun to travel to depositories to verify
data recorded on the inventory sheets.

Any state archives considering the establishment of a regional
system should not underestimate the hours that must be devoted to
training and supervising depository employees. Clear lines of author-
ity must be established. Training materials and procedures must be
well thought out and standardized. The central archives must involve
itself in constant evaluation of the work produced by each depository.

The second observation based on my experience with IRAD involves
the work and morale of the student interns. Part-time employees who
are interested in local history and/or an archival career should be
chosen. It is disastrous for a new program to hire people who are
only tangentially interested in the work. The type of work in which
motivated graduate assistants are employed is also crucial.

At IRAD the daily work routine was determined by the tasks
assigned by the state archives. Most often the work routine was de-
termined by the frequency with which records were delivered and the
amount of records transported on each trip to the depository. During
the first year work was erratic and much of it seemed boring or non-
productive. Noninvolvement in field work accommodated our busy aca-
demic schedules, but many interns concluded that they were not being
provided meaningful work on a regular basis. Some came to see them-
selves as low-level clerks manning lonely outposts.

The IRAD system survived the struggling first two years and is
currently funded by the Illinois General Assembly as a program of the
state archives. My experience as a student-intern at IRAD taught me
that in any archival program utilizing part-time help thorough in-
struction and consistent supervision is a necessity and that, in
archival depositories as in other forms of work, the level of produc-
tivity and quality of the product are directly related to the meaning-
fulness of the work as perceived by the lowest laborer.

The Iowa County Records Inventory Project (ICRIP) was a two-year
pilot project funded by the NHPRC and administered through the Iowa
State Historical Department, Division of the State Historical Society.
This project was part of a two-tiered effort to revive Iowa's dead
public records program. Earlier in the century Iowa possessed an ex-
emplary public archival program for state records. By 1977, however,
the Hawkeye State lacked any program for state or local records. Iowa
was one of two states without a state archivist, and its "state
archives" was in reality dead storage with no archival arrangement or
finding aids. The only bright spot was a functioning state records
management division and commission.

The Iowa Code grants the head of the Division of Historic Museum
and Archives (Iowa State Historical Department) authority to accept
county and municipal records offered but not power to set retention
and disposition guidelines for local public records. Hence no
retention-disposition guidelines for local public records existed in 1977; county and municipal officials relied upon vague and inadequate statutes, decisions of local courts, county attorneys' opinions, and advice from state agencies for the disposition of records. Moreover, the State Historical Department had no statutory authority to implement the recommendations of any local public records pilot project.

F. Gerald Ham, State Archivist of Wisconsin, had pointed out the deficiencies and made recommendations on Iowa archives in a report funded by NHPRC. The State Historical Board, governing body of the Iowa State Historical Department, made the creation and funding of the position of state archivist a priority, supported by a "leverage" grant to the department funded by NHPRC for an assistant archivist for one year contingent upon creation of the state archivist's position. Dedicated persons and groups, including members of the State Historical Society and the Iowa Historical Materials Preservation Society, engaged in long and active lobbying in support of the creation of the state archivist's position. The Governor's Historical Records Advisory Board supported funding to implement a two-part program for Iowa's public records. As a participant in this campaign, I felt confident about the support for the County Records Project and the future of a state and local public records program in Iowa.

The procedures of the Iowa County Records Inventory Project were based upon programs in other states, especially the Texas County Records Inventory Project. (In fact the ICRIP used the excellent film "Texas Bound" to publicize its own effort.) As project archivist, I was responsible for completion of inventories of all county public records in at least twelve sample counties, two from each congressional district selected on the basis of geography, size, age, urban-rural demographic ratios, and agricultural-industrial concentrations; publication of inventory guides for the sample counties; preparation of an inventory procedures manual; compilation of a file on the general conditions of county records in Iowa; preparation of recommendations for continuation of the project including changes in the Code of Iowa; and preparation of a preliminary retention-disposition schedule for all county records discovered in the inventory. When these tasks were completed, the list was expanded to include more items: utilization of volunteers in four sample county inventories; utilization of a university work-study student in three counties; generation of newspaper, television, and radio publicity in every part of the state about the project and the plight of county records; assistance to two counties in their own records surveys; and assistance to a municipality's records survey.

The County Records Project established a foundation for a future county records program. This was paralleled by the hiring of a state archivist in March 1979, and more recently by staffing of the NHPRC-funded assistant archivist position. Clearly, the state records situation constitutes the priority of this state's fledgling archival program, but it is hoped that some of the work of the County Records Project will be continued in a modest way so that contacts are
maintained and initiatives begun by the project are expanded.

Public records surveys are expensive, labor intensive efforts and should be launched with a more specific goal than "finding out what's out there." The final result of the inventory often is the published guide, but in the early phase of a new program the inventory guide is of secondary importance. The records survey provides data for the initial retention-disposition schedule which is the keystone of a local records program. In Iowa we may have concentrated too much on production of the inventory guides.

The total universe of local public records cannot be manageably inventoried in the early period of a new local public records program. Even a state like Iowa with a population of a little over two and a half million has ninety-nine counties. A discrete slice of that universe may include offices in a small sample of governmental units such as counties or cities. ICRIP may have erred in trying to inventory records in every office within the sample counties. A good argument can be made, however, in favor of a thorough inventory of the sample universe.

Local public records can be used to educate the public about the importance of their local government records. In Iowa one unexpected result of the project was the heightened awareness among some key county officials of records management and the importance of several records series. Such initial consciousness-raising lays the groundwork for cooperation in implementing retention-disposition schedules.

In an agriculturally based state, it is important to mobilize local constituencies such as genealogical and historical societies and local officials in order to win local support for statewide records programs and to win those crucial legislative battles. The so-called "little old women from Dubuque" often make dedicated volunteer workers and effective lobbyists. One should also contact statewide organizations representing local officials. The Iowa State Association of Counties, for example, provided effective communications with county officials, and individual statewide bodies such as the State Association of County Clerks assisted with the screening of the preliminary retention-disposition schedules.

Also, one's legal mandate in the area of local public records often predetermines the scope and limits of a local records program. As far as I know, the state archives in Iowa still lacks a clear mandate in the area of local public records. Thus the initiative for continuation of the county records project rests with county officials, many of whom resist state control.

Historical Records Advisory Boards can play an important part in the establishment of local public records programs. In Iowa the Board is fortunate in having as one of its members a former county recorder and president of the State Association of County Recorders.
After working in the depository outpost in Illinois and riding the inventory circuit on the plains of Iowa, I reversed Horace Greeley's dictum and sought my fortunes in the East. In mid-1979 I was hired by the State Archives, New York State Education Department, and assigned to the Local Government Archives Program (LGAP). Since the Local Government Archives Program in New York State is in its nascent phase, I shall confine my comments to the preconditions, procedures, and goals that have been established.

In 1978 the Governor's Historical Records Advisory Board applied for a grant from the NHPRC to set up approximately ten model local government archives throughout New York State. NHPRC approved a "pass through" grant amounting to approximately $155,000. The state archives administers this grant on behalf of the board; and the program's director is the state archivist, who also is the state historical records coordinator.

Any local government body may apply to the advisory board for up to $10,000 seed money to establish an archives. The New York State Historical Records Advisory Board distinguishes between an archives and a records center and stresses that an archives may consist of only 5-10 percent of an agency's records which document the evolution of local government and the rights of citizens. The applying agency must demonstrate commitment to maintain and add to the archives once the seed money is expended, provide a safe and secure facility conforming to current New York law and regulations regarding the protection of local public records, and install at its own expense such major items as steel shelving. Other criteria for selection include the size, type, age, and location of the requesting governmental body. The advisory board establishes selection criteria and makes the final decision on every application. My job as project archivist involves visiting applicants and filing reports with the advisory board on their potential as model archives.

Once its application is approved, the participating governmental body receives the "pass through" funds. The money can be used to purchase equipment and supplies normally funded by NHPRC and to hire a project archivist. My responsibilities include providing forms and procedural manuals as well as technical assistance to the participating governments. Other state archives personnel assist in this work. As in other NHPRC grants, the local agency must file interim and final activity and financial reports with the advisory board. In addition, members of the advisory board publicize the program and visit model archives in their regions to monitor progress.

The New York State Local Government Archives Program is a new approach to archival management of local public records. A strong tradition of local home rule exists in the state. A regional depository system was discussed in the late 1940's but lacked support. The citizens of New York prefer to keep their most important local public records in their place of origin.
Since 1912, a local public records program has operated out of the State Education Department according to a clear legal mandate. This state effort predates the establishment of a state archives in 1975, though the program now resides in this agency which is a branch of the State Education Department. The various activities of the local public records program include prescribing retention periods for most local public records except court records and most of New York City's records; giving advice on various records management procedures such as indexing, filing systems, and creation of noncurrent records centers; and guiding the review of local governmental microfilm projects. Hence there is a legal foundation for the role of the state archives in the area of local public records and a history of state guidance and services to local governments. The LGAP is an adjunct to these activities and information accumulated by the project will enable the state archives to improve and update its archival and records management services to municipalities.

Governmental units such as the city of Rochester, Albany County, and the city of New York (Department of Records and Information Services) have instituted records management programs, engaged in microfilming or conducted inventories, often with the assistance of grants from NHPRC and Community Development funds. LGAP can build upon this progress by funding the creation of additional model municipal archives and by producing a local public records program manual which will assist other municipalities.

The public records program in New York State is fortunate in having the support of an active, innovative State Historical Records Advisory Board. The grant application stresses the participatory role of board members in the selection process and in monitoring the progress of the models.

By November 1979, the advisory board had approved a grant to a small, rural upstate town, possessing an almost complete record of government business conducted during the nineteenth century. The records apparently survived for years in wooden boxes stored in the town hall attic and were recently rescued by the town clerk and deputy clerk who used a wooden pail and rope to lower the records to the first floor. The town hired a project archivist, and I have made trips and discussed problems at length by telephone. At this stage of the program, we have encountered problems such as humidity and temperature control in local government buildings as well as procedural questions which may not be completely solved when the seed money for the town runs out. At least the experience gained in this program will enable us to identify archival problems at the local level.*

*In April 1980, this project was successfully completed. The town's archives were arranged by record series, reboxed and refoldered, cleaned, and labeled. The project archivist prepared a guide for distribution. To cut down on humidity, two inches of styrofoam were added to the interior of the vault walls. The State Historical Records Advisory Board has also approved funding for three more projects.
The New York Local Government Archives Program represents an innovative approach to the problem of managing and preserving local public records. The program eschews the regional depository system for model municipal archives. Its progress will be determined by the creative mixture of federal, state, and local governmental resources applied to this model.

In this brief article I have outlined the foundations, scope, and goals of three local records programs: a regional depository system; a county records inventory pilot project; and a model municipal archives project. Each of the three programs has strengths and weaknesses. None can be adopted in whole by other states. Since each state is unique, each state must create a system suited to its circumstances. It is my contention, based on experience in these three situations, that the success of any local public records program depends upon striking a balance among the legal mandate of the state archives, the bureaucratic structure in which the state archives functions, the human and financial resources which the state archives can muster, and local traditions and attitudes regarding the preservation of local historical treasures.