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Minnesota: An Archival Network in Transition

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As 1980 ended, the Minnesota Regional Research Centers network completed eight years of operation. The following year Minnesota, after having passed nearly unscathed through the several recessions of the 1970s, experienced its first genuine recession in two decades. With revenues in steep decline the state legislature slashed funding for every agency and dozens of programs. One casualty of the cuts was central funding for the network. This decision caused the Minnesota Historical Society to withdraw from its role as cosponsor and administrator. Barely a decade after its creation the network's future is clouded by questions of administration and budget; even its future as a network is uncertain.

These sudden changes have prompted much soul-searching at the society and in the two university systems that support the regional centers network. At issue is the degree of tangible support the society and the universities extended to the network and the depth of commitment each exhibited to its continuance. While the degrees of support will be debated for some time, the society and the universities face a number of immediate issues. Among these are the disposition of center collections owned by the society and the future of center programs controlled by the universities. A brief retrospective on the Minnesota network should place the present situation in perspective.

Since its creation in 1972, the network—built from two largely inactive centers—experienced dramatic growth. It quadrupled the number of its operating units and launched a variety of ambitious and successful collecting and public service programs. The network includes eight centers located at state university system
campuses in Bemidji, Mankato, Marshall, Moorhead, St. Cloud, and Winona, and at the Morris and Duluth branches of the University of Minnesota. The Mankato and St. Cloud centers were founded in 1968 and became part of the network at its establishment in 1972. At that time centers at Moorhead and Southwest State (Marshall) Universities were added, together with the center at Morris. The Bemidji center joined the network in 1973, Winona was added in 1974, and Duluth completed the system in 1977.

The Minnesota network has been distinguished by its administrative structure and by a number of its programs. It was created as a cooperative enterprise in which the Minnesota Historical Society, the state university system, and the University of Minnesota shared ownership of center operations. The network was intended to strengthen the society's manuscript collections documenting people and organizations of local and regional importance and to provide the universities with material for research in original documents. With the establishment of the Farm Holiday Association project at Southwest State University, oral history became an important part of center collections in 1973; that was followed by projects on Scandinavian heritage in the Red River Valley and the World War II home front in western Minnesota.

The contracts covering establishment of each center include provision for the society's ownership of all manuscripts and oral histories. Local government records—especially those of school districts, townships, and municipalities—have been placed in the centers since 1975, at which time the state archives became part of the society. Their ownership is not covered by contract since state law mandates their control by the state archives.

Within the society the network was operated as part of the Division of Archives and Manuscripts' Field Section. The field director had responsibility for network administration and was aided by a full-time coordinator of regional centers. All papers and records collected by each center are processed at that center, and training for student assistants and interns has been
conducted by society personnel at the centers and during practica in St. Paul. Processing on-site is not without its problems—such as the maintenance of consistent bibliographic quality—but these have been more than offset by the benefits of student education and rapid preparation of collections for public use. The latter factor is popular with the donors of collections as well as the users. Virtually all collecting for the centers has been done by center directors or by the society's field staff on their behalf.

Of the network's eight center directors, six are historians and two are librarians on university faculties. They have enriched the system, for each has brought his or her own research interests and expertise to bear on center collecting. The result is a total program of great variety and breadth, with depth added by a concentration on four subject areas.

The network has been governed by a board of directors, including the director of each regional center, the state archivist, and the field director. The board met twice each year, with one meeting in St. Paul and the other at a different regional center in the fall. To meet the administrative workload generated by detailed planning and management of a six-figure budget, the board created an executive committee in 1978. It included two center directors elected by the board for overlapping two-year terms and the state archivist and field director. The committee met at least three times each year to discuss matters of policy, planning, administration, and budget. It proved valuable in meeting the increased complexities of network management and gave center directors a mechanism for direct participation in shaping the network's growth and program development through allocation of the society's network funding.

Collection development in the various centers began with careful evaluation of the area served by each and with concentration on the sorts of records and oral history each might be expected to produce. The collecting programs thus developed were melded into a workable, systemwide structure. While it was—and is desirable—for each center to have the freedom to develop collecting

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programs geared to special interests, it was even more important for the network to establish a basic group of collecting objectives to be pursued by each unit. These core collections include the papers of state legislators, a group never before collected in depth in Minnesota; the records of local and regional business and, in particular, agribusiness; records of political and social organizations; and the papers of individuals prominent in civic affairs. Though expanded as they have been by special subject collections such as those on the Great Lakes fishing industry (Duluth) and Scandinavian heritage (Moorhead), these basic groups have provided a solid base for research use. They are the "meat and potatoes" of the network's collections.

From the beginning the centers were viewed as having a mission beyond service to any single group of users. Specifically, they were seen as valuable bases for outreach programs aimed at the society's and the universities' statewide audiences—extending their resources and aid to an increasing number of communities. Recognition that genealogists constitute an important and growing group of users, for instance, spurred the acquisition and microfilming of church records, a project undertaken with the support of the society's manuscripts microfilm laboratory. This discovery of valuable caches of previously inaccessible records benefits local historians as well as genealogists. Similarly, accessions of local public records are a boon to both groups of users. The rapid growth of the network's holdings of manuscripts and government records is demonstrated in two published guides to its collections.¹

In addition to strengthening research holdings of value to identified groups of users, the regional centers managed to carry programs to many groups whose members had not previously used society or university facilities or collections. During the past several years community service and education programs sponsored by regional centers reached eighty-seven communities and more than six thousand people. Local history and genealogy classes, church groups, 4-H clubs, elementary and secondary school students, women's groups, and civic organizations are some of those reached directly

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Center collections, particularly oral history, have also been used by broadcasters in the production of programs for educational radio and television and by journalists for a number of newspaper purposes including a recent feature magazine edition on the 1930s depression for the Minneapolis Tribune. During the national bicentennial year, a wide variety of regional projects were carried out by center personnel. These included two series of Bicentennial Minutes produced at the Bemidji center and carried on eight radio and television stations, reaching thousands of people with unique presentations of regional historical information. The series was later used by two school systems in educational projects. Also during the bicentennial, the Marshall center executed the Bicentennial Citizens Art Project with funding from a regional bank and participated in production of the "Bicentennial Time Machine," an ambitious traveling theatre production viewed in twenty-seven communities in southwest Minnesota. In addition, the centers have presented traveling photographic exhibits from the society's education division on a regular basis. These and other activities have brought the regional centers to the attention of a considerable public and have helped attract manuscript collections and oral histories and increase public use.

Aiding in this work has been an innovative program of special project grants, a valuable feature of the Minnesota network. In 1975 the board of directors set aside approximately ten percent of the society's regional center grant budget in a category designed to stimulate additional uses of center collections and resources. In many instances special project monies have been matched by the universities. The special project grants were administered by the executive committee, which solicited proposals from the center directors each February. The proposals were considered by the committee and grants awarded each May to allow for implementation during the summer.

The special project grants program supported a variety of useful activities that added to center resources and visibility. The projects have included
development of data bases for computer retrieval of information on ethnic groups in Stevens County and students at Winona Normal School; production of a series of "history spots" for radio and television; and preparation of an inventory and records schedule for Mankato State University, now used as a prototype throughout the state university system. There were also several oral history projects, such as documentation of women in Duluth politics, former students' recollections of life at Winona Normal School, a comparison of the views of clergy and members of urban and rural churches in central Minnesota, and a series of interviews with business and labor leaders in Duluth. Funding these and other special projects enabled the center directors to pursue research and assemble resources that could not have been provided from basic operations. This program proved one of the best investments made in the network.

In 1979 the Minnesota Historical Society undertook an intensive self-study of its public programs, of which the division's regional centers were a part. The study involved internal program analysis, external review, and preparation of a thorough planning document. A regional center director, elected by the board, was appointed to the Division of Archives and Manuscripts' self-study task force and participated in the review of network operations. The external consultants visited two of the centers and included review of the network in their final reports.

Following the self-study, the division appointed a task force to further study and refine plans tailored to its operations and their place within the society. Concurrently, a related task force on long-range planning for the network was formed. This included the state archivist, deputy state archivist, field director, and three directors elected by the board. The two planning processes were carefully coordinated and extensively analyzed subject strengths and weaknesses in division and network collections. On the basis of these studies, the network task force prepared recommendations on collecting priorities, space, staffing, funding, public records, and related concerns.
The division's long-range planning document was approved by the society's administration in the fall of 1980. The network's planning document was finished early the following year amid speculation that the society's network funding would be slashed and that university commitments to the centers would be reduced accordingly. The network board of directors approved the document after considerable debate; it was never presented to the administrations of the society or the universities. By mid-1981 the state's fiscal position had deteriorated alarmingly, university budgets had been cut at all institutions in the network, the society had lost its funding for network operations, and the position of network coordinator had been eliminated.

Those realities, together with the assessment that relief would not be available for an extended period of time, prompted the society's administration to notify the universities of its withdrawal from participation in the network. The society's departure, of course, effectively halted network activity since the society handled—and paid for—director's meetings, executive committee meetings, a network newsletter, ordering and distribution of archival supplies, and a variety of related administrative and technical services. All of the regional centers have continued to operate; but without central funding they exist as individual entities, and the network is effectively paralyzed.

Why did the Minnesota network encounter such serious problems so quickly? Given its demonstrated success and the ten-year commitment of university faculty and society staff, its predicament seems remarkably sudden. The suddenness may have been exaggerated by an eleventh hour effort made to save the network by preserving a nominal role for the society and at least token funding for basic central administration. Funding was not available, however, and without it the society's administration declined participation in the network.

Despite these setbacks, few of the participants believed that the society would totally withdraw from network involvement; its ownership of manuscripts and oral histories in the centers and its statutory responsibility for the government records they hold appeared
to make that an unlikely option. Thus, the withdrawal caught even society staff members by surprise.

In retrospect, the suddenness and severity of the network's difficulties do not appear quite so surprising. The network's future, in fact, was linked to assumptions about the funding upon which it was built. The network was created by a grant to the society from the National Endowment for the Humanities, matched by an appropriation from the Minnesota legislature. Upon expiration of the grant the legislature made its first biennial appropriation to the society for network operations, a practice that continued until 1981.

This funding base allowed substantial contributions to each center and provided funds for supplies, travel, administrative overhead, and other expenses related to network operation. The society's yearly grants to each center were used to fund student help, travel, and administrative support services. In addition, the society provided each center with basic supplies, from letterhead stationery to Hollinger boxes, acid-free folders, and recording tape. A full-time society employee was appointed to coordinate the network's activities. Because the regional centers were created in institutions that had no archives or archivists, the network was strongly centralized. All technical and most administrative decisions were developed by the society, which even assumed direct administration of one center for several months while waiting for appointment of a new director.

The universities contributed space, equipment, and up to fifty percent of the time of a faculty director. Several institutions made small and variable cash grants to their centers; others matched part of the society's grant funds with available state and federal money for student help.

Like most funding, that available to the Minnesota centers was never adequate, but the yearly award of operating funds to all centers and of special project funding to most of them allowed the directors to develop programs much more rapidly than would have been possible had they relied solely on the cash-strapped universities. The directors were particularly concerned
about maintaining their funding from the society, since it freed them from competition for scarce program funds within the universities.

This flexible funding base, with its genuine opportunities for creative program development, ultimately proved a weakness. The very fact that the directors were free to pursue off-campus collecting and promotion of center resources without direct participation by the universities engendered a perceptible disinterest in center affairs on the part of many university administrators and faculty. The regular arrival of outside funding from the society contributed to this view by emphasizing--to university administrators, in particular--the hybrid nature of the centers. The universities were happy to claim the centers in the aftermath of public relations successes; during budget preparation, however, the centers were often viewed as the society's responsibility. The society's administration, on the other hand, came to believe that public identification of center programs with the universities primarily benefited those institutions and that basic funding should come from that source.

The lack of full-time directors also proved a detriment in the long run as center directors with faculty appointments proved understandably reluctant to lobby vigorously for allocations from declining university budgets. While state budget difficulties worsened, the threat of faculty position cuts created further ambivalence by some directors toward their center responsibilities.

In fairness it must be noted that most of the directors provided significant strengths to collection development, outreach, and intern training programs. They were--and remain--innovators, but most were hampered by the dual affiliation of the regional centers and their own perceptions that neither the society nor the universities was willing to assume responsibility for providing a solid base for center operations.

A further weakness in the Minnesota centers was their lack of involvement with university records. Early prosecution of a records-scheduling effort, with its direct benefits to the universities, might have stimulated
greater support for the centers among key university administrators. Self-interest is a powerful motivator, and the centers undoubtedly served the purposes of their historian-directors and the society rather than the records management and archival needs of the universities. The society has since moved to remedy this omission within the state university system, but the effort came far too late to prove a tactical advantage in the budget crisis.

There is one major factor that in part explains this failure to deal with university records. Until 1975, the society's Division of Archives and Manuscripts did not include the state archives and, thus, had no authority over government records. The network had been in existence for over four years before the state archives joined the division, which then faced the formidable task of inventorying and moving 21,000 cubic feet of disorganized records. But once it had the state archives and, thus, authority over the records of the state universities, the society did not exploit that advantage.

The society's withdrawal from the network created two major issues currently being addressed. First, new contracts—covering future operation of the regional centers and the disposition of manuscript and oral history collections owned by the society—must be negotiated with each university. Second, the society must determine whether government records now in the regional centers may remain there.

It appears that the new contracts will include provision for continued society ownership of manuscripts and oral histories presently in the centers and for future collections to be owned directly by the universities. The society's collections would be placed on long-term deposit contingent upon maintenance of a functioning archives by each university. The question of government records has not been resolved, and there is sentiment both for their continued deposit in the regional centers and for their withdrawal to the state archives. Their status, including the possibilities for future deposit of government records in the centers, will be a difficult issue in the upcoming negotiations. That difficulty may be mitigated somewhat by a
recent, favorable development. The relationship be-
 tween the society and the state university system was
strengthened in 1982 by the award of a grant to schedule
the records of each of the system's seven institutions.
The grant application was first submitted to the National
Historical Publications and Records Commission in early
1980 and was intended to address the twin problems of
unscheduled records and the lack of official on-campus
repositories for them. One of the institutions—Metro-
politan State University in St. Paul—will deposit its
noncurrent permanent records at the society. It began
operation in 1971, occupies rented space, and does not
wish to form a university archives. The other six insti-
tutions, each of which has a regional center, will be en-
couraged to form university archives operations in con-
junction with their centers. Indeed, two universities
have already set up archives, and a third is preparing
to do so. Since disposition of the universities' perma-
rent records is controlled by the society under Minnesota
law, it plans to authorize their retention at each insti-
tution if an acceptable archival program is available to
administer them. The society, of course, maintains
central information files on all government records in
the regional centers and, thus, that particular rela-
tionship between the society and the state universities
remains intact. If the regional centers are later com-
bined with university archives their programs and fiscal
stability will be enhanced.

It is a hopeful sign of strength that all eight cen-
ters have survived the shock of severe budget cuts and
withdrawal of the sponsorship that made them a network.
The university records-scheduling project has gener-
ated support from both the state university system
chancellor and the individual campus presidents, and
most of the directorships are in the hands of men and
women committed to the survival of the centers. With
some cooperation from the general economy it should be
possible to retain most or all of the regional centers;
the survivors will be a lean and hardy lot. As their
individual operations are refined and strengthened
they may, together, be able to renew the network.
Notes


2The University of Minnesota, like the Minnesota Historical Society, is exempt from Minnesota law governing the disposition of government records.