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for county and local historical societies and heritage preservation commissions

## Running out of room

**Bulk-reduction projects free up space, spark debate**

**W**hat to do with old newspapers after you've bought the microfilm version? That's the question pondered by many historical societies making the transition to microfilm.

It's not an easy question to answer, says State Archivist Bob Horton. "There has been much debate on the archival responsibilities of repositories - debate on what materials should be preserved and how best to preserve them."

### Pros and cons

Horton lays out both sides of the argument. "Newspapers are notoriously hard to manage," he explains. "They take up enormous amounts of storage space. Because they're so bulky, they're difficult for staff to handle. And, of course, the material decays over time. It's a luxury for most research centers and libraries to be able to keep newspapers.

"But many people view newspapers as artifacts and believe that, like all objects in their original format, they have an intrinsic value," he says, posing another question. "Do you lose something irreplaceable if you don't keep the originals?"

On the other side of the debate are those who think that newspapers are valuable primarily for the information they contain. "How useful

are newspapers in their original format if researchers can't use them because they're not easily accessible or too fragile to handle?" Horton asks.

So it comes down to this: accessibility versus preservation, the need for space versus the desire to keep the original object. "Let your circumstances guide your decision," Horton advises organizations facing difficult choices. "If you're pressed for storage space or your storage environment is inadequate or you're operating with a bare-bones staff, then microfilm may be the answer."

### A ready source

Fortunately, most Minnesota newspapers are available on microfilm thanks to the comprehensive newspaper microfilming project the Minnesota Historical Society undertook decades



Minnesota Historical Society HPTSG photo

**Archival boxes and shelving purchased with a bequest from a patron enabled the Renville County Historical Society to keep its newspaper collection even after purchasing the papers on microfilm.**

ago. "There may be a few gaps or missing issues," says Horton, "but county and local historical societies are helping us fill those with newspapers from their collections."

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## Out of room *continued from page 1*

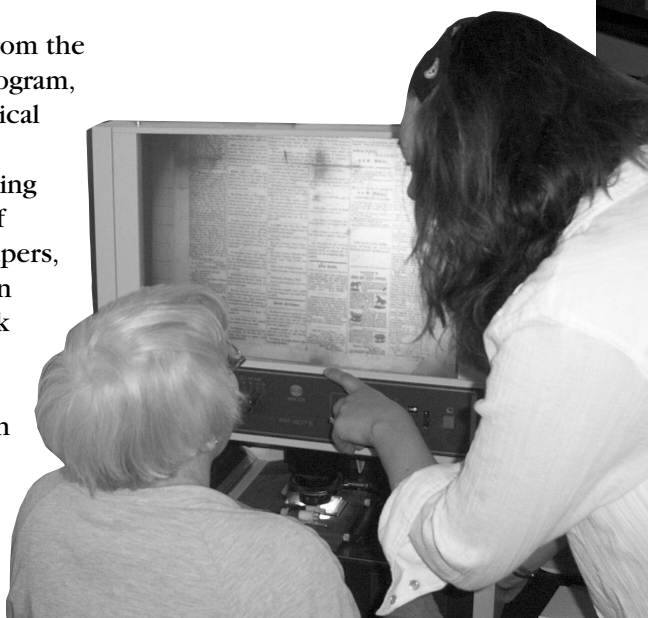
And thanks to grants from the MHS State Grants-in-Aid program, growing numbers of historical organizations and libraries around the state are acquiring those microfilm versions of their communities' newspapers, along with the machines on which to read them. A look at the experiences of several groups illustrates the factors each weighed in the purchase of microfilm and disposition of their newspaper collections.

### A change of mind

"We needed to make more room in our research center," says Lori Pickell-Stangel of the Renville County Historical Society. As director, she also was concerned about the deteriorating condition of the society's newspaper holdings. "Pages were crumbling so badly that every time a researcher leafed through them, we had to sweep up afterwards."

So beginning in 2001 the Renville County society set out to raise funds to replace its large newspaper collection with microfilm copies. Individual donations and a 2002 grant from the State Grants-in-Aid program got the project rolling. "We started with the oldest newspapers, going back to 1871, and went up to 1915 with that first grant," says Pickell-Stangel. A second grant in 2004 bought newspaper microfilms up to 1930. "We plan to apply for grants every other year to get our microfilm collection closer to the present."

Then last spring, as RCHS staff tackled the job of cleaning a storeroom, they made an unexpected discovery. "We found lots of old magazines and other things given to us long ago that didn't fit our



Lori Pickell-Stangel, director of the Renville County Historical Society, helps a volunteer learn how to operate the microfilm reader that staff and patrons will use to view the society's collection of newspaper microfilms.

collecting policies," explains Pickell-Stangel. "After discarding the boxes of magazines, we realized we had plenty of space for the newspapers. So our acquisitions committee decided to keep the originals after all. About the same time, a longtime volunteer passed away and left us an undesignated cash gift. Because she had worked often with the newspaper collection, we decided to use her gift to buy acid-free boxes and shelving for them. Now we're treating the original papers more as artifacts."

**"These days we get out the originals only when we need to make good copies for our exhibits or publications."**

*Lori Pickell-Stangel  
Renville County Historical Society*

To help researchers make the transition to microfilm machines, Pickell-Stangel conducted a series of free workshops. "I trained about 20 staff and volunteers and 20 members of the public. We can serve a lot more people now in our research

center. And we save on wear and tear of the older papers. These days we get out the originals only when we need to make good copies for our exhibits or publications."

### Being selective

At the Blue Earth County Historical Society, decisions were made long ago that have guided the organization ever since. "We began building our newspaper microfilm collection in the 1980s when we established our research center," says BECHS executive director James Lundgren. "A big push in 1998, with the help of a grant, brought us up to date. Now we have only the years since then to acquire on microfilm."

"We didn't have room to store all the originals," Lundgren explains, "so we kept representative examples of each newspaper. We've even kept a few recent ones printed on more acidic paper - significant issues like those tied to our centennial - though we know they won't last in the long run."

The society also has a resource that few other groups can boast of -

newspaper clipping files that date back four decades. "We have a couple generations of volunteers to thank for that," says Lundgren. "They started in the 1960s with current issues of the county's daily and weekly papers. Some clipped obituaries and some created subject files of articles on local businesses and townspeople. As our older papers were sent to the Minnesota Historical Society for microfilming and then returned to us cut from their bindings, volunteers did the same with those. More recently, the volunteers have been indexing the clippings and photocopying them for use by researchers to preserve the original clippings."

### Decision pending

Preservation is the crux of the argument for the Becker County Historical Society, which is just completing its purchase of the county's newspapers on microfilm. "Our collection of bound volumes fills up a whole room," says BCHS executive director Erin McMillan. "And

the public currently has no access to them except those we don't yet have on microfilm. We haven't decided what to do with all the originals."

**"Let your circumstances guide your decision. If you're pressed for storage space or your storage environment is inadequate or you're operating with a bare-bones staff, then microfilm may be the answer."**

*Bob Horton  
State Archivist*

Before their collections committee makes a recommendation, society staff will conduct an inventory, funded by a state grant-in-aid, to make sure that all the newspapers they own are preserved on microfilm. "If we find any the Minnesota Historical Society doesn't have, we'll send them for microfilming. I figure as long as we have the information the newspapers contain," says McMillan, "preserving all

those bound volumes is probably not the best thing for us to spend money on. We'll keep at least a representative sampling and key issues of the papers. But I expect some public opposition if we decide not to keep them all. People have strong ties to artifacts they can touch."

### The debate rages on...

For those trying to sort out the complex debate about archival responsibilities, State Archivist Horton points to two books that crystallize the arguments:

» Nicholson Baker, in his book *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (Random House, 2001), makes an impassioned case for keeping resource materials in their original format. Libraries and archives, Baker says, have violated their public trust by destroying their paper-based collections.

» Countering his treatise point by point is Richard J. Cox in *Vandals in the Stacks? A Response to Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries* (Greenwood Press, 2002). Cox explores how society decides what to preserve among competing wants with limited resources and addresses the implications of a "save everything" strategy in an electronic age.

There's no single course of action that's right for everyone, says Horton. Weigh the arguments, assess your facility and archival holdings, gauge local needs, then adopt a collections policy for your archives that best fits your own situation.

*For more information call State Archivist Bob Horton at 651-215-5866; Lori Pickell-Stangel, Renville County Historical Society, 507-697-6147; James Lundgren, Blue Earth County Historical Society, 507-345-5566; or Erin McMillan, Becker County Historical Society, 218-847-2938.*

Blue Earth County Historical Society



Volunteers (l-r) Edith Hopman, Jo Schultz and Helen Griffith comb old newspapers at the Blue Earth County Historical Society for articles to add to subject files documenting local businesses, organizations and community leaders.

# In the stacks

## 2004 survey takes the measure of Minnesota's local archives and libraries

by David Grabitske, Grants/Field Programs Assistant

**P**reservation of historical records is key to the collective memory of a society. So says the Minnesota State Historical Records Advisory Board, which oversees historical records planning and preservation in Minnesota. And access to those records is crucial to an understanding of a community's history, culture and civic life.

With those thoughts in mind, we focused our 2004 survey for county and local historical organizations on your libraries and archives – what your holdings are, where they're stored, who uses them and what resources you need to improve your records preservation efforts.

We've received 178 responses so far – that's 58 percent of the 305 surveys we sent. We need to hear from more of you. If you have not yet returned your survey, now is the time to do so. We count on the information you send us to maintain contact with you. We also want to track trends and identify issues to ensure that our programs and services continue to meet your needs and expectations.

### Collections storage

How do you measure up? Records held by Minnesota's local historical organizations fill, on average, 93 file-cabinet drawers, 170 boxes and 378 rolls of microfilm, all stored on 704 linear feet of shelving. Throw into the

mix an average of 900 books.

Many historical organizations report having a storage room (average size: 1,416 square feet) for their library and archive materials. Other groups keep historical records in a reference room or an office. Only a few organizations, perhaps hard-pressed for space or caught in a budget squeeze, keep their materials in attics or basements – spaces not recommended for the safekeeping of archival materials.

What about further measures to protect those irreplaceable resources? The most common protection reported was fire-detection equipment. Temperature control, security alarms and restricted access were next in line. And, fortunately for the well-being of the materials stored, humidity control is becoming more common at county and local historical museums and archives. Very few organizations have yet installed fire suppression systems or ultraviolet filtration on storage-area lighting.

### Patron profile and access

The archives and library collections of Minnesota's local historical organizations are used by a variety of patrons for a variety of purposes. Internal use for your own exhibits, newsletters and programs was reported most commonly. Genealogists constitute a second important group of users. Local historians, K-12 schools and scholars also were named as frequent visitors to your collections. Many of you reported use of your archives and libraries by colleagues from other historical organizations. And several



Minnesota Historical Society HP/SEG photo

A workroom at the Stevens County Historical Society does double duty for research and collections storage.

noted that local media frequent your research facilities.

Efficient access to paper collections for all of these patrons is nearly as important as proper storage. Card catalogs, long the staple of libraries large and small, are still the most-used tool to locate records. Electronic databases are steadily catching up, though they have not yet replaced traditional finding aids such as card catalogs, typewritten inventories or accession books.

### Spreading the word

Inaccessibility may be one factor limiting use of your archives. Lack of communication is another. It's important to share news of your collections not only with your own community but also with researchers elsewhere.

Two-thirds of survey respondents commonly communicate about new accessions through newsletters to their members. Some of you also post news about your collections, and even indexes to those resources, on your web sites. Yet one-quarter of survey respondents said they do not report on acquisitions or collections either to their members or to state and local networks. Think what exposure you can get for your collections, for example, by communicating about them to reference librarians at the Minnesota Historical Society, who can then refer researchers to your organization.

### Digitization

Scanning collections in electronic formats is becoming increasingly widespread. One-third of those who

returned their surveys report making materials more accessible by using digital technology.

But the majority use their own standards when creating digital collections.

There are many advantages to using broadly followed standards for digitization. Such standards can streamline maintenance of your digital holdings. They also allow ready access to your collections by others. Both the Minnesota Digital Library Coalition and MINITEX Advisory Committee recommend using the Western States Digital Standards, which are easy to learn and take a common-sense approach. For more information, go to [www.mndigital.org](http://www.mndigital.org).

### Identifying needs

When asked what your staff and volunteers need to better manage your paper collections, most of you identified training in the preservation and conservation of library and archive materials. That ranked only slightly ahead of the need to learn basic archival methods. Also mentioned were cataloging photographs and managing government records in your care.

The most convenient way to deliver that training, you told us, was through printed technical leaflets that you can refer to as needed. Still, there is nothing like being able to ask someone in person, so you also requested workshops and onsite consultations.



**Linda Fransen, director of the Cottonwood County Historical Society, leafs through an illustrated subject index of the organization's photo collection with Marcia Anderson, Tim Glines and Lydia Lucas of the Minnesota Historical Society. The index is also available in computerized format. Use of the index by researchers saves staff time as well as wear and tear on the original photos.**

If targeted grants were available for library and archive work, you said that hiring someone to process your collections would be a priority. So would book and paper conservation. To make your collections more widely available, you would seek grants for technology training and help-desk support.

### What's next

Watch for the 2005 annual survey, to be mailed this spring. A special focus on financial resources will help us learn what resources you've tapped and what funding sources you might have overlooked. It's important that we hear from you. In these lean economic times, we want you to have all the help you can get.

*For more information about the annual survey and the 2004 survey results, call David Grabitske at 651-297-4416 or e-mail [david.grabitske@mnhs.org](mailto:david.grabitske@mnhs.org). For more information on the State Historical Records Advisory Board, call James E. Fogerty, 651-296-9989, or e-mail [james.fogerty@mnhs.org](mailto:james.fogerty@mnhs.org).*



## Making waves

### Grant helps Carver County celebrate sesquicentennial

Armed with a grant of \$23,694, the Carver County Historical Society in Waconia is making big plans for the

county's sesquicentennial in 2005. The matching grant, from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), will help the society invest in its future by raising public awareness of its programs and services, giving residents a better understanding of local history and encouraging a sense of place among new residents of the rapidly growing county.

Part of an IMLS program called Museums for America, grants like this one are

intended to strengthen museums as centers of community engagement and sources of lifelong learning.

Among activities planned for Carver County residents are:

- creation of a local history web site,
- development of an interactive traveling exhibit to be displayed in the county library system and government center and at community festivals,
- an educational outreach program for students on historic and contemporary immigrant issues, and
- a new exhibit at the historical society's museum that will explore how immigrants have contributed to the county's communities.

For more information about this effort to engage residents in the cultural heritage of their county, call CCHS executive director Leanne Brown at 952-442-4234 or e-mail [historical@co.carver.mn.us](mailto:historical@co.carver.mn.us).

Carver County Historical Society



A calendar featuring photos from the Carver County and Chaska Historical Societies is one of many sesquicentennial offerings that will keep county residents in touch with their history all year long.

## Maximizing resources

### Norman County society gets extra mileage from exhibits plan

When the Norman County Historical Society opened its new museum in 2002, the building was a blank slate. It fell to exhibits consultant Claudia Pratt to come up with a plan for filling it. What she devised was not only the opening exhibit, "Music on the Prairie," but a whole system of flexible, reusable exhibits furniture for future displays.

The log building, located at the society's Prairie Village near the Norman County fairgrounds, posed special challenges for Pratt, owner of CMP Consulting in Gardner, N.D. "I borrowed ideas from larger museums and found affordable ways to adapt them to a smaller community," she

explained. "To set displays off from the log walls, we used backdrops made from door panels painted with grit paint to make touchups easy. We created customized platforms that would fit together in different configurations. Then we added picture rails around the walls to hang things on and built movable vitrines - basic cases with Plexiglas covers." To save money, all of the exhibits furniture was fabricated by a local carpenter who volunteered his time.

For more information on exhibits development using adaptable display systems, call Pratt at 701-371-7277 or e-mail her at [cprattnd@mac.com](mailto:cprattnd@mac.com).



Minnesota Historical Society HPPS&G photo

Customized platforms, built by a volunteer, can be reconfigured for changing exhibits at the Norman County Historical Society's log museum.

## State Grants-in-Aid awarded

**T**wenty applicants to the Minnesota Historical Society's State Grants-in-Aid program received a total of \$58,000 in the fall cycle for fiscal year 2005. In this round, grants were awarded largely to projects with long-term public benefits - projects ranging from property improvements to collections management and accessibility.

This was the second of only two cycles, instead of four, for the 2004-05 biennium, a reduction necessitated by state funding cuts. (See the July-August 2003 issue of the Interpreter at [www.mnhs.org/about/publications.interpreter.html](http://www.mnhs.org/about/publications.interpreter.html).)

**Becker County:** Becker County Historical Society, \$450, for completion of the microfilm collection and newspaper inventory.

**Blue Earth County:** Blue Earth County Historical Society, \$3,332, for HVAC in the Carriage House of the Rensselaer D. Hubbard House, Mankato. The Hubbard House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Clay County:** Clay County Historical Society, \$363, to purchase microfilm newspapers and a manuscript collection.

**Fillmore County:** City of Peterson, \$1,323, to purchase PastPerfect museum cataloging software.

**Hennepin County:** Friends of the Cemetery, \$2,500, to create a Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery web site. The Memorial Cemetery is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Lincoln County:** Lake Benton Area Historical Society, \$1,489, to purchase PastPerfect museum cataloging software.

**Mahnomen County:** Mahnomen County Historical Society, \$445, for

preservation of 120 aerial photos.

**Mower County:** Austin Area Commission for the Arts, Inc., \$6,000, for restoration of the 1929 doors on the Paramount Theater, Austin. The Paramount

Theater is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Olmsted County:** Olmsted County Historical Society, \$6,000, for restoration of windows and doors on the George Stoppel Farmstead farmhouse, Rochester. The Stoppel Farmstead is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Polk County:** Prairie Skyline Foundation, Inc., \$6,000, to repair the steeple on the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Crookston. The cathedral is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Ramsey County:** HAND in HAND Productions, \$5,700, for an oral history project on the St. Paul Police.

**Renville County:** Renville County Historical Society, \$2,400, for Phase III of the Photo Preservation Project.

**Renville County:** Sacred Heart Area Historical Society, \$2,500, to purchase a digital microfilm reader/printer.

**Sherburne County:** Sherburne County Historical Society, \$1,846, to purchase the Elk River Star News photographic collection.

**Sibley County:** Sibley County Historical Society, \$1,927, to purchase PastPerfect museum



Olmsted County Historical Society

**Restoration continues on the 1861 limestone farmhouse at the George Stoppel Farmstead in Olmsted County.**

cataloging software.

**Waseca County:** City of New Richland, \$6,000, for stabilization of the New Richland IOOF Hall. The IOOF Hall is determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Waseca County:** Waseca M&StL Depot Society, \$6,000, for window replacement on the Waseca Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Depot, Waseca. The depot is determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Watonwan County:** Watonwan County Historical Society, \$777, to purchase acid-free storage materials.

**Wright County:** Cokato Historical Society, \$948, for window installation on the Akerlund Photographic Studio, Cokato. The Akerlund Studio is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Yellow Medicine County:** Minnesota's Machinery Museum, \$2,000, to publish *A Historical Guide: 25 Years of Minnesota's Machinery Museum*.

## AASLH seeks award nominations

It was a banner year for Minnesota in 2004 when the American Association for State and Local History conferred on us a record-setting eight awards for excellence in the collection, preservation and interpretation of state and local history. Now it's time once again to submit nominations for the annual AASLH awards program.

Nominations may be made from the field in the following categories:

- Awards of Merit, recognizing performance deemed excellent compared with similar activities nationwide.
- Certificates of Commendation, presented for excellence within

available means and regional standards.

Among types of eligible activities are exhibits, public programming, special projects, media/publications, preservation/restoration projects and individual achievement. Special consideration is given to new and promising ideas, approaches and innovations. (For last year's winners, see the Interpreter, September-October 2004, at [www.mnhs.org/about/publications.interpreter.html](http://www.mnhs.org/about/publications.interpreter.html).)

**Deadline:** If you wish to nominate your own or another historical organization, submit a nomination form by **March 1** to state awards chair Ben Leonard, executive

director of the Nicollet County Historical Society, at 1851 N. Minnesota Ave., St. Peter, MN 56082. For more information call Leonard at 507-934-2160, e-mail him at [ben@nchsmn.org](mailto:ben@nchsmn.org) or go to [www.aaslh.org/cgi-bin/awards.cgi](http://www.aaslh.org/cgi-bin/awards.cgi).

David Grabitske of the Minnesota Historical Society, formerly state chair for the AASLH awards program, has been named Missouri Valley regional chair. In that capacity he will, annually through 2008, represent nominated projects from the states of Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota at the AASLH awards committee meeting in Nashville.

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