The success and rapid growth of archival networking is striking. Of the state systems existing today, Wisconsin's Area Research Centers (ARCs) have been around for the longest period of time, and they have yet to reach their twentieth year. In fact, it was not until after 1970 that the advantages of networking became more widely known, and the concept began to catch on quickly. From the perspective of an ARC archivist, it seems apparent that two of the major areas of network success have been responsible for this growth: the preservation of archival materials, and the promotion of outreach. Increased resources like space and staffing, and community interest have enabled us to save historical materials that otherwise might have been destroyed. At the same time, local manuscript repositories allow us to make these archival collections available to an unprecedented number of patrons.

This second concept, outreach, is especially interesting—some would even call it the essence of the network idea. It is a subject with which everyone deals. Any archivist can name a multitude of so-called "outreach projects"; most have attended conference sessions or informally shared ideas about "how we do it in our shop." These discussions are valuable and necessary in the development of ideas; however, it is also worthwhile to think occasionally in terms of a conceptual framework. Accepting the premise that regional manuscript repositories have been very successful in promoting outreach, we are compelled to ask "Why?" What is unique about a network? What does it do that makes it so popular? Archival
networks are able to reach out in a manner that centralized repositories cannot; somehow they are special. But how?

To answer the question of why networks are so effective, and to develop a conceptual framework for local outreach, it is necessary to focus on two items. First, we need to look at the similarities that accompanied the establishment of virtually all networks. These are important because they illustrate where we thought we were going when we began to regionalize archival collections, and they help to explain why we have developed in the manner we have. Second, we need to pinpoint some of the unique features which are a part of networking. These might help us identify a network center’s strengths and illustrate how we can make better use of them.

Ironically, when we begin looking for similarities, it is the variations among archival networks that often stand out more dramatically. Network holdings, for example, vary widely. Governance ranges from systems with a strong central authority to loose confederations whose members cooperate largely on a voluntary basis, and in which individual centers retain a good bit of autonomy. Processing responsibilities, staffing, financing and other aspects of system administration all are handled differently. In short, no two networks are alike. Even so, there are several similarities which are more important. First, regionalism was promoted as a means through which archivists could better preserve valuable historical materials. Sometimes the stimulus was overcrowding at the central depository; in other cases networking was a response to needless duplication of effort, and competition. Whatever the reason, regionalization became popular as we realized that it simply was a more efficient way to preserve documentation that might otherwise have been lost. Second, networks are similar in that they were established with a recognition that, after all, we are not saving all of this old stuff just for fun! There is both a reason and a purpose. The reason is that the dusty old documents are interesting. The purpose is so that they can be used. Statements of objectives invariably acknowledge a responsibility to make archival materials available to prospective patrons. Third, state archival networks have been organized around geographically localized collections. Perhaps it never made sense to do it another way, but the use of geography is significant because it illustrates much about our expectations for use, as well as what constitutes a
good regional collection. Finally, network archival depositories were designed as research centers—places to which people could come and use archives and manuscripts; consequently they frequently were located on college campuses. In the beginning at least, the centers were not intended to offer the wide range of services and activities that are commonly undertaken at a larger state historical society or central government agency.

These four similarities—efficiency in preservation, increased use, localization, and intended design—shaped the manner in which networks have grown. In turn, this growth added new meaning to the idea of archival outreach. To articulate a conceptual framework for this idea, let us consider three aspects of local depository development: presence, perspective and potential.

In general, “presence” provides the means through which a network center can give an archival program higher visibility, greater relevance and increased usefulness. The term can be defined in a number of different ways; probably the most obvious is simple distance—or proximity. It is obvious to all of us that by placing network centers all over the state we will reach more people. But sometimes it is easy to underestimate how many more we actually can reach. The maps show how completely an archival network can blanket a state, leaving only a few residents more than fifty miles from a manuscript depository. The contrast between the network and the non-network model is so obvious that it needs no further explanation.

This proximity is crucial to a conceptual framework because it brings to bear the archivist’s most effective weapon—a human being’s helpless fascination with historical material! It is my firm conviction that archives are inherently interesting. Archival materials are interesting to look at, interesting to touch, interesting to hold—even interesting to smell sometimes! Once they have been exposed to a good archival collection, newspaper editors will take a sudden interest in local history, students will abandon encyclopedias, bowlers will turn into genealogists. Given a detailed look at a good regional archival collection, even the most callous history-hater will turn to mush.

Proximity makes it possible for a network center to take full advantage of this human foible. The simple but obvious truth is that a regional archival center within one hour’s driving time is
easily accessible. Since it is accessible (and full of enchanting material) the center needs only visibility, and its greatest obstacle to use has been overcome.

Because of its proximity, the regional center also is uniquely situated to act as a valuable local contact for the state historical society or agency of which it is a part. In this role, the local depository can become a liaison, and assist with a variety of other historical society activities. Presence also enables the local archivist to help overcome the traditional reservation or suspicion that many people have of outsiders. Last Fall at the SAA meeting, there was a session dealing with outreach. One participant, from a large urban depository, bemoaned the fact that in distant parts of the state his ideas and suggestions sometimes met with a cool reception. The reason, he believed, was because he was perceived as a "Big City Expert."

This sort of situation certainly is not unique to the archival profession, but it has been echoed with sufficient frequency that we all know it is not uncommon. Maybe the attitude shows that Americans, wherever they come from, really are quite provincial—at least this was the notion expressed in an August 20, 1979, *Time* essay entitled "Local Chauvinism: Long May It Rave." In it the author maintained:

> Despite the many and persistent theories about the homogenization of America, the remarkable fact is that virtually every community and region of the nation remains convinced of its own distinctiveness and proud of what it considers its superiority in one respect or another. In short, local chauvinism is alive and well and residing—where else?—in every damn best state/city/county/town/region in the good old U.S.

> ...Thus Minneapolis enjoys writing off St. Paul as though it were a mill village, and Dallas takes malicious glee in depicting Fort Worth as the sticks. South Dakotans often pretend to believe North Dakotans are an alien race, and northern Californians regard the state's southern part as a land of incurable kooks.

Probably everyone can think of other examples (friends have even implied that River Falls is in the boondocks!), but suffice it to say that suspicious hackles are quickly raised when a stranger with
new ideas comes to "God's Country."

Although the network center itself may be the object of similar misgivings, it is closer, and it has the advantage of permanent residency. These facts are very helpful (for personal experience indicates that coming from River Falls one is seldom seen as a Big City Expert). For a regional center sustained visibility is easier to maintain, and this brings trust.

Local contacts fostered through a network center's presence also can be immeasurably helpful in many aspects of archival and historical society work. Although the extent to which this relationship can be exploited will vary according to the center's staffing and funding, the possibilities are limitless. Accessioning often requires extensive personal contacts, telephone calls or visits, and for a historical society several hundred miles distant, scheduling these can prolong or even make impossible the necessary arrangements. Local government archives, business records and private manuscripts sometimes require detailed on-site inventories; these are expensive and time-consuming—especially if they are the sole responsibility of a distant agency. Potential historic sites require local investigation and photographic documentation.

A regional center can help in all of these situations. In many cases the local archivist will know when an area family, business or government office is ready to consider a donation. Local centers are at hand in time of disaster; they can provide help quickly. They also can present workshops or programs, and represent a state historical society at dedications or other regional civic functions. The contacts developed through activities such as these are the most important kind of outreach, because they often will result in continuing community relationships for the local center. In time, this will strengthen both the center's program and that of the entire regional network.

Among the most important relationships that a network center is uniquely situated to develop are those with regional and local historical societies. Even in the sparsely populated area of northwestern Wisconsin there are more than a dozen such groups, half of which have been organized within the past five years. Between them they operate nine museums of different shapes and sizes. (According to one newspaper reporter, Balsam Lake, population 600, with three museums, had more museums per capita than
anywhere else in the U.S.!) The societies have placed literally hundreds of historical markers in recent years. (More than 300 at last count.) They are presently engaged in at least four major historical preservation efforts, five oral history projects, and are inventorying all cemeteries in the region and sponsoring one very ambitious archaeological excavation! Since 1975 they have published more than two dozen local and regional histories, varying in size from fewer than fifty pages to more than 500.

This level of activity gives us an idea of how much must be happening on a statewide basis, and the range of the projects is equally noteworthy. There is much opportunity for involvement, and it is possible for a network center archivist to maintain some degree of contact with all of these historical groups. (I know because I belong to all of them, and the aggregate dues total only half of one annual SAA membership.) Involvement such as this enables a network center to participate in projects, make suggestions and offer assistance as a society member rather than an outside advisor.

Through local contacts, workshops, assistance in community projects and other activities, the regional center can establish a very important understanding: that the network exists to participate in a two-way relationship, that it can give as well as take. Presence becomes both a cause and an effect. Proximity enables the center to stay in touch with local people and events. The result is a higher community profile and an increase in the overall effectiveness of the network archival program.

The second area in which a regional center has a unique opportunity for outreach can be called "perspective," which like presence can be defined in many ways. One of the most meaningful of these is in terms of size. Stated simply, network centers almost always tend to be located in smaller communities than those that have state historical societies or state capitals. Almost 70% of the centralized state archival depositories are located in cities with a population of more than 100,000. But of the 73 communities in which network depositories are located, only 20% have 100,000 inhabitants. At the other end of the scale, almost 25% of the network center communities have a population of fewer than 15,000, against only 4% for state historical societies. And for network centers within this last group, the size extends to the very
small. As closely as can be ascertained, Chadron, Nebraska (population 5,394 in 1975) and Morris, Minnesota (population 5,422) are almost in a dead heat for the distinction of being the smallest; however my own community, River Falls, Wisconsin, with a population of 7,649 is (if you’ll pardon the expression) in the “top ten.” For this reason, let me use the St. Croix Valley region as an example of how the world might look to someone who is seldom blinded by the bright lights of the city.

The River Falls Area Research Center district includes five northwestern Wisconsin counties whose combined population barely exceeds 100,000 people. One of these counties does not have a single community with even 1,000 residents. River Falls has two regional distinctions: it is the largest community in the five-county area, and it also is the location of Pierce County’s only stoplight. (Actually, we have two.) Of the five county seats, the largest is only 5,000; the smallest is 649; two others are just over 900. A population analysis would reveal that of the living things important enough for us to count regularly, cows are the most numerous! (For emphasis I might add that they outnumber people by almost three to one.) Human beings are in second place, although almost everyone agrees that it’s a good thing we don’t count chickens or turkeys! There is no need to further belabor this point. It is obvious that, given such an environment, many archival methods, current trends, developments and priorities which are important in an urban context become less meaningful in a less “citified” environment. Partially as a result of this difference in size, both of the community and of the center itself, networking has created a new breed of archivist, whose experience is less specialized and whose duties are more broadly based than in the typically larger centralized repository. A network center often will be staffed by one harried professional who becomes the Field Services Director, Reference Archivist, Head of Processing, Historic Preservation Officer, Curator of Iconography, Director of the Oral History Program and possibly even President of the county historical society! This situation cannot fail to have an impact.

For example, some notions concerning use do not necessarily hold true. Much of the interest in manuscripts, for example, is very localized. (Some would say very “unscholarly.”) Most River Falls patrons care nothing about the decline of rural education in
Wisconsin as a subject for general study, but they are very interested to know whether we have the records of the Clifton Hollow School. Most will quickly tire if someone launches into a discussion of the effects of the Civil War on industry in the Upper Midwest, but they are eager to talk about Jerry Flint, Frank G. Harding or any other local veterans whose papers receive a regular workout in the ARC reading room. In short, for many people we have developed a highly regionalized perception of history—but then what did we expect? We created localized collections and people responded in a predictable fashion: they used local collections to find out about local history. Some may say that this is not as glamorous as more scholarly, academic history; nevertheless, it is legitimate use.

This pattern of use can influence the perspective on collecting in several ways. At River Falls, for example, we quickly realized that, although they were inherently interesting, manuscripts sometimes could not stand alone. Their effectiveness often depended upon our ability to provide supplementary resources. But, unlike a larger historical agency, most of these materials were not held as part of our university library collection. There were many local histories published as early as the 1850s, and these were needed to add strong secondary resources to the archival collection. Local newspapers were even more important because they provided an excellent background on individuals, businesses and events that strongly influenced the development of northwestern Wisconsin. Documentation, such as state and federal census records, laws and statutes and legislative manuals were also indispensable in providing a statistical base for understanding immigration, population growth and the development of agriculture. Without materials such as these, it was difficult to use the limited archival resources to full advantage. For this reason, they have become almost as important as the manuscript collections themselves, and ARC staff members must spend a significant portion of time and money keeping these resources current.

A second difference in perspective concerns the subjects that a regional center should attempt to document, and the extent to which they should be documented. For example, labor unrest in the late nineteenth century would not be a popular topic with the Kinnickinnic Historical Society. There just wasn’t any in their
part of Wisconsin—at least not noticeably so. In the 1890s, one of the local newspaper editors simply branded populism as a cross between socialism and insanity, and the matter was laid to rest, undisputed. Likewise, no one would be much interested in the Progressive Era or Robert M. LaFollette, even though these are important subjects in Wisconsin history. This is not an indication of anti-intellectualism; it merely shows that a network center’s universe often is smaller. The region’s historical development and demographics play an extremely important role in determining what is “historical” in a given area.

This determination can influence the center’s viewpoint concerning the type of documentation that should be preserved, and on other aspects of collecting—such as sampling. For example, the River Falls collection includes the records from approximately eighty-five rural schools, ranging in time from the 1850s through the 1960s. Were these housed in Boise, Idaho, it would be fairly safe to assume that their use would be very low. The same assumption would be true if they were in Madison, Wisconsin. However, they are in River Falls, and we can document that virtually every collection has been used within the past three years. The same is true with the infamous tax roll, whose reproductive habits are legendary. It may be true that these have been shown to be “low use” items, good candidates for heavy sampling. But when they are placed in a local context, their use may skyrocket. Attorneys will use them to more closely estimate property values when they settle estates, individuals can determine when the family farm was purchased, students discover when their house was built, genealogists find out exactly when their ancestors came to the county. If this is true with one type of record, then it may be worthwhile to reexamine some of our traditional assumptions concerning collecting by subjecting them to an evaluation based upon a network experience.

Perspective also can be defined in terms of the relationship between the network center and the aforementioned array of county and local historical societies. Anyone who has dealt with these groups for any length of time can attest to the fact that an archivist’s expertise is sorely needed. Too often the local historical society’s museum is a place where thumbtacks and nails have been used with wild abandon; the preservation facilities consist of a pair
of scissors and a roll of Scotch magic tape; the "archives" are a couple of boxes of deteriorating volumes and papers from which silverfish and other creepy things dart to and fro.

It would be unfair to put down the efforts of such local groups in a negative sense. They deserve a great deal of respect, and notwithstanding the problems listed above, their efforts follow from the best of intentions. Their work often represents the only effort at preservation in an entire region. The individuals involved have done their best, but they are amateurs—unpaid and untrained. Few have ever considered the factors which speed deterioration of paper; almost none have ever heard of mylar encapsulation. The typical local historical society is consumed by a desire to establish a museum, but few of its members ever have heard of the American Association for State and Local History or its many excellent publications dealing with museum development. Most local societies have established "libraries" of sorts. These are usually uncataloged and cluttered with everything from first-rate county histories to tourist brochures from the French Riviera. Soon space begins to run out; nobody knows what to do about the problem. A solution is even more difficult because the library usually is thought to be of secondary importance to the museum anyway.

It is in situations such as these that a network center's perspective can be a very important form of outreach. Any trained archivist has read extensively on the subject of paper preservation and can explain the effects of acidity or articulate the benefits of proper temperature and humidity control. Through a workshop or by means of individual consultations, a trained archivist can teach people how to encapsulate documents and photographs or to construct a usable fumigation chamber. An archivist also can help a local society focus its collecting efforts, and assist in accessioning or cataloging. In short, an archivist's education can be a valuable asset for any local civic group or historical society.

Through activity generated by the network's community presence and perspective, the potential for a sustained, growing regional outreach program is great. Furthermore, the local depository should become an increasingly important asset in any statewide archival system. The 1980s will likely see more competition for tax dollars, and already we have seen that reliance on granting agencies such as the NHPRC can be risky at best. The
soaring cost of transportation cannot help but have an adverse effect upon archival programs. Coupled with these probable developments is the prospect of even more use through the growing interest in local history, genealogy and historic preservation.

Archival networks with a well-developed outreach program will be in an excellent position to take advantage of the opportunities and meet the challenges. Regional research centers already have proven that the major premises of network establishment were correct: they are more efficient tools of historic preservation, they do promote interest and use. It can even be argued that some of the so-called problems with networks simply are consequences of success. Most network centers actually are under-utilized. They could do so much more. However, before this can happen, archivists will need to become aware of and act upon several facts.

First of all, networks should reconsider the implications of some of the assumptions that accompanied their establishment. The desire for increased use led to the widespread location of network centers on college campuses, and with the end of the "baby boom" many of these institutions are experiencing enrollment difficulties that might easily have a pronounced effect upon the local archival program. The manuscript research center design also may require some re-thinking. It has been the experience at River Falls that the surrounding community does not think of the ARC as a research center; in everyone's eyes we are a miniature state historical society, and expectations are based on this perception. We are asked routinely how to go about having a house placed on the National Register, what to do about nitrate negatives, how to borrow the 1810 Ohio Census, what is the ethnic origin of the round barn, and how to evaluate a museum collection for insurance purposes: all questions that range far beyond the relatively narrow limits of archives and manuscripts use. In other words, River Falls has become, in the minds of most, an "Historical Service Center," where any question relating to something old is fair game.

Since this tendency appears to be a trend rather than an isolated instance, network centers and state historical societies need to establish more extensive communication with each other. Local curators, working on a cooperative basis, need to know more about their authority, responsibilities and the role they are expected to
play. State historical societies should take a more active role in maintaining standards at the centers, promoting security consciousness and participating in network staff training. Both need to cooperate in long range planning to deal not only with the problems of financial cutbacks and staff reductions, but also with new opportunities for use and with the consequences of success. Both should also work together to see that the centers work with other historical society divisions than those directly involved with archives and manuscripts.

If it can take advantage of the advantages of regional presence and perspective, develop additional channels for planning and communication and retain a certain flexibility, the idea of networking will continue to grow—perhaps more quickly than it did during the past decade. The key will be the individual center’s outreach—its ability to reach out into the community and promote use, provide information and develop an awareness of the importance of historical preservation.
Figure 1. Wisconsin and Minnesota, with no networks, showing the proximity of archival research centers within a fifty mile radius.
Figure 2. Wisconsin and Minnesota, with regional archival networks, showing the proximity of archival research centers within a fifty mile radius.