REAPPRAISING AND REACCESSIONING
WISCONSIN STATE GOVERNMENT
RECORDS: AN AGENCY-WIDE APPROACH

BY HELMUT M. KNIES

ABSTRACT: This paper reviews a four-year reappraisal and reaccessioning project undertaken in the late 1990s at the Wisconsin Historical Society with state government records. After describing how the state archives collections developed in scope and size over the half century since the formation of the Wisconsin State Archives in 1947, this article details the various means employed to achieve greater intellectual and physical control over the records and the acquisition methodologies that lay behind them. Finally, the paper offers some conclusions about the relative success of the project and cautions about the inherent difficulties associated with archival undertakings of this breadth.

The title of this paper refers to a major archival project that was conceived of 11 years ago and which had an active life of four years before ending in the year 2000. Viewed in hindsight, some seven years after its conclusion, it is ever more clear that the Wisconsin Historical Society’s 1996–2000 Public Records Reappraisal Project was created for a purpose that was breathtaking in its scope. As conceived, the idea was to take four archivists, give them adequate supplies and support staff, and direct them to reduce, through means of reappraisal and subsequent reaccessioning or deaccessioning, the archives’ holdings of Wisconsin state government records by a figure of 40 percent. Since the total holdings of state government records in 1995 were about 41,000 cubic feet of paper records, such a reduction would have meant eliminating about 16,000 cubic feet.

Given the size of that number, and the fact that the second half of the title of this article is “An Agency-Wide Approach,” the reader might have the impression that the project had adopted a strategy of deaccessioning, based on reappraisal, entire groups of records from individual state agencies. That was not the case, although there were days when the project staff wished that certain state bureaucracies had never been created. In fact, the overall strategy that was adopted is best described by the dual terms mentioned in the first half of the title—reappraisal and reaccessioning. Although it was not clear at the project’s beginning in the spring of 1996, the project team came to be engaged in a massive reaccessioning, even reprocessing, effort.
Over the course of four years, the archivists plowed through 22,700 cubic feet of state government records and deaccessioned 12,536 cubic feet. At the same time, they reaccessioned a total of 4,532 cubic feet and 2,554 reels of microfilm as well as smaller quantities of photographs, audio, and moving images. The difference between the deaccessioning and reaccessioning totals reflects those records series that were left largely untouched after reappraisal (about 5,700 cubic feet). As is immediately clear to the reader, the first number (22,700 cubic feet) means that the project managed to evaluate only about half of the total state government record holdings in the archives. However, the second number (12,536 cubic feet) indicates that the shrinkage resulting from our appraisal work with that half was over 50 percent.

Project staff decided at the very beginning of the undertaking to organize the work by completing the reappraisal of one state agency at a time. They also decided to tackle an entire agency in one fell swoop, no matter its size, and also to examine both the holdings of the agency as it was currently constituted as well as its antecedents and related agencies. In some ways, the work had an almost archaeological quality to it, often pointing back to the late nineteenth century and the birth of modern bureaucracy in the state. The approach of combining agency-wide evaluation with a reaccessioning mind-set meant that the project eliminated the records of no single agency in toto, and as a general practice deaccessioned entire series only rarely. The choice to adopt an agency-wide approach, as opposed to either series-level examinations only or a multiagency functional tack, was made solely by the project staff—one senior, experienced archivist and three relative novices. This choice, as well as others about appraisal criteria, reaccessioning practices, work flow, statistical and narrative reporting, and a host of others, was defined and decided on by the project staff in the beginning weeks of the effort. The work was self-directed and collaborative, with a minimum of external supervision.

Before discussing some of the details of the work, it is useful to address two questions: Why was this project necessary? and How did it come to be?

The project’s necessity, to state it simply, was largely about resource allocation. Specifically, it was about how fiscal resources would best be expended to manage the archives’ state government records collections and the limited physical spaces available for current records storage and planned growth. There were other reasons, of course, including those familiar to archivists, such as improving access, reducing backlogs, and addressing preservation needs. But, for the state budget resource allocators who approved the project, the bottom line was always phrased in terms of how to limit the number of dollars necessary for the storage of records.

Addressing the question of how the public records project came to be is a bit more difficult and requires some historical review. Essentially, the project was necessary because of the tremendous expansion of Wisconsin state government. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century and running straight through to the millennium, Wisconsin state agencies underwent a phenomenal period of growth. As part of the growth, there came a profusion of regulatory functions, the concurrent proliferation of bureaucratic systems, and the resultant explosion of records.

An additional critical factor was that the growth in the quantity and complexity of these records was matched by the Wisconsin Historical Society archives’ practice of
transferring records to the archives using an expansive and sometimes even exhaustive model of documentation. All this resulted in a very big state agency records collection housed in the archives stacks. For want of a better phrase, the above can be termed the “Wisconsin Way” in public records. This means marrying public records archival-management procedures with a strong focus on manuscripts acquisitions. It is a tradition that dates back far before the creation of a state archives to the founding of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the early twentieth century, this tradition evolved into combining collecting patterns that documented both Wisconsin’s pioneers and traditional elites with those that were driven by the research interests of University of Wisconsin faculty—primarily historians, but also economists and sociologists. These research interests resulted in the acquisition of personal papers and organizational records—such as those of labor unions, radical political movements, and social reformers—that later generations of archivists might retroactively describe as having high informational value. At first this collecting work applied exclusively to private records. However, by 1947, when legislative action created the state archives, the stage was set to enlarge the model to include public records. The archival function was placed within the existing structure of the State Historical Society largely because the Historical Society’s leaders actively lobbied for such an arrangement, and also because there wasn’t any suitable alternative. For the first twelve years of its existence, the state archives acquired public records through an appraisal process that evaluated individual series one at time, largely out of context, and without any supporting records management structure. This pattern clearly mimicked existing manuscripts collecting work. Even though the state archives was “sold” to the state legislature as an innovation that would result in cost savings from increased efficiencies, the archivists and administrators who managed it were far less interested in bureaucratic efficiency than in building a broad public records collection that would serve the needs of the society’s academically based research clientele.

In 1959, Wisconsin instituted a modern records management scheme through the use of records retention and disposition schedules, and during the following decade several thousand individual series-level schedules were produced. The state archives, in concert with the state’s Public Records Board, reviewed and approved these schedules. In doing so, the employees of the state archives, talented archivists all, made many hundreds of individual decisions to acquire records from more than 40 different state agencies. The main result of all those decisions was that the size of the state archives expanded dramatically. In 1973, the archives held about 25,000 cubic feet of public records. By 1996, there were approximately 50,000 cubic feet of both state and local government records—a one-hundred-percent expansion in a little less than a quarter-century. During the course of the public records project, the staff reviewed many of those earlier appraisals that resulted in the acquisition of state series. Reading this documentation helped to clarify the reasoning and goals of those archivists. A summary of these goals might be paraphrased as follows:

As the state archives we are statutorily mandated to document the workings of Wisconsin state government. However, as the archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, we are really interested in
a universe of records and documentary issues that is far broader than the purposes of state government and the historical records produced by that government. Therefore, we have an opportunity, verging on a responsibility, to mine the records of state agencies and extract materials for our larger mandate. As archivists we have a unique role to play because we have special access to the records and can act to mediate the gap between the original purposes of their creators and the subsidiary interests of their potential users as we define them.

Time and again, one finds appraisals in the archival case files describing both the content and context of records series and assigning values for acquisitions decisions that derive from the larger collecting interests of the Historical Society’s manuscript holdings and its North American history library. For example, these values could be expressed in an appraisal of an administrative file created for a specific regulatory function that gives primary significance to the records’ contribution to potential researchers’ understanding of topics in health, welfare, economics, crime and punishment, social mores, and others. Only secondarily would the appraisal credit the importance of how the records defined the original regulatory function. This was the “Wisconsin Way” in state records acquisitions, and it set the tempo for how the state archives developed and for its later difficulties with both space and access.

By the 1980s, the era of plentiful space for records storage was over. A major archival stack addition to the Historical Society’s headquarters building, completed in 1967, was now filled to capacity. To alleviate overcrowding, the archives had to begin renting off-site storage. In order to address the space crisis, the state archives also adopted a number of additional strategies. These included: (1) reallocation of nonarchival spaces in our primary building, such as former Museum galleries, for archival storage; (2) the increased use of bulk reduction microfilming for public records; and (3) reappraisal.

Reappraisal was, at first, almost exclusively limited to the re-evaluation of recommendations for the transfer of records as proposed by state agencies on new records schedules. These reappraisals served to reduce the future intake of records, but did little to limit ongoing accessions, much less the size of the existing collection. Gradually, methods of reappraisal were also applied to limiting the size of the annual transfers of public records. The preferred methodologies for this were: (1) statistical sampling; (2) the selection of specific case files or legal files from larger series based on the formulation of special landmark or historically significant categories; and (3) selective weeding prior to or during the accessioning processes.

All three of these strategies have their advantages and disadvantages, and they have been in growing use in Wisconsin for the past 20 years. Additionally, one other significant and, to the best of my knowledge, unique attempt was made to reduce the size of the state records holdings. This effort focused on the reappraisal of one specific series, which was also the single largest public records series in the state archives. It contained the annual filings for the state’s corporate income tax. The state archives had holdings amounting to about 4,500 cubic feet, covering the period 1911–1974. The appraisal logic for acquiring and keeping the corporate income tax returns was grounded in the Historical Society’s manuscripts tradition. Despite legal restrictions
on physical access, despite difficulties with arrangement and intellectual access, and
despite a host of space management concerns, the archives had valued the corporate
income tax filings through its acquisitions actions because of the anticipated long-term
importance of the series for academic research. The 1995 decision to deaccession it was
made with no unanimity of opinion among the archival staff. The dissenters, as they
might be termed, to the deaccessioning decision argued along paths, well trodden by
Wisconsin archivists, that the primary purpose of keeping the corporate income tax
returns, and by extension an argument that could be applied to much of the work with
public records, was not to document the history of the taxation of corporations, but
to have the information contained within the records available as a resource for any
number of as-yet unknown research purposes. As one of those dissenting archivists
might have put it, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt
of in your (evidential) philosophy.”

The genesis of the Public Records Reappraisal Project occurred in 1994 with a pro-
posal by the Wisconsin Department of Administration for the construction of a new
state records facility. This was to be a multipurpose building providing records storage
for several agencies, including the state archives. In order to limit the size and cost
of the state archives’ portion of the project, the state archivist proposed reducing the
quantity of existing holdings of state government records by reappraising and deacces-
sioning selected state records series. Originally planned as a five-year project, which
was then reduced to four, the concept came to be married to a figure—40 percent—as
being a suitable target for overall reduction of holdings size. The planning guidelines
for the project encompassed the following three goals: (1) Reduce the quantity of state
government records held by the state archives; (2) Improve intellectual access to state
government records; and (3) Develop guidelines for future acquisitions through better
records management.

Although these goals are not mutually exclusive, they do vary enough so that formu-
lating strategies for accomplishing each of them could result in three distinct sets of
actions. This meant that specific priorities would have to be set and that some things
must take second, and third, place. The planning guidelines did not go to a level of
defining how the prioritizing was to be accomplished. That was one of the tasks as-
signed to project staff.

It is not the purpose of this article to recapitulate, in detail, the project’s daily work.
In fact, this has already been done, in a most admirable manner, by the project’s team
leader, Carolyn J. Mattern, whose presentation at the fall 2002 Midwest Archives Con-
ference meeting was titled “Discard All Items Past Their Prime.” However, a summary
of how the staff came to conclusions about accomplishing their work is useful.

The crucial aspect was that the group decided to use state agencies, in their role as
the primary centers for organizing records-creating activities, as the focus for appraisal
and deaccessioning. The team developed a prioritized list of agencies and reviewed
the entire holdings cataloged under an agency name, as well as under any and all of its
predecessors and related precursors. This meant that the project had to create a geneal-
ogy of state government agencies for specific administrative and regulatory activities
dating back to the nineteenth century. The project also compared the current holdings
to existing and previous records management guidelines and reviewed the entire body
of records-disposition documents for each agency. In the case of large agencies, such as the Department of Revenue or the Department of Transportation, these disposition authorizations numbered in the multiple hundreds. Finally, and all this occurred before opening any boxes or touching any files, the group completed an analysis of each agency’s structure, mission, and functions. This last action was usually accomplished with the assistance of agency records managers.

The preliminary work completed, the project team divided the agencies’ records, already accessioned at the series level, into logical components based on bureaucratic structure or administrative function. Thereafter, each archivist had great latitude, within the larger collaborative structure of the project, to accomplish his or her work. Since most of the appraisals required some amount of reaccessioning, the project’s work routine was one of fairly constant and intense “processing-like” activity. Seated around large tables, in a scene that often mimicked some nineteenth-century communal activity, archivists and students would spend their days sorting, arranging, weeding, and writing (and, of course, telling stories). The only things missing were work chanteys and a straw boss.

In order to ensure that the group stayed within the bounds of the stated goals, as well as overall state archives parameters, an appraisal committee consisting of the project archivists and other public records staff was created. This committee met biweekly and reviewed all written appraisals prepared by project. Additionally, regular contacts with reference, processing, and preservation staff were scheduled so that our work would benefit from guidance and insights from all areas of the archives. Finally, all decisions about reappraisal, deaccessioning, and recommendations for improved records scheduling were communicated to the state agencies. As a general rule, the agencies could not override our reappraisal decisions. However, if the decision included deaccessioning, the agencies were always given the option of reasserting ownership of the records that were proposed for destruction. This outcome occurred infrequently.

Was Wisconsin’s public records project a success? The answer to that question depends, as is so often the case, on the different meanings of the idea of success. Certainly, for those state agencies whose records were reappraised and reaccessioned, reductions in the size of holdings of over 40 percent were realized. Additionally, the quality of intellectual access to many thousands of cubic feet of public records series was significantly enhanced. And, finally, the state of physical preservation of the records was improved through reboxing, refoldering, and similar measures. On the other hand, the effort managed to examine only a little over half of all the state series that needed reappraisal. Now, more than a decade after the beginning of the project, some larger trends that had a major impact on the work can be seen with a clarity that was not possible then. There were three in particular that should be noted.

1. The project was faced with a problem that was already passing in significance and being replaced by newer, and more intractable, problems.

There is a tendency among archivist, like generals, to prepare to fight the last war before the one they are confronting. By 1996, the state archives in Wisconsin had already spent several decades concerned about the problem of managing ever-increasing
holdings of public records. In one sense, to extend the military analogy, the project was conceived of as the last "big push" that would take the Historical Society out of the trenches to victory over the armies of unappraised and underprocessed records. It would solve the space issue and lay plans for limiting future growth. The unforeseen problem with these assumptions was that by the time the project came into existence, the factors that had caused the space crisis in public records were nearing an end. Simply stated, due to changes in records scheduling (more restrictive), changes in the way Wisconsin state agencies created records and managed records systems (looser, flatter, and less hierarchical), and most significantly, changes in information processing and storage technologies, the annual totals of state agency paper-based acquisitions by the archives had dropped from several thousand cubic feet per year to about 600–700 cubic feet. Statistics show that during the 1970s public records holdings grew an average of 7 percent per year. In the 1980s, growth dropped to an average of 4 percent per year, and by the 1990s, it was down to 2 percent per year. Projecting into the future based on scheduled transfers from state agencies, it was clear that the paper-based public records explosion was over. The more pressing concern was not the bulk of modern public records, but the decline in quality of the records being captured for transfer using traditional scheduling apparatuses, not to mention the problem of missing documentation that existed primarily in electronic form and that was poorly scheduled, if at all. But, this is a topic for another article.

2. The project was faced with a problem that was not the problem first posited.

A critical assumption underlying the planning for the project was that the Historical Society's holdings of state government records contained significant quantities of records that were poorly described and had marginal research utility. It was assumed that if these could be identified and segregated through reappraisal, they could be eliminated. That many of the archives' public records series were poorly described was an unquestioned, and unpleasant, reality. However, the idea that significant portions of the collection contained records of marginal value was not born out in our experience. In fact, the poor quality of access was a direct result of many years of lax accessioning standards, not sloppy appraisals. The project's reaccessioning work usually served to give proof to the overall high standard of the original appraisals completed by Historical Society archivists.

The confusion about this problem lay not in the quality of the appraisals but in a misunderstanding about the documentation goals that underlay them. If one accepts the assumption that the archives' state government holdings was some sort of lush, overgrown, and unruly garden, this was only because that garden had been carefully planned, planted, and nurtured by the archives for many decades. With the reappraisal of each agency's holdings, the project staff found themselves working on a complex set of series that had grown, organically, over time. The staff quickly realized that there was no easy way to reappraise and deaccession, in any aggregate fashion, series from such a collection without doing some considerable damage to the planning that conceived them and to records of unquestioned research value. A decision to do such a thing could have been informed and directed only by an alternative documentation
planning strategy to the one described above as the “Wisconsin Way.” No such alternative existed in 1996, and there was no agreement among the project staff, much less the archival staff as a whole, on how to devise one.

3. The project was faced with meeting a numerical target instead of a documentation need.

The 40 percent goal, a number with which the project staff was much concerned, was arrived at as an extension of a common piece of archival wisdom at the time: process a public records collection and you can expect a level of shrinkage through weeding that approaches 40 percent. Unfortunately, given the size of the records universe they were facing, no group of four archivists could achieve this goal through a plan based on series level reappraisal and reaccessioning. It is a testament to the rigor and speed of the project’s work that it achieved a 50 percent reduction for smaller subsets of records that were reappraised. The key to success in this goal would have been conceptualizing an appraisal methodology adequate to the task at hand. As mentioned above, there was no unanimity of opinion on what approach to take. The differing approaches that could have been adopted spanned the gap between the concepts of a public records project that focused primarily on reappraisal for the purpose of deaccessioning and setting documentation goals, and a public records project whose first priority was to improve access to the existing archival holdings through reaccessioning pursuant to reappraisal. This question was never resolved. The tension it produced, admittedly a dynamic and sometimes creative tension, stayed with the project for its entire life span. Without a clear and repeated insistence on the primacy of appraisal and the concomitant need to develop clear documentation goals for state agencies, the daily drumbeat of the need to reaccession and improve access tended to drown out all other concerns.

What is the significant lesson that can be drawn from this experience with an archival reappraisal project of such a large scale, and how would such a lesson be applied now?

On the one hand, it is true that the state agency series left untouched after the end of the work in 2000 still sit on the shelves in the archival stacks yearning for improved arrangement and access, and a renewed multiyear project could complete this undone work. However, the effort that would need to be expended to achieve significant space savings through deaccessioning and significant improvements in access through reaccessioning would be quite large. Reviving a project similar to the one that existed from 1996 to 2000 might well cost close to $250,000 a year in current dollars. In order to justify an expenditure of that scale, the improvements would have to be judged significant by the standards of 2007 not 1996. In 2007, it seems hard to justify the anticipated gain solely in terms of improved access and intellectual control over paper-based state records series. The gains that could be realized with a major effort, given the State of Wisconsin’s need for much better records and information management tools for both paper and electronic systems, call for a project that focuses, first and foremost, on defining and implementing a comprehensive framework for state agency documentation goals. Only based on the success of this work and the interrelated success in developing systems for the acquisition, management, and preservation of
electronic records systems, should any additional efforts be made to reappraise and reaccession the legacy holdings of state agency paper records.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Helmut M. Knies has been the collection development coordinator for both the Library and Archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society for the past two years, overseeing acquisition of books and serials for the agency’s North American history holdings, as well as supervising the acquisition of Wisconsin state and local government records and manuscripts. Prior to that, he spent six years as the collection development archivist for the Historical Society’s Archives, and was responsible for the management of state government records and manuscripts acquisitions. He has also worked as a member of the Wisconsin State Archives’ Public Records Reappraisal Project.