

CULTIVATING OUR GARDEN: ARCHIVES, COMMUNITY, AND DOCUMENTATION

BY ROBERT HORTON

ABSTRACT: Archivists have long shown an interest in documenting communities and in working with underdocumented communities. Planning such efforts should call into play a wide variety of intellectual and philosophical issues: identity, memory, epistemology, and even truth. A recent collaboration of state historic records advisory boards (SHRABs) in North Dakota and Minnesota examined these issues in a study of agriculture and rural life in the Red River Valley. After working with a wide variety of constituencies, the SHRABs began to analyze how to translate what they learned into the everyday routine of archival practices, with particular references to communities, costs, and benefits.

Introduction

Among archivists, there has long been a marked interest in the question of documenting communities and, especially lately, in working with underdocumented communities. These efforts should call into play a wide variety of intellectual and philosophical issues—identity, memory, epistemology, even truth—that then have to be translated into an everyday routine of practices, with references to costs and benefits, in order for an archival program to act upon them.

Recently, the two state historic records advisory boards of North Dakota and Minnesota completed a project that sought a better understanding of how to document agriculture and rural life. In the process, the project staff wrestled with the larger intellectual issues in a match that pretty much ended in a draw: those concepts cannot be summarily dealt with and neatly transformed into a guideline of best practices for this or that set of records.

But that is not an admission of defeat. As the staff worked through those considerations in 18 months of discussion and analysis, new options came to the fore, which will become part of a strategic planning process that begins for Minnesota in 2002. While that means we have not yet acted on what we have learned, an account of and commentary on the process we followed may have value for other archives and archivists engaged in similar undertakings.¹ This is a narrative about where we started, what we did, whom we met, and how we worked that provides some insight into the idea of a docu-

mentation strategy as a goal and as a process and offers some analysis of what it presupposes and entails. As such, this piece was originally designed to complement the other products of the project—a detailed report on the process and three additional reflective essays, by a historian, a farmer, and another archivist—and it has been only slightly modified for republication here.²

Background

In 2000, the Minnesota and North Dakota SHRABs began work on a collaborative project, “Agriculture and Rural Life: Documenting Change,” with support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). Geographically, the focus was on the Red River Valley, the boundary between the two states. Conceptually, its focus and goals were summarized in the original application to the NHPRC:

- a) Define important components of change in rural society in the late twentieth century.
- b) Identify extant records (inside and outside of repositories) that document those changes.
- c) Consider additional nontraditional sources.
- d) Outline a practical means of creating documentation if necessary.
- e) Prioritize sources against spatial and financial limitations of collecting organizations.
- f) Propose methods of accessibility.
- g) Develop a set of “best practices” for approaching documentation of rural life, in cooperation with state, regional and local repositories.³

There was a variety of motives behind this, but two were stressed in the proposal and are especially worth noting. First, there was a concern that repositories in the two states collected a vast quantity of records that were not being used. While much scholarly research was done on rural society, rather little of it depended on the material we were accumulating. The second concern focused on the question of expertise. Both SHRABs felt strong that making decisions about documentation could best proceed with the close involvement of the people on the ground.

The former concern was a frank admission that something was amiss. If a traditional set of patrons was not using the critical mass of archived records in any significant way, then a new orientation and a new allocation of resources were in order. The latter concern was, in the eyes of most members of the boards and most who have reviewed the project since, the most exciting element of the project. Asking, as the consensus put it, “real people” about their lives would be the critically innovative component of a new approach to documenting agriculture and rural life.

In other respects, the work plan closely mirrored other examples of documentation strategy projects. As, for example, detailed in works by Helen Samuels, Bruce Bruemmer, and Richard Cox, a documentation strategy defined a focus; involved a cooperative effort; looked at a broad array of features (e.g., institutional functions) rather than records themselves; considered means to bridge documentation gaps; crossed disciplines; identified priorities; and developed an appraisal tool to guide decisions about collecting.⁴

In sum, then, the project began with the assumptions that something had to be done, that just rounding up the usual suspects would be insufficient, and that the established process for documentation planning was a good model. To understand the project’s

evolution and to assess its results, we have to look at those assumptions and answer three questions about them:

What did we learn about the components of change?

What did we learn from talking to "real people"?

What did we learn about the process of developing a documentation strategy?

Answering these will outline what is involved in the move from an uncritical acceptance of certain larger intellectual issues to a consideration of how they affect our everyday work as archivists. In the process, we will call into question virtually every word in the title of the project; in the end, "agriculture," "rural life," "document," and "change" will all turn out to be more opaque and more complex than originally supposed.

What did we learn about the components of change?

We were interested in defining the components of change because we wanted to determine priorities for documentation. The fact that the Red River Valley was undergoing all sorts of changes was indisputable; the nature of those changes and the records that best documented them were the subject of our analysis. We learned that change could be defined on two levels, the macro and the micro, and that increased or better documentation would not necessarily inspire more research at either level.

There is an enormous amount of work appearing on agriculture and rural life, written by all sorts of people, in all sorts of genres and disciplines. So much published material is available that, in 1995, the *New York Times* began a review of four recent books on agricultural life with this observation: "At times, there seem to be nearly as many people writing about farming as there are actual farmers. And with the rate that agribusiness is gobbling up small holdings, the equation might actually be approaching parity."⁵ Despite the note of irony, this rings true.

Clearly, if archivists are collecting the wrong sorts of records or not enough of the right ones, these mistakes have had a negligible effect on the production of studies of agriculture and rural life. The disjunction is partially explained by the idea of motivation. As David Danbom noted, research into rural America picked up when the concept of social history became widely accepted. "Beginning in the midsixties, there was such an outpouring of work ... that it was possible by 1981 for Robert Swierengen to write of the 'new rural history.' Since then, this outpouring has become a flood."⁶

This has implications for the development of a documentation strategy. When planning how to expand the user base and collect "better" records, it is not a case of "build the archives and they will come." The availability of adequate documentation may enable research but does not inspire it. What made the "new rural history" possible was a change in the way the historical profession determined what was scholarly and what was not. When new topics became legitimate areas of study, then historians looked around to see which records would fit the bill. This was not a situation where the archivists were the catalysts.

Because historians are aware of the effects of shifting academic fashions, we found them reluctant to make any final recommendations about documentation when we began looking for advice on how to adapt our appraisal criteria. When asked about change, the historians looked inward; they emphasized that their profession would evolve—and

evolve in ways they could not predict. As a result, their testimony was inconclusive. The summary of the academic interest group meeting held in July 2000 notes, "The group was uncomfortable with guessing what historians may use in the future, and was caught inside the box when discussing the present."⁷ In consequence, most suggestions from academics were practical rather than conceptual; instead of documentation priorities, there were concrete recommendations for helping local repositories, primarily in order to make more material available and to open more avenues for research in the future.

There may have been another reason for the historians' reluctance to settle on a firm documentation agenda. In the professional literature, there is a strong, explicit consensus that "change" is not new to the area nor, indeed, to agriculture and rural life almost anywhere in America. To the contrary, the outline and the details of change have been apparent and consistent for most of the century. The cultural, economic, demographic, and economic factors all point in the same direction: towards the cities and suburbs and away from the farm.

To quote David Danbom once more, "The twenties foretold the course of agriculture over the rest of the century." And, in more detail, "For most of this century the Great Plains, like most of the rest of the West, has been a ward of the United States, maintaining its standard of living only because more money flows in through federal transfer payments than flows out in the form of taxes."⁸ Or, to quote a recent article in the *New York Times*, "Many historians have long argued that white settlement, particularly of the northern Plains, was largely government-induced from the start, through subsidies to railroads and homesteaders."⁹ As these quotations imply, there is a very strong case that the history of the Red River Valley and perhaps most of rural America is written in Washington, D.C. At the very least, the study of any region has to be located within the larger economic and political context that frames it.

Perhaps the situation seems more dramatic now since, as the pace of change accelerates, local and rural institutions appear increasingly less viable. Their disappearance, paradoxically, makes their contingent nature all the more apparent. Our sense of that contingency is reinforced because the nature of change has been remarkably consistent over time and geography. The agricultural economy of the United States was and is part of a global economy. In the Red River Valley, this has been true since European settlement.¹⁰ The area has never enjoyed any autonomy from the effects of government policy or market conditions. As a result, the broad nature of the change it has undergone in the past several decades is in many ways similar to that which every agricultural area in this country has undergone in that period.

What that implies, of course, is that nothing about the area is unique at a macro level. There is, to borrow from academic jargon, one meta narrative for agriculture and rural life that is essentially the same across the United States. From that perspective, most of rural America looks the same. Gross statistical data from the U.S. Census or other government agencies, articles from the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, or reports on federal agricultural policy or developments in NAFTA or GATT might provide all the significant documentation someone needs to understand the why and the how of changes in agriculture and rural life.

This sheds some light on the conclusions Mark Greene drew from a sampling of academic publications on twentieth-century rural society, done in preparation for the

project proposal. As noted in the application to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, "The most frequently cited sources are government reports and statistics, followed by scholarly monographs and journal articles, followed by newspaper articles (one author ranks the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* as the best sources for information on agriculture, along with the *Des Moines Register*, while most authors rely on papers of the locality being studied)."¹¹ The historians seem to have it right: nothing we learned suggests that better sources exist for studies of change in agriculture and rural life at the macro level.

The other side of the equation, though, is what occurs on the micro level. While the overall narrative of change might be depressingly similar across the region, the individual responses to that narrative, the stories of people reacting to those changes, are all unique. Adequate documentation would be a function of some dialectic between the macro and micro levels, between the actions and reactions of social forces and individuals. This, of course, is true of practically any historical event. As analogy, consider what Omer Bartov noted recently: "It is only through the telling of numerous personal tales that the reality of the Holocaust can somehow be grasped and the generalizations inherent to collective histories and sweeping theses be complicated and enriched."¹² For a complete history, we need both the personal tales and the collective histories.

But to what degree is difficult to say. Certainly nothing in the project gave us the insight necessary to determine how many or whose individual triumphs or tragedies are sufficient to tell the story of the Red River Valley. Nor did we discover any compelling evidence that one form or another of documentation would best meet this need. In some ways, the fuller appreciation of individual diversity, we realized, resists the reduction that is inevitably part of a documentation strategy. If we emphasize the individual response to change, then we value difference at the most granular level. We start to deconstruct the collective history when we note even the smallest details; there is less and less in common when we look this closely. At that point, we come close to saying that everyone has a story and every story is worth telling, with the possible corollary that every story is worth saving, too. But that spiral into the particular makes managing archives impossible. All sorts of practical limitations serve to keep us somewhere closer to the macro level and further from the micro level of documentation.

For example, the major project currently supported by the Minnesota Historical Society is the creation of a museum in Minneapolis telling the story of the flour industry. The approach here is analogous to that described in William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, where one city's economic development to a fascinating extent influenced the fate and even the appearance of the geographical area dependent upon it.¹³ As the society noted in a proposal for support of its Mill City Museum project, "More than 100 years ago, forces converged here to make Minneapolis the flour-milling capital of the world. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, what happened here continues to shape your world."¹⁴ While the plans for the museum are still taking shape, it seems clear that its goal will be to select and interpret an illustrative set of individual stories, within an exhibit and as a synecdoche, where a part speaks for the whole.

What did we learn from talking to “real people?”

I placed quotation marks around the term “real people” because the term was the subject of some contention during the project, often sparked by my own, pronounced distrust of the dichotomy it implies. The term’s advocates spoke eloquently of the need to get the opinions of the people on the ground about their own lives and the issues affecting them, so that any decisions about documenting those lives could reasonably be made. This feeling was shared by most of the two SHRABs’ board members and it was an approach notably praised by commentators on the project. It would, in fact, be hard not to praise it. A grassroots approach has an undeniable appeal, raising connotations of Jefferson, democracy, and town meetings.

I was nonetheless wary, for a variety of reasons. For the project, gathering information was only a starting point. The critical components of developing a documentation strategy came afterwards. A finished product was dependent on taking one more step, analyzing the information we gathered, and then, even more important, taking the final step and making decisions about professional practice on the basis of the analysis. To accomplish all of those tasks would involve the ongoing input, review, and cooperation of a number of groups, institutions, and informants, but the final determinations and decisions would reflect the understanding and resources of the archivists. To begin that complex process by privileging one group of informants as “real” seemed problematic. Their input was valuable, but it still had to be evaluated. Otherwise, we ran the risk of taking the first slip down the slope to an uncritical acceptance of the stories people told about themselves.

This was a danger. As Kathryn Marie Dudley has compellingly noted, much of what Americans think about agriculture and rural life has been informed by a variety of mythologies: “There is a serious disconnection between what we know and what we want to believe about farming as a way of life.”¹⁵ In a recent issue of *Daedalus* examining Minnesota, Joseph and Anthony Amato spoke even more starkly about the process of inventing a heritage, with particular reference to a point close to home: “The notion of a Minnesota culture immediately strikes observers as counterfeit. Minnesota, never a natural or cultural unit, was born and nurtured by continuous artifice.”¹⁶

These critiques raise important questions about perspective. As many a citizen has told me in my travels through Minnesota, things look different from St. Paul. Whether that distance measures objectivity or ignorance is a legitimate and probably inevitable subject for debate. Any answer is a shot at a moving target. But privileging one perspective runs the danger of making decisions impossible to reach. Even the most practical of farmers can become postmodernists when disputing the ability of an urban bureaucrat to understand their realities. But the farmers’ perspectives may not be and certainly are not automatically better; they are simply different. That difference may be informative, but still fall short of being persuasive.¹⁷

With those caveats in mind, we can ask, “What did we learn from the people on the ground?” On one level, we made connections: we liked the people we met. As all the project staff would agree, everyone was extraordinarily open and gracious. To a captivating degree, our contacts were articulate, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic. To an extent, this just reflects the selection process, as anyone who was not interested in the

topic or unwilling to discuss it could simply ignore the invitation to a meeting. We met only people who wanted to help out, a situation that mirrors the experience of others in the field. As noted in a description of a University of Michigan ethnographer's work in North Dakota, "Anthropologists say they work hard to get divergent views. But they naturally spend the most time with the friendliest people." As the article goes on to point out, this presents a problem for analysis. "Ethnographies offer rich detail and texture, but require randomized, controlled surveys to back up their anecdotal points."¹⁸

Anecdotes we had. Surveys we did not. They were well beyond the scope of the project. As a result, the information we gathered has to be treated warily, as our sampling was not scientific.¹⁹ We met a limited number of people and spoke to them for limited periods. In addition, we met only people who stayed behind, an interesting consequence of having a specific geographic focus, but something of a constraint when dealing with the concept of change, particularly with its most notable feature here: emigration on a scale which, in some places, verged on depopulation. Our contacts were in many ways making a stand. Their stories could be usefully balanced by hearing from some of those who left the area and moved to a city or suburb.²⁰

This is not to say that the people we met presented unbalanced accounts. Indeed, Ken Ware, the extension agent at the Ada Interest Group Meeting, September 2000, spoke persuasively about the larger context for agriculture, especially the critical impact of national policy: the emphasis on cheap food makes small farming uneconomical and the trade barriers against Caribbean sugar prop up the sugar beet agribusiness. This certainly echoes the concept of a global economy and the implication that the history of the Red River Valley is often written somewhere else.

Just as persuasively, at the Social Services Interest Group Meeting, September 2000, Doug Seiler addressed the complications of record keeping in a bureaucratic age. A North Dakota social worker, he noted that he worked with 259 agencies in this region. Conceivably, a variety of these agencies could interact with individuals and families in any number of permutations, as they are variously oriented towards geography, political subdivision, age groups, health concerns, traumas/emergencies, occupational groups, incomes, specific social or cultural factors, ethnic origin, and so on. As a result, any single individual's transit through the region or through life could involve an array of contacts and transactions crossing a whole variety of communities and boundaries. A kaleidoscope might be better suited to capturing that experience than an archive.

The mention of a kaleidoscope raises an important issue: how we looked at things, how we framed the project. We did need to set some boundaries. One aspect was conceptual: we confined our interests to change in agriculture and rural life. Another was geographic: each state in the collaboration had selected a different area of concentration. North Dakota picked three counties, a political concept. Minnesota picked a watershed district, a topographic concept, and one that crossed more clearly artificial boundaries. What we heard from our informants about boundaries was something slightly different and much more fluid. The actual point of comparison most often raised in meetings was the concept of community. Despite its popularity, we did not get a hard and fast definition of it.

For the majority of people, "community" meant the place where they lived, but that was a net thrown over many diverse entities and concepts. Becoming a mere bedroom

community, for example, was an invidious end to some residents of small towns, so even the basic term had to be qualified. In addition, internally, every community, even the smallest, draws distinctions between young and old, insider and outsider, rich and poor, good farmer and bad, and so on. In one meeting, for example, Brian Gion, Steele County North Dakota Extension Agent, blamed "poor marketing skills on many farm liquidations. Gion believes that to survive in today's agricultural business climate, you have to be a full-time expert marketer. Without that, great crops aren't going to save you."²¹ No doubt one of those less-than-expert marketers has something additional to say about that. As Kathryn Dudley wrote, which I read as a lament, "There are always other stories to be told."²²

But there is a different way of thinking about community. As we learned, a community has distinguishable physical aspects or institutions, which are most important because they have symbolic value, i.e., the significance of having a local school, hardware store, grocery store, or bank was that it connoted independence, an autonomous viability as a distinct entity. This symbolic value creates and reinforces a sense of identity, but that essentially works in a binary sense: a place has a school or it does not, it is a community or it is not. In some ways, this is similar to the arguments about the value of a major league sports team. The Twin Cities have some shaky franchises that most often make a pitch for public support and a new stadium on the grounds that, without professional sports, Minneapolis and St. Paul would be like "a colder Omaha." In other words, they would lose their identity as big league towns.

Identity is different from history. Keeping the Twins in Minnesota preserves an image, but keeping the records of the Minnesota Twins would not sufficiently document the state. Similarly, a school or a bank really is not the same as the community; having the records of a school or of a bank does not equate to documenting the community. Since it was principally at the symbolic level that our informants were talking about community, the conversations did not lead to very productive discussions about record keeping in the sense of a regional documentation strategy. Instead, we can follow the thread of that conversation to another emblem of identity: the local historical society.

The project identified roughly 20 institutions actively collecting records in the region, not counting public libraries, repositories at the state and national level with records of interest, or any organizations that maintained their own archives. That makes for a lot of records but, more significantly, a lot of repositories and potential repositories per capita. The phenomenon is not peculiar to the Red River Valley. There are over three hundred local and county historical societies in Minnesota. Why so many? The answer is complex. On one level, a historical society is increasingly an obligatory component of the basic cultural apparatus of contemporary society. This can be inferred from the description of the development plans for Cooperstown, North Dakota, "Boasting an art gallery, museum, golf course, and full service community center, the community is looking to provide similar services to those found in Fargo."²³

On another level, the local historical society evinces a sincere concern for the past but, given the level of resources and commitment available for support, this concern could take the form of heritage rather than history. As David Lowenthal suggests, the two are very different: "Heritage ... is not a testable or even a reasonably plausible account of some past, but a *declaration of faith* [italics in the original] in that past ...

heritage is not history, even when it mimics history. It uses historical traces and tells historical tales, but these tales and traces are stitched into fables that are open neither to critical analysis nor to comparative scrutiny."²⁴ The possibility is acute because the prospect of change, particularly change construed as loss, is a powerful motivating factor: "Legacies at risk are cherished for their very fragility. The heritage of rural life is exalted because it is everywhere at risk, if not already lost."²⁵

In all, verifying the variety of repositories working in the Red River Valley and the variety of their motivations was an important consequence of talking to "real people." But, as with the appreciation of individual experiences, diversity complicates the development of a documentation strategy. In practice, for a geographic region, that demands movement towards selection of a set of priorities that reflect a consensus and can inspire collaboration across institutions.

What did we learn about the process of developing a documentation strategy?

There is a number of approaches to a documentation strategy in the archival literature, but Richard Cox has a concise recommendation on how to develop one:

What is desired to be known, according to present knowledge and conceptions of future research (about as best as can be determined), about a particular topic or geographic area is ascertained and the existing documentation evaluated to determine not only what should be saved but what gaps there are and how they can be supplemented. The focus is on the importance of an ongoing activity or in identifying the important features of a geographical region rather than their informational byproducts.²⁶

This more or less makes up the agenda for the project, but all the steps proved impossible to accomplish in the time and with the resources available. Gathering information consumed much of our energies. In addition, gathering information was a more comfortable task than some of the others on the agenda. Cox's use of the passive voice in the quotation above hints at the disagreeable nature of some of the tasks that fully make up the development of a documentation strategy. Decisions are not just made: *someone* makes them. That is a critical but often extraordinarily difficult act because archivists recognize that we cannot save even everything that is worth saving. Saying "no," then, is ultimately one major consequence of a documentation plan. Someone says "no": "no" to those records, "no" to those issues, "no" to those institutions, people, and places. Not many people are comfortable with the prospect of just saying "no." At the end of a process that emphasized diversity and the appreciation of difference, it is especially hard to make such decisions. For two SHRABs, dealing with a complex region, a volatile mix of issues, and an array of constituencies, saying "no" means taking an intellectual approach to an emotional issue that will undoubtedly have political ramifications.

We realize that developing even a modicum of support for such a documentation program and strategy would demand an ongoing process and mechanism for negotiation and collaboration. In that sense, we have validated the experience of a number of documentation strategy projects.²⁷ A one-time infusion of resources for an analysis can

carry work forward only to a certain point. The application of program funds and a corresponding reorientation of program activities would be necessary to implement a strategy on a comprehensive basis. Helen Samuels emphasized the collaborative aspects of this: "Documentation strategies are multi-institutional activities, as they are intended to coordinate and plan the natural dispersion of the integrated documentation of modern society." She added an important point: "Documentation strategies rely on strong institutional archives."²⁸ Given the enormously varied levels of resources and expertise among the institutions covered in this project, it is probable that one of the state historical societies would have to make a serious commitment to foster that collaboration across the region.

The deterrent to making that commitment is that such cooperation would be very difficult to coordinate, even if some agreement for action were achieved. Think about maintaining that consensus over even a relatively short term. Consider the number of organizations involved and the often very broad nature of their missions. Factor in the scarcity of resources and the difficulties of coordinating a shift in priorities just in one institution, let alone across a variety of them. Add, just as spice, the realization that information technology has arrived in the Red River Valley, too, with the result that the nature of record keeping and the expectations of patrons are radically changing: we confirmed that records, in all forms and formats, were available in—to use the cliché—"staggering abundance." All in all, as the project manager noted in a draft of his final report, "The opportunities for future work seem limitless."²⁹

That prospect is not altogether inspiring. We have discovered some very daunting obstacles to making a documentation strategy work here. One implication is that implementing a strategy might be appropriate and feasible in situations where the entity in question is bounded by some definite frame (as in a high-technology company or a university), but is problematic when the entity is a geographic convenience encompassing a number of disparate record-creating entities, ranging from a typical small farm to the local bank to the data warehouse of the regional office of the Department of Human Services. In addition, with a more strictly defined entity such as a university or a corporation, there is a relatively less complicated administrative problem: still a large number of records creators, but essentially only one organization responsible for records collection. As a result, a university or corporate archive is in a far better position to make decisions about resources and priorities that can be implemented on a consistent basis as part of a routine program.³⁰

Ultimately, the concern for practical considerations is going to lead to some recognition that the distinction between the macro and micro levels of analysis and between the macro and micro documentation of a region will perhaps tacitly dictate an allocation of responsibilities. That may be cold comfort to those looking for a concerted program and for active collaboration. But limits on resources make that prospect appear less promising and more like the horizon routinely faced by most archives. There is just too much to do. In the face of that, when everyone's reach exceeds his grasp, institutions will use their missions to justify their choices. On the local level, county historical societies will not close up shop simply because, from the perspective of Washington or New York, they are all part of "flyover country." At the state and regional levels, though, some consolidation of interests appears inevitable and some corresponding emphasis

on representative rather than comprehensive documentation will follow. As a practical matter, then, local documentation is likely to be primarily a local responsibility; accordingly, the question becomes how to sustain viable archival programs at the local level.

SHRABs in various states have taken different approaches to this situation. A number of regrant programs have successfully provided funding and services to local societies. In the spring of 2000, the NHPRC, working with the Council of State Historic Records Coordinators (COSHRC), sponsored a conference on archival education that directly addressed the issue of helping local repositories and their staff to learn basic skills and technologies.³¹ Efforts along these lines would directly answer the needs expressed in the archival focus group meeting held July 24–25, 2000. An ongoing framework for collaboration seemed to be the ideal: “Throughout discussions, the idea of a regional archival alliance kept resurfacing.”³² Whether a regional documentation strategy is the chicken or the egg in relation to such an alliance is an interesting question to ponder. In that context, analysis such as that done in this project might be in and of itself the most useful step, since it provided an essential educational opportunity; managed as an ongoing process, institutions can compare notes, discover mutually beneficial projects, and find ways to work within the framework of a very high-level conceptual understanding. That rising tide of awareness might lift all boats. But it might not, since the tide of records is rising irrespective of the quality of the boats and the expertise of the sailors within.

Conclusions

At the end of *Candide*, Voltaire’s characters reflect upon the catastrophes they experienced as a result of all that thinking and planning. The eponymous hero repeats the book’s most famous line, “Il faut cultiver notre jardin.” But from one of his companions in misfortune comes a useful gloss: “Travaillons sans raisonner, dit Martin; c’est le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable.”³³ It is tempting advice and alert readers may detect an echo of it in common archival practice: we may not be able to articulate a documentation strategy, but we are going to develop an archives.

We miss the value of Voltaire’s perception of human endeavor if we take that quotation at face value. The irony of his work is that we really have to think about what we do, regardless of the perils, and the irony of this project is that even what Voltaire considers the most unreflective and undemanding of activities—rural life—proved to be more than conventional thinking could encompass. So the next step is to examine the alternatives.

In that context, Benedict Anderson makes a point that has been just touched upon above: “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”³⁴ Conceivably, what we have begun to document in this project are the styles in which communities are imagined. To a notable degree, our style is elegiac. We lament: history is being lost, a way of life is disappearing, communities are vanishing, our region and our culture are fundamentally changing.³⁵ That style presumes a whole set of values and perceptions that might be more important to document than the changes themselves. Right now, we are worrying about the definitions of “region,” “community,” and “rural” in the hope of

fixing a set of structural features or criteria to guide our work; to echo Anderson, we are trying to find out what is false and what is real. At ground level, for the residents of the Red River Valley, that distinction is in many ways immaterial. To quote Joseph and Anthony Amato, "The presumption of actually being a place and having a culture allows residents ... a way to take measure of who they are and what they value in a world often beyond their understanding and control."³⁶ The real challenge for archivists could well be to document those presumptions, their enactment, their representation, and their evolution.

There are two hints at how that might be done. Alessandro Portelli has written recently on studying oral history as memory and then realizing memory's value as evidence by accepting and analyzing the subjectivity that inevitably colors what people remember. He notes, "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did."³⁷ The focus groups we organized are a step in that direction. Amplified and elaborated in a comparative framework that contrasts people's stories with other sources, they could provide a wealth of documentation on how the residents of the Red River Valley are structuring their view of their world.

With a specific focus on traditional forms of records, Elisabeth Kaplan has recently explored the relation of archives, historical societies, and identity. She has particularly and compellingly urged archivists to become consciously aware of their role, since they "appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built. In turn, notions of identity are confirmed and justified as historical documents validate their authority."³⁸ The documentation of the Red River Valley would be fascinating to examine in that light. Within the area's complex transit in the mind of European culture from frontier to settlement towards frontier again almost within the space of living memory, we have the opportunity to study the role of archives and records as representations of some of the more significant aspects of American identity. Kathryn Dudley wrote, "Family farms have become our national icon of autonomy."³⁹ The documentation process is an important component of how that icon was created and how it is preserved. It well deserves our attention.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Robert Horton is state archivist and head of the state archives department at the Minnesota Historical Society. Before coming to Minnesota in 1997, he was head of the electronic records and records management programs at the Indiana Commission on Public Records. His current focus is on a number of projects related to electronic records, information technology, and the records of the tobacco industry.

NOTES

1. And this account, of course, is my own perspective on the topic and not the official view of the Minnesota Historical Society. The help of, among others, Jim Fogerty, Michael Fox, the late Lila Goff, and Gerald Newborg was essential to my understanding of the project and its goals. I am also grateful to Todd Daniels-Howell, Mark Greene, and the reviewers of *Archival Issues* for their help in improving this essay. I owe a special debt to Beth Kaplan for her comments and, well, just about everything.
2. The final products of the project are available on-line at <<http://www.mnhs.org/shrab>>.
3. Minnesota State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Documenting Agriculture and Rural Life. Proposal to the NHPRC* (May 1999).
4. Helen W. Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Chicago and Metuchen, NJ: SAA and Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992); Bruce Bruemmer and Sheldon Hochheiser, *The High-Technology Company: A Historical Research and Archival Guide* (Minneapolis: Charles Babbage Institute, 1989); and Richard J. Cox, *Documenting Localities: A Practical Model for American Archivists and Manuscript Curators* (Lanham, MD, and London: SAA and Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996).
5. Maxine Kumin, "The Ground Beneath Our Feet," *New York Times*, August 6, 1995. <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. February 8, 2001.
6. David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): xi.
7. Ben Leonard, "Academic Focus Group: Meeting Summary, July 17–18, 2000."
8. Danbom, 197, 149.
9. Timothy Egan, "Indians and Bison Returning to Plains Others Abandoned," *New York Times*, May 27, 2001, sec. A1, sec. A18.
10. See, for example, Hiram Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza: A History of Bonanza Farming in the Red River Valley of the North* (Fargo: North Dakota, Institute for Regional Studies, 1964).
11. *Documenting Agriculture and Rural Life. Proposal to the NHPRC*, 1.
12. Omer Bartov, "An Infinity of Suffering," *Times Literary Supplement*, December 15, 2000, 5.
13. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1991).
14. Minnesota Historical Society, "Mill City Museum: A Proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities," February 2001, 3. For more on the society's plans for the museum, visit <<http://www.mnhs.org/events/saf/safdesign.html>>.
15. Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 6.
16. Joseph A. Amato and Anthony Amato, "Minnesota, Real and Imagined: A View from the Countryside," *Daedalus* 129:3 (summer 2000): 55.
17. And they may not even be all that different: Dudley argues persuasively that rural America does not constitute some isolated culture separate from "America." Dudley, 17, 174. This is echoed in Danbom, 193.
18. Stephanie Simon, "The Study of Us," *St. Paul Pioneer-Press*, October 29, 1999, 6A.
19. A recent article about the decline of small dairy farms in Wisconsin points out some of the problems of the anecdotal approach by highlighting the debate among Wisconsin farmers about defining a farm in terms of size. A spokesman for the state's Farm Bureau said, "We've got people who have this locked-in perception of a farm and they don't want that changed." David Barboza, "America's Cheese State Fights to Stay That Way," *New York Times*, June 28, 2001, B1, B8.
20. As a possible counterpoint, consider an Iowa State project that indicates "former farmers have largely succeeded in building satisfying new lives and sound financial foundations." Dirk Johnson, "Leaving the Farm for the Other Real World," *New York Times*, November 7, 1999, The Nation section, 3. One former farmer, now living in a city, said, "The kids would never want to go back now ... The telephone never stops ringing."
21. Leonard, 2.
22. Dudley, 41.
23. Leonard, 2.
24. David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: the Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996): 121.
25. Lowenthal, 6–7.

26. Cox, 79.
27. Compare this report to the conclusions Richard Cox draws about the effort to develop a documentation strategy for western New York state. Cox, 99–102.
28. Samuels, 14–15.
29. Ben Leonard, *From Independence to Interdependence: Rural Perspectives on Change*, Final Report, April 26, 2001, 28.
30. This is, of course, all relative. No archive reliably has the resources and support to make this sort of thing work perfectly. But, in terms of documentation strategy, see the works of Helen Samuels and Bruce Bruemmer, cited above, as cases in point.
31. For details on the National Forum for Archival Continuing Education, see the COSHRC Web site: <<http://www.coshrc.org/nface/index.html>>.
32. Leonard, *Archival Focus Group: Meeting Summary*, July 24–25, 2000, 1.
33. Jean François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme*. In the Everyman's Library edition, the translation reads, "We must take care of our garden," and "'Let's get down to work and stop all this philosophizing,' said Martin. 'It's the only way to make life bearable.'" *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992).
34. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Press, 1983): 15.
35. This took some interesting forms. For instance, in the Ada focus group meeting, there was an extraordinary outpouring of regret about the phenomenon of the disappearing local bank, largely expressed in terms of dismay over the impersonal nature of technology, e.g., the tradition of sitting down with a neighbor contrasted with the advent of voice mail. As my own childhood recollections of the community bank my family used are colored by the memory of the complex strategies my mother used to get a check cashed outside of the bank's 9–3, five days a week, work hours, the advent of ATMs, debit and credit cards, Internet banking, and so on all seemed incredible boons.
36. Amato, 74.
37. Alexander Stille, "Prospecting for Truth in the Ore of Memory," *New York Times*, March 10, 2001, A15, A17.
38. Elisabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist* 63 (2000): 126.
39. Dudley, 7.