FROM PROFILE TO POLICY: A MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY CASE STUDY IN COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

GLORIA A. THOMPSON

Making "order out of chaos"—the skill often attributed to the processors of the archival world—may have broader applicability. The Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) is typical of midwestern state historical societies in having collected manuscripts in a less-than-systematic fashion for more than a century. Although charged with documenting the wide and varied aspects of the state's history, the manuscripts holdings were generally developed through acceptance of what was presented or through the particular interest of manuscripts curators and other staff members. In an era of funding cuts and diminishing resources, the need to collect selectively is heightened. We sought to make these situations manageable and to give increased direction to collecting.

The staff of the Minnesota Historical Society's Division of Archives and Manuscripts had a long-held sense that current collecting policies were vague and perhaps out of date. The intial written statement regarding collecting is found in the Society's 1849 charter: "The objects of said Society . . . shall be . . . the collection and preservation of publications, manuscripts, antiquities . . . pertaining to the social, political, and natural history of Minnesota." Clearly a broad mission! The opportunity to refine it came in 1980 when the division established a planning task force to examine all aspects of the operation, including the manuscripts collecting policy along with government records needs, technical services projections, and reference and outreach capabilities.

It was in this context that a five-member Manuscripts Collection Committee undertook to analyze all existing collections by identifying the primary and secondary topical emphasis of each one.* It was

*The analysis extended beyond the Society's own holdings to include the Minnesota Regional Research Center Network, which was at that time still administered by MHS. On the other hand, it was limited to Minnesota-related collections—excluding, for example, gold mines in Alaska—and it also excluded single-item local history materials.

TABLE 1
MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION COMMITTEE
Subject Categories

Agriculture—relating to culture of the soil and of domestic animals and plants; includes agricultural organizations, accounts of life as farmers, horticulturists, etc. Excludes business topics such as co-ops, farm machinery production, agri-business.
Business—agri-business, lumbering, transportation, fur trade, mining, merchandising, communications, banks, co-operatives, other.
Labor—labor leaders, labor movement, unions, anti-union groups.
Economic Affairs—consumers, Depression, advertising, tourism promotion, economic concepts, and processes.
Environmental Affairs—exploration, surveying/mapping, land, conservation, ecology concerns.
Science, Medicine, Technology—
Education—school histories, PTSA groups, school activities, papers of educators.
Culture—arts, architecture, recreation, sports, and organizations concerned with these.
Religious Life—missionaries, clergy, religious sentiments of individuals and reflections of religious movements.
Church Records—
Family Life—courtship, marriage, parent-child-sibling relationships, social organizations.
Genealogy—genealogy collections, papers of genealogists.
Ethnicity and Racial Groups—process of immigration, individuals and organizations, accounts of life in U.S. (churches and church records).
Law and Judiciary—lawyers' records, papers of judges.
Military Affairs—various wars, anti-war activities, pacifism, military/patriotic organizations.
Politics—parties, political movements, politicians.
Social Welfare and Social Reform—includes organizations and clubs, also programs such as Peace Corps and VISTA.
Women's Organizations—women's movement, women's groups not part of above categories.

believed that knowledge of actual strengths and weaknesses revealed by such an analysis could provide the basis for more explicit collecting guidelines. The committee's first task was to establish consistent subject categories that would provide the framework for the analysis. The "Basic Hierarchy/Main Entries" list developed by the Midwest Archives Guide Project (an automated data-base project involving the state archives of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois) provided a system that required relatively few modifications. The resulting topical classification system is presented as Table 1.

Each committee member analyzed several topics. We met to reach a consensus on what to include in each broad subject area. For instance, regarding the essential focus of an African Methodist Episcopal church, we asked: Should we enter it primarily into the "church" category or the "ethnic/racial" one? We categorized it as primarily "ethnic/racial" because we decided that we really wanted to know how strong our collections were in materials pertaining to Black Minnesotans, and recorded a secondary emphasis in the "church" category.

Similar discussions followed in the category for women. Turn-of-the-century processing methods subsumed women's papers under titles of their fathers', brothers', or husbands' collections, and we wanted to discover what holdings related to, or were primarily generated by women. In final form, the women's category related to women affecting public policy, women's issues, or women's movements that could not be tabulated in any of the other 17 categories. On the other hand, we tabulated a women's fine arts society under "cultural" rather than "women" because the thrust of the organization related to the preservation and promotion of the arts. Such occasional subjectivity is obvious and inevitable. Some of our categorical subject definitions or components reflected our goal of highlighting hidden subject strengths, thus providing more information on what we knew to be current research interests. It was most important to make certain that all committee members agreed upon the final categorical definitions once tabulations began.

The committee then devised means to tabulate basic statistical information relating to 2,941 collections and to present that information as a concise collection profile. The collections log form (Table 2) was used to register collections according to their major subject emphasis and to record date span, topics of secondary significance, and size. This essential core of descriptive collection information provided the basis from which to construct summaries for each of the designated topics. To follow one example (see Table 3, Topic Summary Form): 58 collections (less than two percent of the 2,941 collections logged) were considered to be primary labor collections; of these, 13 were considered item-sized (five discrete items or less) and 16 collections were between five and 20 cubic feet in size. Further, out of these 58 collections, 42 (or 72%) were from the twentieth century. Similar quantifications were computed for all basic subject categories.

Finding aids, such as the three published guides to holdings, inventories, and the card catalog, along with acquisition reports, provided the basis for the statistical profiles. The individual responsible for the labor profile scanned all of these sources and, as a result, became well-acquainted with the contours of the labor collections. The acquired knowledge extended to some qualitative evaluations, which were shared with other staff members (see Figure 1).

The profiles dispelled some myths and provided the basis for additional analysis. Through divisional lore, we had come to believe that we had a strength in labor collections, but the study indicated only two percent of our surveyed collections contained a primary labor emphasis. We could determine from the Military Affairs profile that few holdings related to the recent military conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. We compiled a list of collection

TABLE 2
COLLECTIONS LOG FORM

Topic: LABOR

Sub-Topic: _____ **Quantity**

Collection	Guide Entry No.	Dates	I	≤1′	>1′ ≤5′	>5′ ≤20′	>20′ ≤50′	>50′ ≤100′	>100′	Film	Secondary Topics
RR Telegraphers of NA, Vinton, IA	3-2443	1880s-1950s		X							
Retail Clerks Union, St. Paul	3-2521	1930s-1960s				X					
St. Paul Jobbers Union	3-2573	1890s		X							
St. Paul Labor Temple Association	3-2574	1920s-1930s	1								
St. Paul Plasterers & Cement Finishers Union	3-2576	1910s-1930s	1								
Sheet Metal Workers Union, St. Paul	3-2614	1940s-1950s	2								
State Capitol Employees Union, St. Paul	3-2668	1950s-1960s			X						
United Garment Workers, St. Paul	3-2721	1900s-1930s	2								Women
Westphal, Gustavus Adolph	3-2795	1890s-1940s		X							Politics
Citizens Alliance of Minneapolis	3-1863	1900s-1940s				X					
Citizens' Association of St. Paul	3-1864	1900s	12								
Mahoney, William	3-2298	1920s-1950s		Ⓧ							Labor-Politics
United Steel Workers of Am., Hibbing	3-2767	1930s-1960s			X						
Upholsterers, Fr. & Bedding Workers, Minneapolis	3-2770	1950s-1960s		X							

TABLE 3
TOPIC SUMMARY FORM

Topic: LABOR

Sub-Topic: _____ **Quantity**

Collection	Primary Topics	Dates	I	≤1′	>1′ ≤5′	>5′ ≤20′	>20′ ≤50′	>50′ ≤100′	>100′	Film	Secondary Topic
N of collections	58		13	20	5	16	2			2	16
dates/size of collections											TOTALS
RAW DATA		1700				1					1
		1800	1	1							2
		1800/1900	2	4	3	4					13
		1900	10	15	2	11	2			2	42
TOTALS			13	20	5	16	2			2	58
											TOTALS
PERCENTAGES		1700				2					2%
		1800	2	2							4
		1800/1900	3	7	5	7					22
		1900	17	26	3	20	3			3	72
TOTALS			22	35	8	29	3			3	100%

Figure 1

SF-00006-02

STATE OF MINNESOTA

Office Memorandum

DEPARTMENT Minnesota Historical Society
Division of Archives and Manuscripts

TO : DLC, DEM, RB, GAT

DATE: 24 March 1980

FROM : DKN

PHONE:

SUBJECT: Collections Committee: Summary analyses, in general and by subject

Sources used: Guides 1, 2, 3; guide entries for Guide 4; Uncataloged Collections Notebook; Acquisitions Reports, 1976-1980; JMW's accessioning project file; card catalog (for a limited number of ethnic groups).

Statistics: Each title counted as one collection. Both feet and film are counted in tabulating quantity; all centuries represented are counted in tabulating dates. Therefore, the totals of figures for size and/or dates may equal more than the number of collections. Percentages for quantity and dates are based on the total figures for size and date, not on the number of collections.

Survey/Tally sheets: Collections counted as secondary topics are indicated by a dash (—) immediately preceding the title and a circle around the quantity indicator ((X)). Collections whose titles are immediately preceded by ⌣ are counted as primary topics. 50 items or less are tabulated as items; more than 50 items are tabulated as ≤1'. Volumes estimated to measure less than ca. 2.5" are tabulated as items; volumes estimated to measure more than ca. 2.5" are tabulated as ≤1'. Reminiscences are dated by date of collection, not the period of the reminiscence.

Subject definitions: discussed under summary analysis of each subject.

LABOR

century w/highest %: 1900s (72%)
date emphasis: 1920s/30s-1960s

size emphasis (size w/highest %): ≤1' (35%)
size w/second highest %: >5'-≤20' (29%)
% over 20': 3%
% items only: 22%

subject emphasis: records of local unions; a few papers of individuals involved in the labor movement.

subject definition: Papers with a strong labor component but whose creators are thought of primarily as politicians or for their political activities are not counted as labor collections.

strengths and weaknesses (Table 4) which was derived exclusively from the tallies of title, subject orientation, size, and date span.

Establishing priorities for manuscripts acquisition was a subjective, difficult, and sensitive process. Although the profiles were revealing, carving out priorities was an emotional undertaking, particularly for individuals who had personal subject interests. As a committee, we were comfortable with developing a list of high,

TABLE 4
EVAJ UATION OF HOLDINGS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths	Weaknesses
Military Affairs	Military Affairs
Civil War	Korean War
Dakota Uprising	Viet Nam anti-war
Environmental Affairs	Environmental Affairs
Duluth has some rich collections	DAM collect Metro-area chambers of commerce?
Early explorations	Consumer affairs
	Depression
Politics	Politics
20th Century	Early Republican and Democrat records
Mid-20th Century parties	Right-wing ad hoc groups
Ad-hoc groups	American Party
	Current protest groups
	Farmer-Labor Association
	Early Democrats (19th Century)
	Individual Republicans
	Encourage Centers to collect local party organizations
	DAM—Twin City, district party records
	Metro-area elected state officials
Agriculture	Agriculture
Largest percent in the centers (we rely on them to document this aspect of Minnesota history)	20th Century highly mechanized family farms
	Materials to keep up with changes in agriculture (20th Century)
Labor	Labor
Non-labor collections (the political ones) seem to document early radical, formative period	Do records reflect the changes from radicalism to the establishment approach?
	St. Paul central union
Local unions	Labor leaders
	Should we emphasize unions connected with the business areas we collect?
	Centers: Mexican-American farm laborers
	Duluth

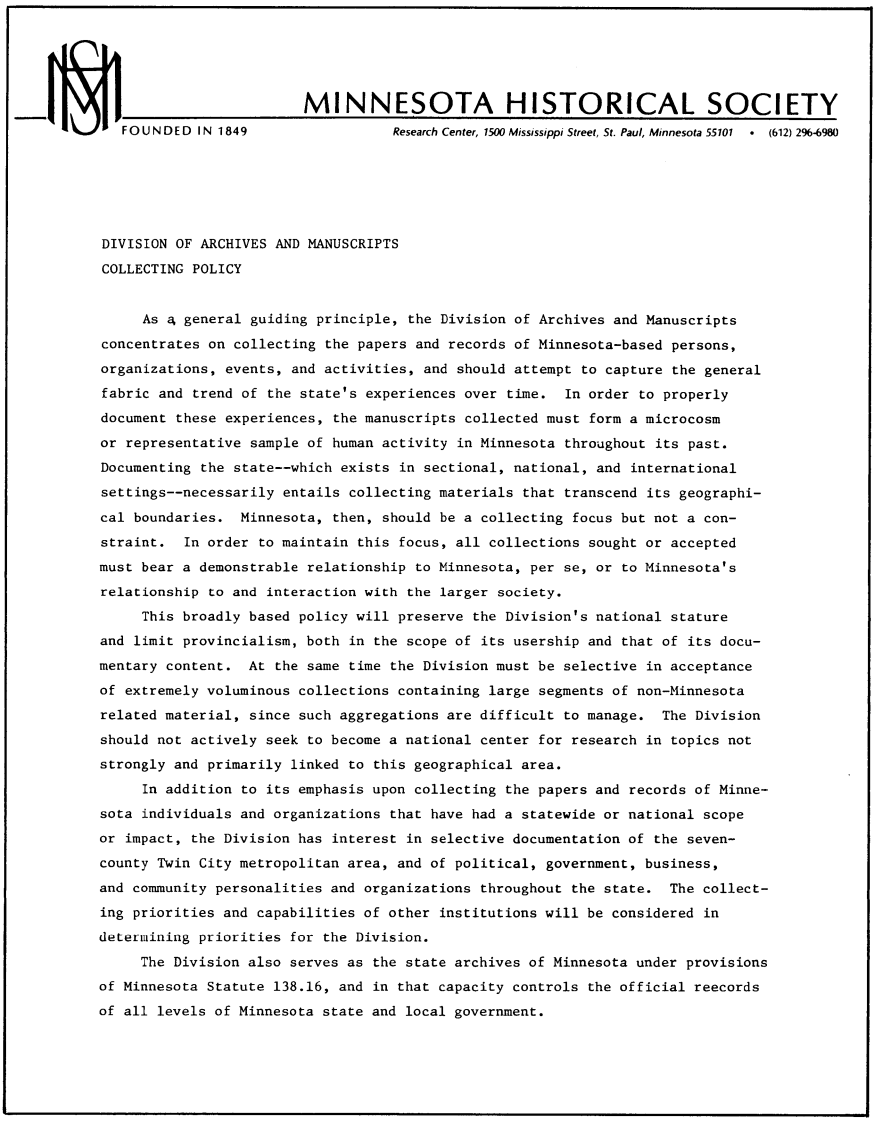
TABLE 5
COLLECTING PRIORITIES

High:	Consumer affairs (Economic Affairs)
	State-wide farmers' organizations (Agriculture)
	Railroad unions (Labor)
	Twentieth-century transportation (Business)
	Flour milling, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Business)
	Right-wing political groups (Politics)
	Radical left-wing political groups (Politics)
	Metro-area elected state officials (Politics)
	Metro-area party records (Politics)
	Pacifism, anti-war organizations/movement (Military Affairs)
	Women's movement (Women's Organizations)
	Indian experience (Ethnic/Racial)
	Jewish immigration and experience in Minnesota (Ethnic/Racial)—project approach
	Japanese and Asian experience in Minnesota (Ethnic/Racial)—project approach
	Cooperative movement (Economic Affairs)
Medium:	World War II to the present (Military Affairs)
	Great Depression (Economic Affairs)
	Union records to support the business areas we collect in (Labor)
	Twentieth-century family life (Family Life)
	Labor leaders and continuing labor movement documentation (Labor)
	Health Maintenance Organizations, medical clinic approach (Medicine)
	Professional and amateur sports (Culture)
	Twentieth-century religious life (Religious Life)
	Irish in Minnesota (Ethnic/Racial)
	Swedish people in Minnesota (Ethnic/Racial)
	Germans in Minnesota (Ethnic/Racial)
Low:	Advertising, printing, publishing (Business)
	Twentieth-century merchandising (Business)
	Church records (Church Records)—unless they augment a high-or medium-collecting priority
	Metro-area boosterism and other economic promotional organizations (Economic Affairs)

medium, and low priorities (see Table 5). Ultimately, this list was made by using the statistical collection profile, while aware that future collecting would be more restricted. Indeed, the desire for a collection policy statement follows recognition that limitations exist.

Through our statistical data and recommendations, the division's administrative personnel developed a range of objectives for development and selectivity regarding the Society's manuscript collecting. If a topic such as business was considered to be strongly repre-

Figure 2



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FOUNDED IN 1849

Research Center, 1500 Mississippi Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101 • (612) 296-6980

DIVISION OF ARCHIVES AND MANUSCRIPTS
COLLECTING POLICY

As a general guiding principle, the Division of Archives and Manuscripts concentrates on collecting the papers and records of Minnesota-based persons, organizations, events, and activities, and should attempt to capture the general fabric and trend of the state's experiences over time. In order to properly document these experiences, the manuscripts collected must form a microcosm or representative sample of human activity in Minnesota throughout its past. Documenting the state--which exists in sectional, national, and international settings--necessarily entails collecting materials that transcend its geographical boundaries. Minnesota, then, should be a collecting focus but not a constraint. In order to maintain this focus, all collections sought or accepted must bear a demonstrable relationship to Minnesota, per se, or to Minnesota's relationship to and interaction with the larger society.

This broadly based policy will preserve the Division's national stature and limit provincialism, both in the scope of its usership and that of its documentary content. At the same time the Division must be selective in acceptance of extremely voluminous collections containing large segments of non-Minnesota related material, since such aggregations are difficult to manage. The Division should not actively seek to become a national center for research in topics not strongly and primarily linked to this geographical area.

In addition to its emphasis upon collecting the papers and records of Minnesota individuals and organizations that have had a statewide or national scope or impact, the Division has interest in selective documentation of the seven-county Twin City metropolitan area, and of political, government, business, and community personalities and organizations throughout the state. The collecting priorities and capabilities of other institutions will be considered in determining priorities for the Division.

The Division also serves as the state archives of Minnesota under provisions of Minnesota Statute 138.16, and in that capacity controls the official reecords of all levels of Minnesota state and local government.

sented, the staff could decide whether to continue to build upon that strength or let it remain constant for a time; on the other hand, if an area were weak, they could decide to continue its de-emphasis or to make it a high priority.

The committee developed the manuscripts collecting policy statement (Figure 2) which is distributed during field work. The statement is broad enough to allow acceptance of what we want and

need, narrow enough to allow us to decline to accept materials, and quite philosophical in its outlook. As such, it is a fine donor/public relations tool. It is not altogether unintentional that the document intended for public distribution is flexible. A more precise document that targets *particular* businesses, politicians, and groups was developed for in-house use.

The Division no longer actively solicits diaries and letters from the Civil War or from the Dakota War of 1862, nor records of specific religious denominations. The analysis indicated quite thorough documentation of these areas. However, when people walk in with such items, we believe we cannot afford to refuse them unseen. There is always an element of good, common-sense public relations. Additionally, a diary might provide a definitive description of the activity of a particular regiment in a particular campaign. If the material is redundant, we can suggest its placement in a county or local society or underscore its significance as a family memento.

Because we had determined that the number of collections pertaining to women and Asians were inadequate, the Division developed a grant-funded Women's Collections Project, which helped lay the foundation for a strong collecting program in that area. Similarly, many new groups of Asians have settled in Minneapolis and St. Paul since the Vietnam War. Discussions with refugee groups have begun, affording a timely and unique opportunity to contact these new immigrants to discover how America has affected them, their thoughts about the lands left behind, and hopes for their future here.

The existence of written collecting guidelines may save money and staff time in situations where several agencies are competing for the same collections. Because of the knowledge gathered through our collection analysis, a framework is emerging for cooperation with other Minnesota collecting agencies. We had collected cooperatively with our regional research centers since 1972, but in a less formal manner. The Minnesota Historical Society collected papers of statewide and national significance and retained the privilege to collect anywhere in Minnesota. It was the analysis, however, that permitted us to view, in conjunction with the regional centers, one interrelated Minnesota collection. Unfortunately, in the economic climate plaguing the state subsequent to this analysis, the Society lost financial support for the regional centers and officially terminated active involvement in the network. The Society retains cordial and cooperative relationships with regional center personnel in an informal way. The centers collect materials of regional and local importance.

MHS retains the privilege and prerogative of collecting Minnesota materials throughout all 87 counties, but concentrates upon

defined priorities. For example, the analysis showed us that the regional center in Marshall, Minnesota, has a number of agriculture-related collections. MHS has more collections because it is older, yet the regional center is in a geographical part of the state that makes it more accessible to rural residents who wish to donate material. We expect that the Marshall center, under the auspices of Southwest State University, will continue to solicit material related to agriculture. Cooperation extends to repositories other than the regional research centers. Certain areas of interest, such as music and the arts, are purposely not represented in the Society's collection policy, but are the basis of discussions with other appropriate repositories in Minnesota.

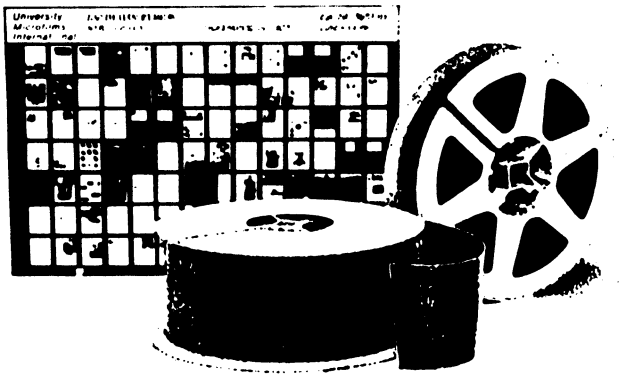
During the project staff morale soared. Virtually every member of the staff participated. The project was the priority; some routine work was postponed. Other benefits have also followed. Staff members now know more about the holdings. They are aware of what is needed to complement existing holdings as well as what MHS believes it can live without. The targets and priorities are especially helpful as an aid, not only in identifying donors, but also in rejecting unsolicited and unwanted donations. Donors tend to respect written guidelines and the rationale for having them.

The benefits of such a study have more than compensated us for the time and energy invested through more focused documentation of our state. The policy saves time and therefore money; duplication of work can be diminished and precious staff time and funds can be spent on priority projects. Such a collecting document is flexible—one that can be revised periodically to meet current challenges. Goals and objectives can be compared to determine whether or not collecting targets were met. The essential analysis of 130 years of collecting is complete; the framework for future studies is well established.

Ultimately, we were satisfied by counting the number of collections in each topical area as the basis for our study. We were bothered by our inability to measure quality of the collections surveyed. (It would have been impossible to look into each records carton of read every inventory to determine quality.) We can be reasonably confident that we were able to secure an accurate reflection of our holdings. A complete collection *profile* was a firm foundation upon which to develop a concrete policy statement.

Collection analysis, then, should precede development of a collection policy. Collection analysis is labor intensive but can be done. It provides a rational collecting plan, allows for the targeting of priorities, assists with donor relations, boosts staff morale, may provide a springboard for cooperative collecting, and, indeed, provides a flexible policy document that may be modified to meet new challenges.

this publication is available in microform



Please send me additional information.

University Microfilms International

300 North Zeeb Road
Dept. P.R.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106
U.S.A.

18 Bedford Row
Dept. P.R.
London, WC1R 4EJ
England

Name _____

Institution _____

Street _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____