

## THE MIDWESTERN INQUIRER

by David Klaassen

The *Midwestern Inquirer* is, or aspires to be, a modest and informal means of sharing information on "how others do it or view it" on various types of archival activities and circumstances. It poses a question each issue, invites reader responses, and

summarizes the responses in a subsequent issue. It is avowedly unscientific and cheerfully shifts the blame for any unrepresentativeness in its reports to those who should have responded but failed to do so.

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### Archival Word-Processing Operations

Few would challenge the assertion that computers and automated techniques have altered the way archivists view and carry out their work. Much of the attention has focused on the development of databases by which information about archival holdings can be shared and manipulated more effectively. It could be argued, however, that the more mundane applications are ultimately of comparable significance. Word processing is among the simplest and most natural applications of microcomputers, and it is particularly suited to archival work, which is heavily text-oriented and requires frequent revising and updating. What begins as a simple means of entering, editing, and subsequently revising text turns out to have a wider range of possibilities, some of which make existing practices more efficient, others of which open new opportunities.

What follows is a summary of specific applications reported by MI respondents. Their value lies both in their direct applicability and in their potential to stimulate other related approaches. They involve the use of features such as "search," "merge," "index," and "sort." Readers already familiar with the appropriate word-processing functions may be able to emulate the applications based on the brief descriptions provided here.

More detailed explanations and, in some cases, examples of the products are available upon request from *The Midwestern Inquirer*, or readers may inquire directly of the persons whose applications are described.

**Form letters.** Lee Stout, Penn State University, uses the "merge" function of Microsoft Word to simplify the preparation of routine letters of solicitation, acknowledgement, and notice. His examples include acknowledgement of gifts from University and non-University donors, requests for donations of books by faculty members, and cover letters for news releases and similar notices. The "merge" function retrieves the appropriate standard text and permits insertion of the name, address, item(s) sought or received, or other designated elements. The value of his examples may lie as much in the way the letters are crafted to accommodate the specific insertions as in the underlying technology.

**Inventory preparation.** Charles Schultz and Jay Harrison, Texas A&M University, used WordPerfect to assist at a number of points in processing a set of departmental research reports. They entered basic author, title, date, and report-number data into a merge file so that it could be

manipulated in a variety of ways. They used the "sort" function to produce a chronological list to use as the basis for arranging the documents themselves. After adding box and folder numbers, they created an author index as a cross-reference to the folder list.

**Folder labels.** David Klaassen, University of Minnesota, developed a WordPerfect "macro" that permits the reformatting of text contained in an inventory's folder list to produce equivalent folder labels. The trick here comes in dealing with hierarchies of indentations commonly used in folder lists to avoid repeating common headings for each in a sequence of folders. By defining and using a macro (a stored chain of keystrokes, both text and functions), the staff member enters the box/folder number and, when necessary, changes the common heading (e.g., "board of directors" or "subject files"); and the computer copies the remainder of the title from the data file containing the folder list to the one where the set of labels is being compiled. This application requires a word-processing program with a "windows" feature that permits simultaneous viewing of two documents, to keep track of what is going on.

**Box labels.** Bruce Bruemmer, University of Minnesota, observes that word processors can take much of the repetitive drudgery out of preparing box labels for a large collection. A "macro" (sometimes referred to as a "program") can be defined that automatically produces the proper alignment of text on form-feed label stock. Depending on printer capacity, you can produce large type (or even graphics) to improve appearance and reduce eyestrain in poorly lit stacks. As in the folder label application above, the staff member need enter only the changeable element, in this case likely the box number and location code.

**Reformatting MARC-AMC records.** Marion Matters, Minnesota Historical Society, has developed a conversion program, utilizing

XyWrite software, that takes data from an RLIN record, strips the various field tags and other extraneous characters, replacing them with appropriate text to produce a hard copy identical in format to MHS's conventional finding aids. Her program was designed for batch-processing conversion of many RLIN records at a single command. It does not appear that this could be emulated with most word processors other than XyWrite, which has advanced programming capabilities.

**Searching and listing.** Many archivists use the "text search" feature in their word-processing programs to locate a word, phrase, or other chain of keystrokes contained in a computer data file, e.g., locating a reference to "Oak Grove Township" contained somewhere in an inventory. Marion Matters and John Wickre, Minnesota Historical Society, have taken a long step beyond by developing a XyWrite search program that searches for one or more terms, stores them, and prints a compilation of blocks of text containing the search terms, linked to appropriate location information. The search-and-list ability for a single term (a word or phrase) in a single file could be emulated with the "macro" feature of some other word processors; what appears to be unique to XyWrite is the capability to batch-process a search for multiple terms across multiple files with a printout of the search results. Wickre uses it to search MHS's massive Northern Pacific and Great Northern Railway collections, the finding aids for which comprise four shelves of three-ring binders. (He was able, incidentally, to expand the scope of the searches by converting pre-computer, typed finding aids to machine-readable status by means of an optical character reader.) Large-scale batch searches run rather slowly, but the staff member can do other things while they run.

The element common to many of these applications is the word processor's ability to eliminate the drudgery (and the

increased possibility of error) of repetitive effort, i.e., the retyping of the same text in form letters, labels, or different descriptive formats. It follows, then, that the

labor-saving benefits increase with the size of the project. For just a few labels or a letter that is seldom repeated in the same form, the approaches described here may be more trouble than they are worth.

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**Future Topics: The Question Mark is Passed**

Beginning with the April 1988 issue, MI will have a new chief inquirer. Bruce Bruemer, archivist at the Charles Babbage Institute Archives, will don the mantle of ultimate authority. He is conveniently located right next door in beautiful Walter Library so the transfer of files and for-

warding of mail is easily accomplished. My appointment as editor of The American Archivist may not technically constitute a conflict of interest or consorting with the enemy, but it does have significant workload implications. Thanks for bearing with me in the development of this feature.

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**April Topic: Duplicating or Loaning Oral History Transcripts**

The October 1987 Newsletter carried the invitation for readers to respond to an inquiry about the manner in which archives permit access to oral histories in their pos-

session, particularly in regard to duplication or loan of transcripts. Responses received before March 15 will be summarized in the April 1988 issue.

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**July Topic: Use of Electronic Mail**

Another high-tech feature of the modern office is the use of electronic mail, where messages and text are exchanged through a computer terminal. Large offices often use a local area network to support electronic mail. More commonly, electronic mail is coordinated through a corporate or academic computer center. National electronic mail systems have been established through government, academic, or commercial networks.

Most archival discussion of electronic mail has been concerned with its effect on paper records and traditional correspondence.

However, more and more archivists are beginning to gain access to one or more electronic mail systems. A number of archivists using the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) have discovered that the system can be used for sending and receiving messages. Academic institutions usually have a network that allows mail to be exchanged throughout the campus or university system. Most of these networks are further connected through national networks like Bitnet or Arpanet.

Electronic mail creates interesting pos-

sibilities for archivists. It offers enhanced communications among colleagues and donors, an alternative to telephone-tag and long distance charges, and a better way to send text for publications and conference session descriptions (especially when the deadline has expired).

Three questions, then, on your use of electronic mail:

1. What electronic mail systems do you currently use or might you use in the future? Who can you contact through your system? What is your electronic mail address?
2. Please comment on your use of electronic mail. Is it effective? What problems

does it create? How does it effect communication with colleagues or donors?

3. Would you encourage MAC or SAA to publish electronic mail addresses in their directories?

Responses received by June 15 will be reported in the July newsletter.

Address all responses and inquiries to Bruce H. Bruemmer, Charles Babbage Institute, 103 Walter Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455 or call (612) 624-5050. On the chance that someone actually uses electronic mail, you can also contact me through the following:

Bitnet -- BBRUEMMER@UMNACVX  
Genie -- BRUCEB

## MAC AND THE NCC

Since 1984 MAC has provided financial support for the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (NCC). The NCC is an advocacy office based in Washington, D.C. It focuses on legislative and public policy issues related to historical and archival professions. In recent years, much of its attention has been on independence for the National Archives, appointment of the Archivist of the United States, funding for the National Archives, the NHPRC and NEH, and federal regulations controlling access to government documents.

At a recent meeting of its National Policy Council (of which MAC is a member for 1987-88), the NCC decided on its agenda for the coming year. Its director, Page Putnam Miller, will focus on: 1) budget and building planning for the National Archives; 2) preparation of a study on reference services and personnel policies in the National Archives; 3) reauthorization legislation and funding for the NHPRC; 4) funding for the NEH; 5) scholars' access to

government documents via the Freedom of Information Act; 6) reauthorization of the U.S. House Historical Office; 7) funding for historic preservation; and 8) diverse bills relating to the National Park Service and historic sites.

The NCC is a large coalition of approximately 50 organizations. While its major constituency is historians, its members also include organizations representing archivists, state and local history agencies, political scientists, and genealogists.

Through information received from the NCC, MAC has been able to monitor federal archival issues much more closely. As a result, it has been able to articulate the views of midwestern archivists on national archival issues more effectively than before. As the National Archives enters a new era of independence, MAC hopes to continue to work with the NCC to advance the cause of American archives.