To Preserve Local History: The WPA Historical Records Survey in Oklahoma, 1936-1942

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By blue Clark

The work of the Historical Records Survey was the greatest program of government support of historical research in the history of the United States. Oklahomans shared in that vast experiment. The Historical Records Survey in the state, like the overall national program, was but one small segment of the huge New Deal effort to extricate the country from the stagnant economy and resultant unemployment problems of the Great Depression.

The Great Depression swirled around Oklahomans like the airborne dust of the Dust Bowl. The depression affected everyone. Farm prices, and consequently farm income, fell drastically, devastating the agricultural sector. The rest of the American economy collapsed after 1929. Capitalism faltered throughout the country, idling industrial labor at unprecedented levels. Professionals lost jobs and fell back on meager family resources or public agencies for relief. Approximately one-half of the state’s 2.5 million residents depended on some form of relief. Workers eager to find jobs accepted employment at ten or fifteen cents an hour when jobs were available.

Confronted by popular demand for emergency relief, state and federal governments gradually established relief agencies. The most active in the fight against unemployment was the federal government under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt. One of the most popular of his new programs was the Works Progress Administration (WPA), later known as the Works Projects Administration. Probably the most unique of the projects spawned from the umbrella that was the Historical Records Survey. Unlike other emergency organizations of the New Deal, the Survey employed the educated professional, a program of white-collar urban relief for professionals. In time of need, the Survey provided work for artists, lawyers, librarians, historians, researchers, and other professionals, as well as for their staff and clerical assistants.

The first suggestion for a national survey of state and local public archives using relief labor originated with Francis S. Philbrick, Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania and Chairman of the American Historical Association’s Committee on Legal History. Robert C. Binkley of Western Reserve University drew up the plans for the proposed project in his role as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Materials for Research of the Social Science Research Council-American Council of Learned Societies. The executive secretary of the Binkley committee and a key person in the newly opened National Archives, Theodore R. Schellenberg, assisted in the gestation of the survey proposal. Further assistance came from Luther H. Evans, the future director of the Historical Records Survey. Directors of local and private records projects and deeply interested scholars also promoted the idea of the survey.

Luther Evans piloted the actual project outlines through the national administration of Franklin Roosevelt. The President sought innovative ideas that would assist economic recovery in all sectors. Evans began the Survey of Federal Archives, directed toward cataloging and binding the mass of old records in the nation’s capital. His persistent prodding of the administration eventually led to the establishment of a nationwide Historical Records Survey under the WPA through Presidential Letter Number 1090 of November 15, 1935. The directive proposed the broad terms of the Survey, which were to locate local records, to study methods of preservation, to recommend ways of cataloging primary materials, and to encourage their utilization.

Francis Philbrick suggested that the Survey should start with an inventory of records found commonly throughout the country, such as county records. Those materials became the focus of the Historical Records Survey. From 1936 to 1939 the national survey employed an average of 3,000 persons per month who examined holdings and took down the information on printed forms in most of the 3,000 counties in the United States.
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The WPA by 1936 was deeply involved in employing out-of-work citizens in thousands of work relief projects. The Oklahoma Historical Records Survey began on February 18, 1936, as a statewide unit of the Federal Writers' Project. It continued until September, 1939, under the legal sponsorship of the WPA. Librarians and historians made up the advisory board. Robert H. Slover was the state supervisor, assisted by Elsie May Barnes. From September, 1939, until January, 1941, the Oklahoma Historical Society sponsored the Survey on a statewide level. From January, 1941, until the project ended in July, 1942, the Oklahoma State Records Commission sponsored the Survey. The attorney general, the state treasurer, the state examiner and inspector, the state auditor, and the state librarian constituted the Commission membership. Charles E. Hutchinson directed the program after January, 1939, with Neil Sanborn acting as his assistant. State headquarters for the Survey were located in the State Historical Society Building in Oklahoma City, even under the sponsorship of the Records Commission.

The Survey in Oklahoma was slow getting started. Except for the highest levels of supervisory personnel, workers came from certified public assistance rolls with requisite educational backgrounds. Twenty percent of them had to have the equivalent of a high school education. Ten percent were required to have two years of high school or one year of business school training. Another twenty percent had to have training equivalent to two years of college and be able to make reports from facts found in libraries and public records, or through interviews, and to compile statistical information. Another twenty percent were expected to have training equivalent to two years of college work and be able to edit the field schedules sent in by workers, to perform complicated clerical tasks, to prepare research material for analytical use, and to supervise other workers doing similar tasks. Gradually qualified people were screened and hired.

By the first of the month following its establishment, the state Survey employed only twelve in the state office and in field offices in the state capitol and in the Historical Society Building. However, by the fifteenth of the month, there were projects beginning in eight Oklahoma towns. As of May 1, 1936, there were workers in twenty-two centers across the state. Not all of the people involved in the Survey were paid workers. Some of the help came from unpaid volunteers. Sometimes if wives were on the payroll, retired or unemployed husbands helped the workers for free, as happened in Hobart. Supervisors guided work in eastern, northern, and central sections of the state in many areas of interest to later researchers. Like the initial inventory of records in the nation's capitol, the state survey first indexed records in the state capitol. The workers uncovered state agencies' records that produced 7,770 information forms. A complete list of state offices, boards, commissions, and institutions led to the accumulation of a vast amount of data on the history and functions of state governmental agencies.

In mid-1935 the Board of Directors of the Historical Society approved a resolution from Grant Foreman to apply to the federal government for funds to provide for indexing newspapers, cataloging and classifying Indian records, and surveying Oklahoma Indian materials in the library of the society. In late 1935 the project was expanded to include copying materials in the office of the Superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes in Muskogee, compiling an index of historical materials at Bacone College, and indexing early newspapers in the Muskogee Public Library. All for the benefit of the Historical Society. Foreman supervised the project until July 1, 1936, while Maurice Wardell of the University of Oklahoma directed the Federal Archives Survey Project.

Following their efforts in the state capitol, workers turned their attention to other records within the state. For purposes of clarity and uniformity, administrators developed guidelines which divided the manuscripts work of the Survey into six phases. First were American Indian records. A feature of the Historical Records Survey exclusive to Oklahoma among the states in the huge amount of records in the Indian Archives Division in the Historical Society pertaining to the Five Civilized Tribes. Originally housed in Muskogee's federal courthouse, the records were brought to Oklahoma City and were indexed and cataloged under the direction of Grand Foreman by Bella Watts (now Bella Looney). The records included executive, legislative, and court records kept by the governments of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole nations. The earliest records in the Indian Archives date from about 1860. Other valuable primary resources rest in the Indian Archives, including records of various United States Indian agencies in Oklahoma, ranging in date from 1870 to the 1920s, materials on Indian schools, records of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes (Dawes Commission), collections of individuals, and interviews in 112 volumes called the Indian and Pioneer History, assembled under the direction of Grant Foreman. He became a member of the Board of Directors of the Historical Society in 1924 and worked tirelessly to make the Society
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an official repository of Indian records, accomplished in the enact-
ment of legislation in Congress designating the repository through
an Act of Congress in 1934.\footnote{1}

The second phase of the Historical Records Survey dealt with
federal records within the state. Together with the records of the
federal Indian agencies, they produced 19,700 serial forms noting
holdings by late 1837. Federal records surveying was originally an
independent project but was absorbed by the Historical Records Sur-
vey. Among the federal agencies creating records in Oklahoma were
post offices, the veterans’ administration, the armed forces, relief
agencies such as the WPA, and the federal courts.

The third phase of the Survey dealt with county records and is the
aspect with which the entire Survey is most readily identified. The
equation of the Survey and county records may have arisen because of
the staggering volume of county source materials. In late 1937 alone,
state workers produced 64,661 serial forms on county records. These
forms contained information that made a nearly complete inventory of
the records of each of the seventy-seven counties in the state.
Transcriptions of the proceedings of the boards of county commis-
sioners, for the territorial and early statehood periods, were part of the
county records work. Transcriptions of forty-eight boards are in the
State Archives collection. The transcriptions provide information
about all aspects of county government activity. In addition, informa-
tion collected was used to prepare histories of individual counties.
The county histories were largely the work of Oklahoma historian
Joseph B. Thoburn. The State Archives contains histories for all but
eight counties.

Municipal records formed the fourth phase in the work of the
Survey in the Sooner State. In conjunction with the survey of county
records, WPA workers located, examined, indexed, and cataloged
records of cities, towns, and other incorporated places. Workers
cleaned and then shelved minutes of meetings, ledgers, business
records, deeds, and records of marriages.

Church records were the fifth phase of the Historical Records Sur-
vey. Workers contacted a total of 3,150 religious bodies in the state
and surveyed many of their records. Work proceeded on the basis of
counties but was suspended in many counties because of lack of funds
and manpower and the concentration on public records.

The final and sixth phase of the Survey was for workers to in-
to the ninety-five private collections within Oklahoma.\footnote{2}
The Historical Records Survey examined more than just manu-
script materials in its workers’ quest for resources throughout the
state. An important segment of the work was the American Imprints
Inventory. By early 1940 a total of 10,286 titles printed in the United
States before 1877 had been located in one or more of twenty-one
libraries in the state. The bibliographical information was typed on
forms, one copy going to the Chicago offices of the Imprints Survey,
where a copy was sent to the union catalog section in the Library of
Congress, and another copy was retained in the project files. Workers
for the Survey prepared a legal index of all statutes, codes, and
Session Laws covering local and state government functions. It was
designed to assist editors of Survey publications in preparing the
seven-volumes. Workers attempted a survey of civilian organizations, as
well as an assessment of newspapers and archives of educational
institutions. These last tasks were carried on during field super-
visors’ free time as a sideline and failed as a result of limitations of
available time, money, and manpower, although their effort created a
body of forms.

The Survey headquarters staff located a local co-sponsor to supply
working space, a technical supervisor, and supplies at no cost to the
state office. Local workers, under the supervision of the Survey lead-
er, found, rearranged, cleaned, copied, and cataloged municipal,
county, state, and federal records. They also indexed and brought
order to newspaper files and collections. The headquarters employed
a uniform system of recording data from its people in the field.
Workers used printed forms which they completed in longhand in
pencil with the desired information and sent the forms to the state
office. There research editors checked the material. If it was not
satisfactory, the editor returned the form to the workers for improve-
ment. Finally, typists in the state office made five copies of all the
material and filed it by counties and then by offices. From the in-
formation collected came published guides, available in state librar-
ies, and unpublished guides, working papers, and records of the
Survey. The WPA sought sponsors for the publications and where
none could be located or only modest sums found, the publications
were completed in mimeographed form. The guides are now stored in
boxes and are accessible to researchers as Manuscript Group 31-1 in
the Archives Section of the Oklahoma State Department of Libraries
building located at 300 Northeast 18th Street in Oklahoma City.\footnote{3}

Diligent contacts and searches uncovered a large number of public
and private collections of documents. Initial efforts used correspond-
ence with leaders of women’s clubs, churches, chambers of commerce,
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Inventories of county archives were to consist of separate volumes for each county, with every unit in the series numbered according to its respective position in the alphabetical listing of counties. Inventories of state archives, of municipal, church, civil, and other records were to be separate publications. One hundred copies of individual inventories that were mimeographed and bound were distributed free to state and local public agencies, to public and institutional libraries in the state, and an additional 100 to repositories outside the state, such as the National Archives and the Library of Congress. The Imprints Inventory in the state never intended to produce its own publications, merely providing a search of libraries.

Oklahoma's historical records activities placed the state in an important role among other states. The Sooner State was one of the first to approach the national administration in 1935 for financial support. The state's legacy of Indian and pioneer heritage, its rich deposits of primary materials, the persistent interest in preservation of irreplaceable records dealing with the early history of the region among authors like Grant Foreman and Joseph Thurman, and the historical acumen of WPA leaders in the state like the state director, General William S. Key (a member like Foreman and Thurman of the Historical Society) combined to give Oklahoma a leading role in the work of the Survey. Oklahoma requested for projects under the WPA at the outset surpassed all states but the far more populous ones of New York, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. Most early allocation of funds under the WPA went toward school repairs, construction of bridges and roads, or other physical signs of employment activity, but in September, 1935, the first money for records was allotted to Okmulgee County for copying county records. Muskogee County workers were so zealous about surveying their records that they produced a report on Muskogee County records early in the project's life. It was the first county inventory published in the United States. Records Survey administrators used the report as a sample of their work to enlist continued congressional support of the project. Employees working in Bryan County completed their work rapidly and published the first county church records inventory in the entire United States. In 1939 Luther Evans resigned as the Survey's National Director to take a position in the Library of Congress. His assistant, Sargent B. Child, succeeded him. The advent of warfare in Asia and Europe led to the gradual involvement of the United States as the "Arsenal of Democracy" and the resultant upsurge in employment figures re-
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duced the need for federal relief. As a result of a bill to abolish WPA projects, the national office closed on August 21, 1939. Projects did not end, for local sponsorship in each state continued local programs. The demand for manpower cut increasingly into WPA rolls as war production increased and the coming of war in December, 1941, curtailed operations. Administratively, the Survey ended in April, 1942, when the Service Division of the WPA rechanneled its energies into the war effort. The main goal of the Survey had been to furnish employment to needy and qualified state residents, and that goal had come to an end as employment and enlistment skyrocketed. The Survey came to a halt as federal funds were cut off and as workers found more lucrative jobs in private industry or enlistment in the armed forces.

Through seven years of its existence the WPA spent some $10.5 billion nationally and employed about 3.8 million people at its peak in 1938. Over 100,000 needy Oklahomans families were affected. Federal relief projects gave gainful employment while pumping federal monies into local economies. The Historical Records Survey provided many important services. New skills were learned or professional abilities were kept alive and utilized to locate and index forgotten records. Sixty or more Oklahomans found gainful employment each month.

The straightening of local records aided counties and the public materially. Long-lost materials were rediscovered in basements, attics, and other hiding places. Records were cleaned, indexed, and stored. Workers built shelves and moved records so they were no longer resting on dusty and musty floors. Better housing for documents was secured, or suggested, or promised, for the future. Workers created among officials an awareness for public records problems, if only temporarily. Workers made inventories of records and noted where they were located. The cleaning and cataloging greatly increased the records' accessibility, at least for a time.

The diligent researcher can find in the records valuable information not found elsewhere. One example will underline their value. In many instances the minutes of county commissioners' meetings which incorporated towns are no longer available. Research in this instance is especially difficult because only one copy of the minutes exists in many cases. Those in the State Archives from the Historical Records Survey are handwritten. Although there are no incorporation papers as such in the Survey records, there are copies of minutes which authorized the incorporations.12

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Beyond gathering a great mass of data, the Survey accomplished many other results. The mass of material made possible a new approach to local history if researchers wanted to delve more deeply and conscientiously into federal, state, and municipal records on local issues, election results, census returns, marriage statistics, or local government developments. The work of the Survey provided training for curators of many local and state agency records collections and gave added training to local librarians. The work of the Survey encouraged the establishment of a state archives department.13 Furthermore, the Survey set a precedent for government-sponsored preservation of state, county, and local records that serves as a model which could be used again at some point in the future. The successful conclusion of the work of the Survey in any small town was the direct result of the support of local and state public officials, historical and legal specialists, volunteers and groups in the community. That cooperation could be tapped again to ensure the survival of another generation of state and local records.

Under the Historical Records Survey socialized scholarship during crises amassed information of significant value for research. The unprecedented level of federal support for historical resource inventories left a remarkably successful legacy of primary resources cataloged for the use of researchers and writers. Except for the war and the end of federal support, the Survey would have completed the most extensive cataloging and bibliographic project ever undertaken with government sponsorship. The five-year work of the Survey awaits another undertaking to reach completion.

ENDNOTES

1986. Clark holds the Ph.D. in history and is currently Director of American Indian Studies at Long Beach State University, Long Beach, California. 1939. p. 3.

1 Ron Stephens, State WPA Administrator, Daily Oklahoman, September 23, 1938.

A microfilm project has been launched to microfilm the approximately 3,000,000 pages and 6,000 bound volumes in the Indian Archives Division. Inquiries or offers should be directed to the Mary Leo Ervin Boyle, Archivist, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, W. Gay Post Historical Building, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105.

Information for the names of the works derived from Letter, Ene May Burris, Assistant State Director, to Board of Directors, Historical Society, October 27, 1973. State Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, Manuscript Group 21-1-5, Box 1, folder 16, and from Nell E. Sams, comp., "Reports on the Accomplishments and Activities of the Oklahoma Historical Records Survey Project, 1936-1940" (Oklahoma Historical Society, 1940), Manuscript Group 21-1-5, Box 1, folder 7.


In addition, Chapter 5 discusses the Survey's "County Records and Manuscripts." The National Archives can supply 16mm microfilm copies of the original index to the state's WPA report. The microfilm publications are arranged chronologically, which were edited by the WPA, referred to as Records Group 65: TR350, Rolls 54, 55, and 56, covering 1935-37, 1936, Roll 11, for 1936-1937, Roll 13, covering 1939 to 1940.

End of the project. They are available from the Publication Sales Branch, National Archives and Records Service (USA), Washington, DC 20408.