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The Nebraska Newspaper Project

by

Katherine L. Walter
Project Director

The Nebraska Newspaper Project completed a planning grant in 1992/93 with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The grant provided support for a major survey to identify significant collections of newspapers around Nebraska. Surveys were sent to newspaper publishing companies, county and municipal clerks' offices, historical societies, libraries, and genealogical societies. While there were many responses to the written surveys, telephone calls had to be made to about one third of the institutions. In some cases, staff visited collections around the state to verify holdings.

The survey proved that the most significant collection in the state is at the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln. It also proved that the Nebraska State Historical Society does not have a monopoly on the state's newspapers. Some real finds were

made—newspapers previously unknown to the Nebraska State Historical Society, newspaper issues that fill gaps in the Society's collections, and unusual newspapers printed on paper made from corn stalks and wallpaper. Some ethnic newspaper collections were discovered. For example, the University Libraries in Lincoln has an important collection of Czech American newspapers.

The telephone calls to track down papers were often fascinating. Nebraska's village clerks rarely had newspapers, but they knew who had. One clerk called and told us that when the newspaper office in her community closed years ago, all the newspapers were given to the local mail carrier. When the mail carrier died several years ago, half the papers went to the daughter and half to the son. The son had moved away, but the daughter was still in town. She worked down the street. Would we like the phone

number? We did want the phone number, and we found fifteen years of a paper missing from the collections at the Society and several years of a newspaper for another community that we did not know existed.

A word about microfilming: if filmed and stored according to standards, microfilm is believed to last around five hundred years. The Society has found, however, that it is sometimes difficult to borrow newspapers for microfilming. In some cases, the library or county historical society may not allow papers to leave the premises and may not want them disbound for filming. Though the institution may have issues for a few years before the paper becomes embrittled and falls apart, inevitably the paper degrades. When this happens, the history of the community and a piece of Nebraska's history is lost. The tradeoffs are local control (ownership) versus sharing history for five hundred years with many scholars, genealogists, and Nebraskans who live outside the immediate community (access).

As I reflect on the accomplishments of the Nebraska Newspa-

per Project's first year, several images come to mind. The first one is of the many people who have made it possible—Nebraskans or former Nebraskans who care about the history of the state. Letters came from Nebraskans in Texas, Indiana, and other states who still get the hometown newspaper and saw Nebraska Newspaper Project ads. Calls came from librarians, retired newspaper production workers, trash companies, and interested citizens throughout the state.

The second image that comes to mind are the many places in which newspapers are squirrelled away. From garages to basements to attics, in vaults, on shelves, laden under dirt, in pristine folders, kept and not entirely forgotten, with stories of births, deaths, weddings, natural disasters, sordid trials, wars, stock market crashes, and the price of hogs. The paper is yellow or dark brown and it drops away at a touch.

The final image is of newspaper mastheads. The mastheads read "The Arlington Leader," "The Sagebrush Tribune," "The Gering Courier," "The Wahoo Wasp..." Whether the papers are "rain soak-

ers” or nationally renowned papers like “The Commoner,” they proudly display their titles and their opinions.

If funding is secured, the next phase of the Nebraska Newspaper Project will start in January 1994. The proposal pending is to catalog 4500 newspapers held at the Nebraska State Historical Society and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries on OCLC, to add them to the United States Newspaper Program union list on OCLC, to make the records accessible through IRIS (the UNL Libraries’ online system), and to inventory newspapers for cataloging and microfilming at other institutions around the state. After this stage is finished, Nebraska

Newspaper Project staff will travel around the state to catalog and union list the many collections. Papers not yet on microfilm will be filmed when made available to the State Historical Society. We anticipate the project may take another six years to complete.

The Nebraska Newspaper Project needs your help and your support. If you come across individuals in your communities who may have many years of a paper missing from the State Historical Society’s collections, please pass their names along to Andrea Paul, State Archivist, (402) 471-4785, or call the Nebraska Newspaper Project, (402) 472-3939. The hunt is on!



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