

MHS collections

THE MINNESOTA Historical Society has one of the major collections of newspapers in the United States and certainly the most complete assemblage of Minnesota newspapers anywhere. Approximately 3,000,000 issues of 6,500 newspaper titles are included in the collection, with current issues of 500 of these titles being added to it at the rate of 35,000 issues a year. The collection contains some rare and unusual items published outside Minnesota. These include many newspapers from Eastern states and from abroad from the time antedating the beginnings of journalism in Minnesota Territory in 1849 as well as several unique runs of ethnic and other specialized non-Minnesota newspapers since that time. But fully two-thirds of the collection's titles and 85 per cent of its issues are Minnesota newspapers.

The society is presently engaged in a program of attempting to acquire — and to preserve on microfilm — a complete record of all the current issues of all Minnesota's community newspapers. It is acquiring, too, a representative sampling of the state's "underground" press and the specialized newspapers serving Minnesota's religious denominations, ethnic groups, educational institutions, business firms, labor organizations, political parties, fraternal societies, and other specific voluntary associations, institutions, population segments, movements, and points of view.

The bulk of the newspaper collection is housed in the society's main building at 690 Cedar Street, where the newspaper reading room on the first floor is open to the public six days a week (legal holidays excepted). The collection is used not only by professional historians, teachers, and authors, but also by students at all levels of research — from those doing high school assignments to those working on doctoral dissertations. Others using the newspaper collection include amateur historians compiling histories of local churches, businesses, specific buildings, or entire communities; genealogists going back into family histories across stepping stones of birth announcements, marriage notices, and obituaries; lawyers searching for

proof of legal notices; persons needing to document their birth dates to prove social security eligibility; individuals with a remarkable diversity of other specialized research needs; and a surprising number of persons, young and old, who are pursuing no specific research at all but are simply curious about "old newspapers" and how things used to be.

The importance of gathering and preserving old newspapers as resources for the study and interpretation of state and local history has long been recognized in Minnesota. In his message of September 4, 1849, to the first legislature of Minnesota Territory, Governor Alexander Ramsey noted that "newspapers are the day-books of history, as well as semi-official records in many cases." He recommended that suitable provision be made for the preservation "in a durable form, [of] a copy of each and every newspaper that may be published in the Territory, [so that] much that is interesting in the fleeting registers of the day, and which, in years to come, will be esteemed rich mines for the historian, can be saved for satisfactory reference and future information."¹

BY THE TIME, seventy years later, when the Minnesota Historical Society was comfortably settled into its new Cedar Street building, with four floors of newspaper shelving and a specially furnished newspaper reading room on the main floor, the society's superintendent was able to describe its collection of Minnesota newspapers as "numbering about 10,000 bound volumes and ranking among the half dozen largest and best-cared-for newspaper collections in the country, . . . [constituting] an invaluable source of information for State and local history . . . much used by research workers."²

¹ *Journal of the Council During the First Session of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Minnesota*, 17 (St. Paul, M'Lean & Owens, 1850).

² Solon J. Buck, "The Minnesota Historical Society," in *Michigan History Magazine*, 4:697 (October, 1920).

By 1933–35, when it was inventoried by participants in the depression-inspired programs of the Civil Works Administration, the society's collection of Minnesota newspapers had grown to almost 18,000 bound volumes. While this collection was growing larger, however, it was also growing more difficult to use. Researchers had to rely more and more on the library's catalog — and less on the librarian's memory — to determine what the collection contained. As was fairly common in newspaper libraries, the only "catalog" of the collection had come to consist of a file of 3-by-5-inch inventory cards giving the title, place, and frequency of publication and the library's holdings of each newspaper. These cards were filed alphabetically according to place of publication.

Such a card file offered only limited, slow access to the library's newspaper sources. The cards did not ordinarily indicate the class or kind of publication but, rather, jumbled together regular community newspapers with school papers, church newsletters, house organs, promotional pieces, fraternal publications, and the like. The card file gave newspaper names in alphabetical order according to the cities and villages they represented rather than on any geographical basis and thus failed to provide a direct approach for anyone trying to locate newspapers from any specific county or region. Moreover, the format of the card file provided no quick way of picking out, from the many different titles published at one time or another in any city in the state, those titles dating from any specific time period in which a researcher might be interested.

To these inherent limitations of the card file had been added, by 1969, the further one of inaccuracy — caused largely by the fact that, for lack of staff time, the inventory cards had not been consistently updated over the thirty-four years which had intervened since the inventory of 1933–35.

THEREFORE, in the summer of 1969 the society's newspaper division began a new inventory of its collection of Minnesota newspapers. Extending over the next two and a half years, the inventory was carried out by volunteer workers, high school students participating in a federally funded Neighborhood Youth Corps program, and college students working part time during summer vacations.

The bulk of the inventory work was done by Wilbert Harri, a Carleton College student who later did graduate work at the University of Minnesota, and by Terry Nordenstrom, a student at St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, who worked part time in the society's newspaper division through the Neighborhood Youth Corps program. He is now a University of Minnesota freshman.

As the inventory work neared completion, a title index to the collection was put down on 3-by-5-inch cards. This has been found useful and is still being maintained and elaborated. The newspaper division staff, however, felt that some additional way of displaying the accumulated inventory data should be designed to make the collection's materials more accessible to researchers who do not have a reference to any specific title but who are simply trying to find out what community newspapers the society might have from some given place and time. With this in mind, we decided to experiment with what might be done in the way of a catalog in loose-leaf book form. We also decided to experiment with a visual display of information laid out on each page in a tabular or two-dimensional co-ordinate pattern of rows and columns: each *horizontal* row being devoted to data relating to a particular newspaper and each *vertical* column being devoted to a particular kind of data.

A sample page from the finding aid in its present form is shown. As in the traditional card file, the newspapers are here grouped according to their cities or villages. The latter are not arranged in alphabetical order alone, however, but are first grouped according to the counties in which they are located. This makes the titles available to searches on a geographical basis.

Most of the people using the newspaper collection

FAUSTINO AVALOZ, assistant curator, newspaper division, pulls out a bound volume of newspapers.



Brown County						
ass	Decade	C	City	Title	Freq.	Holdings
	01234567	+	Comfrey	TIMES	w	Mr 9, 1900 - D 28, 1944 Ja 4, 1945 +
						x
	1 4567	+	Hanska	HERALD	w	O 15, 1915 Mr 6, 1942 - D 28, 1945 Ja 4, 1946 +
						x
	90123		New Ulm	BROWN COUNTY JOURNAL	sw	Ag 31, 1899; F 17, 1900 Ag 30, 1902 O 18, 1902 - J1 29, 1937
						x
Ger	23		"	DAKOTA FREIE PRESSE	w	Mr 9, 1920 - O 25, 1932
Col	567	+	"	DMLC MESSENGER	m	S 1951 +
						x
Ger Lu	9		"	EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHER SYNODAL-BOTE	sm	Je 1, 1891
Ger	901		"	FORTSCHRITT	w	Mr 26, 1891 - D 29, 1915
						x
	7		"	HERALD	w	[Ja 31, 1873 - N 15, 1878]
						x
	34567	+	"	JOURNAL	d	Ag 2, 1937 +
						x
	45		"	MESSENGER	w	Ag 22, 1940 - F 6, 1941 Je 10, 1948 - O 19, 1950
						x
	90		"	NEWS	w	Ap 22, My 13, O 28, 1893 Ap 10, 1897 - D 31, 1898 Ja 7, 14, F 18, 1899; F 16, 1907

A SAMPLE finding aid page for Brown County illustrates the kind of information provided by the new system.

are looking for information characterized by some degree of geographic specificity. That is to say, the researcher is often concerned with an event that occurred in a given locality, and which is most likely to have been reported in the newspapers specifically serving that place. Hence, the distribution of titles by county along what amounts to the "vertical axis" of the finding aid offers a number of advantages to the researcher. For one thing, it makes it easy for him to broaden his search to include the newspapers of nearby villages or cities should his search of the newspapers of one specific place not yield sufficient information. Further, should the researcher decide to broaden his geographic coverage to include an entire region of Minnesota, the state's eighty-seven counties would provide a more manageable number of components out of which to assemble his geographic search specification than would the state's hundreds of cities and villages, no less than 598 of which are represented by one or more newspapers in the society's collection.

For most researchers, however, the grouping of the state's cities and villages by county makes it possible to "zero in" at once on the particular section of the finding aid relevant to their geographic requirements. They need scan only a few pages of entries, or perhaps only a single page, in order to ascertain which particular newspaper titles meet their other search

specifications. The latter are most likely to be (1) that some specific time period be represented in the society's holdings of the title; (2) that the title be a "regular" English-language community newspaper or — sometimes — that it be some other specified class or kind of publication; and, for many researchers, (3) that the title be available on microfilm. The data display format of the new finding aid provides an array of visual scanning columns that permit the researcher to acquire at a glance these kinds of information about each newspaper title.

The scanning columns are set up so that an entry appears in any one of them only if a given newspaper deviates somehow from a "normal" or usual condition. For example, an entry appears in the "class" column only if a given newspaper differs in some significant way from what one expects a "regular" community newspaper to be. Then the particular notation entered serves to identify the special characteristic that differentiates the newspaper from the "normal" community ones. Similarly, an entry appears in any one of the "decades" columns only if a particular decade is represented in the society's holdings of a given newspaper. Likewise, an entry shows up in the "C" (for current) column only if a given newspaper is currently received by the society and in the "microfilm" column only if the holdings span dates immediately

preceding it are available on microfilm in the society's reading room.

Because the scanning columns are set up to be blank under ordinary circumstances, the communication of routine or negative information is handled by blank spaces. Thus the presence of any notation at all in these columns serves as a flag calling immediate attention to some exceptional or especially significant feature of a newspaper. The result is an increased scanning speed far beyond that possible with the card files used in the past.

Terry Nordenstrom not only assigned and encoded the entries for the "class" and "decades" columns but also had a major share in working out the systems of notation used in these columns. Details of these and

other features of the finding aid are available at the society's newspaper division.

Because the typical user of the society's collection of community newspapers is a person trying to find contemporary local accounts of some event which occurred in a given place at a given time, it is a matter of great convenience to be able, through the new finding aid, to determine quickly which newspapers are held by the society from any specific time period or geographic area and whether they are in fact community newspapers at all.

RONALD WALRATH
Newspaper Curator

BOOK REVIEWS

Boyhood on the Upper Mississippi: A Reminiscent Letter. By Charles A. Lindbergh.

(St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1972. xiii, 50 p. 50 illustrations. Hard cover \$4.50.)

IN THIS REMARKABLE reminiscent letter, written in installments over a period of more than four months from late October, 1969, to February, 1970, Charles A. Lindbergh has given us a vivid picture of what life was like in a small Minnesota community during the early years of the twentieth century. As unusual as the letter itself is the fact that it was written at odd moments and in such diverse places as a steamy hut in a remote part of the Philippines, the Army and Navy Club in Manila on the island of Luzon, Frankfurt, Germany, and a hallway on the tenth floor of a building in New York where Lindbergh was marooned when elevator service failed him on a chilly Friday evening in late December. His account of his boyhood days on a farm on the banks of the Mississippi River was finally finished as he made an inspection trip, between New York and London, of the recently inaugurated Boeing 747 of Pan American Airways (he serves as a member of the company's board of directors).

The intent of the letter was to furnish information to aid the Minnesota Historical Society in making a complete restoration of the Lindbergh homestead near Little Falls, which was first designated as a state park by the Minnesota legislature in 1931. By that time the home itself had been vacant for almost a dozen years, many of the structures built to house livestock and farm equipment had already disappeared, and the house itself had fallen into a sad state of disrepair. During the next decade, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Division of State Parks of the Minnesota Conservation Department began to renovate the house with funds available through the Works Progress Administration. By 1937, the house had been restored and

a strong fence constructed to protect it from souvenir hunters. Many original family possessions were collected and returned to the home in the years that followed, particularly after Lindbergh's mother, Evangeline Land Lindbergh, died in 1954. By 1957, six rooms on the first floor had been restored and an exhibition area set aside in the basement. It was about this time that the home was opened to the public during the summer months.

In 1969, the Minnesota legislature transferred the administration of the house and seventeen acres of land adjacent to it to the Minnesota Historical Society which undertook to restore the house, as well as its furnishings, to its condition from 1906 to 1920 when it was the home of the Lindbergh family.

For anyone of Lindbergh's vintage, this account of life on a Minnesota farm in those early years of this tumultuous twentieth century awakens strong and nostalgic memories. Lindbergh begins his account with a resumé of happenings before his own recollections of events, as related to him by his mother. From 1905 until 1920, the account moves more rapidly as his quick memory furnishes sharp details of his life in Minnesota. The result is the kind of letter that most men wistfully wish they had been capable of writing. His description of his years as a farmer during the time before World War I stirs memories which charm and sadden one at the same time. His account of the effort to teach his father to drive the family automobile awakened memories in this reviewer of his own father as he tried to learn the mysteries of the automobile after a lifetime of driving horses. Lindbergh's adventures on the Mississippi River with his homemade rowboats have a Tom Sawyer flavor to bring up happy and sad memories of the way of a boy in the carefree days of childhood.

It should be pointed out that the letter was not intended for publication. However, it has such obvious charm and is so revealing, not only of the times but of the



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