

The Dog That Didn't Bark:

Documenting Change and Diversity in Wisconsin, 1945-2000

Keynote Address

by Michael E. Stevens, State Historic Preservation Officer

Wisconsin Historical Society

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Introduction

When Jennifer and Helmut asked me about the title of this talk, I told them that it should be called “The Dog That Didn’t Bark.” They gave me a quizzical look, so let me explain.

In “Silver Blaze,” one of Arthur Conan Doyle’s best-crafted Sherlock Holmes stories, this piece of dialogue appears.

Inspector Gregory: "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident."

Trying to figure out what is missing from the historical record is hard; predicting the questions that have not yet been asked is even more difficult. Indeed, we must look, like Sherlock Holmes, for the dog that didn’t bark.

I commend the staff members who compiled the Wisconsin Records Assessment Project for their work in trying to unravel this thorny problem. Jennifer Graham, Helmut Knies, and Peter Gottlieb took on this difficult challenge in assessing the gaps and identifying future question. They developed a conceptual framework, examined use records, surveyed records custodians, looked at bibliographic literature, and conducted onsite interviews.

The report represents a substantial amount of work. It also provides us with a substantial amount of data to evaluate. We now know far more than we did before about the perspectives of the men and women who are responsible for collecting and caring for materials in repositories around the state. We also have a better handle on use patterns through the analysis of historical literature and call slips at the Wisconsin Historical Society. The background materials, both surveys and site interviews, should continue to be useful.

In the end, the best we can do is to make guesses. This project allows us to make informed and educated guesses. And that is our role today, to try to assist in testing those guesses, in refining the processes, and developing strategies to document our own time in an informed manner.

Let’s revisit the purpose of this project. The opening words of the report read:

“Which historical records do Wisconsin archives need to collect for an adequate account of events and people in the state from 1945 to 2000?”

We are not here to assess how to document our own time — the end of the first decade of the 21st century — but rather an era that is becoming increasingly distant from today.

To answer that question we need to have an understanding of what are the most important historical trends in the 55 years after the end of World War II. We also need to know where the strengths and weaknesses are in the current documentation of those trends.

In the first half of my remarks today, I will respond to the report by assessing the methodology used in the data gathering in the project and then by evaluating the recommendations.

In the second part, I will outline an alternative vision of the major trends of the last half century of Wisconsin history and pose an alternative conceptual framework for thinking about collecting. In doing so, my aim is to generate a discussion, not only today but in the coming months about the core questions: what is historically important about this era and what should we collect?

Methodological Assessment

Let's start with a methodological assessment. The report notes that the agenda for future collecting was:

“based on an assessment of collections held by major repositories in the state and on collecting needs perceived by staff who work at those repositories.”

The report also looks at the user community by assessing user demand through call slips at the Wisconsin Historical Society as well as a bibliographical study of scholarly publications over the past three decades. This is critical because we need to be conscious of those for whom we are collecting.

Who uses our collections and what materials do they want?

We are, of course, collecting both for people who are alive today and for those in the future. The world of manuscript collecting and use has widened over the last century.

At one time, manuscript collections were the preserve of university-trained historians who plowed through them for academic purposes. Many repositories in the early 20th century asked for letters of recommendation for scholars who use the collections. Here at the Wisconsin Historical Society there has been a tradition of broad access; but even at the Society a century ago, undergraduates were not allowed to have unfettered access to even the library stacks.

Today, what a difference we see. Middle and high school students are using archival materials for their National History Day projects. Genealogists pursue family history. Hobbyists explore collections to maintain their historic tractors. Re-enactors research Civil War uniforms. Filmmakers mine collections to enable them to tell their stories.

Changes in the way we live suggest that usage will continue to evolve. The extensive interest in genealogy over the past three decades shows no sign of abating and means that archive users will want to know a great deal about individuals. The rise of blogging and social networking media suggests that individuals interested in specialized topics no longer will work in solitude but will have vehicles to share their findings, which in the past were too specialized to ever get published.

In assessing users, the project staff looked at patron registrations and call slip use patterns at the state's largest manuscript repository, the Wisconsin Historical Society. The Society collects data on its users based on the following categories: administrative, legal, scholarly, genealogical, personal, commercial, and other. In the report, “the only call slips used in this analysis were marked Scholarly.” This might have been a useful methodology in 1971, when 73% of call slips had the scholarly use box checked, however, that's not the case today. By 1982, scholarly use fell to 58%. By fiscal 2008, it

fell to 40%.¹ I suspect that scholarly use is either the same, or even lower, at most of the other repositories in the state. Although the Society uses a very broad definition of scholarly research and includes projects by National History Day students, we are still missing 3 out of 5 users.

What products do users make from our collections?

If use is an input in studying what our users want, the outputs are the final products created by users. They show us what researchers ended up doing with the resources they found, and here the project makes an important contribution to our understanding by categorizing the subjects being researched.

As with the registration and call slip study, the focus was limited to traditional academic outputs. Only products that appeared in tools such as JSTOR, *America: History and Life*, and dissertation and theses databases define the universe of use. However, just as archival use has expanded beyond scholars in the past three decades, the way people use materials have changed.

Filmmakers such as Ken Burn used the collections. Wisconsin Public Television has produced more than 30 hours of history programming in partnership with the Society. Historical consultants wrote nominations to the National Register of Historic Places. All of these substantive products are excluded from the analysis.

We can't assume that manuscript collection use is simply the province of academic scholars. As a result of the work done here, we now have a better sense of what scholars are seeking, but we still have a gap in our knowledge of what better than 60% of our users want.

Another challenge to our understanding of users is that we don't know what researchers failed to find. This question — again like Sherlock Holmes's dog that didn't bark — is equally important in finding what is missing. What have researchers looked for that they could not find? What are the dead end queries? I hope that we could persuade some archives graduate student to pursue that question, which should be remarkably enlightening. As SHRAB further develops its thinking, I urge an expansion of thinking about the audience.

My final methodological comment refers to the analysis of the universe of documentation. Here the report rightly analyzes the availability of state and local government records as well as government documents. For the second half of the 20th century, published government documents are in greater abundance than for any other previous 50-year period. Another piece of documentation that needs to be considered is the group of more than 500 newspapers listed in the *Wisconsin Blue Book* as being published in 1945. For some subjects, newspapers serve as a daily diary or chronicle.

¹ In FY2008, only 665 (38%) of 1,760 researchers defined their use as scholarly. Call slip use, which reflects the number of boxes called for by researchers, shows a similar pattern. Of the 9,212 call slips submitted that year, only 3,657 (or 40%) were scholarly. I had hypothesized that the change may have been the result of a changing mix of use between manuscripts and public records. That does explain the variation in 1971 when manuscripts represented 61% of usage at the Society. However the ratio of manuscripts to other types of records is identical in 1982 and 2008, representing 49% of use each year.

Evaluating the Project Recommendations

Let's now move on to the recommendations. Through surveys and analysis, the project classified collections in 14 categories that were used in a 1985 project at the Society. The project has a number of recommendations embedded in the report, but there are five major areas recommended for collecting:

- **Populations**, with specific interest in Hmong and Hispanic populations
- **Natural resources and environment**, with special emphasis on public perceptions of natural resources
- **Residential patterns and mobility**
- **Agriculture**, with emphasis on specialty farms and sustainable agriculture
- **Recreation and Leisure**, how changes in way people engage in out door activities.

Populations

Let's start with the first two on the list: populations and natural resources. Here, the argument in the report holds up very well. We see a strong convergence between survey results of repository interest, use patterns, research interest, and shortages of collections. Both areas are undeniably important part of Wisconsin's history. Wisconsin has prided itself, for a long time, on its diverse ethnic heritage. Indeed, as late as 1970, one in four Wisconsinites had grown up in a home where a language other than English had been spoken. Broadening collections to reflect the changing population is critical; not only for understanding our past, but also for the long-term survival of cultural institutions if we are going to ensure that we document the history of all the people. Based on Wisconsin birth records, we know that the kindergarten class that starts school next fall will be 10% black, 9% Hispanic, and 2% Hmong. That means that when the high school graduating class of 2022 starts looking for history projects of their own people, we need to make sure that everyone is represented. If our history is not the history of everyone, then everyone is a loser.

While there are gaps in Hispanic and Hmong history, there are still gaping holes in African-American history. Between the 1940 census and the 2000 census, the black population grew from three-tenths of one percent (12,000) to 5.7% (300,000). There still is no history of African Americans in Wisconsin, partly because of the paucity of materials. It is an area that still needs further documentation as much as the other two recommended in the report.

Natural resources and environment

The report also effectively makes the case for improved documentation on humanity's interaction with natural resources. There is a strong convergence between the recommendations and what is learned in the various surveys. Recent research interest is high in knowing more about humanity's relationship with the land. Here, we have the advantage of valuable public records, especially the rich records of the Department of Natural Resources and its predecessor the Conservation Commission. Strong private collections also exist, but much remains to be done.

Residential patterns and mobility

I find the report less persuasive in the other three areas: residential patterns, agriculture, and recreation. In my reading, the data gathered by the project and the evidence put forth does not support the conclusions. Unlike populations and natural resources, none of these other three subjects fall in the top five most important subjects in the view of survey respondents. At the same time, we find that some of the categories that are ranked low in the recommendations also rate very high on current research use and in the minds of the survey respondents. Let's look at the three subjects recommended by the report and then at three others that were not highly recommended.

No one will question that shifting residential and mobility patterns are important. Bill Thompson in Volume 6 of *The History of Wisconsin* offers an excellent analysis of the impact of these changes in the state.² However, when we look at research use, this topic ranks only 11th out of 14th subjects, representing only 3% of the use. There are some other anomalies in the survey data. This subject ranks only in the middle of all subjects that need documentation at the repository level, ranks as one of the top five subjects that repositories would like to collect, but ranks low as a subject that will contribute to a better understanding of Wisconsin history.

In making the case for more manuscript collecting in this area, the report says that existing manuscript collections don't deal with "general issues such as mobility and residential preferences or phenomena such as urbanization and suburbanization." It also goes on to say "manuscript collections containing information relating to cities, villages, and rural areas in a more general sense — how they developed is rare." I argue that it should not be surprising to find little on this subject. In working on this topic, researchers would normally expect to find it in voluminous government records, not private manuscripts. There are numerous records about the phenomenon in federal, state, county, and municipal records. During the era under consideration, newspapers are an excellent source of data on the public debate over these issues. Yes, this is an important theme, but government records and newspapers document this phenomena

² William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, vol. 6 of *The History of Wisconsin*, ed. by William F. Thompson (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988).

more completely and more efficiently as Bill Thompson's treatment of the subject in his book demonstrates.

Agriculture

Next, let's look at agriculture, which is another area that is recommended as a priority. It is a subject that is both important part of our history, but it is also one that has been heavily documented. It ranked dead last in the survey in terms of repository need and in last place in subjects chosen by repositories. At the Society, it's one of the three lowest used subjects, representing only 2% of call slips and in the literature review, and it ranked near the bottom in the number of articles and dissertations. The only indicator in which agriculture ranks high is on the state need question. Again, this is a phenomenon that is similar to the residential patterns subject because there is an immense amount of data in other resources. There are federal and state agencies dedicated to agriculture that generate large amounts of public records as well as published reports. The University holds extensive records from its School of Agriculture. Bill Thompson in his bibliography notes that there is no aspect of Wisconsin life in the postwar period more documented with statistics than agriculture.³ Given the low demand and the high documentation, it's surprising to see this on the recommended list. Even more surprising, is the emphasis on organic farming. This is a recommendation I would expect to see in a report on documenting the first decade of the 21st century, but for most of the 55 years covered here, it is not a subject of high interest.

Recreation and leisure

Finally, let's turn to the recreation and leisure subject area. Here we have a category that is defined as an area of need, yet when one probes a little closer, the data on this subject is very similar to the data gathered on the subject of religion, which is not recommended. Let's compare the two. In the citation study, both religion and recreation have identical scores, representing only 4% of the studies. In measuring call slips, the two categories differ only by one half of one percent, with religion ranked at 3.5% and recreation at 4%. In the survey question about repository need, recreation received a 2.4 rating, which is identical to the 2.4 rating received by religion. Even the prose analysis in the report uses very similar language in describing the two categories. In looking at the existing collections, the report says "Religion is fairly well-documented." The report also says, "recreation and leisure seems, on the surface, to be well-documented"

Yet, in the conclusion, the report says religion "is a subject with a moderate need overall for improved documentation at the repository level" while recommending a need for documentation of recreation. In support of that position, the report argues that recreation ranked fifth in need at the repository level, yet its score on this question was identical to that of military history, which was not recommended. The report also fails to point out that although recreation ranked fifth in state need, it ranked only one-tenth of a point ahead of religion and business on the same question, while those subjects are not in the recommended category. The report also states that there is a fair amount of

³ *Ibid.* 758.

published sources on recreation and leisure as well as in the records of many government agencies. The case is not proved from the report's own data.

Social organization

Now let's turn to three subject areas that ranked high in the survey, but are not included in the recommendations: social organization, business, and politics. By far and away, the number one choice by almost every measure used by the project is the social organization subject. This category was identified as the single most important thing to collect in the survey, ranked number one in repository choice, number one in repository need and number 4 in state need. Users also voted for it with their call slips. At the Wisconsin Historical Society, it represents 24% of usage and 21% of scholarly citations. Thus, we have a subject in which there is high user demand and high perception as being in need by repositories, yet the report claims it is "adequately documented." Why is this?

I believe that the confusion lies in the expansiveness of the social organization category. There are many records in this area because it represents the widest area of human activity studied by historians. Bill Thompson says it well in volume 6 of *The History of Wisconsin*, when he writes "In Wisconsin during the postwar decades, as elsewhere during any epoch, how they made a living and how they arranged their private and domestic lives was more significant to most people than the ebb and flow of public events. Come war, peace, depression, or good times, it was the necessity to satisfy basic physiological, social, and psychological needs that drove most people and occupied the greater part of their time and energy."⁴ He goes on to say, "Every important social trend in Wisconsin between 1940 and 1970 was the cumulative result of millions of decisions by individual men, women, and youths about marriage family, residence, education, income, and expenditures, which in turn led to subsequent decisions about how, when, and where they would reside, work, and spend their leisure time."⁵

Second, by including this subject in and among the other categories, the report creates a misleading framework for analysis by looking at it as just one of 14 subjects when in fact it stands above the others. There are so many questions that need to be understood by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists, that the social organization category supersedes and stands above the other categories. It supplies raw material that can answer numerous questions we have about this period.

Business and industry

Another anomaly between high ratings and low recommendations is the business and industry category. It ranks third most important in survey and third in repository need. But what's even more amazing is that 42% of respondents characterized it as their first choice out of the 14 options given them. Perhaps that is why Bill Thompson points out the shortage of documentation on manufacturing because "manufacturing remains

⁴ *Ibid.* 626.

⁵ *Ibid.* 247.

relatively unregulated and thus leaves behind less documentation in public records.”⁶ The report tries to explain away the high rating and argues that business records are in demand because they provide documentation for something other than business and therefore more collecting isn’t needed. Yet, if that’s the case, might it not be an important area to intensify collection? Isn’t that true of all records in that they are used for subjects other than for the activity they were created? For instance, we have seen that in David Kynaston’s, book *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951*, draws on diaries and letters not collected for that purpose. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *A Midwife’s Tale* built a wonderful account of that sheds light on family and gender relations, economy, and childbirth practices out of a rather mundane diary. Likewise, the New England town studies in the 1970s or histories of witchcraft in Salem are studied from records created and collected for other purposes.

Politics and government

Finally, politics and government is another category where the survey data doesn’t match the recommendations. It is the fifth highest subject in terms of importance in the survey, and it is extraordinarily high in use. Ten percent of the citations in the bibliographic review are in the category. It is also the second most popular subject at the Society, following only social organizations and representing 15% of the use. It does rank low in what repositories wish to collect. But, given that it ranks higher than many of the recommended subjects, its worth reconsidering.

Although the numbers of collections of conventionally political organizations and individuals are high, these are no longer the principal sources needed to understand the history of the politics and government of this state. We have seen the rise in influence of groups such as Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce or the Wisconsin Education Association Council. As a result of open records laws, the kinds of candid assessments of the behind-the-scenes stories are no longer in the type of political collections and records that have been collected in the past. We need to identify the new places for looking for these.

⁶ *Ibid.* 758-59.

Alternative conceptual framework for thinking about collecting:

What is historically important about this era?

So, what should we collect? How do we get at that decision? To get there, we must try to identify the most significant trends in the half century after World War II and develop a new framework in which we need to think about what we collect? With the remainder of my time, I'd like to suggest some major trends in Wisconsin, try to identify broad questions that researchers of the past look at, and finally suggest some alternative areas that may be more important to document.

In my reading of Wisconsin's history, I argue that the following three subjects are the most important trends. Each has resulted in a seismic shift in the way life is lived in this state. In each of these cases, if I could somehow describe them to a returning GI in 1945, they would say that the world of 1999 is unimaginable. Likewise, a college student of that year would have a hard time in imagining the world of 1945 in these areas. The trends are changing family structure, the implications of changing health patterns, and the decline of the local.

Changing family structure

First, there are changing domestic arrangements and family structure. Recall the quote I shared earlier, that "Every important social trend in Wisconsin between 1940 and 1970 was the cumulative result of millions of decisions by individual men, women, and youths" about day-to-day decisions. Since 1945, the people of Wisconsin have changed the ways in which they have structured and lived their domestic lives in unimaginable ways to people living in 1945, 1955, or even 1965.

In 1945, divorce was a stigma that barred candidates from the presidency. In Wisconsin the marriage rate has dropped 32% percent since 1950. Meanwhile, in that same period, the divorce rate grew 128% in Wisconsin. Fewer people are getting married, and of those who did, more were getting divorced. Although Wisconsin's population has grown 30% in absolute numbers since 1980, the numbers of marriages in Wisconsin has declined 22% in absolute numbers in that same period, from 41,000 to 32,000. The average age of marriage has increased from 1960 to 2007 from 20 to 25 for women and from 23 to 27 for men. Wisconsin now grants one divorce for every two marriages.

Changes in domestic life also reflect changes in the domestic structures in which children are raised. In 1945, less than 2% of births were to unmarried mothers and news of a child born outside of marriage was hushed up. Today 36% of all births in Wisconsin are to unmarried mothers. Also, 52% of divorces include children under the age of 18 in those households where marriage is the norm.

We know from statistics that there has been a substantial change in domestic arrangements in the last half century. What is less widely known is that Wisconsin has diverged from the national statistics in that per capita marriage rates in Wisconsin have fallen below the national average for every year in the past 80 years. Wisconsin has traditionally been a socially conservative state. And while we have statistics on this phenomenon, what have we documented in terms of the personal choices people have made? How have attitudes changed? How do those changes result in thinking about child-rearing practices? And what are the implications of those changes in the various social and governmental structures that were formulated in a different time and under different circumstances?

Implications of changing health patterns

A second major trend is the implications of changing health patterns on the way we live. Wisconsin has a graying population, and again, its one that is older than the national average. In 1910, life expectancy in Wisconsin was 40; by 1937 it reached 57.7. By 1989, an infant born in Wisconsin had a life expectancy of 77. Part of this is the result of reduced infant mortality, although much of it is due to changes in health care systems, and those changes, have led to changes in social structures. The development of antibiotics freed women from the time-consuming tasks of nursing one or more family members through one illness or another. Some historians have suggested that the development of antibiotics in the post World War II era may be the single most important phenomena in women's history.

Perhaps most striking is the invention of a new class of individuals — the retired — who emerged during this era. Prior the development of Social Security, we have a new class of able-bodied individuals who have voluntarily retired from their occupation. Prior to the mid 20th century, the concept of retirement meant the literal inability to work any longer, with the elderly living with their children. For instance in 1930, 54% of the population over 65 continued to work. By the booming 1960, only 33%. With changes in family structures, and women in the workplace, the elderly have become segregated by age. This phenomenon has had ripple effects in the state's economy, government, and social structures. And with changing family structures, we have for the first time a substantial nonworking adult population living separately from their adult children.

Decline of the local

The third major trend about Wisconsin in the last half century is the decline of the local and a nationalization of our culture. This phenomenon started to develop slowly with the invention of the railroad and telegraph in the mid 19th century, and speeded up with the invention of the automobile, air travel, and radio in the first half of the 20th century. After 1945, it took off. Imagine yourself in 1945. Take a drive through the state highways — and remember there was no interstate — and if you stopped for food, you couldn't find the ubiquitous national chains. Local downtown stores would have supplied any needs you have, which are now gone and have been replaced by Wal-Mart. Perhaps most striking of all, television has changed the world and provided us with national experiences — and here the key word is “experiences.” The Kennedy assassination, the

Beatles appearance on Ed Sullivan, the moon launch, nightly reports from Vietnam on the national news, the Challenger disaster, visuals from the First Gulf War — these all flowed into people's homes and what was foreign and exotic was now intimate.

In *The Liberal Hour*, G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot comment that starting in the 1950s Americans shared common emotional experiences. To illustrate, they take a line from Bill Clinton's memoir, in which he talks about watching Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" in the summer of 1963 on television. Clinton described watching the speech on TV as a "memorable event [that] happened to me." Note that the young Clinton didn't read about it or hear someone else who was there describing it. Rather, it was something that "happened to me." Mackenzie and Weisbrot conclude that no event would ever be strictly local again.⁷

The virtual networks and groups that exist in the 21st century are possible only because of the shared national culture, which in our own time has expanded into a national culture. Demographers have demonstrated that Wisconsinites are more sticky — namely, they move less often — than the national norms, but they are not immune to this national trend. How do we understand the decline of the local? The process by which it is disappearing and the way Wisconsinites understand it or deny it, is an important phenomenon in the state's history, since it defines ourselves as a state.

Trends Analysis

All three trends are national, just as are the subject areas identified in the report. I argue, though, that in the long run those three trends more radically redefine the way Wisconsinites experience and live their lives and will have long-term impact for their futures.

At the same time, we are sorely lacking in documentation of the ways in which Wisconsinites experience, process, and understand these trends. Public records are wonderful for capturing the main trends in history, since they give us aggregated data. Manuscript collections are useful when they can illuminate the particular and enlighten the specific. We have data about pioneer life in Wisconsin from various governmental documents, but we know about the particulars of women's experiences in households only through the saved records of Florantha Sproat or Elizabeth Therese Baird at the Society. We know about the military experience of soldiers in World War II through the massive numbers of federal records, but the lived day-to-day experience is known because archivists collected the papers of UW residence hall supervisor Lillian Fried or *Wisconsin State Journal* editor Don Anderson.

⁷ G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert S. Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 34-36.

What should we collect?

How do we ensure that we document what it was like to live in the last half of the 20th century in Wisconsin?

In addition to identifying the major trends in the state's history, I suggest we begin by jettisoning the subject categories that are used in this analysis and which have been used by the Society during the last quarter century. They are too broad, overlapping, and no longer relevant.

The report itself acknowledges the difficulties in using them. For instance, as I've discussed earlier, the social organization category is so broad and encompassing that it gives the impression that there is an excess of documentation there.

Other categories define what falls under them in inconsistent ways. For example, the Populations section stresses, as part of its area of interest, the documenting of "beliefs." Likewise, Agriculture indicates an interest in "personal lives and families." And both are topics that are identified as areas that the state is in need of more collection. We need to know more about the personal lives and families and beliefs in both of these areas.

Ironically, in the definition of Religion, there is not a single mention about documenting "beliefs." Instead, the subject religion is defined as the "history and structure of organizations," namely the history of churches and their affiliate groups.

What do we know about the lived religious experiences? If the subject categories don't take seriously the reasons for which churches exist, it's not surprising to learn that the subject is heavily documented.

Yet, look at what historians are asking in this area. There has been a 25-year move away from institutional histories, and greater interest in the grassroots and meaning of religion. A recent fine example is a new book published by Harvard University Press entitled *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* by James M. O'Toole. The author explores the meaning of the lived experiences of Catholics in American experience as opposed to the formal institutional histories that documented the early 20th century.

Alternative conceptual framework for thinking about collecting:

If we jettison the 14 categories, what shall we put in its place? Instead of trying to shoehorn collecting policies into a paradigm that was developed in a different time and era, it's time to develop a new conceptual framework that could stand alone outside these categories.

Historians and other students of the past research different subjects at different times, but continue to ask the same core questions about human activity over time. I will suggest four broad questions that I believe transcend specific historiographical concerns, not because I believe that these are the only questions or necessarily the right ones, but as a way to frame another possible way of looking at the question.

I believe there are four key questions that historians regularly ask. They are:

- How do people govern themselves and resolve disputes?
- How do people make use of the material world around them?
- How do people make sense out of the world?
- How do people organize their family and social lives?

Let me illustrate how historians have posed variations on these questions in the past, and how they may be useful in thinking about documenting the past.

How do people govern themselves and resolve disputes?

Historians have posed the first of these questions — how do people govern themselves and resolve disputes — in different ways over the 20th century.

In the early decades of the 20th century, historians explored the question through the history of institutions. This gave way during the middle of the century to a history that focused either on formal political parties or in the work of historians such as Richard Hofstadter on ideas. This work, in turn, influenced a generation of ethnohistorians such as Lee Benson who focused on ethnic groups and voting patterns.

During the 1960s, the new Left Historians, coming out of the opposition to the Vietnam War, focused on crowd dynamics, and writers such as Staughton Lynd and Jesse Lemisch spearheaded an effort to write history from the bottom up. Near the end of the decade, we saw books such as Catherine Allgor's *Parlor Politics*, which looked at how women wielded influence or Joanne Freeman's *Affairs of Honor* that used cultural anthropology to explain power.

All of these approaches create a stew that might be all lumped into the question of “how do we govern ourselves and resolve disputes.” And yet, the collections used and the ways in which historians defined themselves fall into multiple subject categories.

While we can't determine the specifics of what questions historians will pose, we can try to analyze the history of the last century and figure out who got to decide how the loaves and fishes get divided.

First, we should note the decline of formal political parties and the processes that are conventionally thought of as political. Instead, we see influential groups shaping the debate in the state over how we govern ourselves.

The rise of the “evangelical right” in how we are governed wouldn't fall in the convention politics and government category. But, it is relevant to the question of “how we govern ourselves.” How can we document this experience? Is anyone collecting the bulletins that are handed out in independent evangelical churches calling people to go to the polls? The same is true on the left. One black political commentator indicated that political pundits initially missed the Obama phenomenon because most of the advocacy took place in the black community through institutions, such as black churches, that only get covered in the media when there are controversies.

One cannot understand the history of the state without exploring the role of Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce or the Wisconsin Education Association Council. The numerous ad hoc groups that have sprung up and organized on issues shape governance and dispute resolution are broadly defined.

What this suggests is there has been a perennial interest in politics, and there are shortages in the documentation of how this is recorded.

How do we make use of the material world around us?

The second core question is “how do we make use of the material world around us?” Here we include studies of how we interact with the land, and much of agricultural history and environmental history would fit. We also include the kinds of things we make, such as architectural history, as well as the way we make and acquire material things.

Business and labor are but two sides of that coin rather than different subjects. The report suggests that we know a great deal about working life, but that requires some additional examination. The Society has strong holdings in labor records. But, just as one no longer looks to the formal political parties to understand politics, in an era when labor unions are in decline, one has to look in other places to understand work and workers.

Some years ago when I was State Historian, I started on a book that was never completed about work in Wisconsin. We had a team of talented history graduate students scouring the archives for resources. We were very successful in finding accounts of life in factories. Government records were very useful in providing first hand testimony about jobs such as tax drivers, hotel workers. Workers' compensation and unemployment compensation records gave amazing details. We also were able to find good accounts of daily life on farms, both in government records, publications, and manuscripts.

Our real challenge was in reconstructing the day-to-day experience at the work place for professionals, such as doctors, dentists, accountants, etc. Yes, there are records of regulatory agencies and manuscripts from businesses, and manuscripts from professional associations, and we had a good handle on professional techniques. However, it was remarkably difficult to get beyond that. I suspect that we know far more about how professionals in the 18th century interacted than we know about life in the late 20th century.

How do we make sense out of the world?

The third question is “how do we make sense out of the world?” This is the realm of ideas, art, and spirituality.

Books on spirituality have dominated bestseller lists in the second half of the 20th century. The United States usually tops the charts when surveys are done about religious beliefs and church attendance, and Wisconsin scores higher than other states.

Our old category of religion as being about churches fails us. The question is no longer about what the mainline denominations have documented in terms of sacramental and institutional records. What do we know about the inner life of church members, similar to the way O’Toole examined in *The Faithful*?

With the rise of independent evangelical churches, what do we know about these congregations and more importantly, the groups they generate? Men’s groups? Women’s groups? Youth groups? Groups such as the Wisconsin Family Council have played an important role in state politics. When the fastest growing groups are outside the jurisdiction of traditional religious archives, who is ensuring that we document these groups? And how do we get a handle on the many spiritual practices or other means of making sense of the world in this era?

We probably have a much better understanding of the interior religious life of Puritans in New England or Victorian journal keepers. In the future, with the abundance of blogs and social networkers, we may get a better sense. But that leaves a gap for the half century after the Second World War.

How do people organize their family lives and interpersonal relations?

Finally, “How do people organize their family lives and interpersonal relations?” The changes in the way people choose to arrange their family life over the past half century, as I’ve noted before, is probably one of the most significant ways in which Wisconsin has changed. The statistics tell us that this is happening. But what do we know about the reasons why it changed? And what are the perspectives and views on the ground? What is the experience in the way that people choose to organize their lives?

From the recent statewide debate over the marriage definition referendum on the state constitution, we know that family life and domestic structures remain a hotly contested issue in Wisconsin. The rise of social networking and blogging may help us address this in the 21st century, but the question for us is: “how do we document the period before 1994 when Netscape Navigator was introduced?”

Conclusion

The work done by this project is important, and its most significant result is not the final report, nor even this symposium. Rather, it is in sparking a statewide conversation. The thinking, the conversations, and the further exploration of what we need to do to document the recent past is a significant contribution and one that I hope will continue.

While the first fifty years of the 21st century are outside the scope of this meeting, let me suggest that in addition to the work we do here, that we not wait for another 50 years to consider how we will document that era. In some ways, it will be both more and less challenging. We no longer will have the luxury to wait a half century to do our collecting efforts.

However, information technology has given us new forms of documentation that we are not accustomed to collecting. In 1996, the average American spent 30 minutes a month online; now it is 27 hours and growing. Today, the Internet has become ubiquitous, changed how we interact, and changed the networks of friends we have. This phenomenon demands that we not only document how information technology has changed our lives, but also how it allows ways of saving that experience.

The other challenge that should not be understated is the disappearance of the daily newspaper, which was the chronicle of American life for two centuries. There are many, many phenomena that have been studied through newspapers. Daily newspapers are disappearing. That fact will perhaps make archivists jobs more challenging. At the same time, the presence of blogs and social networking media means that more information is being recorded about individuals than ever before in human history.

I am confident that archivists will maintain the creative spark that allows them to document our own time. It will require new strategies, but also maintaining the spirit of our predecessors.

After all, documenting contemporary life is not a new phenomenon. In 1861, Lyman Copeland Draper, superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, sent a circular to Union officers asking them “to preserve for the Society, diaries of the[ir] services” in quelling “the wicked and unnatural rebellion of our misguided brethren of the South.” By January 1865, Draper reported that the Society had already received many statements and narratives which will prove valuable “to the future historian of these troubled times.”⁸ Just as Draper embraced new and creative strategies to document contemporary history, we, too, will meet those challenges.

⁸ “Eighth Annual Report,” January 2, 1862, and “Eleventh Annual Report” January 3, 1865, in *Wisconsin Historical Collections* 5: 10, 20.