

## Case Study

SUSAN DAVIS, editor

# A New Map for Field Work: Impact of Collections Analysis on the Bentley Historical Library

CHRISTINE WEIDEMAN

**Abstract:** During the past five years, archivists have shown considerable interest in the mechanisms for carrying out collections analysis projects. Little attention has been given, however, to what happens after the completion of the collections analysis project. In 1986 the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan carried out a collections analysis project that in large part has shaped subsequent field work efforts. The author discusses the ways the library has prioritized subject interests and implemented new procedures for acquiring collections. She discusses efforts in four priority collecting areas: the automobile industry, alcohol and substance abuse, African-American churches, and abortion politics.

*About the author:* Christine Weideman is field representative and assistant archivist at the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan. Part of this article was presented as a paper at the spring meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference in Chicago in May 1989. The author acknowledges the insight and advice provided by William K. Wallach, who read both the original paper and this article.

IN 1986, THE BENTLEY Historical Library of the University of Michigan conducted a collections analysis project to study the strengths and weaknesses of its manuscript holdings. The Bentley Library houses the Michigan Historical Collections, which was founded in 1935 to collect and preserve written, visual, and audio materials that document the history of Michigan and the activities of its citizens and institutions. Since its establishment, almost 8,000 citizens and organizations have donated papers, records, photographs, maps, and other historical documentation to the library. The collections provide coverage from the era of exploration to the late twentieth century and measure more than 28,000 linear feet.

The collections analysis project, conducted from September 1985 to June 1986, was the first step taken by the library in revising its collection development policies. Judith Endelman and William K. Wallach, assistant director of the Bentley, co-managed the project, which also involved many of the library's current staff members.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the project was to focus the library's collecting efforts more systematically and to make more effective use of its limited field resources. Realizing that it had become somewhat passive in its collecting, the library sought to become more active and focused in its efforts—to take on new initiatives or to redouble efforts in areas of continuing importance. The project had immediate and long-term effects on determining areas of both field work concentration and methodology at the Bentley.

The most immediate result of the project was a list of field work priorities. At the

conclusion of the project, the library staff held a one-day retreat to discuss its analyses and to identify and prioritize those areas in which to concentrate field work activity. Out of the eighteen areas studied, staff targeted four for immediate emphasis: the automobile industry, family history, non-mainstream religions, and politics.<sup>2</sup> In several of the remaining areas staff members noted specific individuals and organizations to contact, or stressed the need to build upon existing relationships with previous donors. (Although areas were targeted for special attention, it was understood that field work would also continue in other spheres of interest.)

Because of the desire to undertake new field work initiatives in the priority areas, the library reallocated internal funds in order to add a half-time field representative, at first for a period of eighteen months. This new position complemented an existing full-time field representative, who continued to work on existing leads as well as develop new ones in some priority areas. At the end of the initial eighteen-month period, the library decided to fund the new part-time field position on a continuing basis. A collections development committee, consisting of the director, assistant director, manuscripts curator, and the two field representatives was organized and has met on a monthly basis since then to discuss and direct field work activity. Staff members who have suggestions regarding field work simply discuss them with a member of the committee, who in turn raises them at the next committee meeting. The library adopted this vehicle as a means of continuing staff discussion on collection development.

An archives is defined, in large part, by what it collects, and the project underscored the fact that all staff members have a stake in collections development. During

<sup>1</sup>Judith Endelman, "Looking Backward to Plan for the Future: Collection Analysis for Manuscript Repositories," *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 340-355. Ms. Endelman was an NHPRC Fellow in Archives Administration at the Bentley Historical Library in 1985-86. Her major project was to co-manage the collections analysis project.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 347.

its deliberations throughout the project, the staff also readily recognized the importance of controlling growth through a clearly articulated set of guidelines against which all collecting decisions are measured. In practice, the collections committee examines actual and potential leads in light of both project findings and collecting efforts of other archives in the area, discusses the rationale for pursuing each lead, and places them in priority order with other active field initiatives.

In addition to creating a list of field work priorities and initiating staff changes, the library developed new literature written specifically to attract and educate potential new donors about the work of the Bentley. The collections development committee prepared a *Guide for New Donors* brochure, which summarizes the history of the library and the importance of preserving historical materials, and lists those materials of significance most often found in personal papers and organizational records. In addition, the committee decided to test the efficacy of using separate panel inserts that describe significant holdings in particular subject areas. They chose first to develop inserts that pertain to Michigan political history and to the history of African-Americans in Michigan. These printed inserts are used in conjunction with the *Guide for New Donors*. Experience has shown that both the brochure and the panels have proven to be very effective tools for introducing the library and its collections.

In the four years that have passed since the conclusion of the collections analysis project, the library has initiated field work in each of the four priority areas that has evolved into what is generally a three-step process. First, field staff does background reading and other preparation to become familiar with the specific area. Second, the field staff consults with experts from both the University of Michigan and the surrounding community, who have knowledge of that area. These experts provide a suf-

ficient amount of contextual information to provide an understanding of the area's nuances; they can also then recommend appropriate individuals and organizations to contact. Third, based on those recommendations, the library contacts individuals and organizations using an introductory letter enclosing the *Guide for New Donors*, followed by further communication by telephone or in person. The introductory letter is now somewhat standardized. The opening paragraph is tailored to the specific individual being contacted, but the remaining portions, which describe the history of the library and explain that a field representative will be in touch by phone, are standard enough to be included in almost every introductory letter. This approach has led to the introduction of automation into field work, another tool that promotes a more efficient use of limited resources. Approximately seven to ten days after the letter is mailed, a field representative calls the prospective donor to determine whether historical materials exist, and if so, to arrange a meeting to discuss the work of the library and its interest in preserving those materials.

### Automobile Industry

In the area of the automobile industry, for example, field staff consulted with several professors in business, business history, and automotive engineering at the University of Michigan. The staff also held discussions with external experts, such as members of the Society of Automotive Engineers. From these sources, we learned that one of the least documented but most economically important segments of the auto industry in Michigan is the supplier industry. Faculty and other experts are currently working with the library to determine appropriate ways to document the history of the industry. The effort to do so will be a very large one and will lend itself to cooperative approaches involving other re-

positories. Contacting the most important and representative parts companies in the state and exploring what historical records they might have will require a good deal of staff time.

As a result of discussions with the consulting experts, the Bentley staff learned in more depth of the important and significant research being done at the University of Michigan on the automobile industry. Through its University Archives and Records Program, the library has also intensified efforts to collect faculty papers and university records reflecting that activity.

When the staff discussed the automobile industry at the retreat, they decided to approach Arvid Jouppi, one of the most important commentators on the automobile industry, both in Michigan and nationwide. He is known throughout the state and across the country for his analyses of the car market. The Bentley contacted him, both to solicit his thoughts on how to document the industry and to determine if he had relevant personal papers that might be preserved. After the introductory letter and telephone call, field staff met with him, and the library now has twenty-four linear feet of his papers documenting his work on the industry over the past twenty-five years. He is also quite familiar with both the supply industry and other automobile-industry analysts in Michigan and has assisted us in pursuing leads in both areas.

### **Alcohol and Substance Abuse**

The three-step process in conducting field work was also helpful in our efforts to document family history more fully. We had determined from the collections analysis project that the major social and cultural issues that have confronted many American families in the past and continue to do so today represented aspects of modern family history that the library might try to document. Just as the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research documents the

response of American families to economic issues over the past forty-five years, the Bentley decided to concentrate specifically on the effects of social issues. We determined to concentrate first on the issue of alcohol and substance abuse. The focus seemed appropriate because the library already had extensive materials on the turn-of-the-century prohibition and temperance movements and wanted to preserve documentation on its more modern counterpart.

Given the sensitivity of substance abuse and the difficulty of targeting individuals with personal documentation on the subject, staff members chose to concentrate on the history of organizations that have responded to alcohol and substance abuse. Field representatives began by talking with university faculty members to learn more about the area and to identify the relevant organizations. Based on their suggestions, field staff met with directors of several service agencies in the southeastern Michigan area and were able to determine the types of agencies and organizations that exist. They learned in the process that the various types of agencies are similar to one another throughout the state, and therefore a concentration on southeastern Michigan would provide a representative sample of the entire state. From the collections analysis project the library had determined that it should be more aggressive in documenting areas outside of southeast Michigan, the most heavily populated area of the state. The Bentley Library is located in southeast Michigan and over the years has collected heavily in the area, thus leading to a geographical imbalance in holdings for a repository with a statewide mandate. But in the case of service agencies, it was deemed unnecessary to document the activity taking place in other parts of the state. Nonetheless, geographical balance is a factor that the collections committee addresses in all new field initiatives.

Since undertaking efforts to document this issue, a network of local experts has de-

veloped who assist us with the project. The library has subsequently received several collections, including the records of a non-governmental state coordinating agency, responsible for distributing federal and state funds to programs providing services to combat substance abuse; the records of a treatment agency providing outpatient services on a sliding fee scale; and the records of both the state headquarters and the Wayne County/Detroit Chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. There are several other organizations whose records we are pursuing, including one that provides inpatient services to the indigent, and one that provides inpatient services only to those who can afford to pay. The Bentley is endeavoring to collect historical materials documenting the rather wide spectrum of responses to an issue affecting thousands of American families each year.

### African-American Churches

In relying on experts to help formulate new field work initiatives, the library has drawn on academics and professionals, and on those persons who have previously donated materials to the Bentley. Donors, of course, are knowledgeable about their respective fields, and they also are able to open doors that otherwise might be closed. And they assist in building networks of supporters around the state. This is particularly evident in the initiatives undertaken in the area of religion.

To no one's surprise, the Bentley learned from the collections analysis project that its holdings on religion were comprised primarily of white, mainstream, Protestant church records, an imbalanced emphasis shared with many other repositories throughout the nation that collect church records. In an effort to broaden its holdings, the Bentley began to project to collect the historical records of African-American churches in Detroit. The decision to do so was based not only on the findings of the

collections analysis project in the area of religion, but also its findings in the area of ethnicity. At the one-day retreat in 1986, the library staff discussed the importance of continuing its commitment to preserving the history of African-Americans in Michigan. The library has several important research collections that pertain to the state's African-American community and decided to explore the possibility of both supplementing those collections and broadening its religious holdings, by preserving African-American church records. The collecting of such records would also parallel one of the major goals set by our parent institution, i.e., the increased availability for students, faculty, and other researchers, of academic resources on Michigan's multi-cultural society. The largest African-American community in Michigan is located in Detroit, and the city has long been known for the leading role its African-American pastors take in both state and national affairs. Furthermore, the African-American church has long played a vital role in, and has reflected, the political, social, cultural, and economic life of the community.

Because there are literally hundreds of African-American churches in the city, the library turned to historians, library donors, and other supporters familiar with the African-American community in Detroit for assistance in compiling a list of the most significant churches. A list was compiled that included large churches and small ones, old and new, conservative and liberal, churches of different denominations, and those that are mainstream or evangelical, Christian or non-Christian. The donors who assisted in drawing up the list have remained interested in the project and have been helpful in contacting difficult-to-reach pastors and elders.

Over the past thirty months the Bentley has communicated with forty-one churches, has collected records and established ongoing relationships with five, including several of the oldest and most important in

the city, and is working closely with seven others. The remaining churches include those we have been unable to reach, those who are hesitant to have records placed in a repository so far removed from the church, and those who simply do not want their records placed in an archives. In some cases, church members have strong emotional ties to their records and do not want to have them removed from church premises. As a solution to this dilemma, the library has decided to seek external funds and to use internal monies to microfilm the records of such churches, perhaps in cooperation with a Detroit repository, in order to ensure that the church records are preserved. African-American church pastors and historians with whom field staff meet are supplying the names of additional churches. As expected, the churches have been found to be very important windows into significant aspects of African-American urban living.

### Political Issues

Just as the collections analysis findings in the area of ethnicity influenced field initiatives in the area of religion, so too did findings on religion affect initiatives in the area of politics. The library determined that its effort to broaden its holdings pertaining to religion might also serve to emphasize religio-political groups. In the area of politics, the staff noted the importance of documenting major issues that were fought over and resolved in the political arena. These two findings led to efforts to document the issue of abortion in Michigan more fully. Although the library held materials related to 1972 abortion referenda in the state as well as the papers of individual politicians involved in the abortion question, nothing had been acquired since the early 1970s from groups on either side of the abortion issue. The issue had remained a strong one in Michigan, and in the 1988 elections the voters approved a ban on Medicaid-funded abortions.

Because of the continuing controversy over abortion rights, field representatives approached both the leading anti-abortion and pro-abortion rights groups in the state. In 1988, the anti-abortion Right to Life Committee of Michigan responded positively and began to deposit its historical records almost at once. The executive committee of the People's Campaign for Choice, Michigan's pro-abortion rights group, voted to place its records with us but chose to wait until this year to do so because of a then pending statewide ballot on the issue of abortion.

The library has also recently worked to preserve materials related to school busing in Michigan and to state aid for parochial schools, issues that were quite controversial two decades ago. In addition, field staff has followed closely the influence of the so-called "religious right" on Michigan Republican Party politics. They have made contacts with various organizations in the state, and the library continues to collect the records of, and maintain close ties to, the state party itself.

### Other Areas

Although field work during the past four years has been concentrated on the four priority areas, the Bentley has also followed through on staff recommendations in other subject areas when opportunities have arisen. The results from the collections analysis project in the area of military history, for example, showed few holdings related to the experiences of the Vietnam veteran, and the staff recommended that the library contact veterans groups for materials of historical significance. With the renewed interest in the Vietnam vet occasioned by the success of movies such as *Platoon*, Detroit newspapers interviewed leading veteran spokesmen in Michigan. From those interviews, the Bentley field representatives contacted the president of the Detroit Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of Amer-

ica (VVA), the most important organization for Vietnam veterans in the country. The chapter president worked with the library to preserve the records of the Detroit Chapter, one of the largest in the country, and arranged for a field representative to speak about the library at one of the monthly meetings of representatives from chapters around the state. Thereafter, those representatives voted to donate the records of the state headquarters of VVA to the Bentley.

In another instance, field staff followed through on recommendations in the area of conservation, one of the areas in which Bentley holdings are particularly strong. Staff learned in 1987 that the leading private organization in the state, the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, was about to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. As the project findings had recommended, we contacted the organization and several months later collected its historical records. Additional recommendations led to the donation of the records of the East Michigan Environmental Action Council and the Michigan chapter of the Sierra Club, two

of the most active citizens groups in the state.

For the past four years the collections analysis project has provided a focus for new field work initiatives at the Bentley and has improved the mechanisms by which such initiatives are carried out. It has provided further proof of the importance of more structured and coordinated field work activity and staff member involvement in collections development decisions. Due to time and personnel limitations, staff members have not yet followed through on all the recommendations from the project, including geographical targeting of representative areas around the state to provide more comprehensive documentation of their historical development. The library has scheduled another retreat to discuss the findings from the collections analysis project in light of field activities during the past four years. The conclusions of that retreat along with staff recommendations and annual reviews of priority areas will provide a new map that will guide the Bentley Library in its future manuscript acquisition activities.