1985

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The Kentucky Newspaper Project

. . . it is proper to add that there has been, and still continues to be, in every American state a failure to appreciate the importance of preserving files of newspapers of each locality. The newspaper in itself is of necessity a matter of transient interest. It appears, it serves its purpose, it is superseded by another of a later date, and ceases to be regarded as of importance or value; but there is no issue of the humblest paper in all the land in which there does not appear something which will some time prove of real historic value. The newspaper, of necessity, bears an intimate relation to the official history of the corporation in which it is published. Whether or not it be designated as the repository of the official proceedings of the corporate authorities, it nevertheless contains them, and thus becomes a method of record which, in point of regularity and fullness, is unsurpassed. . . . Hundreds of newspapers have been born, have lived a brief space, and chronicled their share of history, yet no trace of them remains anywhere.

—Simon Newton Dexter North

*The Newspaper and Periodical Press*, 1884

Written a century ago, the comments of Simon Newton Dexter North still retain a ring of truth today despite improved technology and increased capabilities in regard to the preservation of newspapers. Although sporadic attempts at preservation through microfilming can be documented in the history of several organizations, including some libraries and newspapers themselves, a complete record of our history as detailed in the pages of the daily and weekly newspapers of the United States is non-existent. Individual efforts at preservation undertaken by various libraries, historical societies, and state agencies have formed the nucleus for the beginnings of both retrospective and continuing preservation of American newspapers through microfilming. However, a systematic, comprehensive national effort had yet to be made until recently.
Last year Kentucky joined West Virginia, Iowa, Indiana, and Hawaii as the first states to receive grant money from the National Endowment for the Humanities to begin the second phase of the three-phase United States Newspaper Program. This national program is aimed at “locating, organizing and preserving our national journalistic heritage, which is a primary source for historical research,” according to a 1976 Newspaper and Gazette Report issued by the Library of Congress. With the aid of a $142,136 NEH grant awarded to the Margaret I. King Library of the University of Kentucky, the goal of locating and identifying newspapers maintained in Kentucky on a permanent basis will be the emphasis of the Kentucky Newspaper Bibliographic Control Project, a project which will extend over the next three years.

This recent award for the bibliographic control aspect of the national program followed King Library’s successful planning grant of a year ago which represented the first phase of the national program. This second phase received endorsements in the application stage from the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, the Kentucky Historical Society, the Kentucky Press Association, the Historical Confederation of Kentucky, and Dr. Thomas Clark, a professor emeritus of history at UK. Clark has been a long-time advocate of newspaper preservation and was commended by NEH for his service to the Organization of American Historians following their completion of the project which served as a pilot program for the United States Newspaper Program. Following the completion of the current grant phase in 1987, application will be made for funding for the final phase, the actual microfilming and preservation.

In short, the United States Newspaper Program was devised as a vehicle to locate, identify, and eventually preserve newspapers in each state while collecting comprehensive holdings information to “help facilitate research use of the newspapers,” according to the NEH. The program represents a significant commitment from the NEH, according to a 1978 Newspaper and Gazette Report issued by the Library of Congress, in that the federal agency "by committing itself to a ten to fifteen year program" has departed from the "current NEH practice of not funding projects beyond three years."

Kentucky’s three-year bibliographic control project will include on-site surveys and inventories of newspaper repositories statewide to collect complete holdings information. The visits will include university and college libraries, public libraries, historical societies,
state agencies, and newspaper offices, according to Dr. Frank R. Levstik, the former project director. In addition, every effort will be made to survey private collections held by individuals in Kentucky when possible. Such on-site surveys and inventories will begin at the project's headquarters, the Periodicals/Newspapers/Microtexts Department of King Library on the UK campus in Lexington. As the state's largest repository of both Kentucky and non-Kentucky newspapers, King Library will be the only repository to be surveyed and inventoried in the first year of the project.

The extensive newspaper collection of King Library makes it an important research facility in Kentucky for scholars, historians, and genealogists throughout the state and nation as well as for the faculty and students at the university. Newspapers currently published in Kentucky's 120 counties are subscribed to as are approximately 50 newspapers from other states and about 60 from foreign countries, according to Judy Sackett, head of the Periodicals/Newspapers/Microtexts Department.

The microfilm holdings of international and national newspapers are only a small part of the collection. The holdings of King Library are unique when it comes to Kentucky newspaper titles largely due to the fact that King Library's in-house Microfilm Center is the only operation in the state microfilming current Kentucky newspaper titles that are not available on film from commercial vendors. Eight employees work regularly to microfilm approximately 170 dailies, weeklies, and monthlies currently being published in Kentucky. Not only does the microfilming preserve history, according to Microfilm Center Supervisor Lil Blackburn, but it also serves as a link in providing other libraries in the state and other institutions, including newspapers themselves, with microfilm copies of newspaper titles needed for research. In addition to the ongoing preservation of current titles, the Microfilm Center has nearly finished a five-year project which entailed microfilming hundreds of boxes of Kentucky newspapers dating from the period 1930 to 1950.

The importance of the work of the Microfilm Center is not only historic in nature but is also indicated by the need for the newspapers as primary research tools. According to Mrs. Blackburn, orders for copies of microfilm are filled regularly and come from all over Kentucky, the United States, and from foreign countries, including Australia, Germany, and Russia. In addition
to use of the collection by faculty and students, researchers both inside and outside the Commonwealth regularly draw on the holdings of King Library through interlibrary loan arrangements. According to Laura Douglas, interlibrary loan coordinator for the Periodicals/Newspapers/Microtexts Department, requests for both Kentucky and non-Kentucky titles come from as far away as Washington, Nevada, California, Michigan, Texas, Massachusetts, and even from Canadian provinces such as British Columbia. In any given month, hundreds of reels of microfilm may be out on loan throughout the United States and Canada from King Library.

The importance of the Microfilm Center will undoubtedly increase when this second phase of the project is complete and actual microfilming is undertaken. Although it will not be the only such facility used, it will play a major role in the final phase of the program. Before the third phase is undertaken, however, the second phase will include surveys and inventories of repositories throughout Louisville. Included will be the Filson Club and Southern Baptist Seminary which are second only to King Library as the largest repositories for Kentucky and non-Kentucky titles, respectively. In early 1986, surveys and inventories at repositories in the rest of Kentucky will begin. The libraries of such institutions as Western Kentucky University, Morehead State University, Murray State University, Eastern Kentucky University, and the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives will be among those visited.

In the final year of the project, the collections of newspaper publishers, public libraries, state agencies, historical societies, and individuals will be studied and added to the previously collected holdings information. Any information acquired during the project about private collections will also be surveyed in 1987, although such information is welcome throughout the project. According to Levstik, the on-site surveys and inventories are necessary if the project is to achieve the goal of bibliographic control and, ultimately, easier access to newspapers for research purposes.

The holdings information gathered during the project will be entered into the computerized database CONSER (CONversion of SERials) and will serve as the basis for the first complete union list of Kentucky newspapers to date. Although various union lists have been compiled in the past, they are outdated and far from complete, Levstik said. The present grant will allow for compilation of a complete record which is vital to both researchers
needing to know the location of newspapers in Kentucky and to libraries trying to meet the needs of their patrons.

Another reason for the need for comprehensive and accurate holdings information is to aid in preventing duplication in microfilming during the final phase of the program. Levstik explained that the final phase will require the most money, and, therefore, it is crucial to know the holdings before beginning the actual microfilming in order to avoid duplicate and unnecessary filming.

Helping the project staff in meeting NEH requirements and objectives is an advisory committee consisting of professionals in the fields of newspapers and newspaper publishing. The committee includes Albert Dix, publisher of the Frankfort State Journal and Dix Newspapers; Don Towles, vice president of the Louisville Courier-Journal and Louisville Times; James Crawford, publisher of the Corbin Times-Tribune; and David Thompson, executive director of the Kentucky Press Association. For more information on the project, contact Judy Sackett, Project Director, Kentucky Newspaper Bibliographic Control Project, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 40506-0039, or call (606) 257-3166.

—Pat Hawthorne