

# Letter to the Editor

## Inter-institutional Loans

Dear Editor:

I was very pleased to read the article on inter-institutional loans by Tim Ericson and Joshua Ranger. Because the idea of such loans is still regarded by so many archivists with skepticism (if not hostility), I would like to add further evidence that loaning collections is not a peculiar quirk of the Area Research Center system in Wisconsin or the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Missouri.

In 1989, the then archivist of the University of North Dakota (UND), Dan Rylance, initiated what was the first (and I believe remains the only) interstate lending compact, encompassing the archives and special collections units at the UND, North Dakota State University, North Dakota Historical Society, and Moorhead State University (Minnesota). Though truly an interstate program, the distances covered and method of transportation (personally carried in cars by staff of the institutions) are closely akin to an intra-state program. The volume of loans has been small in the intervening years (approximately eight collections have crossed the state border, according to Moorhead State archivist Terry Shoptaugh), but these loans have assisted students and other researchers to gain access to material that otherwise would have been physically out of reach.

Prompted by the initiative shown in this interstate agreement and the incontrovertible success of the Wisconsin program, the Minnesota Historical Society began a loan program with the repositories that once comprised the Minnesota Regional Research Center network – six universities and the Iron Range Research Center. This program, formally launched in 1992, is much less ambitious than the Wisconsin ARC loan program, but tailored to the more limited resources available to the Minnesota institutions. For example, because no courier service is available, collections must be transported by professional staff at one institution or the other. In most important respects, however, we followed the Wisconsin lead in defining and responding to the “considerations” Ericson and Ranger list on p. 104 of their article.

To date approximately a dozen collections or parts of collections have been loaned within Minnesota to support research by students, local historians, and faculty members. No mishaps have befallen any of the collections, though we acknowledge that loans for research – as is true for loans for exhibit – is a calculated risk. The risk of damage or loss to a collection is minimized, we believe, by the policies and procedures we have in place, and are outweighed by the benefit of making otherwise under used collections accessible to those who wish to use them. We would be glad to provide anyone interested in further details with information on the policies and procedures that govern the Minnesota loan agreements.

The efficacy of intra-state loans is now supported by a long history and broad range of venues, so what about the next step? Personally (I do not necessarily speak for my institution on this), I believe there is good reason to actively explore the possibility of long-distance loans via common carriers (such as UPS and Federal Express). First, while the risk of loss or damage to material increases in such instances, we cannot claim that such forms of shipment are beyond the pale. These carriers are already employed by archives, special collections, and museums to ship items loaned for exhibit. (Exhibit loans are often accomplished in specially constructed shipping containers, it is true, but there are low-cost options, such as boxes made of corrugated polypropylene, that offer extra protection for shipping cubic feet of material as well.) Second, many institutions routinely acquire collections from remote donors by having the material shipped by common carrier; those of us who collect modern Congressional collections rely, indeed, on the US Post Office to transfer hundreds of boxes at a time under the Congressional franking privilege. It is difficult, I think, to continue to reject out of hand the possibility of employing similar protocols for loaning collections for research.

At its most basic level, the discussion about loaning collections for research represents one of the fundamental tensions in archival science – preservation versus access. Each institution must decide how to weigh those competing goals, based on its mandate, resources, and constituency. But I hope we are entering an era when more repositories will be open to the idea that making information available about their collections is not enough; we should be working on ways – digital and otherwise – to make the collections themselves more readily available to those who wish to use them.

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