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Le Messenger:

Lewiston's French language newspaper will be recorded by state for posterity

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LEWISTON — Le Messenger, the French language newspaper that thrived here for nearly 70 years, will be recorded on microfilm at the Maine State Library — and researchers are turning to Chicago archives to do it.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has awarded a \$190,000 federal grant to the library for recording of every issue of Le Messenger as well as cataloging of more than 1,700 titles from historic Maine newspapers.

In its heyday, Le Messenger reported on the lives of Franco-Americans in Maine and was believed to be unique in the region. It began publishing in the late 19th century and folded around 1968.

"Le Messenger chronicles a time period and an ethnic group that's often underrepresented in our history," Janet Roberts, the project's coordinator, said Wednesday.

"Overall, in the preservation of newspapers, ideally you'd save everything," she said. "But at the very least, you'd want to have a good representation from different

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Sheldon Hackney

time periods, different geographic areas and different ethnic groups in history. Le Messenger fits that."

Copies of Le Messenger are available on microfilm at libraries in Maine, and the Lewiston Public Library has an extensive collection stretching into the 1940s.

"There is some microfilm, but it's very poor quality. As I understand it, it was done for bankruptcy proceedings, not for use by researchers," Roberts said. "So we'll be borrowing the papers from a library in Canada to microfilm it."

Roberts was not sure where the newspapers are in Chicago or how

they came to be there, though she'll find out as research progresses.

At least one original 19th century copy can still be found in Lewiston, but researchers would have a tough time getting it: It was included in a time capsule sealed into the City Building's cornerstone on Oct. 1, 1890.

The federal grant was awarded through the national endowment's U.S. Newspaper Program, a national effort begun in 1982 to encourage state-level preservation, cataloging and bibliographic listings of American newspapers.

All 50 states and two territories are participating.

"Newspapers are a historian's time machine," said NEH Chairman Sheldon Hackney in announcing the Maine award.

"They provide eyewitness accounts of events both large and small that have helped shape our country," he said.

"By preserving these historic newspapers, we help preserve our ability as a nation to learn about our past and to gain a degree of insight about our path into the future."