

Local History Report

October 2025

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Recollection Wisconsin

On September 22, 2025, I had the privilege of attending the “Recollection Wisconsin Joint Meeting of the Governing Board and Steering Committee.” Approximately 20 of us gathered at the Golda Meir library at UW-Milwaukee to discuss the direction Recollection Wisconsin should go for 2025-2027. Up front, I will say it was an honor to be among this group shaping statewide policy, and it was especially nice to meet in person – prior to this, I had only interacted through remote meetings.

As a refresher, Recollection Wisconsin (RW) is a project of the Wisconsin Library Service (WiLS). Our governing partners include various Wisconsin universities, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and DPI. RW has an operating biennial budget of \$300,000. Its core mission is to bring Wisconsin history and culture into the future through digital preservation.

Much of the discussion was internal and not applicable to KPL. For example, I lead a discussion on “transparency, responsiveness, and stewardship” with regards to RW governance. Rather esoteric to people outside the room. However, a few things I feel might be of interest.

Priorities for 2025-2027 were voted on, with these being the things the project managers should focus on:

- Continued collaboration with underrepresented counties and Culture Keepers. Of Wisconsin’s 72 counties, a few are still not visible online. These are the rural, lower population counties, whose heritage is as important to state history as Milwaukee or Madison. Culture Keepers is the term RW uses for indigenous archives and archivists. Though some of Wisconsin’s tribal nations have been hesitant (with good reason) to share their history, RW believes a fuller understanding of their culture is good for all.
- Conduct an “educator user experience” study. In other words, how are teachers and professors using RW in the classroom? Based on results, RW will build K-12 educator resources. (What topics are overlooked and could be bundled together into a useful collection of photos and documents all in one place?)
- Expand mobile digitization kits. RW receives requests from people who wish to preserve family photos or oral histories. They do not work with the public directly, but can loan such tools to a partner library in that person’s area.

Two things I advocated for, but were not given high priority:

- Increased social media and blog presence. With between 200 and 300 content partners, I felt it was a good idea to invite them to share an image and how it tells their community’s story. RW would still “sign off” on this to avoid any problematic

- language, but other than proofreading I think the time involved would be low. Each partner has their own built-in audience, meaning great potential for new crossover.
- PastPerfect API. Traditionally, RW would pull Kaukauna information from the Kaukauna Memory Project, hosted by the Milwaukee Public Library. This collection still exists, but has not been added to in quite some time. Instead, we have 15,000+ items on PastPerfect. These DO turn up in a Google search, but do not get incorporated into RW. Finding a way to let RW and PastPerfect “talk” would be a huge step forward.

Two other big topics worth knowing about:

- The day after our meeting, another meeting was held with many of the same people called Newspaper Think Tank. One idea discussed was how to get most or all of Wisconsin’s newspapers online in one place. It was speculated this would take at least 3-5 years, and more likely 5+. I asked the obvious question – should libraries pause digitizing and wait for the state to catch up? There was no clear answer on this, and my position remains that I’m very pleased with the newspaper digitization thus far and would not hesitate to do the rest (1991-2018) even if I knew the state would tackle the project in five years. The time saved in 2025 alone by being to access the newspaper online is immeasurable and getting the job done now rather than 2030 would pay for itself.
- Last year at this time, DPLA (the national digital archive RW belongs to) was expected to disappear, but at the last moment Philadelphia Free Library stepped in to be the new host. Now, it appears this deal has fallen through and the project managers of RW have expressed to DPLA they have no confidence. A backup plan from last year was to create a regional (Midwest) hub, and discussions have been ongoing since that time. Unless there is a drastic change, I would expect this is the path going forward. I’m in favor of this. Wisconsin has more history and culture in common with Minnesota, Michigan, Illinois, etc. than the nation as a whole, and such a database would be more relevant – filtering out the “noise” from other regions. As a Grignon family researcher, I am often looking to neighboring states for information. Such a hub would also not stop a national group (DPLA or otherwise) from existing later. The Midwest is a national leader in archives and digitization and this would be a great showcase.

Ending on a personal note, I feel I have found my voice with regards to local history, and it is exciting to represent Kaukauna Public Library among other, larger educational institutions and hold equal weight among them. Historic preservation is not a topic that is going anywhere, and to be able to show that our library takes this seriously and is a leader among its peers is quite rewarding and distinguishes KPL as an outstanding organization.