

A University Archivist Looks at Business Archives

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First, the university archivist is thankful that: he doesn't have to engage in the constant field work necessary in locating and negotiating for the acquisition of significant collections of business records; and he has a "guaranteed annual records income" in that the institution's records must come to him.

But if the university archivist is indeed an archivist, he is disturbed by the problems of business archives. He knows that important aspects of economic, technological and social history depend on the availability of such source material. He sees a few archival programs in major corporations, a few significant business records collections in research institutions, a small number of business records inventories and, frankly, a vast indifference on the part of archivists, manuscripts collectors and the institutions that employ them.

To change this situation, the archivist in an academic or research institution needs answers to the questions which will be raised when he suggests a program for the collection and use of business records. First, how do we overcome the problem of volume in dealing with business records? The answer may not lie in the miniaturization and computerization of data and the intensification of records management programs, but in the development and mastery of appraisal techniques, and the judicious combination of inventories for economic and geographic regions and the collection, preservation and use of key records in corporate and institutional archives. Before collecting business records, the university archivist should have a planned program covering areas of interest and appraisal criteria. This is a condition precedent.

How do we solve the problem of defining a manageable collection program? Many archives are literally littered with the results of unplanned collection. Until there are a larger number of practicing business archivists and a respectable body of literature on this problem, business historians will continue to make major contributions to repeating these mistakes of the past.

How do we change the hostility of administrators and librarians to the collection of infrequently used material? Rising building costs and space pressures in higher education have brought demands for high turnstile counts. The ratio of research uses per cubic foot for business records is notoriously low.

How can we control the erosion of corporate documentation resulting from records management, systems analysis and computer programming? New management techniques may improve the quality and facilitate the selection of archival records, but not necessarily. One solution which constantly agitates the archival pro-

profession is joint responsibility for archival and records management programs.

Finally, how do we overcome the image of business records as voluminous paperwork without the value of traditional archives that record the challenge of public service or the intellectual distinction of research.

Lest you conclude that the standard response of the university archivist is a series of rhetorical questions, I must confess that I once had the answers. In 1956, I published a formula for determining a preservation policy for business records. I had processed records of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad; the Arms Palace Horse Car Company; a Milwaukee tannery and many defunct banks for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. I had even retrieved the railroad records from a scrap dealer's warehouse in Eau Claire. With youthful enthusiasm, I wrote that an agency collecting business records - "should have a fixed policy for the collection of the records of greatest historical significance, covering the broadest range of the firm's activities for the longest time with the smallest volume of the most easily understandable records, with due regard for administrative activity, supplementary material and valid sampling techniques."

I even attempted to explain these factors. This neat formula, not quite an equation, is now safely interred in the back files of History News (August, 1956).

For the past decade I have advised archivists to be very cautious in undertaking to collect business records. Some of the reasons may be found in the proceedings of a 1966 colloquium on "Source Materials for Business and Economic History" sponsored by Harvard. This interesting report offers "wisdom" and "insight" rather than "guidance" and "answers." The participants concluded that personal initiative, trained archivists and committed money were requirements for a successful program.

The Harvard colloquium arrived at about the same point as a 1960 Conference on Science Manuscripts sponsored by the History of Science Society. As scientific records are closer to the primary responsibilities of the university archivist, I am completing a two-year study of the archival evaluation and processing of scientific and technological records.

Our approach to a similar problem may be of interest to business historians concerned about source material. We discussed the principles of evaluation; sequential steps in processing archival material; arrangement; records management; the characteristics, evaluation and processing of special types of records - e.g., personal papers, research and development project files, sound recordings and photographs; finding aids and research users and uses. After dividing 376 specialties into 30 areas of science and technology, we compiled bibliographies and lists of manuscripts collections for each area. The bibliographies, which are essential for effective evaluation and processing, were divided into histories of science and retrospective surveys; biographies and institutional histories; bibliographies, glossaries and general reference works; and basic periodical

literature.

I earnestly hope that business historians, historians, businessmen, archivists and other men of good will shall undertake the arduous work necessary to improve the situation with respect to business archives. It is a real challenge.