

A University Cares for Its War Contract Records

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THE humor page of a popular magazine recently carried a conversation supposedly held in a government office, some of the functions of which had been curtailed. The Chief assures the Senior Information Specialist that "I told the Budget Bureau man we would have to maintain the records and files, and he was very cooperative. Since we are saving several hundred dollars by eliminating the report, he said we could hire as many new employees as the situation demanded. I figure ten or twelve will do nicely." To paraphrase a familiar saying, there is more truth than humor in the scene; at least most institutions responsible for the care of the records of war contracts have found themselves in a like situation. Aside from the advisability of keeping the records from the long-term research and historical view-points, the Contract Settlement Act of 1944 (quoted in OSRD Administrative Circulars 17.03) provides that contract records must be kept for five years after the final settlement of the contract, or five years after the termination of hostilities. These records, as further defined in the Circulars mentioned above, include reports, technical data, correspondence, and fiscal records, a completeness which should bring joy to the archivist's heart. Furthermore, wherever the records are classified, appropriate security regulations must be observed and custodians must be cleared. For this reason, if no other, the war records constitute a special problem for the institutions concerned.

Harvard's wartime contracts numbered over a hundred, ranging in size from the Radio Research Laboratory, employing at its height some 900 persons, to the individual professor working in his laboratory. Some of the larger contracts represented work which the University would not normally carry on, while many smaller ones were but wartime adaptations of continuing peacetime research. The records of the largest contract fill 130 cabinets and include such diverse material as charts, pictures, film, and even a recording or two. All of the material on some of the smaller contracts, on the other hand, could be put in an ordinary

vertical file folder. Some contracts had been completely declassified, some in part, some not at all. The reports of the larger contracts were often well-numbered, substantial volumes, while from some professors all we could obtain was a microfilm copy of the only one he had managed to keep. Such differences had to be taken into account in determining the final disposition of the records.

In October, 1945, the Treasurer's Office circularized the heads of contracts, in an effort to find out the extent of, first, the technical and scientific, second, the business material which would have to be stored. The estimated figure of 300 four-drawer cabinets was much larger than expected, making plans to run the material in with the present University Archives out of the question. Not only was there insufficient room, but the need for security was also an obstacle. Accordingly, it was decided to set up a sub-archives, and the writer began on December 1 to make arrangements. A second form letter was sent to all heads of contracts, explaining the purpose of the new office. Space was found in the new School of Public Administration Building; a vault and cage was constructed in the basement, and offices provided on the ground level, two stories above. Although the separation of workrooms and records has been a handicap, the location itself has proved ideal, both from the point of view of security and of convenience. Unfortunately, the arrangement is only temporary, and at the end of five years, further disposition will have to be made of such records as are to be kept permanently. Since there was already a War Records Office, concerned with the records of alumni serving in the war, the name War Archives Office was selected, and to make doubly sure there would be no confusion, the statement "For the records created in the fulfillment of the University's War contracts" was included in the letterhead.

The new collection developed slowly at the start, for many contracts were receiving extensions in order to complete reports and wind up inventories. This turned out to be a boon, for it was found that helpers and equipment were to come from the completed contracts, particularly the two largest ones. It was also found that the records of the largest contracts were being arranged prior to transfer to the Archives; Radio Research Laboratory even set up its own temporary War Archives Office, with a staff, at its busiest period, of eight. The technical and scientific material was arranged in a subject file, while the business and administrative records fell into the administrative divisions of the Laboratory. A "bible" was prepared, listing the records of each division, cabinet by cabinet, even drawer by drawer, special indexes were drawn up, and cabinets were numbered (with the advice of the Custodian of War Archives). When the records were ready to be transferred, one

of the young women who had worked upon them came too, thus assuring a continuity of care of the largest group of records to be received by this office.

The scope of the War Archives Office was considerably enlarged by the decision to include four collections of reference material developed at as many laboratories. These were transferred from OSRD to the Navy, which in turn has lent them to the University. The largest of these, and also the best organized, is the Radio Research Collection, the central collection for Division 15 of NDRC. With this collection came a woman who had worked upon it almost from the start, again assuring a continuity of care. The requirement of security is the main reason for housing this material with the war archives, though the two collections also have much in common. Besides including in these collections all the reference material received from other laboratories, an effort has been made to include sets of the particular laboratory's own reports. These are in addition to the War Archives set, which then becomes a record copy. Copies of reports over and above these needs are sent to the Library of Congress, where they become a pool of surplus reports. By taking over this material, the Navy has solved for the War Archives Office the problem of what to do with items which could only be called archival if there were unlimited facilities for storage, and has further insured their being kept at the University as long as needed. Thus the make-up of the staff and of the contents of the War Archives Office gradually took shape.

Several decisions were made during the waiting period; one was that the material would be housed by contract number, since that was the surest means of identifying a particular contract. Cabinets would be used, and in the case of smaller contracts, material would be kept in folders on shelves until cabinets were available. If a project was continuing, or if a professor wished to keep data for publication, we would not insist upon transfer, but we would attempt to obtain a complete set of reports. Where a professor had only one copy of a report, and wished to keep that, we would arrange to have it filmed. In organizing material on a given contract, reports would be filed first, as being the prime record of the contract, followed by correspondence files, technical data, and lastly, business records. Classified and unclassified records of a given contract would be kept together, since the whole collection was to be kept locked. A shelf-list, similar to that in use in the University Archives, would be prepared, giving the extent and location of each contract's records, and further listing those records by series. For the catalog, the main entry card would also be by contract number, adding to the information on the shelf-list notes as to the date of the contract,

the responsible personnel, and the classification. Cross-references would be furnished for personal names, for alternate names of contracts, and for selected subjects. So far, these procedures have proved workable, and sufficient for the use of the material which has been received.

All of the cabinets have been stamped as received with the appropriate contract number, and, where there is more than one cabinet for a given contract, a sub-number, running consecutively. Drawers are numbered from A to D for each cabinet. The University, as contractor, was able to purchase as many cabinets as needed. In case any readers may ever have to place cabinets in library stack areas, our experience may be helpful. So that the bottom drawers would clear the supporting ridge close to the floor, the cabinets had to be raised on parallel 2" x 3" timbers. If the front one is placed as far forward as possible, the danger of tipping is minimized. Two standard cabinets (12" to 15" wide) can be placed between the usual stack uprights, and still leave room for pulling out the drawers. Drafting files are a different problem, and after one upright had, with great difficulty, been removed, it was decided to place the drafting files across the aisles and at the ends instead of in their normal position. With these exceptions, the 250 cabinets so far received, cabinets of all sizes and types, both metal and wood, have fallen into place with a minimum of trouble. For filing, the pentaflex system was widely used; our only complaint is that, in moving, the cross-pieces tend to come off the rods, but they can be easily replaced.

So far, the use of the material has been largely by those depositing it in the first place. This is to be expected, until such time as the final inventories have been accepted. Some research use of the technical records of the larger laboratories, and even more use of the Navy document collections, is foreseen. All requests for the use of classified material are cleared through the Navy office at the University. This office has furnished a list of eight persons, mainly connected with Naval research at the University, who have blanket permission to use such material. Careful records, developed in the Radio Research Document Room, are kept of the whereabouts of these items. An effort is being made to check declassification lists as issued by OSRD, in order to make appropriate entries in the card catalog and on the material itself. Already approximately one-half of the records are in the clear, and as additional contracts are cleared, the problem of what to do with the records at the end of the five year period is simplified. The amount of use which the archives receive will also determine how active the collection will have to be kept.

No complete history of the University's war activities is at present being planned. However, in December, 1944, Prof. Sterling Dow was

appointed War Archivist, his job being to collect information, by interview, on all phases of the University's war work. He was assisted for a time by helpers in the fields of medicine, business, education, and general research. Their work has now been concluded and the results turned over to this office. The file will be kept intact, and should serve as a convenient introduction to any study of the records. This attempt to obtain summarizing material at first hand is not dissimilar to that described in an article on the War History Projects, by Vernon G. Setser, in *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST* for April, 1944. Certainly the historian will be grateful for any guides through the maze of modern records which the archivist can provide. If items of local color or human interest can be obtained, the kind of thing which does not often get into the formal report, so much the better.

One of the weakest spots in the documentation of the University during the war is that of the Service Schools. Although these were conducted under government contracts, and as such are included in the definition of the functions of this office, we have acquired so far only the records of one of the dozen or more schools. There is nowhere in the University a complete list of all the service people who attended one or other of these schools, a lack which will be felt increasingly in the future. Many of the records have been sent to service depositaries; others have been incorporated into the regular student record files of the College, the Business School, or the Medical School. As such, they will eventually find their way to the University Archives, or to a sub-archives for the School concerned.

As a concession to possible future use of research or exhibit purposes, a small amount of equipment has been stored with the records. Its use for exhibit was realized recently when the Associated Harvard Clubs met in Cambridge and the alumni wished to learn what had taken place at the University during the war. Additional equipment, when declassified, will be used for instruction in the Physics Department. Though such use is admirable, the problem of providing space for material of this sort is a serious one. Other "problem" types of material include film, glass slides, and a recording or two. So far no special provision has been made for caring for these, other than the film cabinets in which they arrived.

By the time this is read, the War Archives Office will have ceased its separate existence, and will have become a part of the University Archives, which in turn is a part of the University Library. Some ninety per cent of possible material will have been received, the additional ten percent including certain business records not yet available for transfer and material which professors or laboratories continuing their war

research in peacetime wish to keep. What the future of the collection will be, time alone will tell. At the end of five years the University will be legally permitted to destroy what it wishes. It will have a moral obligation, however, to its own past and to the cause of research. For this reason, reports and publications should be preserved permanently. Many of the routine business records could be destroyed, once the final accounting has been approved. Scientific data, with its high rate of obsolescence, is a borderline case. Much will depend upon the use which the collection receives, upon how much has been declassified, how much has been written up, and upon facilities for storage. Certainly, use will determine whether the collection should be kept active, or whether it can go into dead storage, perhaps at the New England Deposit Library. In a sense, the problem is being postponed, but time will aid in its solution, and in the meantime, the University is preserving the record of its war service according to the law, and is making available to the future historian the sources for his work, to the scientists the record of recent performance.