

Archives of Causes and Movements: Difficulties and Some Solutions as Illustrated By the Swarthmore College Peace Collection

By ELLEN STARR BRINTON

*Swarthmore College Peace
Collection*

THE term "movement" is used here to describe a number of voluntary welfare and humanitarian groups, loosely banded together to oppose or assist some "cause" which to them seems of vital importance. The cause may be concerned with slavery, women's rights, prison reform, billboards, opium, protection of children, animals, wild flowers, or any of a thousand other topics. If the issue is of real consequence, bodies of similar interest will develop in most States and sooner or later in most countries. What these crusading groups do to influence public opinion often becomes of historic importance. New ideas are usually highly controversial, and while they later may be accepted as part of the pattern of daily life, the first promoters often face ridicule, social ostracism, and hazards of financial and physical safety.

I

In the Western Hemisphere the first movements developed after the American Revolution. Some groups were interested in schools and education. Others formed the first agricultural societies. Still others met to aid the widows, the orphans, the poor, the mentally afflicted. It became a part of our democratic pattern to form a committee or group to discuss, study, and take action on any important issue. In the early days men and women had separate interests and groups, and not until the burning questions of slavery and of war came to a head in the early 19th century were women allowed to take part in public meetings.

A study of the early history of some currently powerful movements in the United States shows how informal was their very beginning. A few people met in a private house or hotel parlor. Often

there is now no clear record as to participants or date. Minutes were sometimes kept, often not. Money was raised by membership and contribution. Decisions sometimes were published in a local paper. Printed matter might be issued: tiny gummed seals bearing a propaganda slogan (the earliest known so far dates from the antislavery movement about 1840), tracts, books, monthly bulletins, or large poster sheets. Members were sought far and wide to act as distribution agents to "spread the message of the cause." Most of the work was done by volunteers, who not only gave their time but also generously helped pay the bills.

Keeping records of meetings, publications, or finances seemed of much less importance than getting or distributing information and planning some strategy for the next campaign. Usually when the job was done, the cause won (or sometimes lost), the group faded out. The offices were closed and papers disappeared. Sometimes a faithful leader carried a few notebooks home and put them in a desk drawer. Sometimes an officer retained a file of printed matter as a remembrance of some exciting campaign. Sometimes a devoted member proved a better accumulator than distributor, leaving to his heirs trunks and closets filled with printed matter and scrap books. These are the treasures which a movement archivist dreams about and searches for and then in picture-puzzle fashion tries to piece together. His hoped-for objective is a reconstructed collection of minutes, finance reports, membership records, published literature, and correspondence of different groups interested in a common cause that will show what the movement was working for, how, when, where, and with what *success*.

It is necessary to recognize the peculiar characteristics of movements in general to understand the eccentricities of the resulting archives. Leaders and office staffs have an insatiable appetite for information for purposes of shaping policies and securing material for speeches and publicity. They collect printed and processed matter, press releases, copies of minutes and conference reports, and clip newspapers from every possible source. They send material to all other sympathetic groups and persons. Policies are changed to keep up with current events and legislative decisions. There is a constant turnover in personnel. Finances rise and fall, and the number and type of publications varies accordingly. Bulletins are processed or printed as the editor thinks best, with consequent changes in size, shape, and title. There is never enough time, energy, money, staff, or office space to do all that the leaders plan or hope. From the very nature of the task undertaken, problems of today and to-

morrow are vastly more important than those of yesterday. Records therefore are rarely given proper attention and seldom are they found in systematic order, complete with minutes and organization publications. Frankly, it is a question whether anything else is to be expected of bodies organized on a temporary emergency basis for some special purpose. It is the business of the group to look ahead with fire and enthusiasm for the cause. If it slows down enough to be orderly and systematic in office housekeeping, the cash contributors may decide that signs of antiquity are creeping in, that their funds may be better spent elsewhere. Consequently, if movement archives are to be preserved properly for the use of future generations, perhaps interested librarians and manuscript curators should become more than mere collectors and custodians of non-current movement records and undertake in some fashion to guide and assist movement groups in the organization, administration, and preservation of their records. It is for this reason that the Swarthmore College Peace Collection does what it can, not only to collect permanently valuable records of the peace movement, but also to advise existing peace organizations on records management.

II

So far as can be learned, the first organized peace groups started in the United States and England in 1815 and 1816. Of course individuals wrote and published books and pamphlets on the subject from the beginning of printing, but there was no great volume of peace material until World War I. Consequently, although the Swarthmore Peace Collection is constantly searching for items dated before 1914, its chief task is to organize and reduce the bulk of the peace material issued since then. By peace material is meant official correspondence, minutes, financial statements, reports of international congresses, private letters on the subject from individuals of note, all kinds of printed and processed materials including books, periodicals, pamphlets, of all shapes and sizes, and in a score or more languages, posters, and even gummed seals or stamps designed to advertise the cause on envelopes and packages. The main job at Swarthmore has been to find and keep a pattern which will furnish adequate control over the collection.

III

The Peace Collection at Swarthmore is separated into three main divisions. The first consists of *large* bodies of papers received either from peace organizations or private individuals. These bodies are

numbered and arranged in sequence and new group acquisitions are added at the end. The quantity of each group may range from a few boxes to 1300, from a bank of 4 file drawers to 140. In most cases, these files came directly from the originating offices, are accompanied by adequate finding lists, and are supposedly fairly complete. The second, called "Collective Document Group A," includes *small* bodies of material of organizations or persons in the United States. These are arranged alphabetically by organizational title or name of individual. The third, designated "Collective Document Group B," includes materials from all other countries and is arranged first by country and then alphabetically under each country by the official name used by the organization in its own papers, regardless of language, unless we can find an English translation in the same papers. Miscellaneous material not readily identified, is sorted by country of origin, arranged chronologically, and placed at the end of each national series. Propaganda and educational papers often are issued anonymously, without date or source, and these "Miscellaneous" sections are a rich field for discovering items sometimes wanted later to complete newly discovered series of publications.

As each organized body of papers is identified, a 5 by 7 card is made out giving enough information to guide future researchers. Cards are prepared for every peace group for which we have any material on file and for every person whose papers or published writings are historically important enough for preservation by the Collection. Entries now number about 640 in the United States card file and 483, representing 53 countries, in the foreign card file. The upper left corner of the card carries the name of the country. If the card is for a large Document Group, a large *D.G. No.* — is placed in the upper right corner in blue pencil. The top line shows the name of the organization. Then follows a notation of the earliest and latest date of holdings on hand. "Birth and death" dates of groups are not emphasized because sometimes they are unknown or are too controversial for us to adopt. (Two large peace groups have been quiescent ten years, but the last board of directors in each case insists that they are merely temporarily inactive.) Cards always show the address of the group when found, as often the same name is used in different cities or States. They likewise indicate the approximate amount of material on hand, whether 1 piece, 1 inch, 100 feet, or 40 file drawers. A lot of information may be found in an inch of miscellaneous papers — enough to show

what the group stood for, who its directors were, what kind of printed matter it issued, and what size and type of audience it tried to reach. Where possible, some of these data are placed on the file card, together with any special note about material bearing the same organization imprint which might be stored elsewhere, for instance, cataloged books and periodicals, or broadsides, which are stored in a special case for "Peace Posters."

Some other divisions of material have been forced upon us in order to handle properly the items acquired. "Antipeace" material, a phenomenon of the post-World War I era, is handled as a special collection called "Attacks on the Peace Movement." Cartoons for and against the peace movement have been collected by various persons for years, and these are separately arranged by country in folders in boxes. A "Miscellaneous Subject File," consisting of scattered printed and mimeographed ephemera bearing no organization imprint but important because of content, is arranged in folders labeled alphabetically with abstract reference subject titles, such as "Atom Bomb," "Amnesty for Conscientious Objectors," "Birth Control and Peace," "Citizenship for CO's," "Imperialism," "Peace Toys," and the like.

IV

Sorting of the daily mail is perhaps the most important job of the day. Every letter, periodical, and pamphlet received is stamped with SCPC name and date. This stamp serves to supply some date on what is often an undated piece of literature. Periodicals are checked by use of the Kardex loose-leaf system. No attempt is made to secure or preserve the usual monthly or weekly magazines found in most good libraries, regardless of the interest shown in the peace question. Instead, our time and attention is devoted to ferreting out the unusual "propaganda" type of paper written and published by individuals and groups, often with volunteer contributions and labor. About 171 of these are currently received from 24 countries, representing 15 languages.

Any special parcel, book, or collection received is given a space in the "Accession Book." This is a lined book with double-spread pages and spaces for title, cost (or gift), donor, accession number, and disposition. Yearly accession numbers in the style of 49 — 1, or 50 — 96, are used to reduce the number of figures needed. If a parcel and explanatory letter arrive in the same mail, the same accession number is given to both. Every effort is made to connect a collec-

tion of papers with the correspondence pertaining to it so that historic statements, information or mere gossip, may be preserved and made available to future inquirers. Under the heading "Disposition" are inscribed such terms as "books," "periodicals," or the name of the organization with whose papers the material is to be placed. In a surprising number of cases the word "scattered" is used, showing that the bundle received was a miscellaneous lot of material to do with as we wished. Sometimes when material received in an accession is sorted, it is found to be either so foreign or so useless for the SCPC that the whole lot is disposed of promptly.

Staff consultations were held frequently in the days when the pattern for the Peace Collection was in formation, and debates on procedure seemed almost endless. Gradually, however, an archival policy for handling records of the Peace Movement was agreed upon and incorporated in a simple five-page *Policy Pattern for the SCPC*. This document is reviewed frequently as a refresher experience, and so far there has been no need to alter policies.

By using a home-made humidifier and a paper press (see *American Archivist*, July 1950) the Collection can repair and restore almost any paper material at little expense. Commercial rolls of "Permafilm," dull finish are kept on hand. Much material has been saved that might have been further damaged if it had been necessary to send it away to a professional restorer.

V

Experience with the Peace Collection at Swarthmore has revealed the following facts about handling archives of causes and movements:

(1) — Movement archives present no one central controlling body or hierarchy on which to maintain or create a definite overall pattern of records organization. The bodies may have a common goal and work along parallel roads, but they often have conflicting programs, or may even be hostile toward one another.

(2) — Emphasis must always be on the group or organization involved because the donor of papers may have had possession of them only through chance. Unless personal letters, manuscripts, or printed matter by him (or her) are contained with his gift, the donor may get a thank-you note on presentation and then fade out of the picture.

(3) — There will be a constant influx of materials from contem-

porary organizations — or should be if the curator is alive to the problem. These will range from announcements of meetings and board minutes to formal reports of international congresses, perhaps in several languages. These must be filed with earlier records of each organization. (At the SCPC we regularly provide a place for such incoming material in a folder or archive box at the end of the older series.) Why bother with this current material when the archival collection will probably inherit the organizations' noncurrent records later? The answer is that the future is always uncertain for such groups. Don't count on anything coming later. Get everything as issued and take care of it yourself.

(4) — One of the chief jobs in handling movement archives seems to be sorting and discarding. The problem is not to maintain the *absolute* integrity of a body of papers received by bequest, gift, or other channel, but to use it to best advantage. Some lots as received may be complete. Others may be but skeletons which must have missing minutes, reports, or publications added. Other parcels will consist of accumulations of out-of-date reference material from some private home or office. These parcels should be used systematically, like building blocks, to recreate or complete the files of really important societies or organizations. Significant material must be recognized quickly and the mass of duplicate and unwanted items should be disposed of promptly as gift and exchange material or as waste paper.

In short, it is clear that archives of causes and movements present peculiar problems not common to records of the usual institution or government department. Matters of accessioning, identification, sanctity of original order, labeling, and disposition call for an archivist with a flexible mind, a gentle eye, and the ability to adapt standard archival methods to fit the needs of the unique materials that may be entrusted to him.