

Adventures in Business Records: The Vanishing Archives¹

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THE present interest of historians in the evolution of American business is based upon a growing recognition of the role that industry has played in the development of American civilization. In matters of research, general information pertaining to a single business firm or an industry as a whole can usually be found by research in various libraries. Before a reliable history of an industry can be written, however, the scholar must have access to the business correspondence and records of individual factories. The search for these records is often a very laborious and frustrating experience, but the results can be most rewarding. Adequate archives of many companies have been preserved, and of these a number are available for research. Significant studies of such firms have been, are being, or will be made. In many more instances, company records are fragmentary, incomplete, or no longer in existence.

One of the outstanding aspects of American business has been the general development and adoption of mechanization. My research for the past few years has been concerned with one phase of mechanization — the significance of the utilization of power in American agriculture. The experiences which I encountered in searching for the original records of companies manufacturing power machinery for the farm will, I trust, suggest some constructive ideas that will prove helpful to the historian as well as the archivist.

In order to relate the story of power farming it was necessary to study the contemporary information buried in the correspondence of the companies that manufactured steam engines, tractors, automobiles, and other power equipment. One might assume, perhaps, that these business archives would be filed away in the collections of various historical societies or located in archival establishments. Unfortunately this was not the case. Relatively few of these

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records are to be found in public depositories. The scarcity of this material can be seen in the following conclusions based upon research which has progressed beyond the preliminary stage:

1. Between the years 1850-1920 there were approximately 75 companies that manufactured steam engines for agricultural purposes. No important business correspondence of any of these companies may be found in local, State or national depositories.
2. At least 125 companies built farm tractors during the last half century. None of the business records of these companies are preserved in depositories supported by public funds.
3. It is estimated that 1,200 companies manufactured automobiles or trucks during the last 55 years. If my survey is reliable, it appears that not a single, sizeable collection of the business correspondence and records of any of these companies is preserved in historical or archival collections. Certain personal papers of a few automobile executives, however, have reached the safety of library vaults.

Of course, the failure to preserve the business records of these 1,400 manufacturing concerns can be explained readily by the readers of this journal. Until recent years there has been, with some exceptions, little appreciation of the value of business records either by historians or persons in charge of historical manuscripts or archives. Where attempts have been made to preserve modern business records, those interested have been handicapped by well-known obstacles — limited budgets, inadequate storage space, insufficient personnel and, frequently, the disinterested attitude of businessmen.

The problems that plague librarians and archivists are quite convincing. Yet the understanding of their problems does not solve the research problems of the historian, who must swallow his disappointment and then face the stern realities of research on his own resources. If business records are not in public depositories, the scholar must track them down. This generally requires visiting the various factories whose products are related to the research at hand. If the business is still active, current executives may be of assistance. If the company is no longer in existence, the families which were once associated with the business must be contacted. Throughout the quest, the danger of finding the archives already destroyed is ever present.

If the care given to business records of farm machinery companies is typical of the preservation of other modern business records, then there is cause for concern on the part of all who value this type of historical material. At the present time, most of the

business correspondence of agricultural machinery firms has been preserved by accident rather than by any well-conceived plan of conservation by the various companies. These manuscript materials are frequently stored in attics and basements of old factory buildings or piled away in warehouses, where they have escaped the incendiary hands of business executives seeking more space. This is especially true with respect to the preservation of the earlier records. Prior to 1880, when most of the manufacturing firms were relatively small, much of the business was centralized in the home office, where the owners of the factory handled much of the correspondence. Since the letters were often personal in nature, the entrepreneurs frequently preserved company correspondence with their own papers. Thus a portion, at least, of the company records was passed along as part of the family possessions. For example, in the farm machinery industries, over 25,000 letters addressed to the J. I. Case Company, Racine, Wisconsin, during the years 1850 to 1880 have been retained. Similarly, 15,000 letters of George Frick, dating back to 1837, are in the possession of the Frick firm in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. In many instances, officials are no longer aware that old company records are still in their possession. In fact, one of the most difficult problems in this type of research is to encourage these men to make an inventory of the historical information which is in their own files.

In some respects research in business history has become even more difficult in recent years. The emergence of large corporations near the turn of the century increased the volume of business correspondence until it outgrew available filing space. As a result, company officials adopted a filing procedure which called for the systematic disposal of correspondence at regular intervals. Today much of this material is destroyed almost immediately. The remaining letters are kept on file for 3, 5, or 7 years before they are destroyed. To cite an example, government tax agencies require the preservation of certain records for seven years. Only items of a highly specialized nature, such as patent, legal, or financial records are preserved on a more permanent basis. This means that today farm implement companies have little manuscript material dated prior to 1940. This absence of source material is reflected in the difficulty experienced by companies in writing articles for centennial publications or in securing evidence to present in court in time of lawsuits. An official of one large firm in discussing this matter recently stated "Yes, we burn up most everything and then later on we pay thousands of dollars in an effort to find the same infor-

mation." This summer an assistant to the filing superintendent of the same company cheerfully announced, "Well, boss, I finally burned up those old machinery catalogues. You know, those old ones dating back to 1870." Only in recent years have a few companies purchased microfilm equipment to preserve business correspondence.

Since most manufacturing companies have not hired archivists to assist in the preservation of historical information, this haphazard and irresponsible handling of business correspondence by men with little interest in history is causing the constant destruction of these materials. Many businessmen who handle the company records have worked their way up through the ranks of the corporation or are graduates of college courses in business administration. In many instances lacking a sense of history they are thrust into highly specialized jobs in which the future of the business is of primary importance rather than a concern for its past. It is not surprising, therefore, that the mortality rate among business archives is high. An examination of the treatment accorded records in some of the farm implement companies provides convincing evidence of this fact.

For example, a manufacturer of farm and road building machinery since 1870 had approximately five tons of manuscript material stored in the attic of the home office building in Ohio. The value of this collection was called to the attention of the company officials two years ago. In spite of the suggestion that the collection be turned over to a historical society, the entire collection was burned a year ago on the pretext that the papers constituted a fire hazard in the building! The old records of a threshing machine company in Michigan lie in the basement of a mechanic's house, where the water dripping from the pipes above no doubt has made these records illegible. When I stopped in Peoria, Illinois, some months ago to inquire about the business records of a company that once sold five million dollars worth of farm machinery annually, I was told that the last of these materials had just been destroyed.

The merger of manufacturing companies also has raised havoc with business correspondence. Changes in official personnel, the relocation of the home offices, and the general reorganization of enterprises has made the original records so much out-of-date that all too frequently they are committed to the flames. For example, the records of a company in Charles City, Iowa, one of the most successful of the pioneer companies in the early farm tractor industry, were destroyed following such a merger.

These investigations indicate that the business records of the farm implement companies are vanishing at an alarming rate. No doubt these losses are characteristic of other modern business records. If this is true, then obviously attempts should be made to stimulate greater interest in the preservation of business archives.

In this the research scholar can aid materially by broadening his attitude toward his work. It is easy for him to become too much of an individualist. Traveling from one company to another, he often acts like a lone hunter searching out his quarry but never willing to share his game with others on the same hunt. This self-centered attitude should be displaced by one acknowledging the fact that research is a highly specialized job in a profession which involves definite responsibilities to other students, to education institutions, and to the general public. The individual scholar has an excellent opportunity to promote good relations among business officials, historians, and those who have charge of historical and archival records. In searching for industrial archives, the worker usually becomes well-acquainted with the director of public relations, the advertising manager, and other officials of different companies. These contacts may be used to influence these business men to appreciate the historical value of their records. They may be encouraged to preserve more of their correspondence or to install microfilm equipment. The executives of large corporations can be reminded of the benefits which could be derived from adding archivists to their staff. The policy of hiring a historian to write a company history may likewise be encouraged. Above all, the objectives and services of the manuscript repositories and archival establishments should be emphasized. The cooperation of businessmen with these agencies should be tactfully solicited.

Even though the historian fulfills his obligations to the businessmen, he still has not discharged his full responsibilities. Should he be successful in locating certain collections, he should share his success with numerous agencies that might be interested in acquiring these materials. A report of his research investigation might include a description of a particular collection of business papers and an index of the type of evidence which was examined. Timely suggestions relative to the personnel of the company who would be influential in transferring these records to the permanent files of a public depository would be most helpful. The thoughtful scholar, after completing his study, might also send a copy of his bibliography of source materials to the manuscript librarian.

In addition, when a scholar visits local historical societies, he

could encourage these organizations to be more conscious of the importance of historical materials, including business records, which may be present in their own community. Any information which might lead to the discovery of business records should be referred to the proper authorities. If persons engaged in research were fully aware of the important role they can play in salvaging source material, they might become more efficient ambassadors of good will in the present race against the catastrophic destruction of records.

Thus the individual scholar may, from his knowledge of records in private hands, further the progress of records preservation now being developed. In areas where surveys of business records are being made the scholar can enrich the inventory by adding specific descriptions of records based on a knowledge of the actual content of the records. If the repository begins to absorb sections of the business records uncovered by such surveys, the scholar with his specific knowledge of units in a particular industry can assist in a judicious selection of a set of typical papers. In areas where the State historical societies are not equipped to preserve a satisfactory portion of the records in their area, and where the company archives are not comprehensive enough to assure the scholar of the material he needs, the regional repository may provide the solution. The Midwest Interlibrary Center provides an example which might be followed. Here some thirteen midwestern institutions of higher learning, with some foundation help, have combined to erect in Chicago a simple fireproof storage building in which will be pooled and serviced certain type of library materials now in individual institutions. The expense of operation is shared on a pro rata arrangement. In similar fashion, historical, research, and archival organizations in the Middlewest might set up a storage center in some locality and place in it certain business archives now in their single possession and such additional records as might be acquired from business firms.

These suggestions, prompted by my experience in research, are presented in the hope that scholars can be alerted to full participation in cooperative programs pointing toward the solution of our records problem.