

# The Business Records Survey in Wisconsin<sup>1</sup>

By ROBERT POLK THOMSON

*Wisconsin State  
Historical Society*

A casual observer in 1900 could scarcely have predicted what Wisconsin would be like today. Then Wisconsin was mostly agricultural. The days of the lead miners had passed, and ambitious men looked to the vast timber lands for their fortunes. In 1899 Wisconsin set an all time record for timber cutting. But those who watched carefully realized that the timber would soon give out. In 1900 the yield was already dropping and during the next ten years the lumbering industry declined swiftly. As no new natural resources were available for exploitation it seemed likely that Wisconsin would become a peaceful agricultural State, away from the stream of industrial America. Now, fifty years later, an amazing change has occurred. Huge factories sprawl over the State. The clamor of rivets and trucks, machines and whistles bespeak in a rising staccato the importance of Wisconsin's industry. Names like Nash, Schlitz, Allis-Chalmers, Carnation, and Kimberly-Clark are recognized wherever manufactured goods are sold, and Wisconsin-made tractors, automobiles, machine tools, and ships circle the globe. Nor have her extractive industries lost their vigor. Wisconsin is still "America's dairyland"; meat packing is one of her most prosperous enterprises; and she ranks third in the nation in canning. Census statistics show the extent of the growth. In 1900, 142,000 workers manned Wisconsin industry; in 1947 it took 343,000 workers. In 1900 the value of her manufactured products was over \$360,000,000; in 1947 the value had reached a phenomenal \$2,260,000,000 — a rise of over 600 per cent. 1947 found Wisconsin firmly established as the tenth largest industrial State in the country. The half century's rapid developments are as yet little understood. What caused the growth? To what extent has it

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Madison, Wisconsin, October 9, 1950. The author wishes to thank Miss Alice E. Smith, Chief of Research of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for her aid in its preparation.

changed the character of the people? What effect has it had on the bases of her economy? The task of understanding and answering these and similar questions challenges Wisconsin's historians to wider concepts and deeper knowledge. It is not an easy undertaking, but our well-being and future development depend in large part on its success. Not only Wisconsin but the nation awaits the outcome.

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, aware of the rise of industrialism in the State, feels keenly its responsibility to encourage the study of business history. After World War II, with the State's centennial year at hand, the Society began a careful consideration of industry and the problem of preserving its records. The centennial displays of Wisconsin-made manufactures quickened interest in the State's history and brought its industrial role into sharp focus. Businessmen realized the significance of their own undertakings more than ever before and some of them asked the Society to help them prepare their histories. Together with some of these forward looking business men the Society sought the best means of promoting industrial studies. It asked to be put on the mailing-lists of many important firms and began collecting annual reports, company brochures, and the published minutes of executive board meetings. The whole program was given a major boost in 1948 when the David Clark Everest Prize in Wisconsin Economic History was announced. Mr. Everest, a history-conscious paper manufacturer, offered a prize of \$1,000 each year for ten years for the best manuscript on Wisconsin economic history.

After careful consideration the Society decided that the first step in planning for industrial studies was to survey Wisconsin's business records. The problem of business records is a pressing one. Obviously they are basic to any penetrating study of twentieth century America. Archivists face the formidable task of deciding which records should be preserved, and then of handling and storing the huge volume of records. No one had investigated in detail what kinds of records Wisconsin firms preserved or knew how large they bulked. Yet these data were prerequisite to any sound proposal for the preservation of records. Also, the Society needed to find out to what extent business records were available to historians. Would researchers have to rely on the haphazard interest of certain firms, or would enough businesses open their records to permit a systematic study of different industries? A survey of extant records would go a long way toward answering these questions and would provide a much sounder footing for the promotion of business history. Moreover, a list of available business records would be of

great value to any research student. The Society decided to institute such a survey.

Interested businessmen backed the project financially and pledged the support of the Wisconsin Manufacturers Association. Many trade associations offered both advice and publicity in their journals. Having secured this support, the Society next sought a practicable means of conducting the survey. Consultations with some of the country's leading business historians revealed few known attempts to survey business records, and no project of a comprehensive nature. A State-wide business records survey had never been tried before and many thought that it would not be successful. The skeptics warned that businessmen would dislike questionnaires, do not answer unsolicited mail, and would only be annoyed by the Society's efforts. Even the trade associations feared that no more than a third of their members would bother to answer any request for information. The Society was determined to go ahead and searched painstakingly for the best method of conducting the survey. The problems were manifold, for Wisconsin has roughly 65,000 business establishments of one kind or another. It was not practicable to circularize each, but deciding on some method of selection posed a myriad of problems. Several possibilities were considered and abandoned, and for a time the project was stalled at this point.

After much experimentation and disappointment, with the aid of various associations and agencies over the State the Society was able to develop a satisfactory list of Wisconsin businesses. The list finally adopted as being representative of Wisconsin businesses includes over 20,000 firms. Every branch of manufacturing, and almost all retail establishments of any size are included. Only small retail establishments and a few small manufacturing concerns were omitted. The list is coded by the Standard Industrial Classification Code, a nationally accepted coding system notable for its precision and adaptability. The list is just what the Society needed, for the firms listed are divided into trade groups which can be handled as units. The means of conducting the survey had been developed! While 20,000 names are a large number, they are far more manageable than 65,000.

In September 1949, the Business Records Survey got under way. The Society decided to begin with the manufacturing industries, since they are more easily appraised and are more concentrated than retail, service, professional, and other nonmanufacturing concerns. There are about 4,000 manufacturing firms and the plan was

to circularize each. A tentative questionnaire was prepared and submitted to the Society's sustaining members (mostly active business men with an interest in history), and to several Wisconsin historians. Their criticisms were evaluated and a revised form was prepared. The completed questionnaire, only one page long, listed ten types of records and asked the firm to check the records kept, indicating the number of years they had been preserved. Among those included were minutes, journals and ledgers, contracts, catalogues, and correspondence; and space was left for the listing of any other types of records. In addition, the firm was asked for its date of founding; any predecessors' names, and the location of their records; if the firm had ever prepared a historical sketch and, if so, when and where. Finally, the firm was asked if it had photographs illustrating its history. The president of the Society, a well-known businessman, wrote two covering letters for the questionnaire. One explained the project and was enclosed with the initial circular. The other was a follow-up letter and was sent if the firm had not answered within one month. Business reply envelopes were enclosed to encourage replies.

A great many replies were received immediately and the returns were studied with great care. New businesses and out-of-State concerns were thanked and eliminated from further questioning. Several who returned incomplete questionnaires were asked if they could furnish more extensive information. The large majority, those whose returns indicated the existence of a body of records, received a second letter asking if they would permit a qualified historian to have access to part or all of their records. This question had been omitted from the first questionnaire for fear it would keep some cautious firms from answering at all. The businesses took this request very seriously and many replied favorably. Anyone who answered this second questionnaire received a personal reply from the director of the Society thanking him for his interest. In addition, any particularly interesting reply received during the long mailing process was answered with a personal letter. The letters were designed to encourage the largest return possible and to keep the quality of the replies at a high level. The staff emphasized the necessity of building good relations with each firm circularized so that future research workers would have a friendly reception.

The returned questionnaires were better than anyone had predicted. And, most important, they revealed a deep concern over the problems of business records. Many of the firms filled out the questionnaires with a thoroughness indicative of hours of consultation

and investigations. The survey discovered much unsuspected interest and in many places created new interest. Firms wrote that they kept their records, not knowing exactly what to do with them, but because they had the room and thought they might be valuable. Other larger firms described well-organized record preservation programs, and one firm announced that it was in the process of microfilming its collection. Even more striking was the concern for business history. Firms wrote that they intended to write their company histories or that they were already doing so. At least three firms in the State are ready to offer grants-in-aid and a free hand to a competent historian, and several firms wrote that they would be glad to cooperate with the Society if it wanted to undertake the job. The canners of Wisconsin recently published their history and most of the canners referred to it proudly. Many other interesting returns gave leads on little known aspects of industrial history or pointed out individual contributions.

A great variety of material was enclosed with the completed questionnaires. Company brochures, pamphlets, and photographs were received in large numbers. The photographs made a good addition to the Society's collection, and information about those kept by business concerns opens up a whole new avenue for increasing the size and usefulness of the collection. The pamphlets, brochures, and other materials sent were added to the Society's new collection of such ephemerae. Although some of the material seemed useless — sometimes humorous — it shows a part of business life which a historian must appreciate before he can draw an accurate picture. Evaluating such material creates a real problem but the Society believes that some means must be found for classifying and preserving it.

The Society watched the development of the Business Records Survey with cautious enthusiasm. By spring it was certain that the survey was going to be a success. The quantity and quality of the returns from the manufacturers of the State looked good but it became increasingly evident that the project in its larger aspects was going to last a long time. The dean of the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin offered the University's support for a three-month period. A second student assistant was provided to help handle the work and the staff began discussing the possibilities of expanding the project. Best of all, the Rockefeller Foundation's Committee on the Study of American Civilization at the University promised to add its support to the project for the academic year 1950-1951.

By June 1950 the 4,000 manufacturers of the State had received their questionnaires and had had plenty of time to return them. The long months devoted to mailing and processing were over and the results were tabulated. The first statistical study made of the project indicated that 46 per cent of the firms filled out the questionnaires. That is to say, almost half of the businessmen responded to a circular letter. This single fact shows more strongly than any illustration the concern businessmen have for their records. Not only was the return far higher than anyone had predicted but the number of firms who indicated that they were keeping their records was quite large. Over 225 wrote that they would be willing to open their records at any time to a qualified researcher. While in some respects these 225 constitute the most valuable replies, they are not the only firms who may be interested in business history. First of all, it is probable that many other firms would open their records if confronted with specific proposals. Some wrote that their records were not readily accessible or that their office forces did not have time to help anyone struggle through their bulky records. Others thought that their records would be used immediately and were not willing to open them until some future date. The main importance of the 225 firms with open records is that they form a well-balanced group from which scholars can get aid and assistance in beginning industrial studies.

The response from the manufacturers encouraged the Society to extend the survey to nonmanufacturing groups. Commercial firms, retail establishments, service industries, and professional groups also keep records. Here the problems were different and much more complex. To circularize each business would be very expensive. Most of these businesses lack the concentrated importance characteristic of large manufacturing units, and some method of finding the truly important ones is essential. A few trade and professional societies were willing to suggest the leading firms in their own fields, and these were circularized. While returns have been too limited to warrant accurate generalization, it seems that the nonmanufacturing groups show as much interest as did the manufacturers. These positive returns encourage the Society to believe that such a survey is possible and would be successful, but to date it has not had the facilities to undertake the project seriously. Instead it has had to limit itself to developing the potentialities opened by the survey of manufacturing groups. Fortunately they are many.

The immediate problem was to make the information gathered as useful as possible both for researchers and for the Society's



growing program. A geographical file materially advanced both aims. A duplicate list of the 20,000 firms gathered for the survey was set up in a geographically arranged file. This file gives an industrial picture of each region of the State and contains information about records pertinent to their business history. It facilitates regional industrial studies and, equally important, it is of great potential use to a new type of records preservation the Society has undertaken — the regional depository.

While the development of regional depositories is not included in the Business Records Survey, the two are so closely interrelated that brief mention must be made of the depository plan. Under the supervision of the State Archivist, the Historical Society is co-operating with State colleges in setting up depositories at strategic points over the State. Now for the first time in many years the Society can care for many important, but bulky, records. The geographical files set up by the Business Records Survey may be taken apart and distributed among the regional depositories. If so, collecting business records will form a sizeable part of the depositories' activities. There are great hopes that these regional depositories, now only in the formative stage, will be the answer to the problem of caring for local and business records in bulk.

Only the immediate results of the Business Records Survey are known. A great deal of information about business records was collected; and not to be overlooked is what was learned about the attitudes businessmen have toward historical studies. The survey stirred up much interest in records over the State. If nothing else, its nuisance value has been great, for it pointed out to businessmen the potential importance of their records. The real results of the survey cannot be calculated until all of the projects now in progress have been finished and historians use the information. For all the efforts will have been of no avail unless students of Wisconsin economic history make full use of the information collected for them.