

# The State Archives of Colorado

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IN discussing the background for the creation and development of the Division of State Archives of the State Historical Society of Colorado, it is necessary to do an "Alice Through the Looking Glass" and pick out those events which primarily led to recognition of the need for such an organization. Perhaps the original impetus came from the Historical Records Survey, begun in the winter of 1935-36 by the Works Progress Administration. The project was organized to compile inventories of historical materials, particularly of unpublished government documents and records, which are basic in the administration of local and State government and which provide invaluable data for students of political, economic, and social history.

The inventories produced by the Historical Records Survey are the most complete lists of records of Colorado and of its county and municipal subdivisions that have ever been made. They attempt to sketch the historical background and to describe precisely and in detail the organization and functions of the agencies whose records they list. Unfortunately, the Survey on a Nation-wide basis was terminated in August 1939. Although the work in Colorado continued under the sponsorship of the Secretary of the State of Colorado until after 1940, even then the inventories of records did not cover every department. Some of the county inventories of records were published, but most of the inventories never reached publication. The project was extensive and the resultant manuscripts represent a job of magnitude that will probably never be excelled.

This work and its cessation unquestionably spurred the members of the board and the staff of the State Historical Society to take steps toward continuing the program insofar as State records were concerned. On June 17, 1942, the board of directors appointed a committee of two — Le Roy Hafen, State historian, and Stephen Hart, member of the board, practicing attorney, and member of the legislature — to draft a bill on State archives.

While this committee studied the problem of noncurrent State records it became increasingly evident that the years had but multi-

plied the evils reported in 1867 by Hal Sayre, adjutant general of Colorado Territory, who stated:

Immediately on my appointment to the office . . . in May last, I proceeded to take possession of the books and papers of the department, which I found — together with soiled linen, old clothes, dilapidated hats, and what appeared to be the remains of a convivial gathering — a chaotic mess carpeting the floor of the room formerly occupied by my predecessor as an office, in the Executive building at Golden City. The books and papers I collected together and moved to Central City, where I have since made my headquarters.

The committee found that through the years noncurrent documents and records had been treated in haphazard fashion. As a result many important historical records had been lost or destroyed, while unimportant ones crowded the State House vaults. It was obvious that scientific treatment of our public records was needed and that the State Historical Society of Colorado was justified in its willingness to undertake to give the State's historical records the care they deserve.

Accordingly, at the board of directors' meeting of December 16, 1942, a draft of an archives bill was submitted, and support and sponsors were solicited by members of the board of directors and the staff of the State Historical Society of Colorado.

In February 1943 the general assembly of Colorado enacted Senate Bill No. 50, providing for the preservation, destruction, or microfilming of all records of any "public office of the State of Colorado or any County, City, Municipality, District or legal subdivision thereof," and delegating the responsibility for this work to the State Historical Society of Colorado. In fulfillment of this obligation the Division of State Archives was created, and provision made for the appointment of a State archivist, effective July 1, 1943.

The first archivist appointed was Herbert O. Brayer, who was then archivist for the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. Because of previous commitments, however, Mr. Brayer was unable to assume his duties until September 1, 1943. The burden and challenge of just the physical bulk and condition of the State archives was one that is met in every State — records accumulated for decades in storerooms, basements, files, corridors, attics; dusty, dry, or mouldy; in no order and in overwhelming quantities. Not the least of the problem was the apathy exhibited by the custodians of such records! Mr. Brayer approached the problem with vigor and foresight and with the complete cooperation of the board of directors of the State Historical Society.

During the first year the archivist and his assistant, Virgil Peterson, devoted their energies to making a survey of the records situation and confined action to alleviating the more acute records problems. The splendid cooperation of various departmental heads was minimized by the distressing wartime shortage of personnel and equipment. But despite the handicaps of budgetary limitations, the lack of clear statutory provisions defining records responsibility, and the need for an over-all records program, substantial progress was made. The sum of \$5,300 was allocated to establish a small microfilm unit as a beginning on records processing for various State departments.

The archivist and his associate made visits to many of the county courthouses. From personal inspection, correspondence, and conversation with county officials it was determined that over half of the counties in Colorado were suffering from poor, inadequate records storage facilities; insufficient, obsolete, or inadequate equipment; and an acute shortage of personnel to handle even the current records problems.

The major accomplishment of that year was the preparation of proposals for a scientifically planned archival depository. In 1945 a special appropriation of \$46,000 was made by the legislature, to be used in conjunction with other funds then on hand for the construction of especially designed archives vaults within the State Museum. In fact, a building within a building.

After a total expenditure to date of nearly \$100,000 the State of Colorado has probably the finest archival layout west of the Mississippi River. In addition to the archives vaults there are a fumigator, a cleaning plant, a photographic darkroom, and complete microfilm facilities. Hundreds of thousands of important documents have been transferred to the Division of State Archives for permanent preservation; millions of copies of vital documents have been recorded on microfilm and the originals have been destroyed to save space, and many more millions of useless records have been destroyed with consequent savings to the State. A definite program of records disposal and retention has been worked out, educational work with various departmental records officers has been accomplished, and steady progress has been made on an archival program. But all of this is only a beginning. The work ahead mounts daily and there still remains a substantial backlog that will take years to eliminate. In retrospect, the beginnings were on too modest a scale, and as the division has grown and developed it has become increas-

ingly apparent that the "staff and house are too small for the growing family and activities."

To Herbert O. Brayer belongs in great measure the credit for the working organization and plant that has been established. During his various lengthy leaves of absence for work in other fields, his work was ably carried on by his assistant, Virgil Peterson, and at a later date by Garnet Brayer as associate archivist. In July 1949 Mr. Brayer resigned and the writer was appointed State archivist. The work initiated by Mr. Brayer has been continued and extended to other fields as money and personnel have become available.

The State Archives and Public Records Act of 1943 served well through the initial organization period. In the light of time and experience, however, several points proved less than satisfactory in administration of the program:

1. In the act authority was granted to the curator of history of the State Historical Society of Colorado. In actual practice this was not found practical to adhere to and a staff unit called the Division of Archives with an archivist in charge was soon established and continued to function on an extralegal basis for the period 1943-50.

2. The authority granted by the act for destruction, transfer, or microfilming of records was entirely permissive, with no authority given either the curator of history or an archivist to initiate action. As a result, a few progressive departments took action; but many, where action was badly needed, refused to countenance any planned records retention or destruction program. This very fact, because of space and equipment limitations, finally forced the legislature to adopt a more constructive program.

3. The act failed specifically to repeal a complex law of 1937 relating to county records; therefore the attorney general ruled that both acts applied to the processes of retention and destruction. This made it virtually impossible for the Division of State Archives to do much for the counties, as the 1937 law required a petition to the county court and a court order to dispose of even trivial county records.

4. The act's definition of what constituted records created some points of disagreement among the State Historical Society, the State Museum, and the State Library.

The new Public Records Act, which was passed by the legislature in March 1951, was written under extreme pressure, to act as a substitute bill for proposed legislation that would have wiped out the archives and public records program and required that *all* records in every department be destroyed after a 10-year period, this to be done by department heads with no screening and with space, equipment, and statutory limitations the only considerations. With so little time to study the matter carefully, the archivist used what

tools of reference were at hand (National Archives bulletins, materials from the Illinois State Archives, the *American Archivist*, and the like). In the final draft, the National Archives Act's definition of records was used as a basic pattern, together with a phrase excluding museum and library materials.

In the Public Records Act of 1951 the Division of State Archives is specifically established in the State Historical Society of Colorado, with the archivist in charge, and the county records law of 1937 is specifically repealed. In the event that a department should prove unwilling to initiate action, recourse for mandatory action by the archivist is provided. The Public Records Act of 1951 is possibly far from perfection, but it has smoothed our path and opened the door to more constructive work within the departments of government. It is the archivist's belief that training programs in records work (which we have initiated for departmental records officers) should be sponsored and extended by the Division of State Archives, and that a handbook of procedures should be issued. The governor in October 1951 requested each department head to designate a records officer (above clerical level) in each department or division of the State government. This individual is instructed to work closely with the State archivist and to assist in every way possible the promulgation of a constructive records program for the department involved. It is felt that the most effective program is one stimulated by education of the records officers and that the archivist must be alert and responsive to public relations in this field. With our very limited staff, however, we find ourselves having expended a great deal of time and study on the records problems of various agencies but unable to require that our recommendations be followed. What has happened is that the total number of solutions demanded has increased enormously, far beyond our physical ability to cope with them.

In the field of microphotography we have developed and extended our activities until the Division of State Archives operates and maintains one of the major installations of its kind in the Rocky Mountain region. It was soon determined that much of the needed work in various departments was so extensive that microfilming could better be done by installations within some of the departments. The archivist reviews and approves such installations and advises in their organization, set-up, and maintenance. The archivist or the deputy periodically inspects the work being done to ensure that standards required under the Public Records Act are being maintained. When microfilm work is done by the Division of State

Archives for various departments, it is done on a materials-reimbursable basis and ordinarily it is work that could not be done within the departments themselves. We do the specialized jobs that require more than run-of-the-mill technique. Even though the possibility for county and municipality work has been enlarged, we are at present, because of financial limitations, having to confine our work to emergencies or simply to clearing requests for destruction, giving advice, and furthering our educational work for records programs.

Looking to the future: We have reached the point where we must either expand our staff and physical facilities or resign ourselves to a more or less static program. The Division of State Archives expects to continue with its transfer, microfilming, and disposition of records. Because of financial and staff limitations we can now only refine, not extend, our operations; and our present permanent storage space is overflowing. What appeared to be very generous space allotments have proved to be only a generous beginning. If we are to continue to serve the public and our State government by preserving State, county, and municipal records, we shall have to have adequate storage areas for this purpose. Unquestionably, as time goes on there will be need for a separate archives building in order to do a thoroughly adequate job. Although at present we have a fine staff with excellent training and background, we are below the average of the profession insofar as salaries are concerned. Even so, the job that is being done is outstanding, and the State may well be proud of its excellent and comprehensive archival program. Indeed, the division has assumed the same role of leadership for the West that the Illinois State Archives has held for State archives departments generally. The complexity of modern government and its resultant outpouring of records and documents has expedited the development of archival programs.

We have a sound beginning covering traditional archival work, but we recognize that in the immediate future we shall increasingly have to devote a significant share of our time and energy to "records management" in both the noncurrent and current fields.