The National Archives at Age 20[1]

By WAYNE C. GROVER

National Archives and Records Service

IN ANY discussion of anniversaries, it's usually well to establish a birth date. I shall depart from this custom, however, and adhere instead to the strict rules of the nonpartisan bureaucracy. You may date our twentieth birthday as you wish, either from the laying of the cornerstone of the National Archives Building or from the signing of the National Archives Act. President Herbert Hoover officiated at the former event on February 20, 1933; President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the latter on June 19, 1934. Whichever you choose, you have my warm support.

Perhaps the wiser course would be to look somewhat farther back into the impartial past — to Charles Thomson, the heavy-handed scribe and keeper of the records of the Continental Congress; or to an act signed on April 28, 1810, by James Madison. This act was passed after the presentation of an alarming report by a congressional committee appointed "to inquire into the state of the ancient public records and archives of the United States." The committee, under the chairmanship of Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts, resolved "That it is expedient to provide by law for the building of, at least, three additional fireproof rooms, within the building, west of the President's house, of sufficient dimensions to contain all the public papers and records of the departments of state, war, and navy."

Money was appropriated for this purpose; but, unfortunately, it seems to have occurred to no one that it might also be well to centralize the "ancient public records and archives" under a single responsible custodian. Before this was accomplished, there was a slight delay of 125 years — even longer if one counts certain ancient archives estrayed temporarily to a certain famous library. But one should be thankful that the delays were not fatal and that even famous libraries give way to the inevitable. A centralized National Archives was at last conceived and has now been achieved.

A more realistic approach to this question of birthdays might be to say that the National Archives was born somewhat amorphously in the years 1937, 1938, and 1939, when the big accessions began

[1] A paper read at a joint session of the American Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists at Chicago, December 29, 1953.

rolling in and big government began piling up its incredible mountains of paper. That, at any rate, is when practicing archivists began to see what kind of world they had actually been born into; and that is when they began to go berserk — frightened at birth, one might say, and not by a ghost but by a very real monster. It is almost inconceivable that the Federal Government, in the 22 years from 1930 to 1952, should have created more than seven times as many records as it did during its previous 155 years of history. Yet that, according to our best estimates, is what happened.

Sometimes I reflect with anguish and a degree of personal mortification on the circumstances that have led American archivists — at least Federal archivists — to become known and acclaimed for the expert way in which they dispose of records. It was certainly not always thus with archivists, and it is still not what I should regard as the essence of the archival profession.

Then, on the other hand, I read the latest statistics on the rate at which records are being created in the Federal Government and back I go — berserk. The simple fact is that, with all our efforts, we still have not solved the problem. For example, in the fiscal year 1953, for which we now have reports from all Government departments, some 4 million cubic feet of records were created and filed — in one year a volume four times the capacity of the National Archives Building. With what to some may seem an overzealous attachment to records disposal — orderly records disposal after careful appraisal — we succeeded in getting rid of nearly 3 million cubic feet of records created in previous years. The net gain was thus happily reduced to only one new Archives Building full each year.

It is not our intention as archivists to countenance the appraisal of records merely by the use of statistics. We must keep what is essential and valuable, not only for purposes of scholarly research (not even primarily for scholarly research, as J. Franklin Jameson and Waldo Gifford Leland pointed out years ago) but for the purposes of governance itself. But statistics, especially when they are translated into dollars, give us that broad frame of reference into which all worthy projects must fit — the framework of the possible, the practicable, in the world of things as they are.

In the Federal Government, about the highest figure I have heard mentioned as the portion of all the records created that must be kept is 30 percent. On the 4 million figure, 30 percent would be slightly more than one Archives Building full per year — although of course we may assume, I hope, an eventual reduction in this rate

of records creation. The Archives Building cost something over $12 million when it was constructed in the early 1930's and would certainly cost two or three times that much today.

Let us then reduce the figure to 20 percent and assume that we are going to solve everything by the magic of microfilm. We have fairly exact statistics on the cost of microfilming. Twenty percent of 4 million cubic feet is 800,000; and that, at an average cost of $15 per cubic foot would come to an annual microfilming expenditure of $12 million. So far the largest annual sum we have been able to get for microfilming is $55,000, although we have not yet pressed the matter and can probably do better.

Ten percent, a figure I have used occasionally myself, would be less than one-half of a new Archives Building full each year, or $6 million annually in microfilming money. One percent would be a new Archives Building full every 25 years or an annual expenditure of $600,000 for microfilming. My guess is that the man in the street, even if he were standing in front of the Conrad Hilton Hotel and happened to be an historian, would say that perhaps 1 percent is not a bad figure — particularly, he would probably add, if you will please refrain from putting it on microfilm.

The reason we in the Federal Government have dwelt rather overloudly and overlong on this matter of disposal is very simple. It is not that we take any particular delight in throwing records away. This is only the more onerous side of the task of identifying and preserving the valuable records that should be preserved. But we must have the resources to accomplish this task in a sane and systematic way.

It has been my opinion that we are fortunate in having our interests as archivists and historians coincide with the interests of management and the taxpayer. In obtaining aid and encouragement — fiscal and otherwise — I have not hesitated to make this point to either the Budget Bureau, the Congress, or the newspapers. Neither did my predecessors, Dr. Connor and Dr. Buck, hesitate to make it; and I imagine they took no more real joy in facing up to the typewriter and carbon paper and stencils and photo-offsets than I do. The only difference is that I had the Hoover Commission to come along and look into the matter. The voice that issued there was loud and clear — and indeed, somewhat shrill. But it accomplished the purpose.

During the past 5 years we have been able, with the backing of Congress, to develop and provide a staff and a program for a national organization to deal with the records of the Federal Gov-

ernment comprehensively, from their creation to their final disposition. The National Archives is more than a unit of this organization; it is the very heart of it. But what we used to call the National Archives Establishment, thereby enabling ourselves to embrace the Federal Register Division and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, is now called the National Archives and Records Service, one of the four major components of the General Services Administration. In addition to the older units, we now have a Records Management Division in Washington and a field organization in each of 10 regions throughout the United States. We supervise 11 Federal Records Centers (one of which is in Washington) employing some 500 people. By the end of this fiscal year, these centers will be administering nearly 3 times the quantity of Federal records now in the Archives Building.

The records in these centers are available for scholarly research under the same conditions as those in the National Archives. I hesitate to make a lame pun, but the only condition that is missing is air-condition. Most of the records in the centers are retained, however, not because of their research value to scholars, but because they must be kept for varying periods of time to live out their legal, fiscal, or other temporary administrative usefulness. We no longer accept such records in the National Archives Building — records that may have to be kept for 5, 10, or even 20 years or more, but that do not appear to have lasting value as archives of the United States Government. Any that we did accept under the duress of emergency and war, we are moving out as rapidly as we can. As one result, the National Archives Building — full to the beams when I became Archivist — now has some space to accommodate additional accessions.

Should this sound encouraging, let me repeat that we have not yet solved all the problems thrust upon us by the revolution in office technology. We have not yet found ways to reduce the mass to reasonable proportions — to identify and segregate, in a practical and workable fashion, the essential and valuable records found in that range of 1 to 30 percent.

We have bought some more time, just as the empty National Archives Building back in the early thirties bought a little time. We have made some progress organizationally and technically; and we are gradually developing the staff, the opportunity, and the authority to cope with the underlying conditions and causes. During this trying period of our adjustment to the twentieth century, it is our hope that archivists and historians who prefer to focus

their attention largely on earlier and more comfortable centuries will patiently bear with us.

The National Archives, as I have said, is at the center of the rather complex organization which I have the honor at present to supervise. The National Archives is not merely an organization; it is an institution. An institution develops slowly. It must be nurtured and even to a degree coddled, in its formative years. One could not expect that overnight it would achieve full stature and contribute at once its full message to the waiting world of scholars, although somehow many of us in the early days expected this miraculous result.

Yet, and I am now going to be shamefully boastful, I would be willing to match the progress made by the National Archives against that made in an equal length of time by any other institution, living or dead; and I would say further that in many respects the progress made by the National Archives in its relatively short life *is* miraculous.

Certainly J. Franklin Jameson, steering his way through departmental jealousies and ambitions, could never have expected that in a decade's time the vast majority of the Government's older, valuable records could be gathered from all over the world and deposited in the building he fathered. Yet this was done, in the decade 1937-47. We are now engaged in accessioning the last large body of old Federal records still outstanding in the Washington area — the eighteenth and nineteenth century records of the General Accounting Office that have been appraised as worth keeping. A year ago, with the kind collaboration of my colleague, the Librarian of Congress, we finally achieved our heart's desire and accessioned the records of the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, including the most famous and prized of American documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

This vast accessioning program was carried on simultaneously with a steady increase in reference service. I doubt if many archival institutions would have attempted to keep their doors open to the public under the circumstances that faced the National Archives during this wartime decade. But the doors did stay open, much to the credit of a decimated but fervent group of archivists who chose to stay on with the agency during the war years.

Perhaps it was in this period that the National Archives somehow absorbed into its institutional mores a dedicated feeling for service — to the public, to scholars, to the Government. I receive

many letters telling me about this spirit that is found in the National Archives. I am exceedingly proud of it, and pleased to know that it continues unabated. It is of course our principal justification for existence, and possibly should be taken for granted. But it cannot be taken for granted. It is too much subjected to the buffetings of bureaucratic life to be taken for granted.

Recently, for example, we have felt it both just and necessary to discontinue altogether a certain amount of free research we were doing for persons who made genealogical inquiries of us by mail. We have also for many years set certain limitations on the amount of fact-gathering we should do for any type of inquiry by mail. Both congressional acts and common sense dictate such limitations.

It was, I am sure, never intended that the National Archives would provide extensive free research services for the public. Research is the scholar's job; ours is to see that he has the materials for research made available to him as speedily, economically, and helpfully as possible. We have never limited our search room, bibliographical, and reproduction services — in fact we have constantly extended them.

But it is easy under any limitations to damage the spirit of service. The difference is between a grudging service, negatively performed up to the bare limit; and a willing, even eager, service, unfortunately confined by budgetary and other policies within certain limits. There is a world of difference.

In the 10 years 1943 to 1953 the volume of our services to other Government agencies, scholars, and the public generally has more than doubled. I expect it to increase steadily, and proportionately more for scholars than for others. The reason is obvious. Students of American history are still not too much aware of the resources available to them in the National Archives. They cannot be, since we have not yet produced for them the biblographical information they must have. The National Archives staff performed a number of miracles during the war decade, but not this miracle.

The release from other pressures that has come since the establishment of Federal Records Centers and the Records Management Division has enabled the National Archives staff to make some progress in this direction, however. An increase in the staff itself, from a low of 215 positions in 1944 to 260 positions this fiscal year has of course also helped. Much of the additional staff has been absorbed by the increasing reference workload, but we have been able to devote considerable energy to our so-called finding aid program during the past 5 years. If luck is with us, we should

complete the task of publishing inventories of all our holdings in another 5 or 6 years. In addition, special lists and guides should continue to be forthcoming with some regularity. As yet, of course, we have neither undertaken nor planned any calendaring projects, but we do not rule out this method of making certain that the most important of our holdings are more widely known and usable.

It has been possible also in these past few years to give some increased attention to essential repair and preservation work. We estimated in 1952 that approximately 8 million items in our custody were in critical need of repair — not a particularly large number, considering the conditions under which so many of them were kept before the establishment of the National Archives. It will be a long time before we have this work even reasonably well in hand, although we have increased the rate of repair several-fold over the low point during World War II.

Meanwhile, however, Congress has given us a special appropriation to convert the most valuable of our motion picture holdings from the unstable nitrate film base on which they were made to a permanent acetate base film. Some of the nitrate film was literally disintegrating before our eyes — an explosive problem in more ways than one.

Just now we are also engaged in a rather breath-taking attempt to bring some rational order into the arrangement of all our record groups and series in the National Archives Building. It involves the rearrangement of some 600,000 containers and approximately 400,000 bound volumes. It is being done in accordance with very carefully worked out plans and should largely resolve the many problems of arrangement left over from the decade of large-scale accessions I mentioned earlier.

Now, birthday anniversaries tend to make old men like me garrulous. I should like to go on and on, no end to it — the program that has been developed by the National Historical Publications Commission; our expanded microfilm publication program in the National Archives; our delightful stroke of luck in acquiring that distinguished editor and gentleman, Clarence Carter, who now honors us by issuing the *Territorial Papers of the United States* from under our roof, rather than the State Department's.

But I shall confine myself to two final matters. They concern archivists in general, rather than the National Archives specifically. Since archivists in general do concern historians, the latter have an indirect interest; but it is indirect and so I shall be brief.

The first matter is that during the past two decades we have de-

veloped in this country a very respectable body of published knowledge about archival problems. It is not put together in book form. Much of it is in the *American Archivist.* Some of it is in the staff information papers, bulletins, and the *Handbook of Procedures* published by the National Archives. If in these later years we are beginning to pick up momentum over our earlier days, it is because we are building on hard-won knowledge that had to come out of our own American experience. The literature of older countries on the subject was helpful but not wholly applicable. Ideas and techniques threshed out slowly and even at times somewhat painfully in the first 15 years have been of much help in the past 5, I assure you. A few more years and some of our knowledge will begin to crystallize in the handier form of printed books.

The second matter is training. Most American archivists, given an academic grounding in history and political science, have secured their professional training by a process of osmosis. I am not saying that this is a bad process. It could be argued it is the best. But a certain amount of formally organized training seems desirable, if only to speed the process and make certain that minimum standards are maintained.

Such training, to the great good fortune of the archival profession in this country, has been supplied to a most helpful extent by Dr. Ernst Posner of American University, working jointly with the Maryland Hall of Records and the National Archives. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Ernst Posner, his classes and institutes, in spreading the gospel of good archival administration throughout this broad land. The only difficulty is that we find it impracticable to insist that all our new employees take his courses.

Also, of course, it is not exactly the function of a university to conduct inservice training for the National Archives. To make sure that all of our new recruits meet the minimum standards we desire, we have this year instituted a formal inservice training program in archival administration as we practice it at the National Archives. New recruits will take the course during their probationary period and either pass upward to a promotion or pass out. This should be quite an effective incentive to study and learning.

There is an obvious danger, however, in too much emphasis on technical literature and technical training. For one thing, overemphasis might tend to build up a closed craft of skilled technicians who would think more about keeping interlopers out than getting good people in. I shall refrain from citing examples among other

professions; but if I find this kind of spirit developing, I shall certainly advocate an immediate return to osmosis.

The archivist deals with the recorded past. It is not sufficient that he consider himself a technician maneuvering empty vessels on a shelf, no matter how dextrous his technique, how valuable and sound his principles of arrangement. The vessels are full. An archivist who doesn't have some inkling of the significance of their contents is, in my book, not worth his salt. In the National Archives, the best foundation on which to stand in order to acquire such an inkling is still the study of American history and government.