Some Reflections on Business Archives in the United States[1]

By OLIVER W. HOLMES

National Archives and Records Service

THERE was some thought on the part of your program committee that this paper on "Business Archives in the United States" should be presented by a practicing business archivist, and I could wish it might have been. It has been impossible for any one person in recent years, whether working with business records or watching developments from the sidelines, to keep up with what has gone on in this fast-moving field. Although there has been a great deal of writing on the subject, most practitioners have been too busy doing things to write of their experiences. Others are hardly free to write objectively. There is noticeable, too, I feel, the usual reluctance on the part of many business enterprises to publicize such programs. There is no use letting competitors in on a good thing. Much of the writing that gets done is by those whose services are for sale to business, and it has to be discounted accordingly. We have here a field in which calm, impartial appraisal may, in the nature of things, become very rare.

Despite the obvious difficulties, it is time that the profession had a systematic and objective survey of developments in the field of business archives and records management. Such a survey, I feel, would need to be carried out by a combination of questionnaire and field work. There would be many interviews, and one would have to see facilities and study programs in operation. Properly approached, most business firms would doubtless be cooperative, especially if assured of an objectivity that would produce fruitful conclusions. Perhaps the National Records Management Council could make such a survey. Objective reviews of developments in this field at periodic intervals represent the kind of information that it was hoped originally the council would collect and disseminate. It is my belief that such reviews, periodically placed in the hands of businessmen, would make the council better and more favorably known than any number of high-pressured, sensation-triggered publicity

[1] A revised and expanded version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Dearborn, Michigan, September 15, 1953.

brochures. Anyway, I urge the idea upon the recently reorganized board of directors of the council.

Meanwhile, I speak only as an outsider — with no Kinsey statistics and no Leahy statistics — as one who has tried to keep abreast of the major developments and see them perhaps disinterestedly and with some time perspective.

If it seems inappropriate for a Government archivist to speak on the subject of business records, let me, before starting on my main theme, make a few observations. Business and Government may at times look askance at each other, but business archivists and Government archivists have more in common than is generally realized. The technical problems of storage, preservation, repair, and reproduction are practically identical in the two fields. There is much that is similar in the organization, arrangement, and description of the archival holdings — certainly the same basic archival principles govern in both fields. Service practices and problems may begin to vary, but there is still a large common denominator of experience that is applicable. I would say that the same standards of appraisal should govern in deciding what should be preserved and what can be destroyed, and that the same pressures are always operating to influence these appraisals one way or the other. There should be much in common in the training of the Government archivist and the business archivist. Basically, both should have a sound historical background, topped off with special training in archival theory and practice, or they are unworthy of their charge. Ideally the business archivist, in addition, should have emphasized economics and the study of business institutions while the other should have emphasized political science and the study of Government institutions. Actually, the only big difference is a difference in emphasis in subject matter. Practically speaking, there should be a fairly free crossing over between the two fields because each has much to teach the other. Cross-fertilization in the past has produced tremendous benefits, and there should be more of it in the future.

Indeed, if there is any one theme in the past 15 years of business archives development that is more striking than any other, it is the degree to which the outlook, philosophy, practices — yes, even the jargon — of the Government archivist, concerned with public records, have been carried over into the field of private business archives. Many of the practitioners in the field of business archives received their indoctrination in Government archives circles. They have taken their gospel and their enthusiasm into the new field of business archives, which seemed to be ripe for the harvest, and have

found a good reception from management, which had a growing problem for which there had been hitherto no formula in their books. At least the schools of business administration in this country had provided none. But governments had a very old one — long applied in Europe — which, however, the United States Government had only belatedly applied when it established the National Archives in 1934, so that the example had not been before private enterprise in this country before that date. Naturally, it took some years before that example could carry over into the private field. The problem in private enterprise was recognized before World War II and became more acute because of World War II, but it was only after the war that the example of the Federal Government's archives program began to take hold as a possible solution.

On the other hand, some of the practices which most distinguish Government archives in the United States from those of older institutions in Europe are those which possibly have been taken over from record practices of American business. Schedules of records retention and disposal, for instance, were in common use in certain areas of American business before the National Archives was established, although they in turn may have been suggested by the earliest regulations prescribed by the Interstate Commerce Commission for public carriers. Further research is needed on the history of the records schedule concept to trace its origin. Record making and record filing practices of American business have greatly influenced similar practices in Government agencies, as businessmen have entered Government to a greater extent in this country than in Europe and brought the practices of private business with them. The records storage warehouse at a distance from working offices, to house semicurrent records, an institution already in use 15 years ago by a number of large companies, influenced the adoption more recently of the records center idea in Government archival programs. Curiously it appears that the term "records center" is now being carried back into business. Different businesses, working separately as is their wont, often had different terms for their ideas and practices. The archival profession is giving them standard terms to take the place of their home-brewed ones, and hand-in-hand with standard terms there is an increased standardization of concepts. You see, then, that it would indeed be tragic if a nonfraternizing policy between Government archivists and business archivists was ever encouraged or allowed to develop because, obviously, each will always have ideas to contribute to the other. The Society of American Archivists should continue to be a "roof" under which all can meet.

The Ford Motor Company in being so gracious a host to an organization still composed chiefly of Government archivists is certainly doing its part toward emphasizing the common professional principles, practices, and, I hope, philosophy that should always prevail in both fields.

I touch on the subject of current records management only to turn away from it, for with respect to this paper the term "business archives" will have to be more narrowly defined. I am one of those who feel that the term "archives" may include current records, if the user wishes it to do so, and many writers properly use the term "business archives" to refer to the totality of business records. To limit my subject and avoid confusion, I choose, however, henceforth in this paper to consider the term "business archives" as referring only to the noncurrent records of American business. I could argue that archivists have a considerable interest in current records and therefore in records management, but I could not maintain that it should be a controlling interest. Their controlling interest begins — that is, they should take control — at the point where records cease to be current and become noncurrent — a point that we all know must exist, theoretically, but that is, in practice, almost always difficult to locate with certainty. I intend to leave the whole subject of current business records to the records management forces, but with the warning that this differentiation so easily made in theory will rarely exist in practice, because (1) smaller companies may never be able to afford both records managers and archivists, so that the same person will have to be familiar with and responsible for both fields, (2) that even for large corporations, it will almost never be possible to establish the two programs, one for current records and one for noncurrent records, at the same time, that a company will begin with one program or the other, and that the division of labor and organization will come later as the program matures and proves itself, and (3) that there must be some coordination of both programs at a higher level to insure cooperation and integration. As an example, I would insist that a degree of overlapping is desirable at the uncertain point of transferring control just as in a relay race both runners must, for a sufficient time, have their hands on the baton to insure that at this critical point there be no costly fumble.

One phase of this subject that must be sold to business firms if we are to have company archives programs but that can be passed over quickly with this audience is that of the values of business archives both to scholarship and to business. It is always easy to devote

much of a paper on business archives to this part of the topic, and everyone has new arguments and new illustrations, depending on his contacts and interests. You have had something of the argument presented in earlier papers at these meetings, and in other papers before this Society in earlier years, beginning with one by Herbert Kellar in Washington as long ago as 1937. I spoke my piece on this subject, and have little to add and nothing to subtract, in 1938 in my article "The Evaluation and Preservation of Business Archives." [2] The line of reasoning has never been more logically and convincingly presented in short space, however, than in Ralph Hower's *The Preservation of Business Records,* published by the Business Historical Society in 1937 and several times reprinted, the last time in 1941. This publication, which was widely distributed, possibly had more influence in America than any other piece of writing in this field, and with some revision it should be again issued and kept in print as a kind of basic educational document.

In speeches before their colleagues and articles in professional journals an impressive number of American economic and business historians and custodians of historical materials since the 1920's have propagandized in the best sense for the preservation of business records as a necessary part of the source materials of American history. Herbert Kellar, Herbert Heaton, N. S. B. Gras, Arthur H. Cole, Henrietta Larson, Thomas D. Clark, Thomas Cochran, William D. Overman, and Stanley Pargellis come to mind. Others said less in print but worked effectively in personal contacts and through institutions and organizations for the same end. One must mention the work of the Joint Committee on Materials for Research (of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council), set up in 1929 with Solon J. Buck as chairman and, from 1932 until his death in 1940, under the leadership of Robert C. Binkley. There was the American Library Association's "Committee on Archives and Libraries," whose chairman, A. F. Kuhlman, did some good work on business records for a time. There have been committees of the Special Libraries Association, of the Economic History Association, and of this Society, all more or less active at different times, depending on the initiative of their leaders. Finally, there was the Committee on Business Records of the American Historical Association, which performed a most concrete service when, in 1949, it was responsible for securing a grant of $35,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation with which to estab-

[2] In *American Archivist,* 1: 171-185 (Oct. 1938).

lish the National Records Management Council, which organization, it was hoped, would in the future spearhead the crusade.

In all countries, apparently, academic forces concerned with social and economic history have taken the lead and given momentum to the movement for the preservation of business archives. We saw in Professor Sabbe's paper, yesterday, how this also was so in country after country in Europe. And in no country, it seems to me, has there been more energetic and practical leadership in this educational movement than in the United States.

Has there been a sufficient return? Have the results been commensurate to the effort? If the fruits are not so visible as yet, has the seed been sown on fertile ground within the business world so that at least the coming generation may reap the results? Should we be encouraged or discouraged at this time? These are the questions I would like to try to answer in the remainder of this paper by a rapid review of trends and achievements.

It may be helpful to divide our appraisal of results into two main topics, (1) the collecting of business archives by libraries and other collecting institutions and (2) the preserving of business archives by the companies themselves in what we usually call "company archives." It may be useful also to keep in mind the year 1938 as a practical dividing line. Prior to that year the concept of a company archives as one solution to the problem does not seem to appear in the American literature. Undoubtedly by that time it existed in the thoughts and conversations of a few individuals. Just as certain is it, however, that the academic world was not thinking up to then in terms of depending on business to help do the job of preserving valuable business archives. The thinking was in terms of getting the older records away from business, of bringing them together in research centers where scholars were in control. Business leaders might be appealed to to help support these centers in roundabout fashion, but it would be like appealing to them to support other enterprises of admitted social and intellectual value to the community at large.

Between the end of World War I and 1938 the more progressive historical societies and university libraries, under the promptings usually of individuals or groups interested and active in research into aspects of social and economic history, collected business records. Some records of this character, even earlier, had drifted into custody unsought as parts of collections of personal and family papers, but few institutions actively sought such material. The correspondence of an older company might be acceptable because

famous persons had been connected with the enterprise or the letters might reflect important historical happenings. Thus, the correspondence of merchants and mercantile houses of the American Revolution was one of the first respectable categories, always welcome in the historical societies of eastern seaboard States. The correspondence of fur companies and land companies was sought by historians of the West, who usually had to travel east to find them. Local historical societies became interested too in the early enterprises and industries of their region, which inevitably tied in with the famous personages and families of their area about which they were expected to preserve data.

These random interests broadened in the boom period of the 1920's; and the depression period, instead of discouraging the movement, if anything emphasized the dependence of American life upon business enterprise. It encouraged the study of business phenomena in detail — the sources of capital, the use of credit, the techniques of management, labor sources and problems, technology in business and its impact, markets and how they were won and lost. American business records could throw light on these suddenly important topics, and to collect them became respectable. A historical society that held out against this interest, perhaps dominated by some pensioner of the old aristocracy or some idealistic devotee of leisure and *belles lettres,* was the exception and was definitely pictured as a closet of cobwebs by the new historians. Most of these conservative institutions were in the East and South. In the Midwest the historical societies, publicly supported, were less the captives of a class and were more alert to professional winds.

To the historical societies would have to be added a modest number of the large reference libraries of the country, some of them tax supported but others operating in whole or in part with private endowment funds — the New York Public Library, the Detroit Public Library, and of course the Library of Congress. To the older manuscript curators, however, there remained something plebeian about collecting business records. They still preferred to fill their shelves with the papers of statesmen, military leaders, literary figures, and prominent old families. Those aristocratic institutions, the Clements Library and the Huntington Library, held aloof. It was something of a surprise when the Newberry Library broke down, but that was in a later period and because of Stanley Pargellis.

This was a period, however, when a number of university libraries, closer to the new academic interests and needs, entered the pic-

ture and almost took the lead — notable among them, the University of Virginia library, where Lester J. Cappon brought together records especially of the old iron industry of the region; the University of North Carolina, where J. G. de Roulac Hamilton brought together plantation records and other business records of the old South; the rival collections at Duke University, where perhaps more attention was paid to the new industries of the South; the University of Kentucky, where Thomas C. Clark brought together records of small business; and the University of Louisiana collections at Baton Rouge, where there are also many plantation records. There were later comers into this list, for example, the University of Michigan, where we saw emphasis on lumbering records.

There remain to be mentioned of this period two unique enterprises, each of which deserves a paragraph.

The first is represented by the program of the Business Historical Society, founded in 1926 at Boston, and of the Baker Library, erected in 1927 as the library of the Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration. By agreement the manuscript division of the Baker Library became the depository of business records collected through the society's efforts. The program was unique in that the society and the library actively sought out and collected only business records. The present custodian of these collections is the chairman of this meeting, and the best guide to them, as well as description of the growth of the holdings, is to be found in his *List of Business Manuscripts in Baker Library* (213 pp.), published in 1951. Other discussions of criteria of selection and the problems of caring for business records are to be found in several provocative articles by Arthur H. Cole, former curator and present librarian of the Baker Library.

This library, it was hoped, would become a greater center, a sort of laboratory, for the study by the case method of the development of American business. From these records would be written articles, monographs, volumes, on the enterprises whose records were preserved, and these in turn would become building blocks upon which could be erected the history of American business. There was much the same motivation in forming collections of business records in other university libraries that I have mentioned; in fact the example of this institution at Harvard probably did much to spread the idea. But the Baker Library still leads all other libraries in its holdings of business records and represents the fullest or most complete development of the idea of preserving American business records by the collecting method. It was hoped that other

collecting institutions, devoted solely to business records on the Boston model, might spring up in other industrial areas of the country, but none has, and as time passes it appears less and less likely that we shall have another institution just like this.

The second enterprise deserving special mention is that represented by the former McCormick Historical Association Library, located until 3 years ago in Chicago. Founded as long ago as 1912 by the children of Cyrus Hall McCormick, head of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, and opened to scholars in 1919, this library contained the records of the old McCormick company from 1831, when the reaper was invented, to 1902, when the company was united with other farm machinery enterprises to form the International Harvester Company. Added to the company records, however, are the personal papers or family archives of the McCormick family for the same period and earlier. Had this institution been established after 1938, it might have been named the McCormick Archives, but it was an archival establishment supported by a family and not by a firm. As such it was unique in America.

Although the full facts are not known to me, apparently as the older generation passed from the scene, the support of the library lessened. The separate building in Chicago was given up a few years ago; and, after some investigation as to where the best location and most suitable arrangements might be found, the library was moved to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, in Madison. There it is perhaps even more available to scholars than it was; and its old head, Herbert Kellar, is still available to serve as a guide and adviser to students in its holdings and in the materials of business history in general, which he has made his specialty over the years. There is added logic to the location in that the Wisconsin society is adding other business records to its collections at a brisk rate and has become perhaps the major center for the study of the history of business enterprise in the upper Middle West.

By drawing a line at 1938 I do not mean to imply that this "collecting" of business records ceased or even lessened after 1938. I suspect it has continued to increase. The Newberry Library entered the field in a big way after that date by swallowing, and digesting, the early archives of several major midwestern railroads. Wisconsin's serious concern with its program has arisen since the end of World War II. If there has been a slowing up in some eastern institutions, it has been more than balanced by the entry of new institutions into the field, some modestly but others with determi-

nation. These are chiefly in the West, where the third and fourth generations are now becoming more conscious of the significance to them of the business enterprises of the pioneer generations. The slowing up in certain older institutions has often been because of the lessening of available space, as at the Baker Library, where we have emphasis for the first time on the winnowing of certain large collections.[3]

It is indeed important that there be no slowing up in this collecting activity. We are dependent upon its energetic continuance for the preservation of most of the records of American business activity before 1890 and those of small business and unsuccessful business enterprise after 1890. Let no one underestimate the significance of these categories. Let no one think that because "company archives" are appearing upon the horizon there is no longer need for the old-fashioned "collecting" of business records.

I have given this much space to summarizing this activity because I want to emphasize that it represents a major archival achievement of our generation. Support must still be given these institutions that they may continue for additional generations to perform their appointed tasks.

It was obvious even by 1938, however, that these collecting methods and these collecting institutions were not going to solve the problem of caring for the twentieth-century records of American big business. The major reason was lack of space. The valuable records of any one of a hundred leading corporations in the country today would swamp any collecting institution that attempted to care for them. In addition, however, the techniques of handling modern records in bulk were different and demanded special experience. Archival rather than manuscript control methods were called for. Furthermore, as one came down into the twentieth century, businesses naturally were more reluctant to have their records taken away from them as was done under the "collecting" method. They might need certain older records, or the records might be used against them, if they were to be opened to the public. The company did not feel it could afford to lose its control. On the other hand, the social and economic historians did not want to leave the ultimate preservation of valuable records to chance, nor did they want to wait forever for access; and some of our large businesses seemed destined to go on forever. In this dilemma, knowing that he could not care for these bulky records, and that he probably could not

[3] Robert A. Lovett, "The Appraisal of Older Business Records," in *American Archivist,* 15:231-239 (July 1952).

get them if he could, the historian set about persuading the large companies to consider the values of their own records and make provision accordingly for their care.

This was the burden of the very fine 1937 pamphlet by Ralph Hower that has been cited. It urged that the companies themselves should consciously and carefully select the records to be permanently preserved because such selected records were of value first to the company itself and second to the historian who would study the development of the company or the industry or would study certain aspects of its experience in relation to the larger experiences of society. It emphasized that such a selection and control program, properly administered, should not only pay its way but ought to profit a company. In this pamphlet a full-fledged records management program with some archival features is outlined in the section "How Records Should be Preserved," but the word "archives" is missing from the text and so is the word "archivist." Hower speaks of the need for centralized control but says, "The actual execution of the program may be done under the capable direction of a junior executive." In other words, although several publications of the National Archives are cited in the footnotes, there is missing any clear recognition that the formula so recently inaugurated by the Federal Government for handling its record accumulations might be applicable also to the records of large private corporations.

In my article of 1938 there was more emphasis on the careful selection of business records for preservation, and the new appraisal program of the National Archives for the records of the Federal Government was cited as an example of the conscious winnowing that was desirable instead of leaving the future record to chance. It was also stated in this article that the larger business organizations in the coming generation "will be struggling with the same complicated problems of record housing and arrangement that governmental units are now concerned with, and they will, for the most part, have the necessary money to work out reasonably satisfactory solutions. Trained archivists should contribute to this result." [4] It was possible in this article for the first time to cite an example: "The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company has recently employed a trained archivist to grapple with its record problems." [5] Calling in an archivist for advice was still a long jump from a full-fledged company archives, however, and it is not at all clear that in 1938 any business executive was making that jump even in his mind.

[4] In *American Archivist*, 1:180 (Oct. 1938).
[5] *Ibid.*

The Firestone Archives was, I believe, the first "company archives" deserving of the appellation, and William D. Overman, who was put in charge, may be designated the pioneer business archivist in this country. It was he who in 1937 had been called in on an experimental basis as noted above. At the Springfield meeting of the Society of American Archivists in October 1938 he made the first report to this fraternity of a professional archivist's venture into this new field. His proposed program for the company was a modest one compared with later developments. The company thought about it for several years while Overman went back to his former job. Then in March 1943, in the midst of World War II, the company called him back on a permanent basis, and the first company archives program was inaugurated.[6]

The war aggravated records problems greatly in all large companies. Records control and management programs were badly needed, but there were few experienced persons available to install them during the conflict. It was obvious that the need for archival programs in business would be all the greater when the struggle was over because the accumulation of records had been greatly accelerated and a large percentage of them would become noncurrent with the return to peacetime operations. There was much talk among archivists during the war years about potential postwar opportunities in this field, talk both of the possibilities of archivists' positions opening up with individual companies and of the possibilities of selling an advisory service to any and all companies desiring the outside view of an experienced practitioner.

In the later war years and early postwar years, special record programs were being inaugurated in many companies. They were empirical programs, tailored to fit individual conditions and circumstances. The persons placed in charge went to work on their job as they saw it, and only later did they discover that others were also wrestling with these problems, that they were members of a growing fraternity. Some of them came to the National Archives for help. Many others began to read the *American Archivist* and to adapt ideas and practices with respect to Government records encountered there to the conditions of the business world. Some of them took the American University summer course conducted by Ernst Posner and similarly pondered the general applicability to all organizational records of principles enunciated therein. Still

[6] W. D. Overman, "Some Problems in the Preservation of Business Archives" (read Oct. 26, 1938). 8 pp. typescript in National Archives Library; also "The Firestone Archives and Library," in *American Archivist,* 16: 305-309 (Oct. 1953).

others began to get together and exchange experiences at the annual meetings of our Society.

None of these record programs can be considered a true archival program, perhaps, but most of them possessed elements of an archival program — a records retirement or disposal schedule, a special depository or building, with special equipment, for noncurrent records needing still to be kept, a specialized reference service rendered on them, specialized use of microfilming and other techniques to reduce the bulk or give special security to or service on records, special arrangement and finding controls with a special crew in charge. In general, this program operated for all or most of the company, taking over older records from the many current file rooms and stations. Usually the depository was a special corner or floor of an office building; less often it was a separate building, an outmoded factory structure or warehouse fireproofed and otherwise converted for the purpose. Sometimes the building has been a structure of historical or other popular interest, which can be used also as a museum to contain objects as well as records associated with the company's past. The old stone powder mill of the Dupont Company on the Brandywine is one example. Fair Lane here on the River Rouge is another. The specially constructed archives building for business corporations may come eventually, but it is still a good way in the future.

The motivations behind these record programs differed. Most often, perhaps, the programs were inaugurated as an effort of management to maintain or restore control over the bulging file rooms and their untidy overflow areas, an effort made more desperate by war demands for space. Sometimes, however, the desire to prepare company histories for anniversaries led to a systematic roundup of the older records, later followed by a considered program to care for and exploit them. Occasionally the publicity department of a company awoke to the fact that early records emphasizing a company's long or historic past were of value in advertising and other public relations activities. Often the factors were multiple in a single company.

To catalog and characterize these archival programs company by company is beyond the scope of this paper. The survey that I have proposed should do that. What I have in mind might perhaps be a companion volume to that on company museums prepared by Lawrence Vail Coleman with the help of a grant from the Carnegie Foundation and published by the American Association of Museums.[7] The relations between company archives and company

museums are often very close, but, preferably these enterprises should be separate or one of them is likely not to be completely developed.

Despite all this archival activity, stemming chiefly from the records management approach, and despite the increasing popularity of the term "archivist" as the title for the person placed in charge of the program, there are few properly developed archival programs in operation as yet in the business world. They can certainly be counted on the fingers of two hands. We are still at the beginnings. But they will grow. There may be hard times, as there were with company libraries during the depression. They survived, however, and are today stronger than ever. Once libraries and archives and museums are fairly started it is difficult to dismantle them completely. They have a way of growing, now faster, now slower, but always growing. Time is their ally. If we can get these enterprises fairly started in a substantial number of our larger corporations, the future of the "company archives" idea is secure. It will be an accepted part of business organization as it is of Government organization.

Unquestionably the most fully developed business archives program in the country today, albeit one of the youngest, is that of the Ford Motor Company. Since it has already received considerable attention in printed literature [8] and since most of you will visit the headquarters of operations at Fair Lane, I shall not go into details. You will be amazed at the progress made in little more than a year. I like to think that in the long run perhaps the greatest influence of the Ford Archives will be as an example to other companies — a demonstration and a model and perhaps a training ground for personnel. It will become that and more if continued under the same competent and imaginative leadership that has characterized its operations to date.

It has been my thesis in this paper that the preservation of the record of American business can be accomplished only by the energetic promotion and operation on a large scale of two very different programs that are nevertheless complimentary to each other — one the "collecting" program of the libraries and the other the "company archives" of big business. The first must not now be allowed to lag. The second has a boundless future before it.

[7] Lawrence V. Coleman, *Company Museums* (Washington, 1943. 173 pp.).

[8] Henry E. Edmunds, "The Ford Motor Company Archives," in *American Archivist,* 15:99-104 (Apr. 1952); Wayne C. Grover, *Fair Lane; a Business Archives* (Dearborn, 1953. 5 pp.); and *Fair Lane Ford Motor Company Archives* (Bulletin No. 1, Dearborn, 1953).