

A Manuscripts Collecting Venture in the Middle West: Indiana, 1950-1953

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SINCE the advent of the "atomic age," some custodians of the nation's historical manuscripts — sources of American history — have pondered the dangers in Washington, D. C., and other large cities and have considered what might be done to avert or avoid them. Big businessmen have felt similar concern for personnel, records, and papers.¹ In this article there may be found a suggestion.

In 1948 an officer of Indiana University Library, on hearing that the writer had discovered near Cannelton, Indiana, an important collection of historical manuscripts — some papers of Hamilton Smith in the hands of an heir² — asked him whether he could induce the owner to place it in the library and could extend his researches throughout the State, to build up the library's special collections.

The writer was more than ordinarily interested in this suggestion. He had had much experience in such work; he knew how cramped was space in most repositories of materials of national importance and how selective and sporadic the collecting had been. Many important collections had remained unsolicited, some had even been refused by repositories when offered, and some were in the hands of people who were unaware of their value. Here was an opportunity to gather such collections into a university repository in a small town, at a safe distance from large cities, in the region or section of origin. This repository could obtain microfilm reproductions of related collections in the large cities; and historians could use

¹ Joseph E. McLean, "Project East River — Survival in the Atomic Age," a review of the 10-vol. report of Project East River, sponsored by the Federal Civil Defense Administration, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 9:247-252 (Sept. 1953); Federal Civil Defense Administration, *Critical Target Areas . . . Official List as of July 1, 1953* and *Annual Report*, 1953; Hanson W. Baldwin in *New York Times*, June 13, 20, 1954; and George E. Cruikshank in *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 1954.

² Mrs. John P. McAdams, a granddaughter, of nearby Hawesville, Ky.

them *in situ* for the writing of new history to redress the balance of the old.

The writer had been searching at Cannelton, on the eastern edge of the coal field below the falls of the Ohio River, for the records and papers of a steam cotton mill which was established there in 1848 and is still in operation.³ It was not a mere local affair. It was the deliberate building of an outpost of the advancing western industrial frontier rivaling William Gregg's new Graniteville cotton mill on the South Carolina Railroad not far from its Hamburg terminal opposite Augusta, Georgia. The Georgia Railroad planned to build from Augusta around the southern Appalachians to connect with railroads of the West and the Northwest. The Hamilton Smith papers of 1847-51 consisted chiefly of Cannelton promotional material; the Cannelton cotton mill office vault was found to contain records and papers from 1850 to 1947; and Indiana University Library held the only known file of Smith's weekly newspaper, the Cannelton *Economist*. Smith, an attorney of Louisville, Kentucky, was a native of Dover, New Hampshire, graduate of Dartmouth College, and intimate friend of Salmon P. Chase. Chase's papers, in Washington and Philadelphia, could be microfilmed. For a first combination of originals and reproductions of materials of national importance, this one would be ideal.⁴

Therefore, with encouragement by Indiana University authorities, the writer conceived a full-scale program for collecting manuscripts of the region or section that Hamilton Smith had called "the central west," mainly west of Ohio. To enlist the aid of as many interested people as possible, he would, as visiting professor in the department of history, teach a graduate course on manuscripts, and as library consultant on manuscripts conduct an inquiry for the papers of persons who had influenced sectional and national policies and actions. He would cooperate rather than engage in unseemly competition with other manuscripts collecting agencies.⁵

In the fall of 1950 he began at Bloomington, Indiana, the com-

³ See Indiana chartering acts for Cannelton enterprises, approved Feb. 15, 1848. The first organization was under the name of the Cannelton Cotton Mill; the second, soon afterwards, under that of the Indiana Cotton Mill; since 1946 the firm has been Strongwall Mills, Inc., a unit of Bemis Brothers Bag Co., St. Louis, Mo.

⁴ See the writer's "Conflicting Cotton Interests at Home and Abroad, 1848-1857," in *Journal of Southern History*, 7: 173-194 (May 1941), and "The Advent of William Gregg and the Graniteville Company," in "Notes and Documents," *ibid.*, 11: 389-423 (Aug. 1945); Mary G. Cumming, *Georgia Railroad & Banking Company, 1833-1945*; and Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun, Sectionalist, 1840-1850*, pp. 234-246. Chase had long watched Calhoun closely.

⁵ The writer's Indiana correspondence and papers, July 1948-June 1950 (ms.), show the origin and development of the planning before he began work in Bloomington.

pilation of a directory of names of persons whose papers might be desirable: first, those notable in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the Government of the United States; next, those prominent in the government of the State; then, leading private citizens in all walks of life; and so on. The directory framework thus set up would serve as a guide. The names of those whose collections were desired by professors, graduate students, and others were entered and of course were given first attention. All pertinent information obtainable by interviews with those interested and by supplementary research was included. Then the writer had constantly to coordinate his own efforts with those of other interested persons. There were at Indiana University several men, among them the late Lawrence Wheeler, professor of journalism and director of communications, who were rich in local acquaintance, knowledge, and experience in soliciting gifts — Wheeler, in 1951-52, acquired for the library the papers of the Willkie Clubs of America (Associated), 1940, 65,000 items (66 feet).

The consultant felt at times a bit overawed at the apparent strength of Hoosierism — as if he were “a stranger in the midst.” On the other hand, he gained confidence from finding that most of the research projects of Indiana professors and graduate students were, like his own, in the economic and social backgrounds of political history. His early acquisition of the Hamilton Smith papers, 1825-75 (4 feet),⁶ was interesting to them. By advice and counsel to a graduate student and the owners of the Howard Ship Yards and Dock Co., of Jeffersonville, Indiana, he induced the owners⁷ to deposit records and papers, 1846-1942 (430 feet), in the spring of 1951. Soon afterwards came the gift of the Cannelton cotton mill records and papers, 1850-1947 (45 feet).⁸ These three collections extending over more than a century were naturally considered valuable for many studies in economic, business, technological, social, and political history.⁹ In June 1951 interested persons formed an Economic and Business History Group, in which laymen and business and professional men and women would participate.

The group was an important aid to collecting. On December 7,

⁶ Mrs. McAdams by inquiry among relatives had considerably enlarged her collection.

⁷ Mr. and Mrs. James E. Howard, of Jeffersonville, Ind.

⁸ Gift by Lee Rodman, last president of Indiana Cotton Mill, and A. H. Clark, of Bemis Brothers Bag Co.

⁹ Wesley C. Mitchell, in his foreword to Shepard B. Clough, *A Century of American Life Insurance* (1946), writes, “Any business that has rounded out a century can make a genuine contribution to the history of its times if it will let some competent writer use its records candidly.”

at the thirty-third annual meeting of the Indiana History Conference in Indianapolis, with Joseph Baerncopf, of the George S. Olive Co., presiding, the group presented a well-planned program. It consisted of articles illustrating the practical use of business records; a bibliography of articles, brochures, and books on economic and business history recently published, a number of which were displayed; announcements of projects and studies in progress and of the means provided for carrying them on; and descriptive lists of the manuscripts collections available in Indiana repositories.¹⁰ The Indiana University Library list, especially processed and prepared for use in our own venture, proved effective beyond our hopes and expectations. Eminent business and professional men, of political importance as well, seemed surprised and fascinated. "Well!" exclaimed one, the head of a law firm almost a century old, "I see you have papers of some of my old friends. . . . Let me show you our library and old files. We are crowded for room."

Some of our difficult and prolonged searches were disappointing. A distinguished national political organizer and leader, aged and retired, made no response to our advances. The papers of J. F. D. Lanier, early banker, financier, and railroad promoter, of Madison, Indiana, and the archives of his New York firm — Winslow, Lanier and Co., 1849-1934, founded for the marketing of western railroad bonds — had disappeared. Yet continuing interest in Lanier's contribution to the history of the West in general and Indiana in particular led eventually to the discovery of the State Bank papers and many of Lanier's letters among the Indiana State Archives collection of auditor's records and papers. These and personal papers of Samuel Merrill, contemporary president of the bank, later given to the Smith Library, are in the State Library.

The volumes of Edmund C. Burnett's edition of letters of the members of the Continental Congress, to 1789, had long ago stirred the writer's hope that many more letters and papers of later members of Congress might be found. He persistently searched his way into the heart of Hoosierdom. The going was slow, but progress was made. At Danville, Indiana, for example, when probate records yielded no clues to descendants of James Madison Gregg, Democratic Congressman (1857-59), the writer asked Circuit Judge Horace Lincoln Hanna whether he knew any clue. He did not; but he recalled that his father, John Hanna, a Republican contemporary who had later served in Congress, left papers. Of these,

¹⁰ For announcements and references to programs and sessions of the group, 1951-53, see *Indiana Magazine of History*.

Judge Hanna deposited a selection of 59 items, 1853-79, including letters by Schuyler Colfax.

Most of the writer's inquiries had to be initiated by mail. Usually the subjects were taken up in their chronological order. It was thought that community interest in the early subjects would be more easily aroused. The first letter in each case stated simply that the history department and the library were seeking a representative of the family; that the individual's correspondence, diaries, and papers, were wanted for writing the history of Indiana's participation in national affairs; and that any information, suggestions, or help would be appreciated. These letters, with a copy of a general circular enclosed, were addressed to carefully selected people, most of whom were long-time members of State and county historical and pioneer societies.

Some answers revealed a sad state of public information and opinion on historical matters: this was the first time any one had asked for the papers; no one had supposed that they would ever be wanted, and it was now too late; or, "none of your business — burned everything before I left Washington."

Only a part of the general inquiry for papers of members of Congress could be completed. Yet the immediate returns justified the effort. Besides the papers of John Hanna, there were received Mrs. Charles Ward Seabury's collection of the papers of her grandfather, Will Cumback (d. 1905), including an unpublished Lincoln letter, dated June 15, 1860, and some Oliver H. P. Morton correspondence; papers of the late Congressmen George W. Rauch and Richard N. Elliott; selected papers of the late United States Senator James A. Hemenway, 1906-21 (1 foot);¹¹ and some papers of former Congressman Courtland C. Gillen, 1930-33 (1 foot). Other collections were promised.

The attraction of collections in any repository increases with each new acquisition. The full effect of the Indiana inquiry remains to be seen. Such an inquiry should never be given up as not worth while. It should be regularly resumed, especially for the new collections which currently become available.

Mindful of the dictum of Frederick J. Turner that a large region or section is a congeries of smaller ones, the writer lost no opportu-

¹¹ The burning of a summer house had destroyed the voluminous files, but fortunately a selection of interesting items were preserved in the main residence. Of these, George R. Hemenway, son of the Senator, gave 111 items, 1906-21, chiefly letters by A. J. Beveridge, N. M. Butler, J. G. Cannon, W. T. Durbin, E. H. Gary, J. P. Goodrich, Will H. Hays, Frank O. Lowden, Joseph Medill McCormick, H. S. New, Tom Taggart, and John W. Weeks.

nity to probe the smaller ones of "the central West" for some of their characteristic historical source materials. In mid-September 1951, he called on Circuit Judge George W. Long, Democrat, of Columbus, Indiana, for suggestions. Judge Long recounted remarkable developments of that section in his time and advised an interview with J. Irwin Miller, Republican. (Democrats and Republicans have a way of living together — not in mere "co-existence" — in Indiana.) Mr. Miller, son of Hugh T. Miller, sometime professor at Butler University and banker in Columbus, had studied history in Germany and at Oxford University, in England. His grandfather Joseph I. Irwin (d. 1910) had been merchant, banker, and promoter of turnpikes, "traction" (interurban) and steam railways, and industries. His uncle, Will Irwin (d. 1943) had made a national reputation as financier and promoter.

J. Irwin Miller, reticent about himself and his family, talked of the achievements of others and suggested visits to certain old-timers. He was much interested in "community" history and in comparative studies on a large scale. He hoped that someone would write a history of the Columbus community. The writer, however, inquired about family and business papers of the Irwin-Miller-Sweeney group and obtained permission to examine those in Mr. Miller's care. Some of the papers were lent to the university library. Later Mr. Miller agreed to facilitate the writing of a history of the Cummins Engine Co., manufacturers of the Clessie Cummins diesel engines for automobiles and trucks. He agreed to suggest to the company that it give a candidate for the doctoral degree access to records and papers and pay his travel expenses, including those of a trip to California to interview Clessie Cummins. Mr. Miller thought that there were other companies in Columbus who might have their histories written.

Responses elsewhere were similar. In northern "lake shore" Indiana, at South Bend, the Oliver family and H. Gail Davis were generous in making available diaries, papers, and writings for a history of The Oliver Chilled Plow Co. The Oliver Corporation of Chicago gave additional materials to the university library. From the Vigo County Historical Society, in western Indiana, came the transfer of a large collection of electric railway papers, both city and interurban, known as the Russell B. Harrison collection. At Evansville, Indiana, the writer found the John E. Iglehart collections of early family business correspondence and of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society correspondence and papers, ca. 1922-33, including correspondence with the late Frederick Jackson

Turner, which he has permissions to use. A French Lick Springs Hotel request for the writing of its history resulted in gifts and loans of relevant materials and led to a general survey of manuscripts and newspapers in south central Indiana. Raymond Stout, of Paoli, kindly permitted examination and detailed listing of the Quaker records, 1913 to recent dates, and of newspaper files in his care.

Incidentally Mr. Stout suggested a visit to Dr. Arthur F. Bentley, author of works on political science, mathematics, and philosophy. As a result, Dr. and Mrs. Bentley gave selections of the Kerlin family papers (6 feet), and of Dr. Bentley's correspondence and papers (109 feet), not yet open to public use. Mrs. Bentley, formerly of Indianapolis, graciously mentioned the writer's mission to her friends, among them Susan McWhirter Ostrom, who with her two sisters and her brother gave to the library the large and valuable collection of the late Mrs. Felix T. McWhirter's papers relating to many State and national women's organizations, including the Federation of Women's Clubs (23 feet). From Indianapolis came also William P. Hapgood's Columbia Conserve Co. archive, 1910-May, 1953 (150 feet), including records of an interesting employee-ownership venture.¹² Then, in response to an inquiry which someone had forwarded to the proper person, a call came from C. W. ("Mickey") McCarty, editor of the *Indianapolis News* and a trustee of Indiana University. He arranged a conference with Adelaide Fairbanks Causey, the only surviving member of the family of Charles W. Fairbanks, United States Senator and Vice President; and she sent her magnificent collection of the Fairbanks and related papers of more than half a century (126 feet) to the university library. For some time they will be closed to the public.

The inflow of manuscripts requested continues naturally. In the spring of 1954 Mrs. W. Stewart La Rue of Indianapolis, about to move into a new house, asked the university library to take over the Ralston papers, those of her father, Samuel M. Ralston, 1886-1925 ("at least a ton and a half"), and some papers of her mother, late Democratic National Committee member for Indiana. The papers of Governor and United States Senator Ralston are reported to be complete. Senator Ralston, as all readers of American history recall, was author of the law which authorized publication of the *Territorial Papers of the United States*.

¹² On solicitation by C. K. Byrd, associate director of Indiana University Libraries. The writer, as consultant, supervised the "follow-up" for comprehensive selection and final transfer to the library.

Much has been omitted from this report on "Operation Manuscripts." The writer trusts, however, that enough has been written to encourage and facilitate similar efforts elsewhere in this atomic age to gather and to preserve manuscripts and copies of materials of national historical importance. Indiana alone, during 3 years of consistent effort, has yielded well over 600 linear shelf feet of manuscripts of high average quality and utility. Of the 48 States, one would expect few to yield less and enough others more to maintain the average of 600 each, or a total of 38,800 feet. This in turn would induce much copying of irreplaceable manuscript treasures in the 70 "critical attack areas," and would bring about the construction of repositories in safe places in the country for emergency housing of those treasures. What State can afford not to do what Indiana has done?

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