

# Archival Heritage Meets Modern Records in Panama

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OFFICIAL determination to grapple with modern records problems, archival tradition, effective Point Four backing, and constant Panamanian amiability combined to make the first archival technical assistance project in Panama a satisfying one. This was a training and consultants program on which I served as records management advisor from January to July 1954, on loan from the National Archives and Records Service to the Foreign Operations Administration.

The work was undertaken in accord with the Point Four policy of strengthening the national economy, health, and culture of cooperating countries. While the major programs in agriculture, public health, and education may more directly combat the conditions encouraging communism, the public administration activity of which this project was a part both promotes the success of those programs and bolsters public confidence in the government. The paperwork maze in Panama (and in Mexico, where the advisor stopped en route home) emphasized the need for administrative analysis coupled with attention to the core of past and current valuable records that embodies much of the national heritage.

There are archivists in the United States who say earnestly that we should clean house at home before we give advice abroad. Let us by no means suggest that the job is done in our own country or that we know all the answers. It happens, however, that we have been forced by the mass of our records to seek solutions sooner than have many less populous countries. We have also developed a body of archivists who can appraise the records experience of those countries as the complexity of official documentation grows on them and can suggest means of controlling the flood while preserving the culture. Our justification lies not so much in any virtue of ours as in

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the lessons that experience has forced upon us. Panama and most other countries are, in a quite natural stage of evolution, at the point of confronting the mass and barely beginning the controls. Here is a phase of administration in which we can carry out the basic technical-assistance aim of sharing our "know-how." It is well worth the investment of personnel as a part of the total international goodwill program.

That our activity in this field is to be extensive is shown by the fact that this project was only among the first of several. Thomas J. Pugliese went at the same time to the Philippines for 3 months on a Point-Four contract operation of the University of Michigan, to be followed by Arthur E. Young in August for another 3 months. Herbert E. Angel left in August for a similar project in Iran, though under different auspices. A related undertaking was the lecture tour of Theodore R. Schellenberg in Australia, supported by a Fulbright grant. The National Records Management Council has undertaken a Point-Four assignment in Israel. Other such projects are in the making.

Fortunately the conduct of the Point-Four program, especially in Panama, is such that a technician once chosen can plan his work within a broad field. Thus, when it became evident that the Panamanian Government was not benefiting enough from the experience of its professional archivists and that they and the administrators had only in a few cases faced up systematically to the problems of twentieth-century records, we were able to work toward bridging the gap. Fortunately also, all officials concerned were receptive to plans and carried them out with intelligence and enthusiasm.

Panama was the first country in the Americas to erect a building especially for its archives (in 1924), and the nation has a real if not fully realized archival tradition. Though the nation dates only from 1903, its National Archives holds notarial records dating from the 1780's and judicial records nearly as old. Some files of the ministries date from the 1840's. Much of the major nineteenth-century administration is documented in Colombia, which was then the parent state. Despite severe temperature and humidity problems, many of these early records in Panama are in quite good shape. Losses from climatic conditions or from lack of care are more likely in those older agency files that have not come under the custody of the National Archives.

Most of the historically valuable records in the country are or should be in the National Archives (except for those in some precious private collections) as administration is highly centralized at

the city of Panama. The legislation establishing the Archives provided not only the building but authority to receive records from existing Government offices and to pay some attention to the records management of agencies that did not have their own archivists. Sad to say, space in the building was promptly shared with another agency, and the Archives became so full that transfers from the ministries had to be suspended for a time. They are only sporadic now. Budget troubles led to progressively smaller appropriations for the National Archives, so that in addition to being overcrowded it could hardly keep up with the arrangement and listing of notarial and judicial records. Ministry files, once received, have had to be neglected.

In this situation, of course, the National Archives could not begin to tackle the recent records accumulations in the various agencies. Nor was there any other agency to do so aside from some attention, necessarily part-time, given by the Comptroller General's Office in the interest of general economy of operation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has for years had a well-ordered historical archives. Two other agencies, with larger resources than most, employed records officers of some training and experience and established real records offices — the Institute for Economic Development (and its chief predecessor) and the Social Security Agency. It should be noted that all persons who deal with what we call either archives or records management (and many deal with both) are included in the Spanish term for archivists.

Of about 4,000 Government employees outside the national school system and the national police, possibly a dozen have a full-time professional interest in archives as we know them. They are led by Juan Antonio Susto, who was for 22 years national Archivist; Angel Rubio, a distinguished Spanish emigré professor of geography and Archivist of the Institute for Economic Development, who like Sr. Susto, had experience in the Archives of the Indies; and Manuel B. Moreno, for two decades Archivist of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Most of the 50 or so persons officially classified or generally known as archivists in the Government are at work in filing and current records management. Among those who took major parts in the Point-Four project are Estela Moreno de Grandi, Archivist of the Comptroller General's Office, who was assigned as almost full-time assistant to the advisor during the project; Mary Comanto, Archivist of the Social Security Agency; and Carmen Mata, Administrative Officer of the Statistical and Census Bureau.

At least two-thirds of the existing records of the Government

are in the various operating ministries and autonomous agencies. Considerably less than a third are divided among the National Archives and two important agencies which have quasi-archival functions, the Public Registry (of property) and the Civil Registry (of vital statistics). Without active measures of control the proportion in operating offices would constantly increase, for the Government is beset by the typical problems of complex governmental functions and modern methods of creating and duplicating records.

The volume of records is considerable in relation to the size of the Government. Much more important, the files created and preserved in most processes have become more extensive than an economical minimum. Complex paperwork, excessive duplication, and lack of a records retirement program brought about the request for a records project. The chief complaint of administrators was that often papers could not be found in their files. The most serious paper flood turned out to be in personnel records, which the advisor estimated to be more than 20 percent of the total.

Specifically, the request sent by the late President Remón to the Director of the Point-Four project in Panama was for a records management advisor to teach a course, in Spanish, at the University of Panama. This developed into a series of 10 survey lectures, each an hour and a half long, based on the life history of records. The main subjects discussed were the historical background of archival work; the role of records in documentation; records creation and current control; filing (the most requested topic); reference and information service; physical preservation; evaluation and retirement; intermediate custody; and archival management. The Government sent to the course, which was conducted in official working hours (indeed, convening at 7:30 in the morning!), 144 archivists, file clerks, administrative officials, and others, representing every agency. Needless to say the lectures had to be general in order to be helpful to such a diversified group. But it was desirable to emphasize that improved filing alone, although vital, would not solve all the problems. The fact that several enrollees had no background for the subject was not entirely bad; they learned something of it and could spread interest in the necessity for care of records throughout the Government. The university could not under these circumstances impose academic standards for admission; as a result the only recognition for completion had to be certificates of attendance. These were distributed following a formal closing ceremony.

At the request of a group of 15 of the more experienced persons,

the records management advisor met with them for several weeks in an informal seminar in which such specialized problems as the definition of archival and records functions, the classification and cataloging of archives, and needs in archival legislation were discussed.

In the general course three motion pictures from this country were used, two on filing and one on our National Archives (all with Spanish commentaries). Text for a Spanish sound track for one of the motion pictures on filing was prepared, and we hope that it can be scored to a copy of the film for use throughout Latin America. A bibliography of the few pertinent writings available in Spanish and of selected English titles was issued. Exhibits of records management forms and commercial filing equipment also were presented. Subsequently a list was prepared of 20 key points in the Government to which publications, sample forms, and other information might be sent from time to time from the Point-Four office or the Comptroller General's Office.

For tangible demonstration and training, projects were undertaken in three agencies. In each case on-the-job training was given by the records management advisor, working directly with Panamanian agency staff members. At the Comptroller General's Office, an inventory was begun to show steps in paperwork needing analysis as well as to aid in planning for records retirement. This office was a strategic point of attack because personnel, procurement, and fiscal actions from all ministries are handled there and any Government-wide controls would have to be initiated there.

In the Ministry of Labor, Social Welfare, and Public Health, key files were analyzed and a new file scheme for general use was drawn up. Official support is shown by the fact that most of the work was done in the Minister's immediate office. This minister became President early in 1955. In each of these projects the written products were duplicated for circulation among other agencies.

In the National Assembly, thanks to the interest stimulated within the Permanent Legislative Committee (which carries on when the Assembly is not in session), a complete separation and rearrangement of the library and archives was undertaken. Since the material involved includes the basic legislative records of the country from the beginning of its independence, this project is of vital importance. Here even more than elsewhere the initiative and momentum came from the agency itself. The records management advisor drew up an outline of steps to be taken and reviewed the work as it progressed.

Inspections were made in most of the agencies, and to 10 of them written recommendations were submitted. The main recommendations were contained, however, in a comprehensive report made to the Comptroller General as the sponsoring official, and the report was referred by him to the President. Attention was called to operations that the agencies could institute on their own initiative, such as the improvement of file systems, better utilization of space and equipment, procedural analysis, and the like. More serious were the problems requiring central Government action, including designation of an advisory committee as a focal point, adoption of legislation, establishment of an intermediate records center, recognition of the archival profession, training, and the like.

Although the problems require long-range action and little could be done immediately, special attention was given to the serious situations of the National Archives, the Public Registry, and the Civil Registry. There is reason to hope that these will be taken in hand and that Panama can regain the position of leadership in the archival field that it had when its eminent President Belisario Porras brought about the first archival legislation and the construction of the Archives building.

A complete draft of a proposed records law was submitted. As would be true in any country, the national legal framework and conditions had to be taken into account. Neither in this nor in any other phase of the project would it have been sound to recommend the simple adoption of our own ways of doing things. The whole approach in such an undertaking must be different, beginning with study and appreciation of existing conditions, potentialities, and objectives.

The proposed law includes definitions designed to clarify the responsibilities of the Government and of its officials. It would provide the basis for development of a professional corps and professional training, a National Records and Archives Council, an authority that would issue permission to dispose of Government records, recognition of a program of transfers to the National Archives, a basis for central studies and controls for records common to all agencies, and recognition of the Government's responsibilities in regard to private collections of national importance.

Because many of these goals require much preliminary work and careful nurturing, the proposed national council would have the responsibility of developing standards for recognition of professional training, for effective records management in the agencies,



and for the care of private collections. The council would undoubtedly have to serve through consultants employed by it, since the program outlined is large and technical. But a law establishing such a council would at least set the goals and provide the authority to act.

In addition to the advisory activities mentioned, ancillary developments of the project included cooperation with a United Nations economic technician in reviewing the proposed revision of procedures at the Internal Revenue Administration. There was also preliminary consultation regarding the training program in public administration for the Central American countries set up by the United Nations in Costa Rica.

Of course nearly every phase of the project represented only a beginning, a groundwork for later development. Followup plans included publication of the lectures of the University of Panama course. These were mimeographed in provisional form and have since been edited for publication in and by Panama, in Spanish. (They do not exist in English in any form; so the author is pleasantly immune to critical analysis in the United States.)

Because working knowledge is more directly effective than information on paper, a most important sequel to the project was the sending of two Panamanian archivists, Sra. Moreno de Grandi and Srta. Comanto, to Washington as Point-Four trainees. They are working with the National Archives and Records Service, the Bureau of the Budget, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and other agencies; and they are also taking courses in the archives and records curriculum at the American University. Many readers of the *American Archivist* met them at the Williamsburg meeting.

The extent of the professional interest in Panama is shown by one of the most satisfying outgrowths of the project, the formation of the Association of Panamanian Archivists. At its first meeting in the summer Sr. Susto was installed as president, Professor Rubio as vice president, and Sra. Moreno de Grandi as secretary, with Srta. Mata serving as secretary pro tempore while the secretary is in Washington.

Vital to the project were the interest and support given by Vance Rogers, Director of the United States Operations Mission to Panama, and by Robert S. Avery, public administration advisor, now returned to his position as professor at the University of Tennessee. Support should normally be expected, but this was an example of

the kind of intelligent cooperation that an archivist would welcome at home as well as abroad.

The project was in and of Panama, and that country pays most of the cost of Point-Four work within its bounds. The knowledge that the President was interested permeated through the Government. The direct backing of the Comptroller General, Enrique Obarrio, and the cooperation of members of his staff were invaluable. The general plan was approved and many details were worked out by a committee he designated, consisting of Eduardo McCullough, Assistant Comptroller General; Carmen Miró, Director of the Statistical and Census Bureau; and Rubén Carles, professor of economics at the University of Panama, all well known to their fellow specialists in the United States.

All interviews in agencies began with the ministers or agency heads, and many of these men gave their backing to concrete steps undertaken within their agencies. Public interest, aroused by generous publicity in the press and several other indications of support, is mentioned here only as the kind of result that anyone engaged in such a project might well seek.

All foreign technical assistance activity raises the question as to how much momentum will continue after the stimulus of the technician's presence is gone. This cannot, of course, be judged except by time. But the indications, especially the leadership of the Panamanian archivists, give rise to hope that in that country real progress will be made.

The success of the venture as a whole can likewise be judged best only after a period of time, and then by the Panamanians, whom it was designed to serve. It is fair to say now, however, that certain things were accomplished. An important one that might not be noted, were attention not called to it, was that Panamanian archivists, who had had no recurring occasion to be acquainted or exchange experiences previously, were now brought together. Equally important to the aim of the work was that the archivists and administrators were shown that their interests in this field are so closely related that they must cooperate.

Since a program is effective only through the knowledge and ability of people, the instruction and on-the-job training given to several and the training grants for two leaders may be considered as major steps in the project. In this field a fundamental need, which also might pass unnoticed, was the emphasis throughout on logical orderly procedure and on proper arrangement of records. If that alone was made clear the work was worthwhile.



Legislation is a fundamental need for real records progress; so the drafting of the proposed law was a main goal reached. In this, in actual projects initiated in agencies, and in the written recommendations, the groundwork was laid for future development.

Finally, since there is evidence of interest in such work in other countries, this was in some measure a pilot project for Latin America. The fact that Panama is small enough to permit the whole field to be encompassed, and especially the high degree of cooperation extended, made it a good place for such an enterprise. If the Panamanians retain even in small degree the impression of cordiality that this advisor brought home, then we may feel that a contribution was made to international understanding with a highly important neighbor.

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