Growing Pains of a Records Management Program

By BEN F. GREGORY [1]

Office Methods Staff
Tennessee Valley Authority

ABOUT the time the National Archives was established, a few TVA people had already become concerned about problems arising from that agency's rapidly accumulating records. Because TVA was a new organization, with unique regional responsibilities, there was little precedent to use as a guide. The agency attacked its records problems with all the fresh vigor and enthusiasm characteristic of healthy youth, and under such conditions it was natural that progress should have been made by trial and error. But after years of change and refinement and with the unwavering support of top management, TVA had in operation, before the passage of the Federal Records Act of 1950, a records management program which fully met that act's requirements, plus two refinements not specified in the statute. To be sure, the comprehensive term "records management" was unheard of in the early thirties. But TVA actually initiated parts of its present records management program more than 20 years ago.

Since TVA's program in records management has now reached an age of relative maturity, it may be interesting and profitable to review some of the problems and difficulties that have been encountered and solved during its growth and evolution. The trial and error approach made many of these solutions expensive. If this review does nothing more than relieve some other organization of some of that expense and administrative inconvenience, it will have served a good purpose.

ORGANIZATION AND USE OF RECORDS

TVA was barely 3 months old when it took its first step to solve its paperwork problem. After much discussion of the ad-

[1] The author joined the staff of TVA in March 1934, was transferred to the Office Service Department in 1941, and is now the staff records officer of TVA, responsible for coordinating and evaluating its records management program. He has published several magazine articles on records management and has spoken before records administration conferences.

vantages of alphabetic and subject filing, a committee was appointed to work out a subject scheme which appeared best suited for the wide range of subject matter contemplated in TVA activities and which a little later assumed the characteristics of the Dewey Decimal system.

As might be expected, the question of how to organize the file material for use was no sooner settled than another problem took its place. Where should the organized files be located for the most efficient reference service? The early decision to establish and operate a central file in Knoxville seemed sound enough. But that was before the accumulated volume of records began to grow large and before TVA had spread out to several buildings in Knoxville and widely scattered field points in the Tennessee Valley. In the latter half of the thirties, some troubles began to develop. Several units of the agency organizations began to accumulate their own file material outside the building which housed the central file, while at the same time they dutifully continued to forward all the official copies of correspondence and other records to the central file according to approved procedure. At first there was no objection to this; later, however, the outlying organizations were found to be holding not only nonrecord copies for quick reference but many originals of incoming correspondence as well.

In 1936 the Office Methods Staff tried the experiment of setting up a branch file, analogous in point of service to a branch bank in a suburban area. By the summer of 1939 four branch files had been established under the same administrative organization as the central file. The whole central-file theory was seriously challenged in a file-system survey report of August 1939, which indicated that branch-file service cost almost a third less and was used four times as much as the central file service. The Knoxville central file was discontinued in January 1940, and most of the material in it was microfilmed. TVA file service was then localized, usually along organizational lines, to provide quicker, cheaper, and more adequate reference service to individual organizations. At first, the decentralized or branch files were administered by the central service organization responsible for their functional control. After some experimenting, however, centralized administrative control was found to be unnecessary and in most cases undesirable. In the summer of 1945, therefore, the administration of all current files was made the responsibility of the individual organizations which they served, and only a strong centralized functional control was retained.

The decimal coding system referred to above was ideal for TVA files while they contained only a limited range of subject matter. Troubles began to appear when more than 10 detailed subjects were needed under an established parent classification. In a few short years the addition of dashes, brackets, parentheses, and similar symbols had reached unwieldy and confusing proportions. Because of this experience, branch files by 1940 were using an alphabetical-numeric coding system, which in theory at least permitted unlimited breakdown of subject matter wherever needed. This actually was an improvement over the decimal system for TVA files, but I suspect that one of the primary reasons for its adoption was the wider grasp of the subject matter that was possible by 1940. At any rate, it was adopted as standard for all TVA files.

Soon after central file operations began, the library method of cross-indexing subject matter by the use of cards became both expensive and cumbersome. More and more typists had to be assigned to the preparation of cross-index cards, which in turn had to be sorted and filed in special equipment. Moreover, searching in the file was complicated because the searchers had to consult a separate file for indexing leads to the material they sought. This problem soon became so acute that a time-and-motion study was made of the operation. As a result of this study a radical departure from the previous method was recommended and was quickly approved and adopted. Briefly, a letter-size form was developed, on which the typists entered the required index information, and which was filed along with the regular correspondence, documents, and other records. This form was in turn soon converted to a snap-out carbon set of from one to five parts. Each form in a set had a preprinted heavy line underscoring the code by which the individual sheet was to be filed. The underscoring line was preprinted two typewriter spaces lower on each succeeding sheet in the set, so that in one typing operation the typist could complete as many as five separate index sheets which would be sorted and filed in as many different files. This method was such an improvement that a TVA motion picture titled "Time and Motion Study Applied to Letter Indexing" was made to illustrate the old and the new techniques. It is still one of TVA's widely distributed films. What is more, the technique itself still is better than anything I have ever seen anywhere else. It is one of those rare methods that are good to start with, almost flawless; and it

has needed little refinement in some 20 years of intensive application.

By 1936 it became obvious that the building and equipment used by the central file would have to be expanded out of proportion to office space. To relieve the overflow of records, some of the more voluminous documents and papers were moved out of the central file into unoccupied basement space in another building. When this space too was filled, some of the bulkiest records were stored in an abandoned nitrate plant on the reservation at Wilson Dam, Alabama. Shortly thereafter, however, the new Federal Building in Knoxville was opened; and for the first time a real records center was established, using most of the basement space to house and service relatively inactive files and segments of records. Back in those days such centers were called "transfer files," because they were still considered to be segments of the official files. All materials were stored as received, which is to say that they were serviced according to the system under which they had been organized while current. By 1940 the Knoxville transfer files contained record segments from 71 different units of organization, filed and serviced under a variety of classification systems. The necessity for renting space on relatively short-term leases precluded the adoption of the location indexing system that is used extensively in modern records centers. Moving day comes fairly often and sometimes with little warning, and it would junk any and all location indexing systems. Most such systems, moreover, are elaborate and expensive to maintain.

In the late forties TVA developed detailed plans for a permanent warehouse-type records storage building, but Congress denied funds for its construction. As soon as regional records centers were established by the National Archives and Records Service in the early fifties, plans for such a TVA building were virtually abandoned. We still, however, operate one records center in each of our three geographic locations in the Valley.

One of the weaknesses in operating the small localized "branch files" is that their management is frequently subject to local pressures that do not conform to the best overall procedures for long time operation. One of the most persistent — and short-sighted — of these pressures comes from the idea of the "intact file." Some official who knows little or nothing about filing problems gets the idea that he wants all file material on a subject assembled and bound for instantaneous use (usually his own). The reasoning behind this urge springs from a number of past experiences, most of

them temporary crises. It is always difficult to make such a person understand that to accede to his request defeats the purpose of a general file, the basic theory of which is to maintain only one copy of each record and to make that copy continually available to *all* members of the organization. What is still more important, however, to the official, such a method of filing by any special subject defeats its own purpose very shortly. What starts out to be a clear-cut and apparently simple subject can within a few months pick up all sorts of fringe material or can explode into a dozen fragments, many of which bear only slight if any resemblance to the original whole. Even if this does not occur, one man can tie up a sizable accumulation of records for days or weeks while he uses only two or three segments of it, meantime precluding anyone else from using the file. Very early in the operation of branch files we did experiment with intact or bound files, but we soon had to tear the volumes down again in order to have the material in a more fluid state.

One of the most effective ways to counteract the intact-file urge was discovered to be the quick assembly of "trip files." These are highly selective accumulations of records, tabbed by dividers for all stops on a trip, neatly but temporarily bound, and labeled with the name of the traveler and the home office file — just in case he should leave it on somebody's desk along the way. Another method (which should be used only in rare circumstances) is the accumulation of temporary "work files," or nonrecord copies of official material. These are understood to be entirely disposable as soon as the temporary need for them has passed.

Another TVA problem closely associated with the decentralized file service has been the maintenance of standards for file operation in each of the official files scattered over the Tennessee Valley. About a dozen of these standards had been developed in the late thirties and early forties and issued singly for use in all official files. By the spring of 1944, 14 of them had been developed, and they were bound and issued under the title *Manual of Files Operation Standards*. The problem with standards lies in assuring that they are followed in the field, that they are changed and refined as necessary to meet field operating conditions, and that any local and minor deviations are justified from the long view and will not lead to operating trouble later on. While most TVA file operators are glad to follow the standards (indeed many of them contributed to their development), once in a while some rugged individualist decides he wants to try another method. This

may turn out later to be an expensive experiment, even perhaps one that has been tried and discarded years ago.

As a positive means of assuring that file operation standards are followed under the decentralized system, TVA in the mid-forties developed and instituted periodic operational audits of official files. These audits are made in conformance with procedures set forth in the *File Audit Handbook*, which closely follows the file operation standards. Briefly, the audits encompass a review of the organizational, administrative, and environmental factors affecting the operation of the file and a systematic test check of detailed operations. Printed worksheets, are used throughout the audit to record detailed information and the results of the test check. From the completed worksheets a comprehensive narrative report is prepared for the administrator of the file. Thus in about 10 minutes the busy administrator can learn from a well-qualified specialist what the overall condition of his file or files is at a given date; what, if anything, needs to be done to improve the service or to conform to archival standards; what the service costs his organization; and whether his operating staff is too large or too small. This system has forestalled some serious file break-downs that would have occurred had ill-advised departures from standards not been discovered soon after their inception, and it has been well worth its small cost to TVA.

Another problem closely associated with decentralized administration of files is that of assuring unbroken continuity of service and standards when one operator leaves and another comes in. Such service breaks often occur suddenly and unpredictably. During the war years, when the operators were predominantly women with husbands in the armed services, most of them were subject to sudden moves that led to their resignation. To meet this problem, a training pool was established in which inexperienced recruits were given 2 weeks of intensive training in the technical details of file operation, placed in a branch file organization for 2 more weeks of actual work experience, and made available for transfer or other assignment as needed. During this period, not one of the trainees ever quite completed the full 4 weeks of training before being requested for a file vacancy. Soon after the end of active hostilities, however, the need for this type of training ceased, and it was discontinued in favor of on-the-job training of file employees *after* they had been employed in a specific file. This training means that an experienced records officer goes into any file office where a vacancy has occurred and works with a new

operator in the routine of the file until he considers that the new employee is fully able to continue unassisted.

CREATION OF RECORDS

During the early years of TVA operations, few people if any thought in terms of comprehensive control over the creation of records. Such controls as existed were largely incidental to procedures developed for certain office operations. Accounting procedures for all TVA operations afforded one of the earliest controls over the creation of significant bodies of records. Engineering reports, legal briefs, and land acquisition records were all controlled by published procedures. A little later, a forms-design and coordination program put centralized active control on the creation of forms. Correspondence standards were developed and distributed to all secretaries and typists.

All these techniques of office management, though not necessarily so considered at the time of their adoption, have actually served the purpose of records-creation control in TVA. They were conceived as features incidental to good administration, in which TVA has always taken a lot of pride.

DISPOSAL OF RECORDS

Most organizations run into disposal problems some years after those arising from the creation and use of records. TVA has been no exception but after its first few years the agency did become conscious of the problem of disposal. When the act of August 5, 1939, was passed, TVA submitted its first disposal list for approval. There were only seven items, involving little volume, on the list; but at least it was a start. Shortly afterward, in the spring of 1941, TVA conducted an experiment with the newly developed technique of microfilming records and disposing of the originals. This experiment indicated that microphotography was feasible for TVA records, and it was instituted as a continuing operation on a fairly large scale. At the peak of this operation in 1942 five cameras were filming TVA records full time. Although microfilming is an expensive device for disposal of records, it should be borne in mind that in those years it appeared to offer the best hope of any large-scale disposals. The act of Congress approved July 7, 1943, which permitted continuing records disposal schedules, greatly accelerated the disposal of TVA records, and the need for microfilming almost disappeared.

With the institution of scheduling for disposal came the problem

of finding or developing qualified analysts to evaluate records. Although most of the analysts attached to the records staff at that time had had experience in the creation, organization, and use of records, none of them had the detailed knowledge of internal procedures that is necessary in the evaluation of significant bodies of records for retention or disposal. To get that knowledge from the people directly involved was a tedious and time-consuming process, with little actual yield. In 1941 arrangements were made to transfer to the records staff two experienced accountants with an excellent background in both accounting and law; records scheduling and disposal then went into high gear. By the beginning of 1944 most of the voluminous fiscal records of TVA had been scheduled for disposal and the remaining few had been scheduled for permanent retention.

To discriminate between record and nonrecord material has been one of the oldest and most persistent headaches in our disposal program. Consistency in the application of these terms has been most difficult to achieve, even in the same mind. One school of thought insists that record material becomes nonrecord when the uses for which it was created come to an end. Another believes that any copy of a record is nonrecord if the record copy is retained anywhere else within the agency. Still another insists on sticking to a literal interpretation of the definition in the first disposal statute. Our 10-year-old standard, "Once a record, always a record," has taken a lot of buffeting but is still very much alive. It has been fortunate that the overall responsibility for this determination has been continually vested in the TVA staff records officer; for, right or wrong, he has the final responsibility for approving all disposals of nonrecord materials. The problem has required much time, effort, and patience in breaking down preconceived notions and in developing and distributing more adequate descriptions of nonrecord types of material to aid in disposal procedures.

There are generally two schools of thought, too, in initiating disposals. One wants to destroy everything in just a short time and considers that to have good office space cluttered up with a lot of files is pure nonsense. On the other hand there is the human squirrel who gloats over every piece of paper that ever came into his possession and will fight fiercely to prevent its destruction. The one must be braked down to something like a reasonable pace, while the other requires constant spurring to get any action. Both have to be handled with skill, understanding, and patience.

Since an excellent article on TVA's retention and disposal of correspondence files has been published by my predecessor [2] the only comment to be added here is that "retention filing" has since 1952 spread to all offices in TVA. It can be said in 1956 that the technique certainly is here to stay.

GENERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Some of the growing pains experienced in the development of a records management program have been diagnosed in the preceding paragraphs. A few others are general in nature, like spring fever, and affect the entire body of the program. One of these is a liaison problem. TVA is different from most other Federal agencies in that its functions encompass the entire region within the drainage area of the Tennessee River but only that region. While most Federal agencies have a specialized function that is nationwide in scope, TVA has authority in the Valley for the development and utilization of all its natural resources for the greatest good of all. At times in the past it has been difficult to establish and maintain fully effective liaison with Washington on matters of records management because of differing interpretations of the principles on which TVA was founded and continues its operations. The situation has been improving rapidly in recent years, however, especially since the establishment of the National Archives and Records Service.

Another liaison problem lies in the grassroots administration of TVA. In many of its field offices, especially those in remote areas, files or accumulations of records come into being and grow like Topsy with little or no guidance from records management specialists. In all cases these are files of minor organizational units, and we probably never would have been very much concerned about them except for the problems of evaluation and disposal that they presented when field offices were closed and their records were shipped to our district records centers. Frequently the shipment of records was the last act of the departing field-office staff, so that by the time the shipment arrived there was nobody left who knew anything about the records. Because of this experience, we have in recent years developed and maintained a system of regular visits by our district records officers to all remote field offices in their districts. These visits promote a closer cooperation between field personnel and district records officers in the management of field records while they are still current and lessen the

[2] Sidney R. Hall, in *American Archivist*, 15:3-14 (Jan. 1952).

problems of disposal after the records are finally received in the centers.

The most pressing problem in our program now is, believe it or not, persuading some of our employees who have made significant contributions to TVA accomplishment to create records of their experience instead of keeping it in their heads, where an invaluable accumulation of knowledge and experience can be, and frequently is, lost in a moment. To meet this problem, we are experimenting now with the idea of developing and maintaining what we call "job handbooks" for specific technical positions. These are to be compact recorded instructions for carrying on all technical phases of a particular position. They are kept in the desk of the incumbent and are expanded as additional experience is acquired. All possible successors are informed of their existence and location. They are intended to bridge the gap between the present and the future. Furthermore, they provide, over long periods, a greater consistency of practice on the part of the incumbent himself. If the experiment is successful, and I see no reason why it will not be, we shall perhaps have to do a bit of selling to spread the technique over the Valley. But selling is a vital and interesting part of records management, too.