Business Records in Libraries

By ROBERT W. LOVETT [1]

Baker Library

THE chairman of the Business Records Committee of the Society of American Archivists for 1955-56 was a librarian, and so was one of the other members of the committee. It seemed appropriate, therefore, for the committee to try to survey the handling of business records in libraries and similar institutions after their transfer from the originating firms. We included in our working definition of business records plantation record books and family accounts, which have long been part of historical manuscript collections. Recently, however, more and more libraries have been acquiring separate collections of business records, in part because of an increased awareness of the significance of business history and in part because of the concern of business firms themselves for the preservation of their older records. The committee therefore set out to gather information on the number of libraries willing to accept such records, some of the practices developed for their handling, and some of the problems still to be solved. In particular, Professor Cole, librarian of Baker Library, suggested that it would be helpful to get an expression of opinion on the reporting of business record collections for the proposed National Register of Manuscripts.

The following questionnaire was, accordingly, drawn up and sent with a covering letter to representative libraries, historical societies, and government archives:

1. Do you collect business records? Do you accept business records?
2. Are you selective as to:
    a. Date
    b. Region
    c. Type of business
    d. Bulk of material

[1] This article is a report by Mr. Lovett as chairman of the Committee on Business Records. The writer has been for some years in charge of the business archives at the Baker Library of the Harvard University School of Business and has contributed to our pages earlier.

The Society's Committee on Business Records for 1955-56 consisted of Robert W. Lovett, chairman; Chester C. Connor, Aluminum Co. of America, Pittsburgh; A. A. Deter, Linde Air Products, New York City; Norman L. Kilpatrick, Director of Library, Florida State University; and Irving Zitmore, Records Engineering, Inc., Washington, D. C. The chairman alone is responsible for the content of this paper.

3. Do you take records of companies still in existence?
4. If so, are there restrictions as to use?
5. Do you attempt to weed business records after receipt?
6. Have you developed any scheme for arranging business records within a given collection?
   Describe briefly?
7. Do you keep printed materials (i. e., house organs) with original records?
8. Do you have a published guide to your collections?
   Unpublished lists?
9. How are your business records used?
10. Would you be able to report such collections to a national listing?
    See example.
11. How would you criticize (as applied to business records) the formula for such listing? See attached.[2]
12. How would you determine the importance of a collection for listing?

Size	Size and dates (e. g., single vols. before 1830)
Dates covered	Particular industries
Other	

13. What series of records (see attached) do you think should be included in the description of a typical collection of older business records?
14. What changes would you make to cover twentieth-century records?
15. What further problems have you met with in the care of business records?

Each question will be considered shortly, but a few general comments are in order first. The writer has had little experience with questionnaires (except on the receiving end), and if doing the job again he might proceed somewhat differently. Minor changes might include sending a duplicate copy with the questionnaire, which the receiving institution might keep in its files. It would also be helpful to type on the questionnaire the name of the library to which it is sent; for there was at least one case in which the returned questionnaire was not signed, the envelope bore no return address, and the postmark was that of a city in which more than one institution had been circularized. At least one of the questions (number 9) was not phrased specifically enough, and a few others might have been changed to advantage. The list of institutions to which the questionnaire was sent might have been better prepared if more time had been available and more up-to-date references had been on hand. The 136 institutions, however, included all State archival agencies that appeared (from the directory in the *American Archivist*) [3] to contain nongovernment records, most State universities and State historical societies, and other universities, libraries, and historical

[2] The attached "formula" and an example of the Baker Library list of one group of business records are printed below in this article.

[3] "Directory of State and Territorial Archival Agencies," in *American Archivist*, 17:209-219 (July 1954).

societies known or believed to have large historical manuscript collections. If any institutions with large holdings of business records were overlooked, my apologies; and if a questionnaire is still desired, I shall be happy to send one. Of the 136 institutions circularized, 80, or 59%, returned questionnaires or made useful replies. Perhaps this is an average rate of return; probably a number of institutions with no business records so classified did not bother to reply. Of those who did reply, 4 indicated that they had no business records at all, 14 stated that they had only a few, and 62 had fairly substantial collections.

The first question, *Do you collect business records? Do you accept business records?* was slightly unsatisfactory; for a number answered only one of its two parts, not both. Still, 14 did indicate that although they were not actively collecting business records, they would accept them. Some of these, as might be expected, were among those who had received small amounts of business material, perhaps as parts of other collections, in the past. A breakdown of replies to question 1 by type of institution is of interest. Of the State archival agencies canvassed, 19 indicated that they possessed business records; 24 State historical societies, a few of which would also be included among State archival agencies, also replied in the affirmative; so did 14 State university and 5 private university libraries, 7 other historical societies, and 7 other libraries. Probably some of those who did not reply also have business records in their care.

Question 2 was: *Are you selective as to: a. Date, b. Region, c. Type of business, d. Bulk of material?* Of the respondents, 24 said that they were selective as to date, with various years in the 19th century indicated as the cutoff point. Some of these were institutions that had only small and early collections anyway or that had not segregated their business records from their other manuscript collections. The largest number (54) indicated that they collected materials relating mainly to their region. Only 12 said that the type of business would affect their collecting policy. The size of collections affected the selection of a good many (29); from the comments it appears that they either weeded collections after receipt or felt they could not take on large modern collections. Questions 3 and 5 clarify these matters somewhat. On the whole it seems that regional selection is a wise procedure in facing the problem of bulk presented by business records. The Baker Library Manuscript Division, which began with a national coverage, has recently transferred to other institutions a few collections relating wholly to another region.

The matter of bulky modern records is further explored in question 3: *Do you take records of companies still in existence?* In answer, 34 institutions indicated that they did, an additional 6 said that they would if asked, and 19 answered no. A few added comments indicating caution, such as: "on a limited basis" and "only a small firm, going out of business, and a distinctive one." At least 2 respondents took the opportunity to say that they felt that a business should handle its own records, so long as it continued to exist.

A companion question, *If so, are there restrictions as to use?* (number 4), drew forth 34 affirmative replies. About a dozen of these were of the "if asked" variety; 14 said they imposed no restrictions. One of the best statements on these two points was made by Dolores C. Renze, of the Division of State Archives, Colorado, who has had considerable experience with recent records. She said in part:

> Experience has proven that a carefully thought out agreement should be executed on all business record collections accepted for custody, as complex problems of servicing for reference, responsibility for use of information, and many other factors enter in. If authority to administer is too restrictive, it limits the value of the collection and one becomes a "storage out." Also, whenever possible, I stipulate that the firm (if still in existence) set up a trust fund with us which will help defray the long range costs of such collections.

When Baker Library receives a large collection, the donor is urged to sign a statement, on a 5″ x 8″ card; there is a place on this for entering special restrictions, though we try to keep these to a minimum. A useful footnote on the card is to the effect that, if material is placed on deposit but not recalled within 20 years, it shall become the property of the library. It would appear that, if collections are accepted from companies still in existence, only noncurrent records should be taken.

Question 5, *Do you attempt to weed business records after receipt?* also ties in with numbers 3 and 4, since it applies mainly to modern records. To this, 40 answered yes; 18, no. Some of the comments were of interest. One sensible respondent replied that, although he would prefer to evaluate records before their transfer, this is not always possible. Another said that he would follow the same procedure as with any other collection that might contain redundant and useless material. One said that, if weeding was necessary, he would probably call in an expert. Another felt that not enough weeding had been done. It is true that judicious weeding is one of the most difficult jobs a manuscript custodian can face. The removal of duplicate material (even when the duplication is of content, not of form) is easier than the culling out of routine series by sampling or by outright disposal. Information is available as to legal and government requirements for the keeping of records, but we need more light on the needs of the historian and economist.

The next question (number 6), *Have you developed any scheme for arranging business records within a given collection?* invited some comments. It was, of course, not applicable to those institutions that did not attempt to segregate business records. Still, 36 replied yes; 17, no. At least 7 indicated that they followed the order to be found in the collection itself, which is the proper archival answer. This practice at least determines the order within individual series but not the order in which the series shall be shelved. In the attachment to question 13 I called attention to the scheme that Baker Library follows, and it might be useful to mention it here (see attachment, below). The administrative records (minutes, stockholders' records, and the like) are placed first, followed by general accounting records (such as ledgers, journals, and cashbooks), then production records (including payrolls), sales records, and finally correspondence. This does not fit every collection, and of course need not be followed slavishly in any case. Two persons indicated that they followed the Library of Congress classification; two, that of the Minnesota Historical Society. Chronological, alphabetical, and geographical arrangements were also mentioned. It is common practice to separate bound volumes from unbound papers.

Some libraries remove printed items (employee magazines, trade catalogs, advertising material, and the like) from manuscript collections; so we asked about this practice in question 7, *Do you keep printed materials (i. e. house organs) with original records?* Only 17 said they kept such materials with the collection; 40 said they did not. One or two mentioned keeping broadsides and advertising matter only. A useful compromise might be to keep ephemeral materials, which the library would not be likely to catalog anyway, with the collection. And it is well to place in the collection folder a list of materials removed, so that the user can be warned.

Question 8, in two parts, asked whether there were published guides to the collections and whether there were unpublished lists. Only 19 indicated that they had published guides; 40 said that they did not; but 35 said they had unpublished lists and only 15 that they did not. At least 3 listed new receipts in their annual reports; and 2 said that guides were in process. A dozen reported that their unpublished lists were on cards; others mentioned looseleaf binders, preliminary inventories, and inventory sheets.

Question 9, *How are your business records used?* is associated

ATTACHMENT TO QUESTION 13

Form for reporting collections of business records:
(Condensed from Library of Congress example)

Name of firm and location
"Records" . . . dates covered
Amount (for less than 1 foot, use number of items)
Location of collections; i. e., name of depository.
Notes and description of contents. See below.
Statement as to guides.
Statement as to availability for use.
"Gift of" . . . . .

Example, from Manuscript Division, Baker Library, Harvard Business School:

Naumkeag Mills, Salem, Mass.
Records, 1845-1947.
72 ft.
In Baker Library, Harvard Business School.
Produced sheeting. Incorporated in 1839; taken over by the Indian Head Mills in 1952. Records start in 1845; key series only continued after 1914. Partial records of the Danvers Bleachery in the collection.
Contents summary: Directors' records, stockholders' records, 1845-1947; Stock ledger, 1846-1944; Dividend books, 1848-1907; Stock certificates; General ledgers, 1845-1941; General journals, 1845-1941; Cash books, 1845-1927; Trial balances, 1845-1929; Semiannual accounts, 1863-1928; Inventories, 1847-1849, 1853-1923; Costs, 1847-1852, 1878-1933; Production (weekly summaries), 1866-1936; Average wages, 1878-1928; Production and sales, 1860-1930; Letters (outgoing) 1845-1897; Unbound papers, including six month accounts, 1847-1855, 1864-1914; Directors' papers, 1845-1945.
Unpublished guide in repository.
Open to investigators.
Gift of the Indian Head Mills, 1954.

Suggested Order for describing older business records.
Administrative records: Minutes (records) of Directors and Stockholders; Stockholders' ledgers and journals; Dividend Records; Treasurer's and other reports; Statements.
Legal: Contracts; Agreements; Patents;
Property: Deeds; Surveys; Insurance and tax records.
General Accounts: Journals (day books, blotters, waste books); Ledgers; Cashbooks; Accounts current; Trial balances; Bills payable and receivable.
Purchasing and receiving: Invoices; Purchases; Inventories.
Production records: Payrolls; Payroll summaries; Records of amounts produced; Cost of manufacturing.
Sales and Shipping: Orders: Sales.
Letters: Incoming and outgoing
Miscellaneous: Diaries, etc.

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with number 8, since use depends somewhat on how widely the materials are known. The question was not very well worded; in fact, one person said it was incomprehensible. However, 39 indicated that their records were used for scholarly and research projects; only 10 reported no use of the material. It does appear that young graduate students often shy away from manuscript collections; but the really serious user more than makes up for the lack. Word spreads from user to user; and if the collections are reasonably accessible, the scholar will find them.

The next few questions related in part to the form in which collections of business records should be reported to the National Register of Manuscripts. We began by asking (question 10) whether the respondents could make such reports, and we enclosed an example based on the Library of Congress form.[4] Of those who replied, 44 persons indicated that they could make such reports, 14 that they could not. The reasons given by the 14 were mainly lack of personnel. The next question (number 11) asked for a criticism of the formula for such listing, as applied especially to business records. Of the critics, 35 seemed to feel that it was satisfactory, though a few thought that the information given in the example from the Baker Library was too detailed. At least two were opposed to linear measurements of collections, that is, to measurement in feet if more than one foot in extent. One thought that explanatory phrases should be used instead of the words ledger, journal, cashbook, and so on; those who would normally use such materials, however, would be persons understanding such terms. Several felt that entries should be limited to a 3″ x 5″ card; and one suggested items that might be omitted to make this possible.

The remarks made by James W. Patton of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, are worth quoting:

> Perhaps this shortening would have to come in the contents summary. The notation "Open to investigators" could be omitted; papers would be presumed to be open unless restrictions were noted. Perhaps the name of the donor could be omitted in the interest of space-saving. Unpublished descriptions in the depository do not require listing, but only published guides and other material available outside the depository.

On the other hand, another respondent thought that the names of important people whose papers were in the collection should be included in the statement. Certainly for many large collections drastic compression would be necessary to get a description on a single catalog card. For the scholar, such a description would be better than none at all; but the more complete and accurate the information is, the more pleased he will be.

[4] See "Attachment to Question 13," above. See also Robert H. Land, "The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," in *American Archivist*, 17:195-206 (July 1954). As an indication of the tricks words can play, when I asked one woman, archivist of a large company, what she thought of a union list of manuscripts, she thought such a list might have something to do with labor union records.

Question 12 was an attempt to determine criteria for reporting collections for a national listing. Should all collections be reported for listing, or should size, dates covered, type of industry, or some other factor be considered? As 18 did not specifically answer this question, the figures do not mean a great deal. But 11 mentioned size as of importance; 14, dates; 18, size and dates together; and 17, the type of industry. Several thought that the individual merit of each collection should be the determining consideration. One said that all large collections and all the early small ones should be listed. Another thought that there was "no convenient way to avoid listing separately a record book for a famous old tavern." I think we should all agree that an occasional record book, or even several books, would just not be worth listing but that the bulk of our collections probably should be described. This is one reason why the job is going to be long and involved.

Having considered collections as a whole, we next took up the matter of what series within a business collection should be judged important enough to list. We meant to ask what ones were worth including in a national listing, but the question seems to have been interpreted by some to mean listing within the institution. We considered in question 13 the older (19th-century) collections, and in question 14 what changes would be suggested to cover 20th-century records. A considerable number did not answer these two questions (38 in the case of question 13 and 42 in the case of question 14), doubtless because they did not have collections of sufficient size or of recent enough date to warrant it. Of those who did answer question 13, most felt that all series should be listed. One noted "all kept after weeding" and another "earliest at least." This of course would make it difficult to confine the listing for a large collection to a 3″ x 5″ card; again, some compromise will be necessary. Those institutions that did not segregate business records indicated that such materials would be included in the description of the larger collections of which they were a part. As for 20th-century records, a few persons mentioned certain types that they thought would become more important, such as personnel and public relation records. One raised a question as to the effect of punched cards and automation. A few thought that there would be no differences in the treatment of recent records from that of older ones. Two felt that more of the recent records could be discarded, and one would microfilm everything and throw away the originals. For most libraries this last procedure would be very expensive, and it is likely that weeding and sampling will be more common practices.

The final question (number 15) was: *What further problems have you met with in the care of business records?* Many did not answer this either, but those who did made some interesting remarks, at least some of which fell into a pattern. Of the respondents, 20 implied that space was a problem because of the bulk of business records. Lack of staff was a problem to 14; among these, 2 thought that accountants and others with business training would be valuable new staff members. Four singled out the costs of handling, and two thought that a library accepting records from firms still in existence should ask for a sum sufficient to cover the costs. One frankly said that there was a tendency to take too many such records; another, equally frank, thought that business firms should look after their own records. Many expressed an interest in the outcome of the project, saying that they would welcome what help they could get in this field.

In 1945 Arthur H. Cole wrote an article entitled "Business Manuscripts: A Pressing Problem." [5] I think it is clear from the answers to our questionnaire that they are still a pressing problem although perhaps different in degree from that presented by manuscripts in general. But, as I have indicated in another article, the problem is being faced on many fronts.[6] Several consulting firms, such as the National Records Management Council, of New York City, are encouraging business to face its own record problems. By showing how savings in money and space can be achieved, they are making record control programs more acceptable to business. It does appear that in the case of modern bulky records the individual company must bear the responsibility and cost of preserving its own archives. When companies are liquidated, the appropriate industry might set up an organization such as the Forest History Foundation to see that records reach repositories, and private collecting institutions should stand ready to ensure the regional preservation of historically important materials. The number of replies to our questionnaire and the interest shown by the accompanying letters and remarks are encouraging. Several institutions are just beginning to collect business records, and these and others are anxious to receive help. For all the favorable comments I am grateful, and my especial thanks go to those who took the time to write full and informative answers to the questions. I hope that this report will serve as some slight repayment.

[5] With Thomas C. Cochran, in *Journal of Economic History*, 5:43-46 (May 1945).

[6] "Care and Handling of Non-governmental Archives," in *Library Trends*, 5:380-389 (Jan. 1957). This whole issue is devoted to the subject of manuscripts and archives.