

# Wyoming State Archives and Historical Department

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*Wyoming State Archives*

ACCORDING to the TV shows involving the West, to authors of western fiction, and to radio programs, the history of the West has been completely wild and riotous, and the name of Wyoming epitomizes all adventure. This, of course, is not entirely true, and recently we have begun to collect and rescue the records that will prove our point. But it is sometimes difficult to convince the public of the truth.

In discussing Wyoming we must remember certain facts in regard to the State. Wyoming has been the eighth, and since the admission of Alaska is now the ninth, largest State in area. Yet in population it is forty-seventh on the list, having only about 300,000 inhabitants. This number would, of course, be lost in a corner of some of the metropolitan areas from which many of you come. Politically Wyoming is subdivided into 23 counties.

Wyoming is a relative latecomer in the Union, admitted in 1890 as the forty-fourth State. It had been made a Territory in 1869, just 2 years after the arrival of the Union Pacific Railroad at the infant town of Cheyenne. Before 1867 the only permanent settlements in what is now Wyoming were several military forts and a number of stage and telegraph stations along the Oregon and Overland Trails.

The history of Wyoming is very close to the present, so close that it is difficult at times to make our people appreciate it. I have numbered among my friends and acquaintances persons who, as children, arrived in Cheyenne soon after the creation of Wyoming Territory. The history of the Territory and State was a part of their lives; and, although some of them appreciated it, many were more interested in their antecedents in the East.

This is not to say that there was no early interest whatever in Wyoming history. In 1895 the legislature created the Wyoming Historical Society and charged the State librarian with custody of

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all property belonging to the society. The secretary of the society was actually the historian of the State, and many valuable private records were collected by Historian Robert C. Morris. He also brought together the nucleus of a museum.

Unfortunately inertia set in almost as soon as the society was organized, for the legislators' desire to have Wyoming's records collected was implemented by a yearly stipend of only \$250 for the work. This was the annual budget from 1895 to 1919. The result, of course, was disastrous. The State librarian continued to serve as custodian of the holdings of the society, but many of them had disappeared by 1918.

From 1919 to 1932 the State had an official historian. During the depression, however, the State librarian was made historian *ex officio*, and this arrangement continued until 1951. Up to that year all appointments to the office of historian, whether as historian alone or as librarian, were political. The appointments were for 2 or 4 years, and the persons appointed were not required to have any professional qualifications.

Space, equipment, and finances were continual problems to the Historical Department. From 1919 until 1937, the department was moved around the Capitol Building, and its museum cases stood in the corridors, unsupervised. There was practically no space in which collections of historical papers could even be stored.

In 1937 the State Historical Department was given quarters on the ground floor in the new Supreme Court and State Library Building. Here the historian had a museum area, an office, and a small vault. The excellent Wyoming newspaper collection, which had accumulated through the years, was housed in the document area of the State Library. Although some problems were solved, the problem of adequate space for storing historical collections of papers and the problems of finance were still acute. In a very short time the museum also became overcrowded.

Each historian and historian *ex officio* did the best she could under the circumstances. The work of collecting private papers had a start; the museum, although small, was a going concern; and the historian from time to time urged in her biennial report that an archives law be passed. The first mention of the need to establish an archives division was made in the report of the historian for 1920, and this was repeated in 1922.

In 1943 a public record law was passed, under which all public officers were requested to deliver to the State historian records no longer needed for their current business if the records were deemed to be historically important. This law was not implemented; and,

except in the case of one or two departments of the State government that had great accumulations of records, practically no action was taken under it.

Until 1950 little concern was expressed over historical work in Wyoming. At that time the Wyoming Federation of Women's Clubs passed a resolution urging that the State Historical Department be reorganized to function under a nonpartisan board, which would appoint a director on the basis of qualifications rather than political affiliation, and that an archives division be created.

A law passed by the legislature in 1951 created the State Library, Archives, and Historical Board. The State Library is headed by the State librarian and is a separate division. The State Archives and Historical Department and the State Museum are headed by a Director, a position which I have filled since it was established.

The board is composed of the State attorney general and eight other members, seven residing in the seven judicial districts of the State and one member at large. The members are appointed by the Governor for terms of 6 years each, with the terms staggered so that not more than three members are appointed every 2 years. The Director of the Archives and Historical Department is appointed by the board on the basis of professional qualifications.

When I took over the position as Director in the fall of 1951, I found I had an overcrowded State Museum, a Historical Department that had been relatively inactive but had collected private papers and newspapers of the State, and a drawer marked "Archives," in which a number of early unbound issues of newspapers, carefully labeled, had been filed. In the small vault were a number of records from the Treasurer's Office, only a part of which had permanent value, and a number of files of routine letters of transmittal from the Office of the Secretary of State, which were later discarded.

The first task that confronted my small staff was to move the museum and the Historical Department to new quarters, larger but not well planned for our operations. To summarize, the move was made, the museum displays were reorganized and set up, and my staff and I turned our thoughts to the historical and archival divisions.

The records that were archival in nature were separated from the private historical papers. Everything up to this time — museum items, historical collections of papers, and archives — had been accessioned together. No real system of handling the records had been attempted; so, once they were physically separated, a new system of recordkeeping was instituted. Three sets of records were be-

gun so that the holdings of the three divisions could be distinguished from each other.

Since the new law directed that we institute many new activities, a tentative timetable was set up. After the move into new quarters in 1952, plans were made in 1953 for the organization of a State Historical Society, for the former one had long since expired. The historical society proved to be a success from the start, and its membership has averaged annually about 900. In addition 12 of the 23 counties in Wyoming have organized county chapters of the society. We now know where to turn for help, and as the society grows in strength and importance we shall have stronger support from the citizens throughout the State.

After the organization of the historical society the timetable called for the beginning of an archival program. In 1954 we began an educational program to tell both State officials and ordinary citizens just what an archival program could mean. This has been a slow and tedious process, and it will be necessary, of course, to keep on with it for many years to come.

Because space has always been and still is our crying need, I began working for a microfilm division within the State Archives program. In the spring of 1954 I interested the Legislative Permanent Ways and Means Committee in such a program, and I was asked to make a survey to see just what would be needed for starting a microfilm program. A number of persons in State government had been interested in such a program, but they had been unable to persuade the legislature to provide funds for one. Several microfilm units were in use in the State offices: the Sales Tax Division and the State Highway Department were using microfilm, the former to save space by filming records that could be destroyed after a period of 10 years, the latter as a part of its current record program. Also in 1954 I had begun the microfilming of current Wyoming newspapers to conserve space in the Historical Department.

Because of an overload of duties and an understaffed department, I could not make a survey during the spring and summer of 1954. When I was told that some legislators were definitely interested in the program, I obtained extra funds to hire someone to make a survey under the sponsorship of the Archives Department. I employed Dorothy Taylor to make the survey. My staff gave every assistance, and I went with Miss Taylor to the various offices for preliminary interviews and explained just what we wanted for the survey and what we hoped would be the result. Since the survey had to be completed in a single month, it was made chiefly through ques-

tionnaires, but a high rate of return gave some assurance of accurate results.

The survey reached the conclusion that, since all available file and storage space in the State buildings was filled to capacity and since there was no immediate possibility of getting a new record storage area, a microfilm program should be instituted to assist with the immediate problem of reducing the bulk of old stored records until such time as a record center could be provided. Governor Simpson, who was elected to office in the fall of 1954, had in mind suggesting such a program; and the survey fitted into his suggestions to the legislature. The new law was originally written so that the microfilm division should be a part of the State Archives Department, administered by the State Library, Archives, and Historical Board. In the process of legislation, however, the board was changed, to be composed of the five elected officials.

Under the law as finally passed, any office of government could ask to have its records filmed. But the disposal of records was put under the jurisdiction of the Archivist. We were most anxious to dispose of the valueless records rather than have them filmed with a consequent waste of money that would put the whole program in a bad light.

The Governor called me in to meet with the Board of State Supplies, under which the Microfilm Department was to function, and asked my help in launching the program. He also instructed me to continue to meet with the board and the microfilm administrator at future meetings. The farsightedness of the Governor has been of great help in this program. Dorothy Taylor was appointed administrator of the Microfilm Department, and we have continued to work together.

To get good results, we interpreted the laws broadly to fit the various jobs in their proper places. The Archives Department surveys records of each State office, inventorying them as best it can under the trying circumstances of overcrowded storage areas. After the survey the records are analyzed and recommendations for their disposition are made by the Committee on Public Records, composed of the head of the department concerned, the State Archivist, the attorney general and, since 1957, the microfilm administrator.

Since we have but little room for the transfer of any original records to the Archives, we have accepted only the early records of the governors, the secretary of state, and the Brand Division, and a few small miscellaneous groups of records from other offices.

Through the microfilm program we have filmed for security many of the early records, the originals of which are retained by the

originating offices. Large groups of other records have been micro-filmed and the originals destroyed; and through our analysis program we have also disposed of large groups of records without filming. All film made by the Microfilm Department must, according to law, be deposited in the State Archives after it is checked to see that it meets proper standards, and the film thereupon becomes a part of the archival holdings of the State.

A part of our archival program might better be termed a record management program. In only a few instances — and only to save space — are records being filmed that might be stored in a record center and destroyed after a period of years. A microfilm program was begun on the county level in October 1957, but microfilming in the counties is done entirely for security. Later we hope to expand the work in the counties.

It always takes time to reach the point where one can reassess a program and initiate the changes necessary for a better balance or for a reorganization. In Wyoming the time has arrived when Dorothy Taylor and I can point out to the Governor and the legislature a better plan for the future, one in which a record center will be an important element, in which we think there will be a reduced microfilm program, and in which record management will have a real part. The plan has been drawn up and soon will be submitted to the legislators.\*\*

Wyoming is now developing a strong archival and historical program. If and when the reorganization plan goes into effect — and we sincerely hope that it will be accepted by the coming legislature — a good many of our present problems, which emanate from overlapping duties and authority, will disappear.

Because of the way in which historical interests grew up in Wyoming, the work in various fields is under several boards or commissions. They will all, we hope, be drawn together under the State Archives and Historical Board, which is already charged with most of the duties. Since approximately \$300,000 a biennium is at present being spent on the various historical, museum, archival, and microfilm activities under the several boards and commissions in the State, I am sure that by coordinating the work a better job can be done.

In Wyoming — which, as I earlier pointed out, is one of the States containing a large area but a small population — drawing all the various functions under one board will be more satisfactory

\*\* Since this paper was written the legislature has passed an act providing for a record center and providing that both the center and the Microfilm Department shall be parts of the Wyoming State Archives establishment. The reorganization went into effect on July 1, 1959.

than having them dispersed under a number of boards or political offices. Researchers who use our records have ready access both to private historical records and to the archival records of the State, counties, and municipalities.

One other question is often asked in regard to our Wyoming organization, and that is the relation of the State Archives to the University of Wyoming Archives. The names are what they imply. The State Archives is the only agency to which archival records of the State and its political subdivisions can legally be transferred. The University Archives contains some archival records of the university.

Actually, the University Archives has another function upon which its archivist concentrates almost entirely — that of collecting personal papers, business records, and other materials for historical research. It was my privilege to open the archives at the university when it was created in 1945, and during the 6 years when I was on the faculty there I worked to save the early university records as well as to establish a research center for western history. While university archivist, I had the name of the division expanded to University Archives and Western History Division of the University of Wyoming Library. The new name, I believe, more closely fits the activities of the department.

The State Historical Department and the University Archives in a sense compete in collecting private papers. But I prefer to think of the two organizations as cooperating to persuade the people of Wyoming to keep their historical materials in Wyoming. A dozen years ago too many important private collections were leaving the State, going to depositories on the east and west coasts. People in Wyoming now have a choice of two depositories in the State for the safekeeping of records that logically belong in Wyoming.