

# John F. X. Britt, 1917-60

By JOHN P. H. DETHMAN

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**J**OHN (JACK) F. X. BRITT died suddenly on April 26, 1960, at his home in Detroit, Michigan. A capable and productive practitioner in the field of records management, he began his career as a records clerk in the U. S. Department of Agriculture in June 1938. From December 1941 to August 1951 he served as records analyst in the Navy Department and as records officer for the Federal Security Agency. During that period he was active in the U. S. Interagency Records Administration Conference. Beginning in September 1951 he was responsible for the programs for records management, forms control, and office standards of the Ford Division, Ford Motor Company.

Jack was born in Washington, D. C., July 2, 1917. He received his elementary and high school education at a Brooklyn, N. Y., preparatory school. He earned his B. A. degree (1942) and his M. A. (1946) from George Washington University, Washington, D. C.

Jack never considered himself an "archivist." His professional life, however, was surrounded by the archivist's tools of the trade. His great labor of love was the American Records Management Association. In 1954 and 1955 he represented the Detroit Records Management Association Chapter in the formation of the American Records Management Association (ARMA). He served ARMA as a national officer since its organization in 1956 and was its second national president. The Detroit chapter is establishing a John F. X. Britt scholarship fund in his memory.

In the fall of 1959 Jack accepted the task of helping to organize the Society of American Archivists' 1960 program for its annual meeting to be held in Boston. Hearing of his untimely death, Program Committee Chairman Alice E. Smith wrote the following as evidence of Jack's enthusiasm for his profession and his work for the Society:

... I am greatly shocked at the news. I have never met him, but, searching last fall for someone active in business records management from the Middle West, and upon the recommendation of Maynard Brichford ... I wrote him and he accepted immediately.

Since then we've had a lively correspondence. He was delighted at the opportunity to plan sessions on records management, which he believed had been overlooked in recent sessions, and promptly circularized some three dozen specialists in the field, studied their replies, and before Christmas presented a proposed program of topics and speakers, all of which, he insisted, were merely suggestions subject to criticism and revision by the rest of the committee.

In the following weeks he was equally energetic in writing to colleagues, fitting their abilities to the program, and making the endless inevitable adjustments. When the program was finally completed, he protested my mild comment that it was rather heavily weighted in the direction of records management, but we finally agreed that records management was, at least, "well represented." Since then I have not heard from him.

I am grieved at the death of this colleague whom I have never met, and feel that the October program will in many respects be a monument to his deep interest in the profession of records management.

Colleagues who know the full story of Jack's life and works recall that he labored under the misfortune of being a diabetic. He never, however, permitted his physical problems to interfere with his determination and ability to work with speed and accuracy. He was never neutral about anything in his life. He reacted strongly to things, responded warmly to people—and they to him. With fierce energy he chose the uncharted records management problems of American industry. He was developing a new scheduling idea when his heart failed on April 26, at the age of not quite 43.

Ford's loss of Jack through his untimely death is great. Jack had only one speed: forward, high. We shall never fill the spot occupied by Jack in our programs.

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### ***Newspaper Archives***

It would be a great help to historians if newspapers would keep archives of significant unprinted information, says Mr. [Allan] Nevins.

"Most American newspapers have some intimacy with the stream of events, even though it is on a small scale," he points out. "They deal with affairs for their city or state as the *Times* of London deals with affairs on the national and international level. The difficulty is that they do not bring to them, in most instances, any high sense of responsibility; and this handicaps the historian. They could keep archives, if they were not too careless or indolent."

—Dwight Bente, "Yesterday's Paper Dead? Not to Historians," in *Editor & Publisher* (Oct. 17, 1959). Quoted by permission of the editor.