

A Tentative Survey of Business Archives

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Eli Lilly and Company

IN preparation for the workshop sessions of the 1960 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, a questionnaire regarding business archives was distributed to 113 companies throughout the United States.¹ The purpose was to discover (1) if business organizations feel a need for preserving their records of the past, (2) where business archives exist, (3) how the records are preserved, and (4) in what way they are used.

The summary below is based on replies from the 51 companies that reported available material. Their average age was 129 years; the oldest company was formed in 1798 and the most recent in 1925. Histories have been written about 39 of these companies; and 5 others reported plans for compiling histories.

THE COLLECTIONS

The terms "business archives" and "business historical collection" are used interchangeably in most companies. "Historical collection" or merely "collection" will be used in this summary. Four organizations reply that their collections were begun in the year of their founding and one the year afterward. Most of the companies, however, give a later date. In many instances the beginning date of the collection coincides with an anniversary date of the company. This seems to indicate that the value of older records becomes apparent when a company history is being written, an important anniversary is celebrated, or some other particular need arises.

The administration of 13 of the collections requires the services of a full-time employee. In one instance a former vice president, after 12 years of retirement, is now operating on a part-time contractual basis as the official historian of the corporation although there is no central collection of materials. In many instances, however, the answers seem to indicate that materials have accumulated

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¹ Assisting in the preparation of the questionnaire were the committee's chairman, Irene M. Strieby, and Robert W. Lovett.

over a period of years with little thought to planning or organization.

In 22 companies special rooms or areas have been set aside for these materials. One company has provided an air-conditioned room with an acoustically-treated ceiling; one a large vault-like room containing files; another a room of medium size in the main office; while still another has a 31½'x13½' room (part of a library area) with some additional warehouse space. Materials not in separate rooms may be found in the training department, the personnel office, the public relations department, the company library, vaults and storage rooms, or a company warehouse. A number of collections are divided and will be found in two or more locations. The smaller collections vary in size from one filing cabinet to one or two cardboard boxes, or one scrapbook of newspaper clippings.

Materials in print or near-print are collected by 48 companies; 42 collect pictures; 34 have museum items; 17 have filmstrips or movies; and 12 have tape recordings. One collection consists of pictures only. Another includes maps, manuscripts, and diaries, while still another is composed of correspondence, ledgers, company publications, annual reports, postal cards, calendars, sales literature, programs, and company souvenirs. The others fall somewhere in between.

Finding aids are in use in 19 collections, 28 have none, and 4 plan some description work. Descriptive inventories, indexes for material arranged under very general categories, and card catalogs are in use. The last are arranged by subject, title, or location, and are suitably cross-referenced. The information may include date of acquisition, name of donor, names of people to whom documents and pictures relate, and/or a brief description of the material itself.

Of the 28 companies indicating that no kind of index is in use, 14 have either very small collections or collections stored in out-of-the-way areas and thus seldom used.

Replies reveal that materials are preserved in document cases, looseleaf binders, bound volumes, and filing folders. These may be housed in metal or wooden filing cabinets, locked cupboards, map-type files, and bookcases, or on open metal shelves. Nine companies report that all or part of their records are stored in fireproof vaults.

PICTURES

The picture collections vary in size more than the collections as a whole. They are reported as follows:

No pictures	6
Incidental (4 or 5)	5
Number unknown	15
25-30 pictures	3
100-300 "	7
500-1,000 "	7
1,500-2,000 "	3
10,000-20,000 "	4
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	50

Yet another collection is composed of 150,000 photonegatives plus a master file of the most important prints. One collection, which numbers in the thousands, is composed principally of old glass plates. Only in nine collections are any or all of the pictures mounted before filing. In more than half the collections the pictures are filed separately from other materials; in a number of instances they are filed with related materials; and a few organizations report both methods of filing. Looseleaf binders and scrapbooks are also used.

Card indexes are in use for 18 picture collections while 2 others are in process of development. These indexes are arranged by title of picture; by name of individual, company installation, building, product, or geographical location; or in very general classes. In one index a microfilm copy of each picture is attached to the index card.

Expanded advertising programs, particularly in the field of television, have increased the demand for pictures. Many requests are directed to companies such as the ones reporting here; 12 will lend original pictures from their files, 23 will provide copies upon request, and 5 of these make a charge for this service. Only 14 report that any restrictions are attached to the use of a picture. These vary:

- A credit line must appear.
- Company approval must be given for any cut lines.
- Company approval must be given for any captions used.
- No pictures may be used for endorsements without permission.
- The purpose for which a picture is to be used must be clearly stated.

Companies have found that in addition to supplying photographs for outside requests there are various ways in which pictures can be used within the organization itself. Some of these uses are:

advertising; anniversary programs; decorative use; editorial use (articles about the company in house organs, annual reports, recruiting booklets, catalogs, and brochures); exhibits (conventions, meetings of various kinds, open houses); guest relations programs; company histories; publicity (news releases); reference (for identification purposes); sales promotion; and training programs.

MUSEUM ITEMS

Thirty-four companies indicate that museum items are collected. These may range from a few old bottles in which company products were packaged to an extensive collection paralleling the growth of the organization itself. As many as 11 companies have provided a separate room or area for exhibit purposes, 7 have full-time employees in attendance, and 10 have exhibit areas open to the public. Two plan to open museums soon and four existing collections may be seen by special appointment. Among the companies that replied giving specific information about their museum exhibits are the following: American United Life Insurance Co. (30 West Fall Creek Parkway, North Drive, Indianapolis), a display of old business machines; Crane & Co., Inc. (Crane Museum, Dalton, Mass.), a scale model of the vat house of the first Crane paper mill, hand molds, and wall cases tracing the history of American papermaking from Revolutionary times; Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., Inc. (1144 East Market St., Akron, Ohio), the first tires produced by the company and a complete display of its tires and other products; and Wells Fargo Bank (History Room, 30 Montgomery St., San Francisco), a historical collection covering the period from the discovery of gold through the San Francisco fire and earthquake.

COMMENTS

An attempt was made, in compiling the mailing list for this questionnaire, to reach a cross section of business organizations throughout the United States. Included were manufacturing and wholesale companies, food processing companies and mail-order houses, insurance companies and banks, and a few nonprofit organizations.

The information given by the 51 respondents indicates (1) that an interest in noncurrent records does exist, (2) that an attempt is being made by a number of companies to organize their records, and (3) that many companies are trying to use these records to some advantage. A survey such as this, however, can do no more than scratch the surface.

In a paper ² read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in 1953, Oliver W. Holmes said: "Despite the obvious difficulties, it is time that the profession had a systematic and objective survey of developments in the field of business archives and records management. Such a survey, I feel, would need to be carried out by a combination of questionnaire and field work." Perhaps the time has now arrived to give immediate, serious attention to the recommendation made by Mr. Holmes, for more and more people are realizing that "the palest ink is better than the most retentive memory." ³

² "Some Reflections on Business Archives in the United States," in *American Archivist*, 17:291 (Oct. 1954).

³ S. G. Champion, *Racial Proverbs*, p. 365 (New York, 1938).

Detained Under Pretext of Classifying

—Les archives . . . de La Ferté-Milon, qui remontent au XVI^e siècle, viennent d'être heureusement retrouvées, il y a quelques mois, chez un particulier qui les avait si longtemps détenues, sous prétexte de les classer, qu'on en avait même oublié l'existence.

—"Chronique et Mélanges," in *Revue Internationale des Archives, des Bibliothèques, & des Musées*, 1:33 (Mars 1895).

Sins of Omission

According to "A Dictionary of Documentation Terms" (*American Documentation*, April 1960), the word UMBRAL means "being intimately relevant to the subject sought." Although this dictionary contains "cataloger" and "catalogist," the compiler must have thought that the words "archivist" and "records manager," as well as "archives," "records," and "manuscripts," are not sufficiently umbral to be included. Or perhaps he did not have access to Dr. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives*, or to a "Glossary of Records Terminology" (NARS, January 1956). But, I ask you, as one archivist to another, do you think that a compiler who would be guilty of such sins of omission really understands the meaning of umbral? Or, for that matter, does he understand the meaning of documentation?

—Kay Davidson in *Archiviews* (Aug. 1960).