

In Memoriam

RALPH BURCHAM

1924-1963

Ralph Burcham, the Archivist of the State of Washington, suffered a fatal heart attack on November 9, 1963. He had been ailing for some months. Dr. Burcham was 39 years old.

Born in Rittman, Ohio, on March 13, 1924, Ralph was a member of a large family that was hard hit by the depression years in that industrial city. He completed high school there and during World War II was inducted into the United States Army. Serving in the European Theater, he was invalided home before the war's end.

As a disabled veteran, Ralph was able to pursue his education. He moved west and took his B.A. degree at the University of Idaho in 1950. Pursuing his newfound interest in western history, he transferred to Washington State College (now University) at Pullman and worked toward his doctorate under Prof. Herman Deutsch.

In January 1953 Ralph accepted an appointment as Assistant State Archivist in Olympia. I had been appointed Archivist 18 months earlier, and together—despite the inadequacy of statutory authority for the job at hand—we surveyed a vast collection of unclassified records that had been accumulating over the years with no professional care.

For a number of years we worked principally as stevedores and microfilm operators. Ralph accepted this in good part and pressed forward this work. In 1957 we lobbied through the legislature the present records management law and began to catch up on the backlog of work.

Ralph took his doctorate in 1957, writing on the gold rush era on the Clearwater. In 1958 he became State Archivist, and in 1963, just a few months before his death, he saw the State archives moved into a new building for which he had done much of the planning.

Ralph was active in the Society of American Archivists and in his work with historical and library agencies in Washington. It was his aim to make the Washington State Archives a useful agency for historical research, something it had not achieved in the past. His acquaintance with official records of the State, especially with respect to their origins and arrangement, will be sorely missed by the agencies.

Dr. Burcham is survived by his wife, Beverly Freeburg Burcham, who is on the teaching staff of an Olympia school; a son, Randall, who is a student at Washington State University; a daughter, Sally Jean, who attends Tumwater High School; his youngest son, Jonathan, a student at a Tumwater grade school, and a baby daughter, Robin.

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