Collecting Business Records

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WHENEVER a group of librarians and archivists meet, you can be certain to hear at least one disparaging comment about the collection of business records. Sometimes it will be argued that there is no need to collect them, because they are readily available in businesses to any scholar. On another occasion you may hear that any institution having a policy of collecting business records will be buried beneath tons of files contributed by businessmen eager to clean house. Again, you may hear the argument that you need keep only a representative sample of records from each type of business.

These comments and the policies they reflect have done damage to the program of collecting source material for economic history. Unfortunately this damage has been done when recessions and unemployment have reminded us that much still needs to be learned about our economic problems. Scholars have long recognized that economic history is a valuable tool for understanding current economic problems, and today both economists and historians are probing the source material of economic history for a better understanding of our modern economy. If American libraries and archives are to fulfill their functions in this research work, librarians and archivists must adopt more useful and positive attitudes toward the collection of business records than they have in the past.

First of all, business records are not easily available to the historian. Records of active businesses are very difficult to obtain, because businessmen usually prefer to withhold or destroy records rather than risk information leaks to competitors or possible adverse publicity from the research done on their records. It follows that the most commonly held business records are those of defunct enterprises, for here the businessman is generally indifferent about information leaks to former competitors or about adverse publicity. Through ignorance, however, or the confusion surrounding the closing of a business the records are often consigned to flames or the junk dealer before the collector can learn of them.

Such difficulties should lay to rest not only the belief that business records are easily available but also the fear that a policy of collect-

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ing business records means certain inundation of staff and facilities by tons of old files. Even if your policy is widely announced there is small chance that any corporation will request you to accept its archives. The same patience, industry, and persistence are necessary to collect business records as to acquire any other kind of significant historical records.

Once having decided to collect business records, you still must determine what kind of material you should seek. From the standpoint of the scholar you should seek every existing record of every kind of business—such things as correspondence, account books, personnel files, board of directors' minutes, memos, house organs, bills of lading, scrapbooks, and any other file or record book you can find. The records are important regardless of the size of the business—records from drugstores and dentists should be collected along with those from manufacturing plants or railroads.

It is unfortunate that so much has been said about limiting collections of business records when the problem may never arise for many collecting institutions. Even when space is limited, collections of business records may prove to be of insufficient quantity to tax the facilities.

If, however, the collections of business records have actually exceeded available shelf space, then the collector must proceed to limit the size of the business records in some fashion. Microfilming is a nearly ideal solution. Provided that the collection is arranged and inventoried before being photographed, scholars will be as satisfied with the resulting microfilm as with the original records. The librarian will be satisfied with the reduction in bulk. Unfortunately, microfilming seems to be beyond the budgets of many institutions.

Despite the desirability of microfilming, then, it apparently has not been the common solution to space problems. One popular solution has been to limit the collections by including only representative samples of different types of businesses. Thus, if records of a representative lumber company were to be collected, no other lumber company records would be preserved. The difficulty here is that businesses ostensibly of the same type actually vary, and locating a set of representative business records is as difficult as locating the average man. It is also doubtful that such collecting policies can build a really valuable research collection.

More promising is limiting the collection by subject. Instead of trying to collect records of all kinds of business activities and limiting the collection to supposedly representative samples, a subject collection will provide a more valuable research collection. A col-

lection devoted solely to the business records of the lumber industry, for instance, would provide more research information than a miscellaneous collection of representative samples.

Another technique for limiting the size of business records is to weed all large collections and save only portions. This may be a relatively harmless device, depending entirely upon the amount of weeding done. Certainly duplicate records need not be saved, even if space is unlimited. However, weeding should never proceed on the basis of itemized lists. Businesses and records collected from them are much too varied to allow routine weeding from standard lists. Librarians and archivists have at times been advised to weed all records of canceled checks; yet such a file, in lieu of records conveying the same information, can be extremely valuable.

Much better is weeding based on two rules: the more general the information contained in the record, the more historically valuable the record; the longer the time period covered by the record, the more historically valuable the record.

An institution might collect, for example, the following records of an incorporated business:

1. Annual statement of earnings. 1914-51.
2. Minutes of board of directors' meetings. 1918-48.
3. House publications. 1920-49.
4. List of customers and addresses. 1923-50.
5. Scrapbooks. 1914-50.
6. Personnel files. 1946-51.
7. Bills of lading. 1948-51.
8. Payroll records. 1948-51.
9. Invoices. 1949-51.

The first four items definitely should be retained. Any of the four contains information covering wide areas of the activities of the firm and also covers a long period of time. The scrapbooks too should be saved unless they contain material a scholar could reasonably be expected to find in newspapers or suitable trade journals. Items 6-9 are likely to cause space problems, since they will probably be quite bulky. The personnel records may contain general information and should, for that reason, be of value. The bills of lading, invoices, and payroll records cover such short periods of time and provide such narrow fields of investigation that they have the least value. They will also probably require as much shelf space as the more generally useful records, if not more space, and their elimination could solve a storage problem.

The records of a single business can thus be arranged on a value

scale. Before weeding records at the bottom of the scale, however, one should recognize that anything less than saving all of the records is an unfortunate expedient. Like other values, historical values change with the development of new historical theories. What may seem trivial today may be of vital significance tomorrow.

Perhaps, as a summary, the best single fact to remember is that business records are historical records, differing little from the political and biographical records with which most librarians and archivists are familiar. Just as duplicate material and artifacts are not saved in a collection of historical manuscripts, neither are they saved in business records. Beyond this any weeding becomes only guesswork. The librarian or archivist, however, has little reason to worry about too many business records. To date the worry is that too few will be found.

Crime and Punishment

As I supervised and participated in the handling of the endless stream of corrugated manuscript boxes, my collector's certainty and enthusiasm deserted me, and the elegance of our new surroundings seemed flattery. What were these tons of well housed items, designated as historical manuscripts, worth beyond their doubtful value as waste paper? What had they contributed toward the advance of knowledge? Our visitors' books, filled with the names of many scholars, graduate students, and other interested persons, naturally did not list the end products of fruitful research, the books, articles, theses, footnotes, or critical comments. Over the years, we had been too concerned with collecting, processing, and making manuscripts available and too far away from the reference materials in the main university library to follow the professional careers of many of the manuscript users. And I had not sufficiently realized that any staff dedicated to a work having characteristics of a cause needs assurance that the cause has value, the more the better.

Just when my feeling was strongest that the punishment of moving such monstrous amounts fitted the crime of enthusiastic collecting, the university historian, Professor Morris Bishop, came in and presented me with a copy of his *A History of Cornell*, fresh from the press. As a Cornellian as well as the university archivist, what more immediate or joyful evidence of the fruitful product could I ask? Professor Bishop had worked through the tons of archival materials in gathering information for his book.

—EDITH M. FOX, *Collection of Regional History and the University Archives: Report of the Curator and Archivist, 1958-1962*, preface, p. 7 (Ithaca, 1963).