

Business Archives: Introductory Remarks

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TO BE different from many speakers at scholarly meetings, I am directing my remarks to the questions originally posed by the organizers of the meeting: Why? What? How? The primary purpose is to provide an introduction to the examples of records management that other speakers will give.

Three points of view must have consideration in advancing reasons for the retention and preservation of business records. Archivists certainly have a strong vested interest in such records. If I may be permitted to mention economic considerations, archivists would like to see many businesses create archives so that the demand for scarce archival talent would experience such a rapid increase that salaries would rise rapidly!

In retaining records, businessmen are motivated by a dual set of circumstances. Ordinarily they feel the necessity of keeping enough records on hand to aid them in current activity and in planning for the future. Administrators in financial, public relations, and other departments often call for archival materials, and not all such needed documents fall within the 5-, 7-, or 10-year limits set by records managers. Furthermore, top executives often need and call for information on decisions made in the past that are comparable to those required in the present. Only by retention of the records can such requirements be met. Only the trained archivist can select and arrange the retained documents in a fashion that can make them readily available either to executives for viewing or to persons with social science backgrounds for condensation and evaluation.

Occasionally firms have leaders who are aware that they and their predecessors have made decisions and established policies of significance in the growth of their firms, industries, economies, and nations. Although such awareness is altogether too rare, the number showing it is definitely increasing. Such business leaders are ready and willing to encourage the writing of histories of their companies and their industries.

Do we in the United States need to stress why the role of business and of businessmen in our history should be brought vividly and

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comprehensively into the written record? I should think not. During the past 200 years no other single group in our society has been more influential in raising our standards of living, in setting the direction of institutional and social changes, in affecting our national policies and international relations. Only by understanding what businessmen have done, and their ways of doing it, can we get a realistic appraisal of the broad history of the American people.

We have developed a business civilization. Through history we should acquire a comprehensive picture of the meaning of the term and what it signifies, now and for the future. In order to get such an appraisal we must add to the present body of literature an extensive amount on the range and implications of business activities in the past.

Obviously essential to the quest for knowledge about the historical role of business and the businessmen in society is the retention and preservation of business records. The retention program should embrace records not only of firms, large and small, but also of trade associations, such quasi-public institutions as commodity and stock exchanges, and such publicly owned corporations as the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Now to turn to the "what" of business archives—what should be preserved? Essential at the beginning is to provide for preservation of all those documents retained for legal reasons. This class includes sealed instruments (charters, contracts, and the like), minute books, and such supplementary materials as data provided directors and executives for decision making. Annual reports are not legally required, but most companies keep them as though they were.

Retention of statistical data is absolutely imperative. From them the historian presumably can reconstruct a chronological record of achievement in costs, sales, and finance. In such a record the historian will have the skeleton for the flesh and blood derived from other sources of information. Specifically, statistics enable the researcher to perceive turning points in the history of a firm. Key memoranda on the thinking behind the decisions made at those turning points should be preserved at all costs. Such memoranda give a glimpse of the motivation and reasoning in connection with those decisions, which have affected the long-term health of the firm and reflect its policy.

As to correspondence, the selection must vary according to the firm and the industry. It is essential to keep top-level correspondence in order that the historian may ascertain and understand the motivation of decisions. Secondly, such correspondence also aids

in tracing the application of the company's policy decisions. The decision-making process is a continuous one: executives first make long-term decisions, then those that implement basic commitments, and both types determine the record of performance. Top-level correspondence is also essential to reveal the administrative style and leadership qualities of top executives.

In this connection I should like to make a plea for keeping memos and correspondence on outside activities of the executives. Their relations to their community, to their industry, and to their nation are of prime importance to the historian in understanding their behavior within the firm. Moreover, the historian is interested in understanding the role of businessmen not merely in the economy but in society.

The techniques of archival management I leave to the archivists. My two associates on this program will soon give you details on this point. But a couple of other ideas merit discussion.

One method of stimulating the retention of business records is demonstrated by the activities of the Forest History Society.¹ This organization was created in the late 1940's to encourage the preservation of archives of firms in the forest products industry. The program can show a marked measure of success. Its director has encouraged firms either to retain their own records or to deposit them in designated depositories. Such materials are now available in many States of the Union and in several Provinces of Canada, available for use by historians in many universities and colleges. A bibliography scheduled for early publication will supply information not only on the character and location of such manuscripts but also on a large number of articles, books, and pamphlets. Accordingly, in the near future we should be able to add considerably to our knowledge of the whole history of forest products in North America from 1600 to the present.

To solve the problem of space, the most obvious recourse is microfilm, but another idea might be entered in the record. In an unpublished paper delivered at the meetings of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association several years ago, I suggested that centers for record storage and management could be established at key points in various parts of the country—near Boston, New York, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Tacoma, for example. Such centers could be profitmaking and thus attractive as investments. Businessmen alone, or jointly with other groups, might form corporations and raise the necessary funds. Land

¹ For information, interested persons may write to Elwood Maunder, Director, Forest History Society, Inc., School of Forestry, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

strategically located in relation to offices of business firms, academic institutions, and governmental agencies could be purchased, a building erected (one capable of expansion as required), and space rented to any organization that would want its records stored and managed.

With a staff of records managers, trained archivists, and historians in such a center, the organization and processing of records could go forward daily. Universities and colleges could deposit manuscript collections, governmental agencies could rent space, and business firms could store records no longer needed for daily operations but on call when occasion arose. With modern communication facilities and efficient records management, any document desired could be delivered in less than an hour to any downtown office. Firms willing to have their records investigated by historians up to any specified date could grant such permission, and the staff would handle the requests.

One group of midwestern businessmen² has initiated already a records storage and management service for private and public organizations desiring to assure continuity of operations in the event of nuclear war. Hundreds of business firms, including leading banks and petroleum companies, have deposited key documents in an underground salt mine provided by the new storage company. If facilities of a similar nature, either under or above ground, could be established near great centers of population to provide continuing records management, I feel certain that administrators, archivists, and historians would reap marked benefits.

² Underground Vaults and Storage, Inc., Wichita, Kans.

Business Records: One Hazard Leads to Another

Losses of this type of local records which are of obvious importance in an industrial area have long caused concern. The British Records Association has recently drawn attention to an additional hazard, that of old papers in business premises being thrown away on the advice of the Fire Prevention Officers to reduce fire-risk. It has, however, been possible to obtain the co-operation of the Fire Service in order to reduce this danger. In Leeds the Chief Fire Officer is to distribute to owners of premises being inspected a leaflet drawing attention to the historical interest of business records and the facilities provided by the Archives Department for their better preservation. Similar arrangements are being made in Bradford and Dewsbury and it is hoped to obtain the co-operation of Chief Fire Officers throughout the Northern Section.

—NATIONAL REGISTER OF ARCHIVES, West Riding, Northern Section, *Annual Report and Bulletin*, no. 8, 1965, p. v.

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