

# Ut Omnes Unum Sint—The Rockefeller Archives

By JOSEPH W. ERNST

*Offices of Messrs. Rockefeller*

IN A WORLD that has seen Protestant observers discussing theology just outside the doors of the Vatican Council, American capitalists conversing with Khrushchev in the Kremlin, and a Republican Party claiming victory in Dixie, our profession seems to be going backward.

Skimming through some past issues of the *American Archivist* I have found such titles as "The Archivist's Role in Records Management" (1956), "What Should Bind Us Together" (1956), "Relations Between Archivists and Records Managers" (1959), "Archivists and Records Managers—A Partnership" (1960), and "'In My Father's House Are Many Mansions'" (1961). All these articles deal with this morning's topic, all of them assume that archivists and records managers share a common calling.

Today's topic and yesterday's discussion suggest to me that somewhere along the line we have had or are having our Council of Trent, where the boundaries of our respective faiths were drawn. Now we too must start an ecumenical dialog.

If this has happened—and I hope it has not—I want to enter my protest against the event. I don't believe there should or can be a meaningful division between archivists and records managers. If my remarks deserve a title I would select "Ut Omnes Unum Sint." In fact I would include the researcher in my plea for unity since the archivist's and/or records manager's work really takes on meaning only when the researcher comes along to use the papers. And by researcher I do not mean merely the academic scholar; in fact, I think the past emphasis on scholarly use of archives is one of the reasons so many people think of archives as a euphemism for old, dead, dusty pieces of paper.

Archival work, records management, and research—all three activities are facets of a common calling: to interpret the world we live in. Robert M. Brown in his book *Observer in Rome* tells a story about a newspaper reporter who wanted to attend a secret briefing at the Vatican Council. Dressing himself in priestly garb

The author, Archivist of The Rockefeller Archives, read this paper at the session of the Society's 28th annual meeting on "Improving Communications Among Records Managers, Archivists, and Researchers," in Austin, Tex., on Oct. 9, 1964.

he passed the checkpoint (if that's the proper term) in the entourage of a late-arriving bishop. Once inside the conference hall, however, he had a twinge of conscience and confessed his masquerade to the bishop. A smile crossed the bishop's face as he said, "That's all right, my son; you see, I am a reporter too."

It seems to me that whether we think of ourselves as annointed archivists, dedicated to higher truths, as working records managers who do all the dirty work, or just plain researchers reporting on the human scene, our goals are ultimately the same.

Obviously, we all share a dedication to Truth. Now it seems to me that truth (with a small *t*) is a rather elusive, changing thing. As a sometime historian, I know that no one has ever preserved, studied, and written down every element of truth in any single historical event. All history is a matter of selection. In the same way no reasonable recordkeeper can say that he has every paper created on his organization or that he wants to keep every record.

Just as the historian will select what he can use, subjectively or objectively, we records people must accept the fact that we shall never have the whole Truth. What we can have is enough of the truth so that future researchers have assurance that their source material is uncorrupted—this is the essence of our common task.

Having emphasized the unity of our common calling, I must admit that our specific functions vary. As government and business have grown since the Civil War, there has of necessity been a proliferation of specialties. In one New York law office a full-time clerk does nothing but compare copies of instruments against the originals, and this for 7½ hours a day, 5 days a week. That sounds as dreary as the classic one-nut-on-one-bolt operation of the automobile assembly line.

There is a need for specialists, especially in the wonderland of automated record production. But our specialties should not divide us. I think communication among records managers, archivists, and researchers must concern itself with a cross-fertilization of ideas, not with whether we should have one or two or three professional organizations.

Someone should go through the *American Archivist* for the past 28 years and determine how many of the articles have really added to the core of knowledge in records work. I am not saying that it isn't interesting to know that we ought to work together or that someone has built a building with fiberglass walls or how to build an archives on a tennis court. But I am suggesting that archivists and records managers might write more nuts-and-bolts articles.

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Articles that present specific philosophies and techniques being used instead of comfortable generalizations based on Dr. Schellenberg's book and back issues of the *American Archivist*. If we don't write them, the editor of the journal can't print them.

Despite all the rocking of the Society's boat during the past 15 years over the difference between records managers and archivists, I am not convinced that we have really faced up to the common problems that I know we are meeting in different ways.

Let me make my position explicit by giving some examples from my own work of the ways in which we could improve communications among our three specialties. I must emphasize that I am not speaking for archivists. What I say is based on my own experience during the past 10 years. Incidentally, no one ever bestowed the title of archivist on me. I did not take the 4-week seminar in Washington; so I do not have a certificate. When I was hired there was no Rockefeller Archives in the formal sense, although the only important elements of an archives—the papers—were there.

Furthermore, my operation is a small one. The total record accumulation of the Rockefeller family does not exceed 4,000 cubic feet. (I tend to think of that as 4,000 Paige boxes nestling on 83 steel shelving units, 7 shelves high.) And about half that total is not yet in the Archives.

Of course not all of the family papers will ever get into the Archives. There are canceled checks, bank statements and reconciliations, extra copies, form letters, and paid bills that deserve something less than immortality.

It may be useful to spell out the guidelines I have used in organizing the Rockefeller Archives. By dictionary definition, archives are public records. Obviously, we in America have broadened our horizons. Following Schellenberg very closely, this is my definition of the potential contents of the Rockefeller Archives:

All books, papers, maps, photographs, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by the Rockefeller family or any of its immediate organizations in connection with the transactions of its personal and business affairs and preserved as evidence of its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities or because of the informational value of the data contained therein.

Again following Schellenberg, these are the characteristics that make the Rockefeller family papers a formal archives rather than a manuscript collection:

They were created to accomplish a definite purpose in their organized state.

They are no longer in current use and have been definitely set aside for preservation, having been adjudged worthy of being kept.

They are preserved for use by individuals and organizations other than the family and its staff, as well as by the family and its staff.

They have been under an unbroken line of responsible custodians.

They are the documentary results of the natural growth and activity of a living organization.

Within these general boundary lines, the Rockefeller Archives has come into being. However, these are the living records of a living organization, and everything I have done has been governed by the current needs of the family. I have kept many items that I should be hard pressed to describe as historical records—for example, brochures of schools or other organizations, where this type of document is the only available information on the organization, or random letters from overzealous correspondents with plans for a better mousetrap, a new world order, or rocket propulsion through spiritual power. The records are the collective memory of the family and its staff, and not every request for information we receive is likely to affect the course of mankind's history.

The Rockefeller archives are divided into two record groups: the papers of John D. Rockefeller, 1877 to 1915; and the papers of the office of JDR Jr., 1900 to 1961. Eventually a third group will be added, the papers of the Offices of the Messrs. Rockefeller—the five brothers, sons of JDR Jr. While these are real, distinct record groups, a continuity of subject matter and content runs through all three.

The surviving papers of John D. Rockefeller divide naturally into two parts. One is the outgoing correspondence, preserved in two series of letterpress books—personal and business. The individual items are in chronological order within the series. The other is the incoming correspondence, which was maintained as it had been filed in wooden Globe letter boxes. Here again there are two series—personal and business. Each answered letter has a notation giving the date of the answer. Each letter box holds 2 or 3 months' accumulation of incoming correspondence, arranged alphabetically.

While there is a name index in the front of each letterpress book, there never was an overall index for the entire set by either name or subject. Furthermore, the incoming set had been used by Nevins, the Hidys, and Mr. Rockefeller's staff through the years; and many items removed were simply refiled in the front of a box.

Now I agree with the principle that the archivist should leave the records in their original order, but in this case I decided I could make an exception to that rule. I proceeded to tear the incoming correspondence apart and rearrange it in two straight alphabetical

files. Letters from one-time correspondents were collected into *A-Z* folders, while separate folders were created for repeaters. For example, the letters from John D. Archbold measure 1 inch; from Frank Rockefeller, 1 Hollinger box; and from W. P. Thompson, a Standard Oil executive, almost 2 Hollinger boxes.

After the physical sorting was completed, we proceeded to read and describe the new folders. Our index to the John D. Rockefeller papers is now an alphabetical listing of everyone who wrote him between 1877 and 1894, with a short indication of the subject matter of the correspondence.

I have no plans, at least for the present, to do anything with the letter books, on the assumption that I can find pertinent correspondence in them from the dates on incoming correspondence, which fills 72 Hollinger boxes. There are 392 letter books; obviously not every letter in the books is covered by a similar item in the incoming correspondence.

At this point I should like to raise some questions. Should the incoming collection have been maintained intact? If so, why? Are there any suggestions for a method of indexing further the letter books? And, finally, while most of the images in the letter books are as good as on the day they were made, some are gone. Whether these pages have faded or whether the original images were poor, I do not know. What steps should or could be taken to preserve them other than air conditioning and light control and/or microfilm?

In reassembling the incoming correspondence I faced another problem. Everything I have read on archives processing includes the injunction, "Remove all printed material." Why? With their letters, schools, churches, patriotic societies, anti-immigration groups, and hopeful speculators frequently included printed material. Some particularly fascinating pamphlets tell the story of Baptist missionaries in old Quebec, which deserves retelling. Why should I put this background material in a separate place?

This question of segregation of printed material has plagued me in my treatment of the papers of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., as well. To cite only one example, JDR Jr. participated extensively in the Protestant ecumenical movement. Time after time an idea was born, people commented on it, reports and memoranda were written, and ultimately a printed document was created. In these files the genesis, development, and later success or failure of the idea is recorded. Why should I isolate the printed expression of the idea from all that went before or after? It seems to me that the re-

searcher might appreciate watching the entire story unfold as it was originally filed.

JDR Jr.'s files present another problem. No one had ever systematically weeded, screened, or purged them. There is evidence of occasional spurts of housekeeping activity when some files were destroyed or stripped, but these are the exception.

So 10 years ago I started reading, inventorying, and destroying. As a matter of fact, I have destroyed about a third of these records. My overall goal has been to preserve the record of the Rockefellers' participation in the American scene without trying to preserve the history of each organization with which they have come into contact. For example, handwritten letters of Mabel T. Boardman form a part of the Red Cross file in the Archives, but no one could or should attempt to write a history of the Red Cross from material in the Rockefeller Archives. The same is true of Columbia, Chicago, and Brown Universities and of the Mount Palomar telescope.

But what does this mean in terms of handling individual items in a correspondence file? I have destroyed extra copies, transmittal letters, memoranda about luncheon dates, acknowledgments of items received, form letters ignored. Do I have to defend this type of destruction? I am speaking of 2,000 Hollinger boxes of material, 600 of which are no longer needed because of these eliminations. Does anyone else bother to weed correspondence files at the management policy level?

And then there is the problem of paper clips! Because of the way in which these files were maintained I cannot remove the clips and let the items fall where they may, for I should then have a meaningless hodgepodge of paper. What is the records manager doing to control the filing of clips and staples and pins?

Here are some further questions:

1. What is the difference between a vital record and a historical record?
2. Might not systems men check with archivists outside their company for another perspective?
3. Should there not be articles on microfilm citation in the historical journals?
4. One large industrial company may have destroyed all its old records now that its history has been written. Do we need to do some missionary work?
5. What is an archives as distinguished from a manuscript collection?
6. What is to be the future of the proliferating private archives?

Perhaps these questions are too detailed to be discussed at a meeting of this kind, but they are the sort of questions that, if raised, might lead to communication among us.

I am concerned with seeing that the Rockefeller Archives will eventually be used by more researchers. There is a rich lode of information in these files. They are filled with insights into religious, medical, educational, and business developments of the past 90 years.

At present access is limited to the family's staff and to researchers with special authorization. At some point in the future our access policy will change. When that time comes I hope the guides I have prepared, in the style of the National Archives preliminary inventories, the shelflists that provide physical control, and today's physical care will prove meaningful and useful to tomorrow's scholars.



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