

LOCAL RECORDS

WHEN a historian becomes a collector, the transformation is likely to be more in the nature of a reformation than a complete conversion; the fundamental faith remains unshaken—only in its outward manifestation is a change to be observed. Thus four years of experience as a collector have left the writer of this paper still fundamentally a historian; confidence in the efficacy of the historical faith remains fixed; the doctrine stands unchanged—only in the increasing belief that faith without works is dead is there a modification in its expression. Thus, however respectful of the doctrines of the archivist, the museum man, the genealogist, the rare-book man the writer's work in collecting may have made him, deep-rooted in his soul remains the conviction that only in the creed of the historian is orthodoxy to be found.

It is, therefore, hardly necessary to announce that this paper on local records presents the subject from the point of view of the historian. Stated succinctly, its purpose is to set forth some of the principles and practices which, from the point of view of a teacher of history, seem worthy of emphasis in a program of building up a collection of local records. These principles and practices can most conveniently be stated in terms of our experiences in building up the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan.

The first principle, then, is that in each state there should be a state-supported collection of records—a collection embracing records both of state-wide significance and those whose relevance may be primarily local. I repeat, such a collection should be state-supported. In Michigan we were very tardy, indeed, in recognizing this principle. Although our State Historical Commission was by law twenty-five years ago given wide powers over the collection and preservation of historical records, the financial support afforded by the state legislature has been sadly meager. Faced with this condition, the State Historical Commission has been unable to carry on an aggressive collecting campaign. Until the establishment of the Michigan Historical Collections of the university brought into being a state-supported depository, the State Historical Commission followed the practice of turning such materials as came into its hands over to locally or privately supported libraries.

From the point of view of sentiment—passing up, for the moment,

other considerations—such libraries might seem logical depositories for source materials of the immediate vicinity. But there are considerable areas in Michigan where there is no such attachment to a particular library. Should records in Centreville, in St. Joseph County (by the way, it is the county seat of the county), which has no library, be preserved in Three Rivers or Sturgis, not far distant, to be sure, but each in a sense a rival community, or in Kalamazoo, thirty miles away, which is the site of the nearest large library—or where? If one may judge from the present day conditions, the question was either seldom raised at all or if raised, in an amazingly small number of cases was it successfully answered. Another serious drawback to the use of the local library as a depository for local records is that to the historian such materials often have little significance unless seen in relation to parallel records from other communities or to those of larger units. The Henry Howland Crapo papers dealing with the lumber industry of the Flint area take on a far greater significance when opportunity is afforded to compare them with the Frank W. Fletcher records for the Alpena area, and the Mershon records for the Saginaw area. The 110-year record of the Pontiac Presbyterian Church is a very valuable source taken by itself, but it tells a far more revealing story when studied in relationship to the records of the Detroit Presbytery and of the Synod of Michigan—records occupying neighboring shelves in the Michigan Historical Collections. The fact that socially, politically, and economically, our society is to so large a degree organized on the basis of the state as a unit renders it most desirable for the convenience of the historian that local records be concentrated in a single center.

Private libraries with liberal endowments may do and have done valiant service along this line. But there will always be a considerable amount of reluctance to turn local records over to a central agency unless that agency belongs to the state. For these reasons the best interests of the cause of collecting local records seem to demand that there should be a state-supported depository whether or not a private depository is already situated in the state.

It may be argued that the principle so stated ignores the value which local preservation of local records furnishes in stimulating interest in local history. The solution of this problem is suggested, I think, by a situation recently encountered in one of our larger city libraries in Michigan. In this library is a large trunkful of the correspondence and other papers of one of Michigan's outstanding

pioneers. The librarian was properly regretful over not being able to give the papers adequate care. She took pains, however, to point out the library's good intentions in this respect by showing a beautifully-bound thirty dollar album in which through isinglass windows some of the more "interesting" of the pioneer's letters may be examined—at least pages one and four of four-page letters are on view! Here was, unconsciously, being offered a solution which should be mutually beneficial: Let the local library turn over to our Michigan Historical Collections the trunkful of letters for us to preserve and arrange for scholarly use, the local library retaining, after the Michigan Historical Collections has had an opportunity to obtain photostatic copies of the contents, the album which so well serves the museum purpose for which it was designed.

The argument will be urged that a program such as has been suggested would, if vigorously pursued, before many years bring on an overwhelming space and administration problem. In reply I would simply say local records must be preserved; experience has proved that local and privately endowed agencies can only in a measure handle the problems of preservation; the state is in a far better position to meet adequately and economically the problem, enormous as it is, of properly preserving local records and making them conveniently accessible to students of the state's history—a plurality of whom, it may be reasonably assumed, will ordinarily live within the borders of the given state.

The second principle I would emphasize is closely related to the first. It is this: The collection and preservation of local records should be in the hands of an agency wholly devoted to the care and arrangement of records, and wholly independent of any agency having divergent aims. One of the reasons why local libraries—why any sort of library, in fact, with a large circulation function—ordinarily operates so unsatisfactorily as an agency for collecting manuscript and rare printed items is that such libraries quite properly are primarily concerned with maximum service to the public, with attaining as striking as possible a record in the actual use of their resources. The administration of such a library, when confronted with an acquisition problem, quite naturally asks, "How frequent will the use of this item be?" Not quite so properly—yet, it is to be feared, all too frequently—another question may take precedence over the one just stated, namely, "How easily can the item be classified?" In the case of local manuscript and non-book printed materials, the answer

to either of these questions is almost bound to discourage interest in the item's acquisition. A historical collection which is simply a department of a library is, it seems to me, in this respect at a great disadvantage.

Similarly, if historical records are collected by a museum the balance between collecting objects for display and visual education, on the one hand, and records for the use of the research historian, on the other, is very difficult to maintain. The two functions are, after all, very different; why attempt to direct them as one? This whole matter of administrative relationship with other agencies was given very thoughtful consideration in setting up the Michigan Historical Collections at the University of Michigan. The answer reached was, I am convinced, the proper one, and is, I think, satisfactory to all concerned. The Michigan Historical Collections are wholly distinct in administration from any other agency, department, or division of the university. Without the resulting freedom, we should, I am sure, not have developed so rapidly; I am very sure we should not be so "historical" in character.

A third principle of importance has already been suggested: The aim of a historical collection should be not collection for its own sake, not even collection for preservation; rather, it should be collection for preservation and for making records available to qualified research students and others having a serious interest in them. In the Michigan Historical Collections we try to complete within the briefest possible time the sorting and arrangement of materials obtained, and we have given a good deal of attention to devising a system of arrangement and filing which provides the maximum accessibility for the research worker. We have found that our emphasis upon making records accessible has been one of the most useful assets in soliciting contributions of materials. People are less reluctant to dig out records from dusty attics when they can be convinced that the records are not simply being transferred from one dusty resting-place to another.

This suggests another principle: Acquisitions should be by donation. Cold financial facts forced us to the adoption of this principle. Our resources were so limited we just couldn't buy. But it soon became clear that entirely apart from this setting, the principle is both reasonable and expedient. We are relieving the donor of the responsibility of preserving the materials—a responsibility directly proportional to the importance of the particular collection. At the same time,

we are rendering an honor to the donor or to the man with whose career the collection is concerned. Scores, probably hundreds, of persons in Michigan have, I am sure, first learned of Henry Howland Crapo—able post-Civil War governor and distinguished citizen though he was—through the extensive collection of Crapo papers in the Michigan Historical Collections, which was one of the first and most valuable of the individual collections presented to us. Besides being appropriate, it is expedient to follow the principle of acquisitions only by donation in order to avoid creating a market value for local historical records. We have occasionally found it necessary to make exceptions to this rule, but we have tried to confine these exceptions to instances where no artificial value would result.

Starting, so to speak, from scratch, the Michigan Historical Collections program has found it advantageous to place stress on the catholicity of its interests. We have as our goal in the Michigan Historical Collections the establishment of as complete a collection as possible of manuscript and printed materials relating to the history of Michigan, excepting state archival records. The breath-taking inclusiveness of this ambition is considerably modified by several facts. Our university library has an extensive file of state documents and several rather complete newspaper files of Michigan newspapers; the William L. Clements Library has some valuable Michigan maps, as well as important Michigan items in its vast store of early Americana. We are not attempting to duplicate these materials. As for newspapers and other publications of the more conventional type, for the period since about 1900, when city libraries became common, the strong probability of their being preserved somewhere in the state renders the obligation to collect them somewhat less rigorous.

Despite these modifying factors, the self-imposed task of the Michigan Historical Collections is still enormous. Particularly at the beginning, the very breadth of the program tended to leave potential donors rather vague as to what materials were of consequence to us. To give the program more positive direction, it helped considerably to make a special effort to collect materials on the history of the state's most important nongovernmental institution—the University of Michigan. For about a year we concentrated on this particular task, collecting official university records from the various administrative offices, records of the various divisions of the university, of campus organizations, of fraternities, of regents of the university, of faculty members, of alumni; pictures; printed pro-

grams of university functions; handbills and posters; files of university official publications, and of various student publications. Not only did concentration on university history give direction and objectivity to our program, but through obtaining collections on university history, we soon found we were building up valuable records on other important phases of state history. Obtaining a large collection of the papers of Dr. Walter H. Sawyer, for years a regent of the university, we came into possession of a large body of material relating to the public health movement in Michigan, a particular interest of Dr. Sawyer. We also gained local records of Hillsdale, Dr. Sawyer's home city. In the enormous Alexander Winchell collection obtained from the Minnesota Historical Society were not only the records of a popular university professor, but voluminous notes on the geology of various localities in Michigan written while Professor Winchell held the position of state geologist.

While we are no longer concentrating so exclusively on university history, the attention which this effort aroused in alumni and other friends of the university is still bearing fruit in the form of valuable accessions on state and local history, as well as on university history in particular. The practice, then, of laying particular emphasis for a time upon an individual field of interest has been for us a beneficial one.

In recent months we have found a particular type of co-operation of immense benefit to us. Resident in Ann Arbor is a man who for twenty years was executive secretary of the Synod of Michigan of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. He plans to spend the early years of his retirement in preparing a history of this synod. This fact furnished us the opportunity to co-operate with him in affording him working space and the use of our facilities; in return he has persuaded most of the larger Presbyterian units and some of the individual congregations to deposit with the Michigan Historical Collections their important records. In most instances this transfer was facilitated by making the transaction in the form of an indefinite loan. Thanks to this friend's efforts we now have a very impressive collection relating to the Presbyterians in Michigan. Among the more important items in this Presbyterian collection are the following:

Five manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Synod of Michigan, 1834-1853, 1867-1884.

Eight printed volumes of the Records of the Synod of Michigan, 1850-1936.

Four manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Detroit, 1827-1849, 1899-1921.

Two manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Flint, 1905-1926.

Two manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Grand Rapids, 1870-1913.

One manuscript volume of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Grand River Valley, 1858-1870. This became the Presbytery of Grand Rapids in 1870.

Six manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Kalamazoo, 1839-1925.

Six manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Lansing, 1870-1931.

Three manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Marshall, 1838-1870. This was incorporated with the Presbytery of Lansing in 1870.

Two manuscript volumes of the Minutes of the meetings of the Presbytery of Washtenaw, 1837-1862.

One volume of the Session Records of the Constantine Presbyterian Church, 1856-1877.

Two volumes of the Session Records of the Homer Presbyterian Church, 1838-1930.

Three volumes of the Session Records of the Marshall Presbyterian Church, 1841-1930.

Six volumes of the Session Records of the Pontiac Presbyterian Church, 1824-1920.

Two diaries of Reverend Peter Dougherty describing his work as a missionary in the Grand Traverse Region, 1838-1842.

Copies of the letters of Reverend William M. Ferry describing his missionary work at Mackinac Island, 1823-1831.

The example of the Presbyterians will, we trust, be followed by other denominations. All of you who have used denominational records—particularly those of the smaller units—know how revealing they are of social history generally and of local history in particular. In fact the possibilities in collecting this type of record—the records of institutions having state units and one or more grades of local units, particularly if carried beyond religious denominations to include the records of lodges, clubs, reform movements, professional organizations—are so limitless as almost to tempt us to restrict our collections to this variety of record. Sober reflection reveals

several obstacles to so extreme a step, but the opportunities are sufficiently great to warrant a carefully planned campaign to build in that direction. We are experimenting with the practice of inviting Ann Arbor units to deposit their records with us. Whenever a local unit accepts our invitation, we shall proceed to use this fact as an argument for corresponding action by the parallel and the larger units of the given organization.

No account of our experiences with local records would be complete without mention of the assistance we have had from the various federal agencies. From the Historical Records Survey we have had many valuable suggestions. Our WPA assistants have not been as numerous as we wished—a condition no doubt due to our city being a small one—but their quality has been excellent. If the level of efficiency in university faculties were as high as that in a sixty-year-old WPA worker we lost to private industry a few weeks ago after a year with us, we'd soon have our entire country really educated. In NYA assistance we have also found the quality of work good. While it has taken time to train the WPA and NYA help, there is not the slightest question with us that the assistance obtained has been worth many times this effort.

It will be noted that I have considered the term local records in the sense of the more informal type of record. As for local formal archival records, certain legal technicalities would, I believe, have to be cleared up before transfer could be made from the offices in which they have been housed. If assurance could be given that they could and would be preserved in an orderly manner, I should be inclined to favor, in Michigan, the retention of the purely formal records in the local government headquarters. However, having about three years ago purchased for twenty-five dollars from a janitor's assistant a small box of papers which he had rescued from a two and a half ton load of records destined for a pulp-mill—records of one of our oldest counties in Michigan—I am somewhat skeptical of the history-mindedness of our local officials in Michigan. To be sure, perhaps there may be in each county some janitor's assistant whose respect for history will safeguard the interests of scholars, but when it comes to determining upon a fundamental policy, most of us would prefer more positive assurance. If we must depend upon janitors' assistants, some means must be devised of instructing them in historical method. This particular janitor's assistant's idea of selection of documents for preservation was to take one item from each large

collection of records. Imagine the tantalizing effect upon the scholar trying to make use of the lot! Yet at that, the poor man was faced with a difficult problem. After all, he couldn't filch the whole two and a half tons! Fortunately for us, the problem of the preservation of local governmental archives in Michigan is not for us to settle, though it is profoundly to be hoped that the state legislature will before long adopt a program of preservation going beyond its present rigidly-worded prohibition against the destruction of records—a prohibition which it would seem at least some of the local officials take altogether too lightly.

Despite the absence of obligation to preserve local governmental archives, our opportunities and responsibilities with respect to less formal local records in Michigan seem almost limitless. The list of principles and practices I have named as desirable in a collecting program no doubt appears inadequate and incomplete to many present here. I hope that I at least may have the benefit of suggestions as to how the list may be properly extended. In order to facilitate the offering of such suggestions, I will briefly restate the principles and practices I named:

1. There should be in each state a state-supported collection of state and local records.

2. The collection and preservation of local records should be in the hands of an agency wholly devoted to the care and arrangement of records and wholly independent of any agency having divergent aims.

3. The aim of a historical collection should not be collection simply for its own sake; not even collection simply for preservation; but rather, collection for preservation and for making records available to qualified research students.

4. Acquisitions should be by donation.

5. The practice of concentrating effort for a time upon a particular field of interest may well prove beneficial as far as records of other fields of history and particularly of local areas are concerned.

6. The field of organization records, especially those of organizations having state and local units, is decidedly worthy of cultivation—particularly if some individual of influence in the organization can be interested. In this field the practice of accepting on indefinite loan rather than on the basis of transfer of ownership is often conducive to attaining records.

7. In view of the fact that WPA and NYA assistants can often handle efficiently the task of sorting and arranging local records, collectors of records of this sort may with especial propriety lend their support to the employment of such assistants and to the continuance of these federal grants.

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