

# The Status of Business Archives

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FOR some time the Committee on Business Archives of the Society of American Archivists felt that a directory of business archivists would be helpful. To make a start on such a directory—even though it was realized that coverage would not be complete—a questionnaire was sent in May 1968 to over 700 U. S. and Canadian firms.<sup>1</sup> The American Records Management Association (ARMA) kindly agreed to let us use its address list. This was weeded to eliminate nonbusiness members and multiple members from the same firm. To include firms not in the ARMA listing, a further selection was made from the Fortune “500” list of corporations. Notices of the project were placed in certain of the library and archival journals. The committee realizes that some business archivists may have been overlooked.

The questionnaire was somewhat similar to that used by the College and University Archives Committee in preparing its directory.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of the questionnaire’s origin in a university library, emphasis was placed on information of use to the researcher. This included the date when the archives was established, dates of the holdings, types of records collected, approximate size of the collection, and availability for use. But answers to these questions also revealed the nature and extent of the archives. The definition of business archives included in the letter accompanying the questionnaire was supplied by William Rofes of IBM, a member of the committee.

For the 725 questionnaires sent out there were 216 replies, or about 30 percent. Of these, 83 (38 percent) were not included in the final listing, leaving 133 to be so included.<sup>3</sup> Of those not included, a few (no more than 14) represented nonbusiness activities or commercial records management firms or libraries. The majority of those not included, though they had the courtesy to reply and in most cases had some aware-

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the directory were distributed to those filling out the questionnaire. Copies may be purchased at \$1 each from A. K. Johnson, Jr., P.O. Box 7993, Atlanta, Ga. 30309.

<sup>2</sup> A copy is in *College and University Archivists in the United States and Canada*, compiled by the College and University Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists (Ann Arbor, 1966). A short report of the survey is Robert M. Warner, “The Status of College and University Archives,” in *American Archivist*, 31:235-237 (July 1968). A more detailed account of a survey of labor union records is Paul Lewinson and Morris Rieger, “Labor Union Records in the United States,” in *American Archivist*, 25:39-57 (Jan. 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Two or three replies, received after this was written, were included in the directory; but they do not change the percentages significantly.

ness of historical records, just did not have an archives. In a number of cases, an officer of the firm wrote that the records were kept in various departments and had not been brought together in an archives. In a few cases, an archives was planned or in process; in others, older material had been haphazardly given to institutional libraries.

A breakdown as to the job responsibility of the archivist, for the 133 replies used, may be of interest. Thirteen firms had full-time archivists; in 6, the archivist devoted 50 percent to 99 percent of his time; 9 had full-time or nearly full-time historians; and 1 had a museum director. These may be called "pure" archives; they total 29 (or 22 percent) of the replies used. Librarians were given the added responsibility for archives in 21 (16 percent) of the cases. Archives was a part-time job for someone in public relations in 7 (5 percent) instances. In 46 firms (35 percent)—the largest number—the assignment was to someone connected with the records program, including files. This may in part be due to the fact that the ARMA address list was used; but it also reflects the tendency to "justify" an archives (or perhaps bury it) as part of the records management program. In 24 instances (18 percent) the archives responsibility was assigned to a variety of persons, not included in the above; and in 6 cases archives were deposited, in a planned program, in an institutional collection.

Replies to the question on size have been arbitrarily grouped in three headings: small (under 1,000 ft.); medium (1,000–10,000 ft.); and large (over 10,000 ft.). Of the 102 (77 percent) who answered this question, the majority, 62 (61 percent), were in the small category; 25 (25 percent) in the medium; and 15 (14 percent) in the large. Some of the collections were very small; and by the same token, the time spent on them was often very little; for instance, less than 1 percent.

A large number of replies checked the holdings column; one wonders if this was sometimes done perfunctorily. In any event, 116 indicated that they have unpublished records; 115 have publications; 83 also hold pictorial material; and 25 have tape recordings. In many cases, the holdings antedate the establishment of the archives or even of the firm. As might be expected, almost all the replies indicated that material was available to persons within the firm. But 75 (56 percent) indicated that it would also be open (though sometimes on a restricted basis) to scholars.<sup>4</sup>

Replies used have been broken down roughly by type of business. Thus manufacturing firms accounted for 64 (48 percent); fairly large groups within this category were oil and gas companies (9), chemicals and drugs (7), electronics and space activities (10), and food and beverages (6). Utilities accounted for 11 (8 percent); distribution (retail stores) for 4 (3 percent); financial services (banks) for 10

<sup>4</sup>For a survey on access to records, see Arthur M. Johnson and Barry E. Supple, "The Businessman Speaks to Historians," in *Business History Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Summer 1960). The writers of this article received 93 replies to 221 letters; a summary only is reported.

(8 percent); and insurance companies for 11 (8 percent). Transportation was represented by railroads (5); airlines and aircraft manufacturers (8); and motors (3)—a total of 16 or 12 percent. Returns were well divided among older firms and new ones, large firms and small.

Although it is not included in the directory, returns on the question of the person to whom the archivist reports may be of interest. If one groups such officers as president, secretary, treasurer, and legal counsel together, they comprise the largest category, 62 (47 percent). The next largest is the general services or planning officers, with 28 (21 percent) so reporting. Combining the records or files function with the library or information function, 13 (10 percent) report to personnel in these areas. Twenty-one (16 percent) report to public relations or advertising personnel. In some cases, this corresponds to the earlier breakdown by position held by the archivist; but in most instances the archives function, wherever placed, reports directly to a senior officer.

There seemed to be little pattern, but a few interesting points might be noted. More librarians responsible for archives seemed to be found in banks and insurance companies, with 4 in each. More railroads had deposited older records with institutions than firms in other categories, perhaps because of the age and size of their collections. The records of all the food and beverage companies reporting are open. In the case of two rubber companies, the archivist reports to public relations officers; and in the case of three railroads, to the president. Several Canadian firms have deposited older records with the Public Archives of Canada; this is in part due to the public nature of the business.

In the directory listing itself, the name and address of the firm appear first. An explanatory note on the business engaged in is added, where necessary for clarity. Next appears the name of the person responsible for the archives, with his title if shown on the return. Then comes the percentage of time he devotes to the archives. There follows the date when the archives was established (note that this does *not* mean the date of the company's establishment). The earliest date of material held is also on this line, if it differs from the date of establishment of the archives and is not shown in the "holdings" category. The latter includes a brief summary of material held, plus an indication of its size. Special holdings are noted wherever possible. If open to scholars, it may be assumed that the material is open also to persons within the firm, meaning employees. Restrictions on use are noted wherever applicable. A note on the letter accompanying the questionnaire indicated that an affirmative reply did not commit the firm to allow public access. Thus in all cases anyone contemplating use of the material should write ahead. The existence of guides is noted; in many cases, there are also internal indexes for use of the archives staff.

A list of records management firms that responded to the questionnaire is included in the directory and also one of firms responding that have deposited records in institutions.

One may conclude from the returns, much as was concluded by those who sent out the questionnaires earlier to college and university archives and to labor archives, that considerable education is needed. The percentage of replies by business firms is small and of those having archives still smaller. It is of interest that percentages, where comparable, are not far different from results found in a recent study of records and archives administration practices in the Canadian business community, presented by William J. Gray and John C. L. Andreassen.<sup>5</sup> Still, it is encouraging that 216 persons troubled to answer the questionnaire or to send letters. The majority of these had a real understanding of historical material, even though only a few had full-time or nearly full-time archivists. The existence of a records management program is in most cases a sign of an archives program or at least an awareness of such. Those active in records management, archives, librarianship, even public relations and other areas, should cooperate to convince management of the value of older records.

<sup>5</sup> A four-page brochure was distributed at the meeting of archivists in Ottawa in 1968; the presentation took place on Oct. 7 in Montreal. Other recent surveys of business archives include Helen Davidson, "Survey on Business Archives," unpublished, 1964. Mrs. Davidson was then chairman of the Committee on Business Archives of the Society of American Archivists. She sent a letter to 402 firms and received replies from 59. Also, Clyde M. Collier, "Collecting Information About Archives From Industry," a mimeographed paper, read at the meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Atlanta, Ga., Oct. 5, 1966. He received 71 replies from a mailing of 314; summary only reported. He is interested in scientific and technical records.

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### "Mass and Mess of Correspondence"

We have in mind the organization of a new and different kind of Federal club—a correspondence club. The Federal Specifications Board has reduced the kinds of ink for Government use from 12 to 7. Study of the great and increasing mass and mess of correspondence with which the Government is afflicted makes one almost wish that the Specifications Board had limited the varieties of inks to one, and that one the invisible kind. Stenographers and typewriters are alluring temptations to verbosity, loquacity, garrulity and prolixity. We use a page or two to say what should be expressed in a brief sentence or two and use a brief sentence or two to say what might just as well or better be left unsaid. Those who can't write out their message in longhand and make it readable can dictate to an intelligent stenographer who can make a fairly presentable production out of a jumble of bad grammar and a halting vocabulary, and thus make possible, correspondence that otherwise would never have troubled the mails and otherwise would never have been missed.

—Address of Gen. H. M. Lord, Director, Bureau of the Budget at the 12th regular meeting of the Business Organization of the Government at Memorial Continental Hall, Washington, D.C., January 29, 1927.