

The Modern Business Archivist

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BUSINESS archival establishments have been known to vanish as quickly as they appear. Some exist, nevertheless, and the fact that any formal archival procedures are followed at commercial organizations calls for thought about how individual archivists may serve both their company and their profession, which facets of business archival work may first be standardized, and what further steps the profession as a whole may take to aid such efforts.

A study by a business magazine in 1967¹ compared the hundred largest business firms in 1917 and in 1967. Appearing in both the 1917 and the 1967 lists were 45 companies. A comparison of the list of 45 companies with the *Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada*² shows that of these 45 large, historic firms, 17 qualified for inclusion in the directory. Considering the recent origins of the archival profession, the record is surprisingly good.

The trend toward widespread acquaintance of business and archives will continue as business firms find hitherto unsuspected values in their archives. Business firms discover these values while the "archivist, continually and instinctively, . . . [brings] order and relation to unrelated things by sorting and categorizing—to the end of revealing the content and significance of the records with which he works."³

In spite of the "creeping growth and late blooming"⁴ of business archives, and even though business firms cease to find value in their archives and the archivist falls from favor, there is evidence of the increasing willingness of business to preserve records of enduring value.

Because the position of "archivist" is unusual in business organizations, the archivist entering a business firm for the first time will find that he practices his calling amid unpredictable conditions of acceptance and understanding of archival theory. Business is not accustomed to the archival discipline. The newcomer may expect to hear, "An archivist? What is that? Did you make it up?" Those better informed associate archival work with preservation and with reference service, but the archivist is fortunate who finds other than top management officials informed on archival methodology.

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¹ "The Classic Blue Chips," in *Forbes*, vol. 100, no. 6:234 (Sept. 15, 1967).

² *Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada*, compiled by the Committee on Business Archives of the Society of American Archivists (1969).

³ T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, p. 81 (New York, 1965).

⁴ Wilbur George Kurtz, Jr., "Business Archives and Museums: The Corporate Attitude," unpublished paper read on Oct. 18, 1967, at the 31st annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Santa Fe, N. Mex. Mr. Kurtz is Archivist-Librarian of Coca-Cola U.S.A.

In uncharted waters, then, it will be helpful for an archivist introducing a program to a business firm to be prepared to write his own job description, defining the limits of his authority, describing what he is able to do, and stating the recommended organizational status for this work. He should know the salary expected, and his own qualifications for such work. He will base his recommendations on what he believes to be the value to the company of such activity. If he is prepared to supply this carefully executed statement, the archivist will find management receptive, always provided he justifies the expense. Values will require different interpretation for each company, by each archivist. The archivist may realize that businesses are accustomed to spending money for pure research, and that sometimes values do not appear until after a certain amount of exploration and inventorying has taken place.

The archivist may expect to recommend floor space and sketch out a plan for an archives area; present specifications for all physical facilities from card container to storage cabinet to hygrometer; and to unpack, clean, sort, appraise, mend, arrange, describe, shelve, provide reference service, and prepare a finding aid to the archives. He should know the approximate costs and relative values of equipment and be able to draw up a 5-year budget covering salaries, equipment, services, and acquisitions, and to state the purpose of such expenditures. Some portion of the budget will cover the services of museum curators, librarians, architects, designers, and other professionals who may be needed in consultation.

There may be correspondence with members of the public seeking to sell pamphlets, containers, trade cards and products bearing the company name, particularly if the company perpetuates a brand name extensively advertised in the 19th century. He may perform all these activities, and more, in an early period of his association with a business archives. After preliminary work and study, the archivist will be ready to prepare the detailed program for administration of the company archives.

Ernst Posner's plan of "organization for archival service"⁵ contains most of the essential elements for a business archival program. With adaptations appropriate to the commercial world, the plan may be readily tailored by the individual archivist for the individual company.

A written procedure will establish the responsibilities of the archivist and the relationship of other departments to his work. In business as in State archives, the archivist will function most effectively when his status is independent, reporting directly to the president, or as a member of the president's office, and serving all departments equally. As in State archives, the written plan for organization of the business archives will cover proper staffing and physical facilities, responsibilities for permanently valuable records, responsibility for records management, for historical activities, an acquisition program, recommendation on records creation, control over disposal, accessioning, preservation, rehabilitation,

⁵ *American State Archives*, p. 351 (Chicago, 1964).

arrangement and description of records, reference service, photographic reproduction, a complete publication program, and exhibits of archival materials either in the company museum, company offices, or through a historical agency with which the company maintains a relationship.

If the archives department is not responsible for the records management program, it will maintain close cooperation with the records department, arranging for a flow of information between the two departments and procedural coordination. It will establish a similar relationship with the company library and with the public relations department. United Air Lines reports a "full-blown historical program that embraces the field of historical writing, museology, and records management."⁶

Henrietta M. Larson has pointed out that "it is impossible to describe business records as a whole" and that they "differ according to the stage or type of business which they represent, and size of the operations of the particular man or firm, and the function in the productive system of the particular kind of business which they record."⁷ Business archives may have at least one characteristic that differentiates them from government archives. The archives of a business firm contain examples of the firm's products. On the sale of these products has depended the very existence of the firm. In the case of a publishing house, the products are the books it publishes.⁸ In some cases the products are, in themselves, archives; in other instances, their nature is that of materials accessioned with archives.

One publisher, whose archives were recently studied, has been producing over the years not only books, magazines, catalogs, pamphlets, and posters but scissors, tracing wheels, and other products related to the home sewing industry. We arranged the records in the following manner: The records as a whole constitute one record group. In first order of arrangement are the records of administrative activities. A second subgroup comprises the records of manufacturing activities. One series contains the nonwritten records. Tools and various goods relating to the industry, not produced by the company but bearing a historical relationship to the records, are arranged in separate series.

The third and largest sub-group, records of the editorial and publicity departments, contains copies of all published works of the company: books, magazines, catalogs, and posters. No distinction can be made between the departmental origins of the different publications. When the business was founded, one man produced all editorial and artistic work, and in later years the organizational relationship between the editorial and publicity departments appears to have been interchangea-

⁶ Adriano G. Delfino, "Business Archives and Museums—Does One Foster the Other?" talk given on Oct. 18, 1967, at the 31st annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Santa Fe, N. Mex. Mr. Delfino is Corporate Historian of United Air Lines.

⁷ *Guide to Business History*, p. 21-22 (Boston, 1964).

⁸ Interview with G. Frederic Tingle, Vice President of the Butterick Co., Inc., on Oct. 17, 1967. Mr. Tingle identified the particular relationship between "product" and "archive" in business organizations.

ble. Respect for their origin and for the order in which they had been maintained over the years requires that all records of artistic and creative work remain together. The physical nature of this third group is that of library materials. A shelf list, using procedures adapted from American Library Association rules for serials cataloging, is the publication cataloging them piece-by-piece and series-by-series⁹ within the overall archival arrangement.

In another industry nonprinted materials might from the standpoint of volume constitute the largest group: their physical form being that of museum objects but their classification remaining that of an archival group. When products are perishable, containers remain a record of the the product's existence.

Business archivists may expect to receive requests for reference service from the public. Bearing in mind the need for confidentiality and protection of the company's interests, some service should be provided. The extent of the service and the manner in which it is to be provided are decisions that the business archivist will face rather early in the course of his association with the company. At the business archives, genealogists and hobbyists will be the most frequent nonprofessional researchers. The procedures used by the Michigan Historical Collections in dealing with the public will be readily applicable to business archives.¹⁰

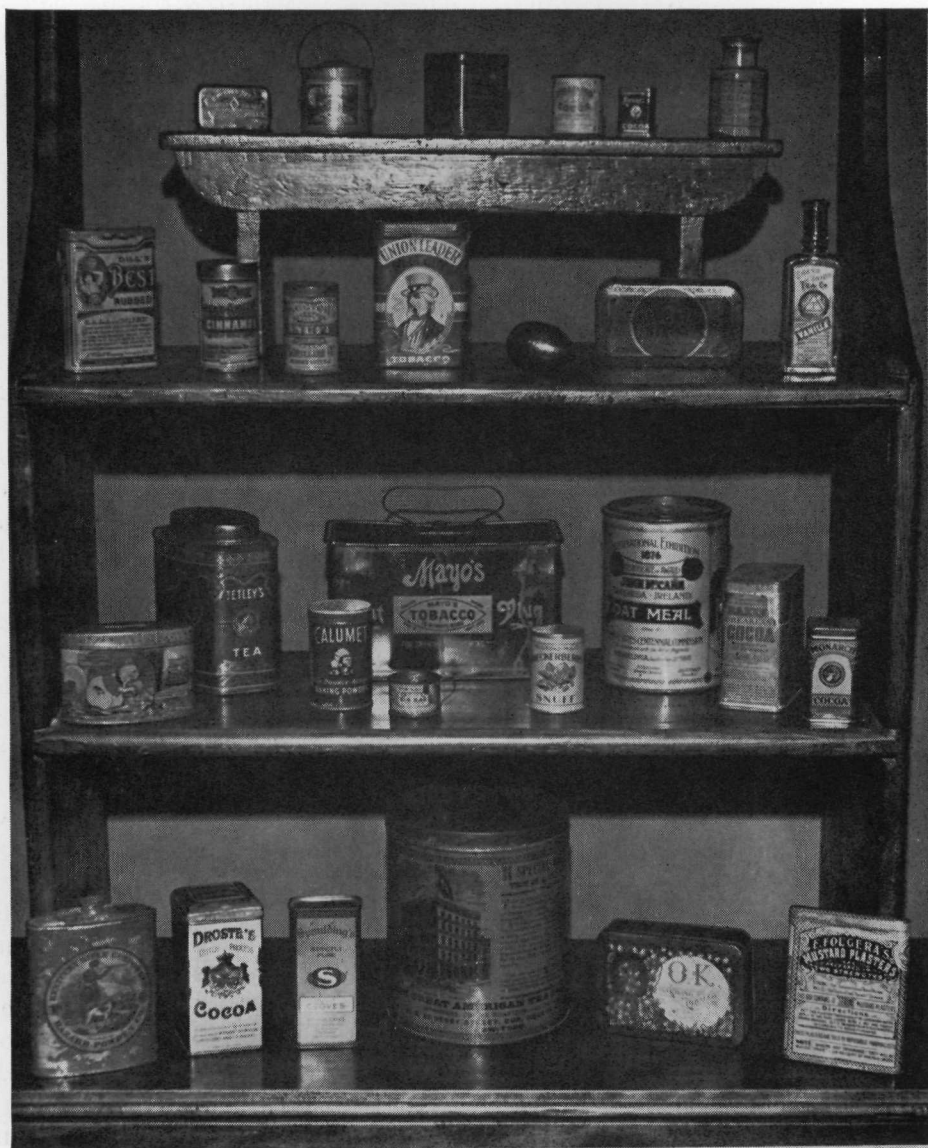
The archivist tailors his services to the appropriate need. For example, an archivist may receive a request to prepare a procedure to be used temporarily for accessioning, description, and general care, a procedure which can be understood and handled by nonprofessional personnel alone. The procedure must be simple, the language plain and uncluttered with abstruse terms.

If his is the typical business organization, he will be the only archivist in the company. As in the writer's case, he may be a "visiting" or "consulting" archivist for more than one firm. As visiting archivist, after he has spent considerable time at company offices, he may have become aware of one or more employees with a suitable academic background, an interest in business history, and the instincts necessary for good archivists. He is in a position to recommend that these employees take archival training. With a full-time archivist on the company payroll, he may not be consulted quite as often. He will regret this, but there is more work for archivists to do than any of us can dream of.

The qualifications of the business archivist may differ from his counterpart in government. The smaller the business, the more diversified will be his responsibilities. Like the archivist in government service, he is guided by the knowledge that his first obligation is to those whose records he administers. He should understand the business in which he works. He will find it helpful to have an academic background in the areas of business management, business history, industrial history, and

⁹ Study and recommendations by Madeleine Davies Cooke, Oct. 24 and Nov. 11, 1968.

¹⁰ Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscript Library*, p. 101-121 (New York, 1966).



Photograph by Everett T. Wiggins

PRODUCT CONTAINERS

Business archives sometimes accession such items as containers or other objects connected with a company's product. The containers photographed are courtesy of the Hornbeck collection.

the industry in which he functions.

If he serves more than one business firm in an archival capacity or if he serves a "conglomerate" organization comprising diverse technologies, he will find it useful to acquire correspondingly broad knowledge in order to appraise and arrange the varied records under his administration.

His understanding of the company's records and the professional quality of his work will be further enhanced by the degree to which the archivist has mastered archival theory and is able to apply it to business records. Constant changes in the business world, maturation of archival theory, and advances in archival and records management techniques will require constant updating of the business archivist's knowledge.

The tendency among businesses to integrate their operations creates special problems of archival arrangement, requiring that the archivist have historical training and insight in order to arrange records according to their source. Business records do not readily lend themselves to arrangement in groups and subgroups; and origins and order are obscured as a result of changes in ownership, buying and selling of companies and parts of companies, joint ownerships, and mergers. The principle of provenance, consistently applied, proves an invaluable tool in handling records arising from business activities, activities which give rise to analogies of "river," "brook," and "stream."¹¹

The business archivist, for a long time to come, will be a pioneer in a changing, dynamic environment. Fellow-archivists in governmental and academic environments should sustain him in his solitary endeavors and recognize his efforts to produce results that will benefit the profession.

As a professional, an archivist has a certain detachment. At the same time he brings an intellectual and creative response to his surveying, inventorying, cleaning, mending, arranging, cataloging, shelving, describing, researching, and preparing of finding aids. Fundamentally, the archivist is a humanist. His records represent the activities of people. To do his work competently, "he must know about people, like people, and sympathize with their virtues and their shortcomings."¹²

Sometimes an archivist turns historian. Nevertheless, being true to his archival profession, he will issue a finding aid to the holdings before encouraging the publication of a history. The business archivist who reveals the contents of a hitherto dark and silent archives lights a candle. The company history may be written. The archivist then faces the task of seeing that the holdings continue to be accessible for study by qualified scholars.

¹¹ Roger Lowell Putnam, in a history of the Package Machinery Co., 1960 (typescript, in the writer's custody). Mr. Putnam, Chairman of the Board of Package Machinery, wrote: "Even the greatest river has very small beginnings, and it was so with Package Machinery Company. In 1913, several very small brooks joined together to form the stream that has continued ever since under the name of Package Machinery. Each one of these streams was a small company, making wrapping machinery and centered largely around an inventor . . ."

¹² G. H. Edgell, in introduction to *Excavating Buried Treasure*, p. 5, by Rufus Graves Mather (Boston, 1945).