

Hannah Lay & Company: Sampling the Records of a Century of Lumbering in Michigan

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THE RECORDS OF HANNAH LAY AND COMPANY, of Traverse City, Michigan, are an excellent example of the archival problems encountered in attempting to preserve and organize large volumes of documents for historical research. The surviving materials, some 610 bound volumes plus 28 linear feet of loose papers, were generated by a firm which began its career as a partnership in the Chicago lumber trade around the middle of the nineteenth century; subsequently moved part of its operation to the Grand Traverse area; diversified its interests there to include Great Lakes shipping, real estate acquisition, flour milling, banking, and storekeeping; split into two corporate entities in 1883—Hannah Lay and Company and Hannah Lay Mercantile Company—and continued in this dual capacity until 1931 when the Traverse City assets were liquidated. An important by-product of its corporate growth was the founding and developing of the Traverse City area. Because of Hannah Lay's many commercial ventures, as well as the length of time involved and the accounting procedures of the period, the records produced were not only numerous but varied. Standard files consisted of ledgers, daybooks, journals, bank tallies, cash books, order books, merchandise sales books, invoices, and vouchers kept at both the Traverse City and Chicago branches of the business. In addition, there were a variety of miscellaneous records such as the minutes of stockholder meetings, plat books, contracts, and loose correspondence.

How much greater the total volume of the records would have been had they all survived is not known. What is known is that accidents of time and place, coupled with space requirements, progressively reduced the collection. Around 1890, for example, fire destroyed an unspecified quantity of material. The surviving papers were next stored in the basement of the Mercantile Company's new building where they remained until the firm went out of business in 1930. Apparently space became a problem as this collection grew. In 1937 the caretaker of the building reported that a portion of the records were removed several years before to additional storage space in the Traverse City Bank Building and later sold as scrap. A portion of what was left stayed in the Traverse City area and ultimately found its way into the municipal museum (Con Foster Museum) where it is housed today. This small but important fragment of Hannah Lay records consists of seven bound volumes, including the first Chicago journal, opened on May 23, 1850, and a number of early land patents. The bulk of the collection, however, passed to the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library in the summer of 1936. Even with the losses mentioned above, these materials were formidable. In September 1937, Charles J. Wolfe, then a history graduate student examining the company's early lumber activities, observed that the papers amounted to some ten tons. Moreover, Wolfe concluded that they were sufficiently complete to piece together an accurate picture of Hannah Lay's entire Michigan operation.

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The staff at the Burton Collection began its monumental task of classifying and cataloging these records in July 1937. Judging from the labels pasted onto the backs of volumes and bundles of papers, this project was completed with a fair amount of attention to detail. Unfortunately the next step, preparing a finished guide, was not carried through. Nevertheless, the Burton Collection had saved the Hannah Lay papers from a possible rendezvous with the junk dealer and over the next thirteen years made them available to the scholarly community. Then in August 1950, Elleine H. Stones, chief of the Burton Collection, approached Lewis G. Vander Velde about the possibility of transferring the collection to the Michigan Historical Collections in Ann Arbor. Stones said in a letter, "If these were Detroit business records, or not so voluminous, we would consider them our responsibility, but in view of the fact that you have added some large groups of lumbering papers, it seemed to us that these would be of more value to you than to us." Vander Velde agreed and accepted the gift with the understanding that since there was no stack space available, the records would have to be stored where they would be unavailable for use until such time as space could be found. Consequently, the papers came to Ann Arbor in November 1951 and were placed on the balcony of the university's Fuller Street warehouse.

From that date until very recently we did very little with the collection but store it. Given the bulk, our cramped quarters, a small staff, and the continuous influx of more manageable material, the Hannah Lay project was postponed until 1973, when we moved into our new building. At that point the Hannah Lay records were brought out of storage and arranged by record group for reappraisal.

Once the records were so arranged, two things became apparent. First, the records were not all of uniform value. Much information in one source was duplicated in another. Some records were so fragmentary that it was impossible to determine how they fitted into the collection. Second, as the volumes were lined up along the walls of the stacks, it became clear that storing the bulk of records would require space we simply did not have.

So, once again, we at the Michigan Historical Collections had to face the problem: does the research potential of this collection warrant its retention? Certainly the lumber industry played a crucial role in the early years of Michigan's economic growth, and Hannah Lay and Company was one of the most important of the lumber companies—but should all the records be saved? There were alternatives. Looking at the neatly ordered thick leather-bound volumes, our initial reaction was to save them all somehow. After all, almost every historical record has some research value and surely someday someone would come in to write the definitive history of the Hannah Lay Company, forever grateful that we saved every scrap. Further reflections on problems of funds and space led us to question this approach. Not only in terms of space but also from the researcher's point of view. The records of the firm were kept in such detail and in such bulky form that the completeness of the records could be more discouraging than encouraging to detailed research.

Another alternative would have been to save nothing. We could have destroyed the records as useless to scholarship. Or we could have removed responsibility for decision entirely by shipping them off to another, more receptive, repository. The latter would have been in the tradition of the last fifty years of the Hannah Lay Collection's history.

We ultimately decided that the solution lay in a selective weeding of the materials. Naturally the reduction decisions were uncomfortable ones to make. We had some experience with business records, and we were acquainted with current methods of

handling statistical source material. Yet time did not permit a thorough researching of the history and records of Hannah Lay to remove any doubts that somewhat arbitrary weeding was a wise and proper course.

After the collection's forty years of drift from archives to archives with limited use, logic seemed to dictate that a rational discarding was necessary and indeed beneficial to the life of the collection. Rational discarding presents peculiar problems, particularly with pre-twentieth-century records. The experience leaves a looming sense that history once destroyed can never be regained. Rational destruction of recent records is considered good records management, but a similar approach to unwieldy historical documents somehow appears to be destruction of the American heritage.

How to weed the bulk efficiently, systematically, and intelligently became our chief problem. In devising a system for the selective weeding we adopted two overall goals: (1) to have enough material readily available for the casual researcher to provide a good overview of the structure and scope of Hannah Lay and Company without having to pour through the entire collection, (2) to retain enough material to provide more serious scholars with sufficient material to get a sense of the complexity and importance of the operations of the company at the various stages of its development.

It was a relatively simple task to isolate records which would provide a quick overview of the nature of the company. The complete minutes of the director's meetings (a rarity in business collections) were saved. These, though brief and generally rather formal, provide a cursory view of the history of the company. We also saved the surviving correspondence which provides selective but detailed information regarding the general nature of Hannah Lay's daily activities. There were also selective reports on such matters as sales, Great Lakes shipping, annual reports, and departmental reports, which provided important aggregate information. These, too, were saved. In addition we saved a few items of unusual interest such as the record (1869-70) of the time employees spent eating lunch. The total of these key records amounted to approximately four feet, and they were fairly easily selected. However, to have chosen only those records would have destroyed the research value of the complete set and deprived the serious student of business history with hard data on the development of Michigan's lumber industry. Therefore we chose to broaden our selection criteria to cover other aspects of the company's history.

We first considered saving complete runs of some records and discarding others. The collection contained complete runs of ledgers, daybooks, journals, and sales records and selective runs of such things as vouchers received, orders, and receipts. In surveying the contents of these records, we concluded that no single run would be of much significance without supporting data from other material, and thus this solution was rejected.

We then explored a sampling approach. Since the contents of the general runs of ledgers, daybooks, and journals were quantitative, we figured that the only way significant conclusions could be drawn from the material would be through a quantitative approach to the sources, and that approach would require selective use of the material. Proceeding from this assumption and with no apparent precedent to turn to, we decided to take a sample of each type of record in the collection for selected years. Sampling from a strict statistical point of view simply requires random selection of specific data from a predetermined data universe. Extreme care has to be taken not to bias the results in any direction. For sources like the Hannah Lay records, the concept of sampling is more difficult to apply.

What years should be selected? In the laissez-faire economy of the pre-1930s, business activity fluctuated enormously through frequent periods of booms and busts in national trends. To choose all boom years or all depression years would give a distorted view of business activity. We therefore selected the census years 1860-1930. Although this was an arbitrary decision, it was based on the fact that information in the records for these years could be matched with available census data for larger studies of specific individuals or locations. Given the importance of the company in the development of the Traverse City region, information in the collection particularly for the early years would be useful for topics other than a history of the company.

Had all runs of journals, daybooks, and similar book records been complete and of uniform quality, the scheme would have given complete samples of the records for the eight census years which occurred during the company's existence. However, most of the series did not cover the entire history of the company, particularly the material on relatively short-lived branches. More important, as accounting techniques evolved over time and became more formal, much of the research value of this type of record diminished. Material in the Hannah Lay records for the period after 1900 is of much less value than the earlier records. As a result we decided to save the mid-decade years as well, which would provide fifteen total sample years for the company's seventy-five-year history. In addition we chose to save records for the years 1882-84, during which the company was completely reorganized and the Hannah Lay Mercantile Company was formed.

Generally we kept only record types from which a good sample could be drawn. Fragmentary and miscellaneous records, such as sales of specific departments within the Hannah Lay Mercantile Company store, were discarded entirely. These records dealt only with the most peripheral activity of the company. Some were clearly aggregated in other series. Others were not readily linked to any other series but were clearly of minor importance such as the customer accounts, grocery and hardware sales. At the most, these records covered only three or four years, which would make any analysis over time difficult.

In addition we chose to discard twentieth-century runs of cash records, records of bank deposits, orderbook ledgers, and vouchers audited. For the most part these records appeared to be used for internal accounting of payments received. Generally these figures were aggregated in sales reports which provided adequate coverage. Also these records were related to the Hannah Lay Mercantile Company, which was a less complex operation than its parent company (though it did generate more records) and was of lower priority in our records retention scheme. Most of the HLMC records consisted of individual retail transactions of which there were hundreds of thousands. The parent company was more active in the financing of the HLMC and in the actual development of the resources of the Traverse City area, and its records were therefore thought to have greater research value.

For a few record series we chose to save the entire run. The HLMC invoice books were retained because they contain much information on various firms throughout Michigan and the United States. Aside from being important documents for the history of the HLMC, the series proved an important supplement to our collection on the economic history of Michigan. Monthly reports issued 1900-1925 were also saved in their entirety since they contained significant aggregate information in a very compact form. Had there been significant payroll records, they would have been retained as a source for the history of the people of Traverse City. Unfortunately

none exist for this collection. All the earliest records (pre-1855) were saved for anti-quarian purposes.

The bulk of the collection consisted of long runs of material, and by sampling the volumes we could theoretically reduce the bulk by 80 percent. However, because of certain peculiarities in the Hannah Lay Collection, we realized a reduction of only 60 percent. For example, owing to the high cost of fine accounting-blank books, the company took care to fill each volume completely before starting a new one. As a result chronological records for sampled years often were contained in sections of two or more volumes. To retain information for sampled years required saving a number of large volumes which contained only a portion of our sample. Thus the bulk savings were considerably less than anticipated.

In addition the ledgers presented a peculiar problem. Kept by account name rather than by date, the sample years were more difficult to isolate. Often an account page would include information for three to five years, and the accounts for single years were often scattered through several volumes. At this point our sample system did break down. For the main ledgers of the Chicago branch of the Hannah Lay Company, the difference between a thorough sample and retaining the entire set was so minute that the entire run was kept. For other less important series of ledgers such as the HLMC ledgers and the Traverse City Mill series, samples were as generous as thought prudent within our space limitations.

Since we ultimately could not achieve our initial goal of 80 percent space reduction by selective weeding and sampling alone, we decided to microfilm a substantial portion of the records we chose to retain. Through the generosity of a local foundation, we had funds available for filming records and the Hannah Lay project seemed an appropriate use for the funds. At this point we could have reconsidered our sampling and filmed the entire collections while still keeping well within our space requirements. However, the cost in time and microfilm production for such a solution was high enough to confirm the logic of our sampling approach.

Filming the sampled collection was a relatively simple task and solved the problem posed by the bound volumes of records. Only those sections of the volumes which pertained to sampled years were filmed. For the journals, daybooks, and other account books kept day by day, this was no problem. Given the nature of the ledger accounts, filming was more generous and followed our guidelines for sampling.

Though the filming is not yet completed, we estimate that the collection will be reduced in bulk from 610 volumes and 28 linear feet to 21 volumes, 9 feet, and 60 reels. Our approach to the collection raises serious questions. Information certainly is lost in the process. For Hannah Lay and Company, records for the depression periods particularly of 1873 and 1907 would not be covered in the sample. We felt that the bulk of the entire set of records would really preclude any study of national trends through detailed study of all the records. We further concluded that complete time series which were saved would give enough indication of trends should anyone want to try an in-depth analysis of the history of Hannah Lay.

Technological innovation often makes use of sources previously thought unmanageable. In the case of the Hannah Lay and Company records, the actual raw material seemed so limited that no development could tie together the various pieces to provide important new information on the nineteenth century. The records were mainly detailed accounts, and unfortunately very little substantial literary material survived to provide insight into the significance of shifts and trends. In short, we concluded that this source was unlikely to be mined in detail for a study of

national trends. Technology may prove us wrong on this point.

The sampling/filming approach for reducing the bulk of our lumber records seemed the logical solution. We feel that the essence of the collection has been preserved in a manageable form. This experience was further useful as an exercise in the reappraisal of our record holdings. Thirty years ago, when the collection arrived, the decision was made to keep the collection in its entirety. Upon reappraisal this year, we decided that the decision was presently unworkable.

As the output of records increases at an exponential rate, the need for constant reappraisal is imperative. As a result there is a concurrent need to communicate the successes and failures of reappraisal projects to insure widespread diffusion of various approaches. Obviously, record collections are so varied that decisions on retention and disposal must be tailored to each collection. Similar cases and precedents can be helpful, but ultimately individual judgment must rule. Under such circumstances, the easier road is simply to save and avoid the problems. But, in these days of mounting paperwork, good archival practice requires selectivity. Otherwise, the very best will become smothered in the mediocre and the worthless.

CORRECTION

In our October 1975 issue, in an article by John M. Kinney, entitled "Archival Security and Insecurity," there appeared an error in fact. The article referred on page 494 to a theft by a staff member of the Missouri Historical Society. In actuality, the institution mentioned should have been the State Historical Society of Missouri, an organization entirely separate from and unrelated to the Missouri Historical Society. The *American Archivist* regrets this error and any embarrassment it may have caused the staff of the Missouri Historical Society.