OLD RECORDS IN A NEW WAR[1]

THE "Act to establish a National Archives of the United States Government, and for other purposes" was approved on June 19, 1934, and on October 10, 1934, the President appointed the first archivist of the United States, thereby giving effect to the act. Thus less than eight years ago—and less than six years before the United States was destined to face a great national emergency—the National Archives came into being. Even then the country was far from what had once been termed a state of "normalcy." It was still in the throes of a domestic crisis. Depression was the order of the day, and unemployment, with all of its attendant evils and potentially disastrous developments, was threatening to become permanent. Programs and policies for combating the depression had already been initiated, however, and responsible officials were so thoroughly convinced that the problems of the depression were without precedent in American history that there was little demand for information about the techniques used to remedy similar conditions in earlier decades. So the National Archives was organized and began its work about six years before the country faced a great national emergency which might directly influence its archival activities.

Only with the fall of France in the late spring and early summer of 1940 did the people become conscious that a national crisis was once again at hand. And administrators immediately realized that although the magnitude and many of the detailed aspects of this crisis were without parallel in the past, the general characteristics of the emergency were very similar to those of the emergency the nation had faced in 1917-1918. Measures and policies which had been appropriate and necessary then well might be appropriate and necessary now. With that realization came a change in the status of records created by national defense agencies during the World War and left by them as tangible evidences of the policies and activities which had sufficed to meet that emergency.

Broadly speaking, the agencies constituting the federal government during the first World War—as in the present World War—may be divided into two groups: the old-line permanent government

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agencies that either had been established primarily to aid in the national defense, such as the War and Navy Departments, or were normally entrusted with duties that inevitably were increased by the state of international belligerency, such as the State and Treasury Departments. The second group consisted of the temporary super-agencies established for the sole purpose of expediting the prosecution of the war effort, such as the Food Administration, the War Industries Board, and the Railroad Administration.

The first World War records of the permanent old-line government agencies in time simply became parts of record groups that dated back to some earlier decade. The temporary mushroom growth, caused by the multiplication of duties incident to the war, led to the creation of new subdivisions within their frameworks and to the frequent intra-agency reorganizations that characterized their existence from 1917 to 1919. These developments prompted the creation of many specialized files and the establishment of many new files unconnected with other papers in the prewar files of the agencies but in general all of these files for the period of the first World War gradually became simply groups of records embodied in larger groups of more or less similar records. When temporary subdivisions were liquidated their records were taken over by permanent units, and for the most part they were kept in current files for a varying number of years after the armistice. As the needs of current business required, they were integrated with other files and eventually, when for some reason administrators decided to start a new record-keeping system or to weed out noncurrent material, these first World War records and their postwar accretions were simply added to the tremendous collections of old records already accumulated in storerooms. No special problems attached to the first World War records of these agencies. The period of the war had simply been a period of more rapid growth in the stack of official documents of the agency; the character of that stack had not changed materially and the only peculiar difficulties were those of magnitude.

Far different was the situation in regard to the records of the various temporary emergency agencies which constituted the super-government of the United States during the war. The super-government, through its various instrumentalities, delved into aspects and activities of American life never before of official interest to the government and never again until the present emergency considered a legitimate field of governmental activity. Because in 1917 and

1918 Congress and the President judged that the normal scope of government jurisdiction did not include this field, they intentionally established these agencies on a purely temporary basis. The activities and responsibilities of the Food Administration, for instance, might well have been turned over to the Department of Agriculture, but to do so might have invited an effort to make them permanent functions of that department. It was better, they thought, to let the permanent agencies of the government continue their normal peacetime activities in so far as possible and where necessary to let them simply close shop for the duration without disturbing their legal foundations and scopes of authority than to supplant those normal activities with some special war effort in a field of activity that was not a normal field for governmental interference. By creating special agencies to handle these special problems, officials believed, it would be easier to effect a return to the normal peacetime relationship of government and the governed. When problems peculiar to wartime had ceased to exist, the temporary agencies could be abolished, lock, stock, and barrel.

This theory of emergency government was commendable in many respects, but to the archivist it had one most discouraging feature. when the various temporary agencies were abolished their records were not similarly abolished—and they remained to create many an archival headache. For years it seemed that they might as well have been completely wiped out of existence, to be sure, for they received a minimum of attention. There were exceptions. To the records of the operation of the selective service system were ascribed such importance that Congress appropriated $3,500.00 to enable the Office of the Adjutant General to arrange and maintain them. "Never in the history of this or any other nation," he declared, "had a more valuable and comprehensive accumulation of data been assembled upon the physical, economic, industrial, and racial condition of a people. It contained the first and only record of the manpower of this nation. It would be of untold value to the physician, the economist, the sociologist, and the historian for many decades. . . ."[2]

Certainly General Crowder's words could well have been paraphrased to apply to other groups of records created by the first World War emergency agencies. In the papers of the War Industries Board, the Fuel Administration, the Shipping Board, the Railroad

[2] *Final Report . . . to July 15, 1919, 9.*

Administration, and other similar agencies was buried the story of America's first attempt to achieve total industrial mobilization—and it might be added that this was the most successful attempt the world had then seen. So successful was this effort that in later years the government of Nazi Germany carefully studied the operations of the American system and then adopted for its own a system primarily based on it, with variations to suit the particular circumstances. Other agencies had been equally important in the war effort. The Food Administration, the Alien Property Custodian, the National War Labor Board, the Council of National Defense—all had played their parts. Some had passed through periods of frustration and failure before achieving success—and explanations of these failures often were buried deep in the records, explanations which might help later officials facing similar problems to avoid similar mistakes.

Regardless of the potential importance of these records to later administrators, they all shared in varying degrees the same fate: dead storage, confusion, and near oblivion. The philosophy back of this treatment was quite understandable. The nation had just completed a tremendous effort which had won "the war to end wars." The era of armed conflict was to become a thing of the past in a newly enlightened and civilized world. On the one hand, its friends knew that the League of Nations would insure everlasting peace. Those who disagreed with this thesis, if they thought of potentialities at all, knew that the United States was isolated from European conflicts and had become involved in the World War only through the evil machinations of a minority pressure group and its followers. Whichever theory most appealed to an individual, the resultant psychology was the same: "We need not worry about future wars, and therefore we need not worry about future industrial mobilizations." The fact that at that very time a special section had been established in the War Department to make future industrial mobilizations proceed more expeditiously and that the Joint Army and Navy Munitions Board was actively co-operating with that section was not of particular importance to the world at large. Likewise the fact that Congress had appropriated funds to maintain the records of manpower mobilization was completely irrelevant. That had been done because of the economic, sociological, and historical importance of those records; not because of their military importance. The scholarly muses may smile a bit wryly as they look down today and see a new mobilization of manpower expedited in many

ways by reference to those same records—records which have not yet been greatly exploited for economic, sociological, or historical scholarship!

Even before Wilson left the White House almost all of the emergency super-agencies of the first World War had been abolished. The peace had not been legally established yet, but as the world returned to normalcy the records of those agencies began their peregrinations, starting from the various temporary buildings in which their agencies had been housed to storage in the momentarily most available garage, attic, or basement. Legally each group of records was transferred to the custody of some permanent agency of the government. Essentially many of them were virtually abandoned. No one had authority to destroy them, so they were kept, bandied from basement to attic, from building to building, and even in and out of the District of Columbia. Each move, of course, had a deleterious and cumulative effect on the records. File drawers flew open and papers were dumped on the floor, unceremoniously swept up, and returned to the drawer utterly without order; file cases containing segments of continuous series of records became separated; some few became entirely lost. What had once been an alphabetical file from A to Z might eventually become a fragment, K to M. Confusion soon became the one outstanding characteristic common to the records of nearly all first World War emergency agencies.

Then, with the establishment of the National Archives, concentration of the records of these agencies in a permanent depository was begun. The government began housecleaning. From cellars packed to the beams with file cases, from attics and garages jammed with a variegated assortment of boxes and cases, records began to appear. Within two years there were in the custody of the National Archives the records of the War Labor Administration, the Food Administration, and the Railroad Administration, or parts thereof. To these were soon added the records of the Shipping Board, the Fuel Administration, the Committee on Public Information, the Alien Property Custodian, the Council of National Defense, the War Industries Board, and other lesser agencies. When this material had been accessioned and stored, however, the work of the National Archives had scarcely begun. Generally these files had not been used for years. Despite their obvious importance and despite the interest attaching to their content, no prying scholar nor curious administrator had penetrated their mysteries for years. Their peregri-

nations had induced such confusion and chaos that at the time of their arrival at the National Archives search in them was well nigh impossible.

Within the limits imposed by those general principles of archival economy that are endorsed with varying degrees of unanimity by archivists the world over, the physical and paper arrangements into which these files might be sorted were discretionary with the staff of the National Archives. In many cases so little was left of the original scheme of arrangement that whole files must be put together on the basis of slim clues as to what the creators of those files must have intended. And there were few applicable precedents to guide these efforts. The National Archives was so newly established that it had created few precedents for itself; obviously it could depend on European precedents to only a limited extent, owing to the differences in archival problems in European countries and in the United States.

Furthermore, the records of these agencies were records unparalleled in American experience. They dealt with subjects and fields of jurisdiction never before pertinent to governmental activities. It was possible only to hypothesize as to the probable demands, in type and form, that scholars, historians, economists, and sociologists, as well as administrators, might some day make upon them. Scholars might be interested in certain aspects of industrial mobilization—at some vague future time. Certainly hitherto they had steered a course definitely at a safe distance around any contact with these records; whether this was by necessity or by choice remained to be seen. If they had been deterred from using these records simply by the storage conditions that had prevailed, that deterrent would be remedied; if simply by the subject matter, that could hardly be changed.

Potential scholarly use had to be kept in mind when arrangements were worked out and finding mediums were developed. Furthermore, by the later 1930's the turn of world affairs no longer seemed to preclude the possibility of war quite as positively as it had fifteen years earlier, so there might be administrative calls upon these records by government officials who, in time of crisis, were entrusted with the industrial mobilization of the nation's resources. What was the best way to arrange the records, and what finding mediums should be prepared in order to enable the archivist to answer the questions of a second Bernard Baruch, as well as the questions of an economist or historian?

In the absence of specific experience to guide the archivists, the records of each emergency agency of the first World War period were arranged in general according to the organization of that agency at some specific chronological period of its existence. It was frequently impossible to follow this principle in its entirety, for some units of the agency that existed only before or after that period were represented by records that had to be included in the arrangement. There were instances in which the groups of records of whole agencies became parts of the records of other agencies that had inherited their functions upon reorganization. Thus the records of the General Munitions Board and of its subdivisions were made a part of the records of the Council of National Defense; and, in turn, the records of many subdivisions of the Council of National Defense formed parts of the files of succeeding units of the War Industries Board. These were not arbitrary decisions. They were simply recognitions by the archivists of administrative developments which had taken place decades before. The egg could not be unscrambled.

Generally speaking, however, the principle of arranging according to the organizational structure of the agency at some specific period was followed both in the physical arrangement of the records and in the creation of finding mediums. Thus, once it was established that a given file of correspondence was the file of Hugh L. Frayne, chief of the Labor Division of the War Industries Board, that file was listed under the heading, Labor Division, War Industries Board, and all other files of that unit were listed under the same heading, with appropriate subheadings as needed.

None too soon were these finding mediums completed. Soon after the fall of France the President, in July, 1940, formed the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense, essentially a resurrection of the first World War agency of similar name. Soon afterwards the Office of Production Management assumed its duties, and it was in turn succeeded by the War Production Board. Whatever the name given the agency, and despite the reorganizations it has undergone, the present War Production Board is essentially the 1942 version of the War Industries Board, entrusted with the same single task of mobilizing American industries for war—total war.

As the War Production Board and its many subdivisions were formed and as they began to organize, naturally they turned to the experience of a quarter of a century ago for guidance. Very little of that experience had found its way into print. To be sure there

were volumes on the mobilization of American industry and on how the factories won the war; but for the most part these were vague generalities and failed to include the technical and specific information which might reveal the secrets of how it was all done. There were almost no detailed statements of how, where, and when munitions and ships were produced; of how priorities were administered, of the differences between a priorities system and an allocation system, and of why one worked better than the other.

Lacking printed summaries of what had gone before, newly appointed government officials who swarmed into Washington fresh from private industry to head defense agencies could only turn to the manuscript records of their predecessors of twenty-five years ago. They realized that their problems differed in some respects from those of the first World War—but they knew, too, that in many other respects theirs were the same problems. At least they wanted to know how the parallel organization of the 1917-1918 vintage had been set up. What changes did it undergo? Why? How did it work? What were its procedures? Even the format of office records was investigated. Exactly what blank forms, containing what questions and what statements, had been used in 1918? How had industrial inventories been recorded and kept current?

Again and again these same questions were asked about various first World War units. As each new unit in the present War Production Board was set up under that board or under the Office of Production Management, the new personnel asked these same questions about the forerunner agency of the first World War. In some cases the same records were withdrawn time and again and sent to different offices for examination; it was necessary, in order to save wear and tear on the documents themselves, to make photostatic reproductions that could be circulated as often as wanted.

Initially these questions from emergency agencies centered about the twin problems of office organization and procedure, and that fact alone differentiates the servicing of these records from the servicing of records of old-line government agencies. Normally an old-line agency sends a group of records to the National Archives after a more or less definite lapse of time since they have been current files. If the office is still using the same procedures that it was using when the files were created, and if it is still organized in about the same way, very seldom will it ask questions about its own procedures or organization. If the procedures and organization have

altered, on the other hand, there will be little or no occasion to refer to such dead issues after the records have been sent to the National Archives. Rather, the normal questions from an old-line agency about its own records is a request for a fact contained in some document.

This difference is quite understandable. There is a continuity of personnel and existence in an old-line agency that almost invariably insures against any need to consult old files for procedural precedents. But the emergency agencies of the second World War have almost no personnel formerly employed by similar agencies of the first World War, and even those few individuals, over a span of twenty-five years, have forgotten details.

These circumstances have posed many problems for archivists servicing the records of the emergency agencies of the first World War. The arrangement which had been given these records was not always sufficient to enable the archivist to find answers to important but detailed questions. So supplementary finding mediums, constituting paper cross sections of the records, had to be compiled. For instance, it proved necessary to make a special list of reference material available on the subject of conservation in the Council of National Defense and War Industries Board files. How were efforts toward conservation proposed and executed? What items were placed on conservation lists? It did not matter to the executives of the War Production Board which division or unit of the War Industries Board had carried on the work in respect to a particular commodity; what did matter was what was done, and the material that might shed light on that matter had to be listed for ready availability. Similarly, how had the War Industries Board solved the problems inherent in other duties? How had it administered priorities and price control? How had it co-ordinated its efforts with those of the War Trade Board? It was impossible to find the answers to these questions in any single document; and pertinent papers might be scattered through the records of a dozen different sections. Therefore as rapidly as possible supplementary finding mediums, listing material pertinent to these and similar questions, had to be compiled.

That these supplementary lists were necessary implies no unwarranted criticisms of the arrangement of the records of the War Industries Board. It does mean, however, that without question no one arrangement will suit all purposes and that paper arrangements are therefore necessary supplements to physical arrangements of

records. In no sense does it mean that every subject in a long file must be indexed. That would be impossible, considering the magnitude of the government's record accumulation. But almost necessarily, in any single emergency agency there will be some one, two, three, or more functions of such obviously paramount importance that wisdom will dictate compilation of special finding mediums even before there are demands for them. An example may suffice: at present there are in the National Archives the records of the War Department Claims Board and certain of its subsidiary units—not all of them, but several. These agencies dealt with the claims of manufacturers and others on account of contracts entered into before November 11, 1918, and then discontinued by the government after hostilities ceased. In many cases manufacturers had bought material to be fabricated into munitions, or had built new factories that had not yet gone into production of war materials. When the government wanted to cancel its orders, the manufacturer was left with these surplus materials or plants, useless for peacetime production. So the government established these boards to negotiate settlements equitable alike to itself and to the claimant. Obviously it is far too early in this war for the responsible officers of the War and Navy Departments to start worrying about the detailed problems inherent in the possible ultimate cancellation of the contracts that they are even today negotiating. They have a war to fight first. It is not too early, however, for the custodians of these records of 1918-1919 to consider the demands that will probably be made upon them months or even years hence. On the basis of experience with the War Industries Board records, it is pretty safe to predict that someday a War Production Board official, a War Department official, or some other administrator will ask just how the government went about cancelling those contracts.

It is well worth noting, too, that the demands on the records of the War Industries Board went through several phases. First there were demands for information relative to organization and procedure. Then came queries as to what had been done about specific commodities during the first World War. From an emphasis on general procedures there was this change to an emphasis on specific commodities or subjects. These inquiries vary greatly. At one time the question may be about the content of a ruling on a given date about a given commodity. Such questions are usually relatively easy to answer if the documents have not been destroyed. A definite

answer can be given in comparatively short time. The next question may be a general, "What did it cost the United States to finance private armament plants during the first World War?" Such a question involves long research, no matter what finding mediums are available.

The third phase of reference calls from current emergency agencies for information from the records of their predecessors manifests a distinct decrease in the number of calls and a wider variety in type of inquiry. As is natural, once the War Production Board had established its own organization and procedures, it ceased to have any active interest in what the War Industries Board had done, unless of course, difficulties cropped up. In that case interest revived as to how the War Industries Board met the same problem. As the War Production Board has established its own routine, calls for information about War Industries Board records have declined in number. Similarly, as the War Production Board has decided what it will do about various commodities, it has lost interest in what the War Industries Board did. So calls for information have become fewer and of wider variety.

Until June, 1940, no one could foretell very accurately just what demands might be made on these records in case of a repetition of a national emergency. On the basis of experiences with national defense calls during the past few months, certain conclusions are now inescapable. First of all, it has often been impossible to answer questions in their entirety, or even in part, owing to the incomplete concentration of records of the first World War emergency agencies in the National Archives. Many questions involve the records of two or more agencies, and although the records of most of them are in the National Archives, there are enough which are not there to hinder servicing of those that are. For instance, questions involving wartime financial operations of the government may well involve records of the War Industries Board, the Shipping Board, the War Trade Board, the War Finance Board, and others. Yet not all of these records are in the National Archives, so such questions can be answered only in part. Even at this late date there is definite need for a single concentration of the records of all super-agencies of the first World War.

But not only should the records of the first World War now be concentrated in one place, they should never have been subject to the vicissitudes which they endured. The very confusion into which

they lapsed meant that valuable information is now forever lost. No one today can be sure whether some files were completely lost, or whether apparently extraneous material found among seemingly related papers is really extraneous or was placed there for some definite reason. Obviously the records of the present emergency super-agencies ought not to be subject to such treatment. At the conclusion of the present war, when the War Production Board and other similar agencies are liquidated, their records should promptly be shipped intact to a permanent depository.

Intact, that is, with exceptions. There are today in the files of the War Industries Board and other World War agencies varying amounts of useless papers that could well have been destroyed twenty years ago. The files of current agencies should be carefully weeded out, and useless papers should be destroyed. Of course, this weeding out process should be carried on with a maximum of care—as it is being done even today. But it should be done. The presence of useless papers in the files simply complicates use of the valuable papers.

After these records have been weeded, work should be started at once on necessary finding mediums. Presumably this time the records would be in their original state, the records of each unit together and the records of successive units that handled the same functions definitely integrated. Once they have been physically stored in that condition, it would be far easier to start at once compiling the necessary paper cross sections of those files than it was to bring some order out of the chaos to which the records of the first World War super-agencies had been reduced. During the present emergency much of this work on the records of the first World War must be done under inevitably haphazard conditions of haste; similar work could much better be done another time with greater care and thoroughness if it were started immediately upon the liquidation of the agency. Then the day of need in the future would not bring a repetition of the problems of today.

The present one is the first great national emergency since the establishment of the National Archives. All work done by the National Archives staff on the records of the emergency agencies of the first World War was done on the bases of hypotheses as to what would be wanted. No one knew. Of course, no one knows absolutely what might be wanted by the time of the third World War—if and when! But there do seem to be certain fundamental questions that

arise more often concerning these emergency super-agencies than about permanent old-line agencies—particularly, questions about organization, procedure, and critical raw materials. For the next time, the necessary paper cross sections of the records dealing with those subjects can be prepared on the basis of the experience now available. Of course, mistakes will occur. From the records of the War Industries Board one would deduce that the problems inherent in the manufacture of synthetic dyes were much more pressing than those inherent in the manufacture of synthetic rubber, with the result that emphasis might have been given to studies of synthetic dye production to the neglect of synthetic rubber production. Although no system that can be worked out to anticipate demands on the records will be foolproof, a backlog of experience will help materially to reduce the margins of error.

The first World War records have had their test; they have come of age and in a short time they will be superseded in immediate importance by the records of their successors. The records of those successors will be in a position to benefit from the difficulties of what have now become old records in a new war, when and if they play the same role.

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