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CAN THE WAR HISTORY PROJECTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE SOLUTION OF FEDERAL RECORDS PROBLEMS?¹

THE DILIGENT but somewhat naïve historian of the Penguins, in Anatole France's *Penguin Island*, striving to perfect his chapter on Penguin art, sought the counsel of the learned author of the "Universal Annals of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture," M. Fulgence Tapir. He found the renowned savant in his study, at a roll-top desk, weighted down beneath "a frightful mass of papers." "The walls of the study, the floor, and even the ceiling were loaded with overflowing bundles [and] pasteboard boxes swollen beyond measure. . . ."

To his visitor's inquiry whether he would condescend to advise him regarding materials on the art of the Penguins, the great man responded with tempered enthusiasm and modesty befitting such an august authority. "Monsieur," he said, "I possess all art, you understand me, all art, on cards classed alphabetically and in order of subjects. I consider it my duty to place at your disposal all that relates to the Penguins. Get on that ladder and take out that box you see above. You will find in it everything you require."

"I tremblingly obeyed," wrote the penguinologist. "But scarcely had I opened the fatal box than some blue cards escaped from it, and slipping through my fingers began to rain down. Almost immediately, acting in sympathy, the neighboring boxes opened, and there flowed streams of pink, green, and white cards, and by degrees, from

¹ A paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Princeton, New Jersey, November 16, 1943.

The words "war history" are used here as a brief term generally suggestive of the subjects discussed in this paper. They have no official sanction. Different persons for different reasons have objected to the use of the word "history" in reference to these projects. Some prefer to designate them as records of war administration, general reports, or administrative reporting projects. In using the term "war history" in this paper, the writer does not wish to commit himself to its defense in any controversy over terminology.

all the boxes, differently colored cards were poured out murmuring like a waterfall on a mountainside in April. In a minute they covered the floor with a thick layer of paper. Issuing from their inexhaustible reservoirs with a roar that continually grew in force, each second increased the vehemence of their torrential fall. Swamped up to the knees in cards, Fulgence Tapir observed the cataclysm. . . .

"What a mass of art!" he exclaimed.

"I called to him and leaned forward to help him mount the ladder. . . . It was too late. Overwhelmed, desperate, pitiable, his velvet smoking-cap and his gold-mounted spectacles having fallen from him, he vainly opposed his short arms to the flood which had now mounted to his arm-pits. Suddenly a terrible spurt of cards arose and enveloped him in a gigantic whirlpool. During the space of a second I could see in the gulf the shining skull and little fat hands of the scholar; then it closed up and the deluge kept on pouring over what was silence and immobility. In dread lest I in my turn should be swallowed up, ladder and all, I made my escape through the topmost pane of the window."

The tragic fate that befell this eminent man threatens the archivist in the not distant future—barring some miraculous outburst of genius among record administrators. There is this difference in our situation. For the penguinologists and other research workers who risk pulling down an avalanche upon their heads every time they attempt to use federal records the escape hatch is not anywhere in sight. When we consider the facts that records are being produced in Washington at a rate sufficient to fill a duplicate of the National Archives Building every year, that federal records in the states are crying for attention, that the production of records by state, territorial, and local governments is probably not decreasing, that interest in the preservation of business and other private archives is growing apace—when we consider these things, the paper peril with all its crushing possibilities appears more menacing every hour. This production of records cannot be expected to halt this year or the next, but will continue, with some fluctuations, it is true, generation after generation—even if the American republic should endure for a thousand years. The paper accumulations of the national government have been thought of as the recorded experience of the American people in the art of democratic government.² We can imagine the

² Cf. *Eighth Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States* (Washington, 1943),

archivist of a few decades hence, his face grown pallid in the shadows cast by the canyon walls lined with the records of the twentieth century, floundering in papers adjudged by himself to be worthy of preservation, and paraphrasing with feeling the last words of Fulgence Tapir: "What a mass of experience!"

I

In dealing with this "mass of experience," the most critical problem, the one the solution of which is basic to the continued progress of archival institutions, and to the prosperity of archivists, is not that of preservation, or storage, or description of records, or the elimination of dead limbs, bark, and other trashy adhesions to the records corpus. The groundwork for the solution of these problems has been laid. The really vital problem is that of the profitable utilization of records. The preservation of small quantities of records, such as those remaining from the nineteenth century could perhaps be tolerated as a luxury, a deposit, the richest veins of which could be haphazardly exploited by the more fortunate and energetic among the entrepreneurs of the scholarly fraternity, a field to absorb the energies of the dilettante and others who make historical and other types of research an avocation. It is improbable that such standards and methods can continue to be tolerated and used in justification of the preservation, storage, and expensive processing that modern archival economy entails of the huge volumes of records now being accumulated. The sole justification for the preservation of these records will be their utilization in meeting some important social need. The solution of this major problem of utilization involves continuous study and experiment in methods for making available not only the records themselves but their content in a relatively attractive and usable form, and the education of potential users in their value and practical application.

It is as an experiment, or series of experiments in the utilization of recent federal records that the war history projects are of significance to archivists and records administrators. Although the approach, methods, and understanding of the purpose of the work and the means of achieving it differ from project to project, every worker has in view a very practical objective; namely, to translate

1-2; Emmett J. Leahy, "Records Administration and the War," *Military Affairs*, vi (Summer, 1942), 97.

the confused record of today's experience into a more usable form for the present and future benefit of the government itself. The intent is not merely to preserve the heroic acts of the present for the edification of posterity, to justify or defend the actors in today's drama, to submit to the infallible judgment of history prevailing controversies, or to add to the general cultural resources of the nation. The utilitarian aspect has been emphasized from the beginning.

Although the exact figures are not available, the number of persons employed in the war history projects now totals some three hundred or four hundred. By far the greater number are employed in the several branches of the War Department and the Army. This overweighing of the scale by the War Department is not so serious when we consider that the War Department in addition to control of the Army employs more than a third of all civilian employees of the federal government, and now has very considerable responsibilities overseas. The scope or coverage of governmental activities by these projects will, of course, depend upon the duration of the war, since all or nearly all of them are purely emergency undertakings. As to type, they can be broken roughly into two large groups. One consists of most of the projects in the War Department and a few in other agencies, and the other of the remaining new government projects which have been installed more directly under the stimulus of the Committee on Records of War Administration, where the needs of the public administration specialists are stressed. In the latter group, emphasis is placed upon the preparation of a "record of administrative change" that deals particularly with "the organizational, personnel, fiscal, and administrative control aspects" in the life of an agency.³ Many of these projects are not heavily manned and some are depending at present on a single analyst who devotes only part of his time to the work. Professor Earl G. Latham, now of the Bureau of the Budget, has referred to the product of these as "instant history."⁴ The War Department projects, although taking their origin from the recommendations of the committee, have developed along broader lines and have incorporated ideas on history and historiography indigenous to that department. Without neglecting administrative developments, they have plunged into actual operations in this country, and are now extending their efforts to military

³ Earl G. Latham, "The Technique of Administrative Reporting," *Public Administration Review*, III (Spring, 1943), 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

operations abroad. Carrying Professor Latham's figure a little farther, we might refer to the products of the War Department projects as "two-minute history." They have added a few ingredients and are allowing the brew to simmer a little longer.

There are certain values which records workers will readily perceive in the execution of work of this sort—values so obvious that only passing reference to them is needed. For whatever purpose an archivist approaches a group of records, his first need is guidance with respect to the administrative structure and functions of the agency which created them. Regardless of the particular method of work followed in the individual war history projects, each has given considerable attention to those matters. When the records of the emergency administrations pass to the custody of the National Archives, the staff of the latter should find its labors lightened somewhat by the results of the work of the investigators who preceded them, whether these results are in the form of finished reports or special files of selected documents. Archival and records administration programs should also derive considerable profit from the fact that, as a result of these projects, there has been an important addition made to the number of persons with experience in dealing with government records and who are cognizant, from personal contact, of some of the problems connected therewith. Some of these people will be available to fill vacancies in the expanded archival and records administration organizations at the end of the war. Experience in the utilization of records in a sustained research project and skill in composing a written report based upon such research are qualifications to be sought for among archivists, and too infrequently found. Other personnel will be absorbed in other governmental work or will return to their colleges and universities, and the cause will profit from the appreciation of the value of the archival resources of the nation and the knowledge of the problems involved in preserving and using them, which will thus be more widely spread throughout the land.

It is, however, from the evaluation of all the experience and the products of all the war history projects—their plans, their methods, their accomplishments and their failures—that their principal values for archival and other records workers are to be derived. Difficult special problems arise with regard to the utilization for research purposes of records of this period of mass production which do not exist with respect to records of an earlier day, and certain earlier

problems are accentuated with respect to recent records. The things which are found by experience to be important in the utilization of records are of necessity important to the archivist because those matters must be taken into consideration by him in exercising his judgment as to what records to preserve, how to arrange them, what types of finding mediums to prepare, and what reference facilities to provide.

II

The almost incredible volume of records creates the greatest number of problems for the person carrying on research in recent materials. The great attention given of late to measures looking toward the elimination of the so-called "useless" papers, the preparation of disposal schedules, etc., may have created the impression that the development of an adequate program for taking care of these matters and its efficient execution will dispose of the problems of records volume. It will not as far as the utilization of records for research purposes is concerned. Most of the materials which may be safely destroyed pose no problem to the research man—he can dispose of them through the use of proper evasive tactics. The great size of records groups is not all due to a fiendish addiction on the part of federal employees to the filing of waste paper. Much of it derives from the fact that the size of the government is also great. The body of records of any agency will always remain a solution in which the significant material for any given purpose is very thinly diluted, and there is no known reagent which will precipitate all the significant material on all subjects. The government is not only large, but almost every component agency is a highly complex organism involving a complicated network of procedures, controls, and interlocking units. Furthermore, governmental activities tend to become technicalized to a greater and greater degree. Before a research job can be successfully done, considerable effort must be devoted to acquiring a knowledge of a new terminology and an understanding of unfamiliar concepts.

These factors of the volume of records, their complex and technical character dictate the conditions under which research in recent records must be carried on. Exhaustiveness in the study of segments of federal administration and operations of sufficient scope to provide stimulus and breadth of view for the investigator and perspective and a knowledge of true relationships for the reader by an individual research worker is a physical impossibility. Samuel Flagg

Bemis used to teach the desirability of what he called "multiple-archive research" in the study of the history of American foreign relations in the nineteenth century, as an antidote to the prevailing practice of relying upon American sources alone.⁵ The result of this teaching was greater realism and completeness in much of the recent writing in that field. In studying the modern operations of the American government, multiple-bureau research has become more of a task than almost any multiple-archive research problem of the nineteenth century. The problems of war administration often traverse the boundary lines of many jurisdictions. The thorough study of the government's efforts to help the small business man in the present emergency, for example, will require extensive examination of the records of each of the seven technical services and of the headquarters, Army Service Forces, the records of the Office of the Under Secretary of War, the War Production Board, the Office of Price Administration, the War Manpower Commission, the Labor, Commerce, and Treasury Departments, the Smaller War Plants Corporation, committees of both houses of Congress, the records of representative industrial concerns, both large and small, and those of trade associations and of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce. This list is by no means exhaustive. The field records of many of these agencies would be of a value equal to or exceeding that of the materials in the Washington offices.

The trend seems to be that any comprehensive and thorough research in recent federal records must be carried on by teams of research workers and attached auxiliary personnel. This organization affords the needed opportunity for the individual specialization that is necessary in technical fields, and, at the same time, facilitates the development of breadth of view through interchange of information and points of view. The logical next step to this development in the organization of research is the adoption of planned, long range research programs financed by the government or private institutions. Since we are dealing here with federal records, it would appear that we might consider for the future integrated research programs supported partly by the federal government and partly by educational or research institutions or foundations interested in public administration, economic and social trends, etc.

If this is to be the pattern of the organization of research in the

⁵ Samuel Flagg Bemis, "Fields for Research in the Diplomatic History of the United States to 1900," *American Historical Review*, xxxvi (October, 1930), 68-75.

future, archival work will be affected in many ways. One of the most important factors would be the shift of major interest in records for research purposes from the older national records to the more recent ones, since recent experience is usually more directly applicable to current problems. Teams of research workers would have the resources to reactivate temporarily groups of records, and thereby reduce the services required of the archival agency. Records could be stored until the research workers were ready to exploit them, thus rendering unnecessary much of the archival processing. Of course, there will always be materials which can be exploited by the individual, but, under prevailing conditions the results are bound to be superficial and to present a distorted picture, and consequently hardly justify full archival maintenance of the materials.

III

One of the most important problems confronting the directors of the war history projects results from the lack of any accepted or acceptable standards for form and content in making experience contained in records available for use for administrative purposes. This is a situation which vitally concerns archivists as well as research workers. The varied approaches being followed by the war history projects are ample evidence of this lack of standards. There are available, of course, a number of books dealing with the administrative experience of individual agencies, but few of them measure up either from the standpoint of critical standards or from the record of practical use. How much of the experience of an agency is valuable in guiding its present and future operations? Is a detailed record of the development of the administrative skeleton; *i.e.*, the establishment, modification, and abolition of sections, branches and divisions of any great importance? Can any study of administration separate from operations be made meaningful? May there not be some generally applicable principles of administration which can be derived from the study of the work of a few agencies, thus rendering unnecessary the study of any considerable numbers? How are the differing needs of personnel at the several levels in the administrative hierarchy to be met? Where is the happy medium between desirable brevity and satisfying completeness? These are some of the questions which must be answered during the preparation of studies under way.

As only indifferent guidance is furnished by publications, so also the records of the reference services of file room and archival agency

supply little data regarding the effectiveness of records utilization. Many spot jobs of research for administrative use are constantly being carried on by personnel of these reference units or with their co-operation. One might conclude that the records of these services would be useful in determining how best to make studies of past experience available for practical purposes. This research is largely uncontrolled, however, and extremely wasteful. Objective records indicating intrinsic value of research projects would be very difficult to maintain, and, in any case, records of reference services are universally exaggerated for publicity and budgetary reasons. Anyone who has been exposed to records reference work will be able to enumerate many examples of obviously futile and ineffectual research. At the beginning of the present war, for example, many new administrative officials, who had to mark time while their agencies were being organized and sufficient duties accumulated to keep their personnel busy, showed great interest in past activities. It is highly questionable whether more than an infinitesimal part of this research had any influence on developments. One known case is probably representative. An official in one of the great emergency offices directed an assistant, a capable research worker, to prepare a report on an aspect of the work of one of the depression agencies that appeared to be comparable to the task set the new agency. The assistant attacked the assignment with enthusiasm, and was soon able to submit his report. He heard nothing about it until several months later, when, during a period when work was slack, his superior instructed him to prepare a report on the same subject. He found the original draft in the central files, and, after a short interval, resubmitted it. Within a few days, he found it again decently interred in the files. Such uncontrolled and wasteful research serves principally to disillusion trained workers and to cause them to be disgusted with the government service. It makes no contribution to the standing of the agency having custody of the records upon which it is based. It would be a splendid thing if an objective investigation could be made of the utilization of recorded experience by federal agencies during the present war and the period immediately preceding it. It would provide some very revealing data of great value to archivists, records administrators, and research workers in the field of administrative history. Probably not even the most enthusiastic participants in the war history program would contend that standards are being set by them for reports for administrative use, but certainly contributions

toward such standards are being made even though every single report should later be found to be inadequate.

The lack of knowledge on the part of research workers as to what to prepare and how to prepare it is matched by a complementary lack on the part of administrative officers. They, by and large, have not been educated to use systematically recorded experience from records in practical application in connection with their duties. Most of them, when approached with regard to the preparation of reports about their own current experience are interested in it from the publicity standpoint. A few, often older officials, place great value on the written record of experience. Another reason for the lack of effectiveness of much research in government records, arising from lack of knowledge on the part of administrators, is that directives for research are drawn in such a way that a useful job is impossible. Not knowing what values can be derived from research, administrators expect too much, and when they do not find the facts they expected or in the form they expected, they discard the report as useless or hold the research worker responsible for an unsatisfactory job. All this is not to say, of course, that federal administrators do not value or learn from practical experience. They recognize and know how to make use of the experience embodied in the current efficient management in another agency or a private business concern, which efficiency is derived from the accumulated experience of many individuals handed down from one to another. They respect the record of experience communicated orally by successful men, and appreciate such opportunities to learn as are provided by the park bench oracle of Lafayette Square presided over by Mr. Bernard Baruch. The task is to awaken them to the need of supplementing such experience with that systematically derived from the study of the records of their own agencies. The personnel of the war history projects are doing a great deal of effective missionary work among federal officials. Vastly greater efforts along these lines are necessary, however, before much improvement in the utilization of records can be expected.

IV

One thing on which nearly all workers in the war history projects will agree is that modern government record-keeping and filing systems are, for the most part, ill-adapted for use for research purposes. The reform of those systems will constitute a most worthwhile field of labor for records administration personnel. There will be much

agreement on the need for reform. There will be much less agreement on the exact steps that need to be taken. One difficulty has been particularly emphasized by the personnel serving the Committee on Records of War Administration; *i.e.*, that the usual administrative records of an agency do not provide a complete story of administrative developments and need to be reinforced with transcripts of interviews with participants in events and other complementary matter. One of the lessons most quickly and emphatically brought home to the research worker in current records, where documentary evidence can be easily compared with that of living witnesses, is that documents frequently constitute very imperfect evidence of facts. It would appear desirable to attempt to devise practicable ways to stimulate the record-creating organs to produce supplementary types of records to supply the obvious shortcomings of the current output in these respects.

Insofar as the accessibility of materials for topical research is concerned, some existing filing systems seem to have been planned to conceal information rather than reveal it. This inaccessibility is the occasion for the stress laid by some of the leaders of the Records of War Administration program upon the selection and maintenance of separate files of important documents for the use of future investigators. Such royal roads to research cannot offer serious competition with the official administrative files provided the latter are efficiently organized and managed by people with energy and vision. Among the most objectionable filing systems are the bureau-wide self-indexing subject files. They are too complicated for successful operation by the type of filing personnel generally employed, and their destruction of the possibility of the functional or administrative approach to the study of a subject places a tremendous handicap in the way of the research worker. In some of the war history projects, the central file rooms are by-passed and the initial research begun in the "reading files," "policy books," and other temporary accumulations in individual offices. The permanent solutions of these problems must be sought through the thorough study of filing systems, and of each individual filing system with due regard both to its adaptation for administrative purposes and to its possibilities for utilization for research. The function of the file room is generally too narrowly interpreted. It should not limit its effort merely to producing the papers needed in current transactions, but should be prepared to co-operate in building up a truly representative record for the future.

Since the improvement of record keeping systems can be brought about only after thorough study of a highly technical subject, it would be improper to attempt to lay down principles here. Experience in the war history projects suggests certain possible improvements, however. The drawbacks of the large subject files and the importance of the retention of the reflection of the administrative or functional development of the creating unit have already been mentioned. Certain specialized types of materials—materials which stand out because of their unique character or importance—should be segregated and given special recognition through some means of formal registration or recording. The problem referred to here can be illustrated by the following. In one federal agency, whose function it is to develop certain types of equipment for government use, it has been impossible to find a complete set of the specifications of the products developed within the last three years, either in the Washington office or the appropriate field office. Recurring reports fall within the same category. Surely it would not be too difficult to devise a scheme that would provide complete files of recurring reports with explanations of gaps and discontinuations. With regard to these huge masses of recent records, it is out of the question to depend upon the staffs of archival establishments to prepare adequate finding mediums after the records have been retired. It will be much more efficient and much less expensive to have certain classes of finding mediums—*e.g.*, card indexes of individual series and descriptive lists—useful in current servicing of files but also adapted to later research use, prepared at the time of original filing. Attempts to reform filing systems by hasty administrative action under pressure from superiors to “get something done” can and in many cases will result in more harm than good. A case in point was the recent destruction, as a result of a misinterpretation of a badly drawn directive, of a file of the very highest value to the writer’s own project—a file which can never be completely reconstituted because of the dispersal of the originals of its components in the subject files.

V

And now we come to the matter of the disposal of “useless” papers. The term is an unfortunate one, and has been used, purposely perhaps, to create the impression that there is a very clear boundary line, visible to the experienced archivist and only to him, between records

which are worth saving and those which have no permanent value. The safest basis upon which to exercise judgment in this case is that of knowledge of the ways in which records have been used. Therefore, every experiment in the utilization of records will contribute to the broadening and reinforcing of the basic knowledge upon which decision as to the disposal of records can be made. Leahy, writing in the summer number of *Military Affairs* last year,⁶ calculated that not more than five percent of the body of federal records are really valuable. The writer's own calculations indicate an error of perhaps as much as seven-tenths of one percent on the low side. But how can such estimates as this mean anything when no serious attempt to use even one-tenth of one percent has ever been made? If administrative officers can be educated to the value of studies of experience as embodied in records, uses can be found for many types of materials. Most research workers in the war history projects feel that they are greatly handicapped by the huge quantities of useless papers which they have to wade through in finding the relatively few which are of value in their projects, but they are not agreed as to which should be eliminated. It is natural, of course, that each should conclude that those in which he is not interested are useless.

The problem of useless papers from the viewpoint of the war history projects worker may be illustrated by the following cases. Among the classes of papers which are not highly regarded by some archivists are requests for publications. A colleague of the writer, in a study of War Department planning agencies, unpublished as yet, but which has received commendation from rather high places, has drawn a fairly significant minor conclusion from a study of requests for copies of one of the economic mobilization plans. Surely the effect of any significant government publication can be best estimated through a study of its distribution. It would appear, however, that there could be discovered a more economical way to preserve the record than by retaining all the individual requests. Discarded punched cards constitute a class of materials which all will surely agree is useless. The cards have served merely as a device for the rapid tabulation of statistical material, which is available in a more usable form both in the original source and in the tabulation. The cards themselves are unintelligible unless the original code is available. These cards appear to approach the acme of perfection in use-

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 97.

lessness. On the other hand, one of the most important developments in recent years in government property accounting has been the increased use of electric accounting machines. Not only have the machines reached an astounding height of superhuman efficiency, but the techniques of their use to meet the needs of government agencies have been very highly developed. A worker in one war history project, a well-trained technician, went to considerable trouble to collect samples of punched cards with the intent to have them reproduced as illustrations of the various steps in development in his study of stock accounting and control procedures. The important question is not "Are punched cards useless or valuable?" but "Is a detailed study of the development of government stock accounting procedures valuable?" and "Do the reproductions of punched cards make a sufficient contribution to the study to justify the cost of selection and preservation?" The more experimental studies we have of government records from various points of view, the more confidence we can have in our decisions as to what records to preserve.

Prognostication is a dangerous pastime, and too much space in this paper has doubtless already been given to what is to be hoped for or expected to happen in the future. It seems probable, however, that the day will come when some rather brutal decisions will have to be made about the destruction of records, when cruel amputations will have to be resorted to to reduce the size of the records mass. When that time comes, the methods of the war history projects will be worthy of consideration as a means of saving some of the values. If a group of records has been well studied and a written account prepared, there should be less grief at sending that group to the guillotine than one which constitutes an unworked field. It is possible that even today there are groups of records whose sole value rests in their content of administrative experience useful only to some branch of the federal government. If this experience could be extracted and put into the form of a narrative and descriptive report, would civilization lose much from the destruction of the records?

VI

In this attempt to answer the question posed in the title of this paper, the primary objective has been to emphasize the fact that the test of the whole archival and records administration program will be the degree of the effective utilization of records. The war history

projects, with their purpose of the application of systematically organized experience to the tasks of the present and the future, contain a potential of a satisfying and, to some extent, measurable accomplishment, which offers a promise and a challenge to all persons engaged in records work. There is no argument that can be used to justify these research projects as war activities that cannot be applied with equal force to support a similar program in peacetime—a program not so strictly limited to current records. It would be regrettable indeed if all the planning and experience now available should be thrown overboard at the end of the war. That contributions are being made to the solution of federal records problems is indisputable—contributions through the preparation of administrative histories, through the evaluation of records for research purposes, through the development of standards for studies for administrative use, and through the education of administrative personnel in the value and methods of use of systematically prepared records of experience. A greater contribution lies in the development of a relatively new field in the exploitation of records whose further cultivation will add greatly to the standing of archival and records workers everywhere and will afford them opportunities for playing a greater role in the public service.

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