

Theodore Calvin Pease Award

The New Archives for American Labor: From Attic to Digital Shop Floor

Ben Blake

Abstract

This article grounds the development of labor archives in the context of the archival profession. For the first half of the twentieth century, modest efforts to collect labor records were firmly rooted in the historical manuscripts tradition. By the 1960s, the flourishing public archives programs and the emergence of the new social history spurred a boom in labor archives. This boom ended in the 1980s, as unions faced tougher times and many institutions cut their support for archives programs. Today, the survival of labor archives programs depends on archivists forging a closer relationship with the labor movement, especially by establishing records- and knowledge-management partnerships. But first they must prove their worth to the labor movement. This process begins by examining the history, theory, and practice of the discipline.

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THE NEW ARCHIVES FOR AMERICAN LABOR:
FROM ATTIC TO DIGITAL SHOP FLOOR**The Challenge for Labor Archives**

“What’s past is prologue.” As James O’ Toole points out, this motto also applies to examining the history of archives and the archives profession.¹ Archivists have a duty to evaluate their past to build a better future, not only for the profession, but for those whom they serve. Labor archivists have a particularly serious responsibility given the significance of the labor movement in shaping the history of America. Today, 16.2 million union members face one of the most difficult periods in the history of the movement.² During a recent visit to the Penn State Labor Archives, United Steelworkers of America president Leo Gerard noted, “Twelve steel plants recently filed for bankruptcy resulting in the loss of 42,000 good steel men, and while I am sympathetic to goals of the labor archives program here at Penn State, those men deserve my undivided attention and our union’s total financial backing.”³ He challenges us labor archivists to prove our worth to the labor movement in this crisis. The first step in answering that challenge is to examine our own history, theory, and practice to become better at what we do.

Collecting in the Historical Manuscripts Tradition**Richard T. Ely and Academic History**

In his 1886 address “To Workingmen” in the preface of *The Labor Movement in America*, Richard T. Ely, the first academic historian of the labor movement, called on the working masses to work hard, stay sober, follow Christian ideals, study serious literature, and support liberal reforms.⁴ In the context of the rise of the Knights of Labor and the eight-hour-day movement, Ely’s scholarship marked an awakening of a reform-minded political economist to working-class life beyond the walls of the Johns Hopkins campus. Ely not only wanted to study this new movement, but influence it, so that “The laboring classes are accessible to arguments by those who understand them and really wish them well.”⁵ He was particularly interested in countering the growing radicalism of the working

¹ James M. O’Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 27.

² Eva E. Jacobs, *Handbook of U.S. Labor Statistics* (Lanham, Md.: Bernan, 2003), 379.

³ James P. Quigel, “Union Outreach—A Pilgrim’s Progress,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 1, no. 1 (2002): 64.

⁴ Richard T. Ely, *The Labor Movement in America*, 1886, new revised and enlarged ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1890), ix–xiii.

⁵ Ely, *The Labor Movement*, 309.

class, “[o]ur principle remedy against the evils of socialism, nihilism, and anarchism is better education in political, social and economic science.”⁶

In this Progressive-Era pursuit of a “scientific” understanding of the history of the labor movement, Ely was very much in tune with his colleague, Herbert Baxter, also on the faculty of Johns Hopkins. Baxter was leading a new movement to ground historical scholarship in original documentary sources.⁷ Given the virtual absence of primary source material on the labor movement, Ely had to rely on his own personal collecting to obtain sources for *The Labor Movement in America*.⁸ Ely saw the publication of his groundbreaking work as the first step in the creation of a comprehensive history of the union movement. In this effort, Ely asked his readers to “send me any labor literature, such as constitutions, bylaws, and annual proceedings of organizations, newspapers, pamphlets, etc. The first phases of the labor movement in this country are obscure, and I should be particularly obliged for any of the earlier publications relating to it, as well as for any oral or written communications bearing thereon.”⁹

As Ely’s accumulation of labor materials expanded, he realized that the task of collecting them had grown beyond the capacity of one person. His solution was to establish the American Bureau of Industrial Research (ABIR), which found a sympathetic home at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1904. The mission of this institution was to collect and organize the source material necessary for the publication of a “full and complete history of the American industrial society.” In other words, its goal was to continue the task begun by Ely eighteen years earlier at Johns Hopkins.¹⁰

In the next years, the bureau’s newly appointed staff traveled the country searching for documentation of industrial relations in the nation’s libraries, union headquarters, and employee association offices. As Ely recounted, “[d]ays and nights of fruitless search have led to nothing but disappointment, though now and again the heart has been gladdened by real ‘finds.’ Every possible place was ransacked and apparently impossible ones, old book shops and dusty attics.”¹¹ Although this effort focused on published material, the bureau obtained the records of thirteen labor organizations, including the Western Federation of

⁶ Ely, *The Labor Movement*, 324.

⁷ O’Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, 31.

⁸ Reflecting the academic attitudes of the day, a colleague at Johns Hopkins gave Ely this advice on the proper disposition of the labor newspapers in his university office: “Ely, what you need is a good fire to rid you of all this rubbish.” John R. Commons, et al., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, vol. I (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 21.

⁹ Ely, *The Labor Movement in America*, vi.

¹⁰ David B. Gracy, “A History and Reminiscence: Archives for Labor in the United States,” *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 151–152; Clifford L. Lord and Carl Ubbelohde, *Clio’s Servant, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1846–1954* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1967), 135–37.

¹¹ Commons, et al., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, 24.

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Miners, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the Chicago Federation of Labor, and the Iron Molders' Union. The related personal papers of a number of union leaders were also transferred to the bureau's growing collection.¹²

These records, including a large volume of transcriptions of original materials unavailable for acquisition, were described in a "chronological catalog of research materials," and arranged for long-term storage to make them accessible to researchers in the future. The work of the bureau marked the creation of the first archival labor collection in American history.¹³

As originally planned, this collecting project laid the basis for the publication of an expansion of Ely's original work. Under the direction of his former student John R. Commons, two encyclopedic sets were published, the eleven-volume *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (1910–1911) and the four-volume *History of Labor in the United States* (1918–1935).¹⁴ The later publication earned Commons the title of founder of American labor history. Unlike Ely's earlier work, written in a narrative style for a popular audience, these publications were "for the benefit of scholars to whom the collection itself was not accessible."¹⁵ The new works were, in essence, annotated compilations of selected documents that no longer sought to address "the workingmen." Consequently, America's first archival labor collections were preserved strictly for use by scholars for "scientific" research, the raw material for academic history and proposals for social reform by middle-class experts. The records collected by the American Bureau of Industrial Research were largely divorced from their creators in the union movement.¹⁶ For Ely and Commons, the publication of the results of their research nullified any rationale for continued collecting. Emphasis on the importance of publication reflected the traditional historical manuscripts viewpoint, endorsed by many Progressive-Era scholars. Both collectors and scholars saw publication as the best strategy to ensure long-term access to content because the future preservation of original documents was uncertain. In a significant departure from this approach, the bureau also published a general guide, *Collections on Labor and Socialism in the Wisconsin State Historical*

¹² F. Gerald Ham, "Labor Manuscripts in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin," *Labor History* 7 (Fall 1966): 313–15; John Calvin Colson, *Academic Ambitions and Library Development: The American Bureau of Industrial Research and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1904–18*, D. W. Krummel, ed. *Occasional Papers, Graduate School of Library and Information Science* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1983), 5–37; John R. Commons, *Myself, the Autobiography of John R. Commons* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 134–37; Harold L. Miller, "The American Bureau of Industrial Research and the Origins of the 'Wisconsin School' of Labor History," *Labor History* 25 (Spring 1984): 174–76.

¹³ Unfortunately, Miller does not explain the meaning of a "chronological catalog" involving more than one collection. He also provides no clear description of the policies and practices of the ABIR in relation to its selection, arrangement, and description of collections. Miller, "American Bureau of Industrial Research," 174–79.

¹⁴ John R. Commons, et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, vol. 1 (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1918).

¹⁵ From the Preface written by Ely. Commons, et al., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, 29.

¹⁶ Miller, "The American Bureau of Industrial Research," 165–79.

Library (1915), the first general finding aid created for an archival labor collection.¹⁷ The guide declared that the collection was the “most complete supply of material for the history of labor in America which has been collected in any library.”¹⁸

Rand School of Social Sciences

The library of the Rand School of Social Sciences, founded in 1906, could possibly have challenged this claim. The Rand School was dedicated to the education and training of workers for the union and socialist movements, and as a founding member of the board of trustees later recounted, the goal “was to establish a Socialist school . . . with a broad curriculum to include not only the theory of Socialism but a liberal range of general cultural subjects. We expected to recruit the body of students from the ranks of the workers. . . . The courses are given after work hours, and hundreds of workingmen and workingwomen take advantage of them to satisfy their thirst for knowledge and to fit themselves for effective service to their fellows.”¹⁹

As part of its mission, the school established a research library open not only to students and scholars, but also to members of the labor movement. In the first year of the library’s existence, it accessioned over a thousand items. Most of this material consisted of the publications of left-wing political parties, unions, and related reform associations, but it also included important original documents, such as the minute books, correspondence, and organizational files of these groups. Consequently, the Rand School library was the most important institution collecting union records from 1910 through the 1940s.²⁰

Stagnation Despite the Rise of Industrial Unionism

During this period, the labor movement experienced a decline and then a major revival. Under the influence of World War I patriotism and the open shop movement, American Federation of Labor (AFL) membership collapsed and the Socialist Party virtually disappeared. Later during the depression of the 1930s, the AFL recovered, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a major new labor federation, was founded. Even with this revival, historians generally continued to ignore the labor movement as a legitimate field of study. Office staff maintained current union records, and very little material was archived internally

¹⁷ *State Historical Society of Wisconsin Bulletin of Information*, 77 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1915).

¹⁸ Gracy, “A History and Reminiscence,” 151–52.

¹⁹ Daniel Bell, *The Tamiment Library* (New York: New York University Libraries, 1969), 10.

²⁰ Bell, *The Tamiment Library*, 11–15.

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or transferred to academic institutions. The only positive development for labor archives was the founding of the National Archives and its acquisition of the Department of Labor records in the late 1930s. Collecting union organizational records is, however, outside the mission of the National Archives, which strictly preserves only government documents. The Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress could possibly have collected union records, but it largely ignored the movement.²¹ Consequently, labor history was written by labor journalists, economists, and social scientists, who relied on their direct ties to the movement rather than archival sources or support from academia.²²

In 1941, the Rand School founded the American Labor Archives and Research Institute (ALARI) to remedy this situation. A bold statement promoting this effort declared that the “Institute has set itself the task of making a complete collection of all material, printed or in manuscript, bearing upon any phase of labor history, from any angle—historical, sociological, political or economic.” In another planning document, the institute declared its ultimate aim was to give “an intellectual status to the field of the study of labor.” Later, the institute added another ambition to become a national clearinghouse for locating sources on labor history.²³

These goals essentially echoed the aims of Ely and Commons in establishing the ABIR more than thirty years earlier. In contrast to this past effort, the ALARI rejected the one-time-collection-of-great-documents approach of the historical manuscripts tradition. Instead, it looked to the public archives tradition with its emphasis on creating an ongoing records acquisition program organized systematically. Despite its innovative approach to labor archives and the official backing of the leadership of the AFL and CIO, the ALARI failed to get practical and financial support from the labor movement. Consequently, it was dissolved in 1949, without moving past the initial planning stage.²⁴

²¹ Even as late as the mid-1950s, the Library of Congress had the papers of only one middle-level labor leader, John P. Frey. Henry J. Browne, “Raiding Labor Records,” *American Archivist* 17 (July 1954): 262. Today, its Manuscripts Division lists the records of only three labor organizations, the American Federation of Labor Letterbooks, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the National Association of Railway Postal Clerks. Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division, “Labor History Sources in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress,” <http://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/laborlc.html>, accessed 26 January 2007.

²² Unfortunately, there is no scholarly account of the Rand School library’s archival program, or the general status of labor union records during this critical period. David B. Gracy begins an account of the Rand School with the founding of the American Labor Archives and Research Institute in 1941. Thomas Connors briefly discusses the library’s earlier effort, noting the collection of Socialist Party records and the papers of union leaders. Connors also notes that the AFL published a pamphlet by Stuart Chase, “How To Keep Union Records,” which may be the first union records management guide produced by the labor movement. In general, Gracy and Connors present the only scholarly articles to examine labor archives in the interwar years. Gracy, “A History and Reminiscence,” 152–53; Thomas Connors, “The Labor Archivist and the ‘Labor Question’: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back,” *The Midwestern Archivist* 7, no. 2 (1987): 63.

²³ Gracy, “A History and Reminiscence,” 152–53.

²⁴ Connors, “The Labor Archivist and the ‘Labor Question,’” 64.

New Initiatives in the 1950s

In the decade that followed the demise of the American Labor Archives project, a number of new initiatives sought to revive labor archives. In 1952, several energetic members of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) sought to reinvigorate the organization's Committee on Labor Union Archives (CLUA), which had apparently achieved little since 1943.²⁵ A pioneering article, "The Archives of Labor," published in the *American Archivist*, expressed the rationale for the revival of the committee: "[r]ecords relating to the modern labor movement constitute an important source of primary material for a variety of historical and economic studies."²⁶ Therefore, labor records should garner the same attention from archivists as other important documentary evidence, particularly given the rising interest in business records. Toward that end, Paul Lewinson summarized what was then known about the labor holdings of government and educational institutions and the internal historical records of labor organizations. He proposed that SAA sponsor a national survey of institutions with labor holdings and create a union listing of all American labor collections. Lewinson hoped that this effort would help to bring labor collections to the attention of scholars, encourage archivists to improve description of this material, and influence union leaders to view their records as an "important primary source of documentation worthy of preservation and care."²⁷

With SAA support, CLUA mailed out a survey questionnaire to a large number of libraries, universities, labor research centers, schools of business administration, and other institutions. Only sixteen institutions indicated they had labor holdings. The following tabulation is based on CLUA's findings.²⁸

²⁵ Other than a notation of its existence, there is no official documentation of the activities of this committee in the Society of American Archivists Records from 1943 to 1961. The group was also known as the Labor Archives Committee. See appendix 1, Chronology of SAA Units, for the finding aid of Society of American Archivists Records, 1935–[ongoing], UWM Manuscript Collection 172, Archives Department, The Division of Archives and Special Collections, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

²⁶ Paul Lewinson, "The Archives of Labor," *American Archivist* 17 (January 1954): 19.

²⁷ Lewinson, "The Archives of Labor," 19–20.

²⁸ Paul Lewison and Morris Rieger, "Labor Union Records in the United States," *American Archivist* 25 (January 1962): 39–40.

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SAA Committee on Labor Union Archives Survey Results, 1954–1955

Institution	Number of Labor “Items”²⁹
University of California, Berkeley	35
Library of Congress	19
Detroit Public Library	1
Duke University	1
Harvard University	14
Illinois State Historical Library	2
University of Indiana	2
Minnesota Historical Society	11
New York Public Library	27
New York School of Industrial Relations	(no total) ³⁰
Newberry Library	2
University of North Carolina	8
Ohio State Historical Society	2
University of Virginia	1
Radcliffe Women’s Archives	7
State Historical Society of Wisconsin	112
Total for 16 institutions	244

For CLUA, the results were disappointing. Many institutions did not respond, and those that did revealed just how few labor records were being preserved.³¹ Moreover, the collections described in the returned questionnaires were so diverse that “[n]o listing of items is attempted here because of the great variety of material described.”³² Consequently, the goal of a union list quickly faded into a long-term objective.

Despite the discouraging initial results, the committee pressed on to conduct additional surveys. In 1954, a new questionnaire was sent out to seventy-seven businesses. Unfortunately, only four companies acknowledged they had records relating to industrial relations. As the committee noted, the response from corporate America was “either uninterested or uncommunicative.”³³ Undaunted, CLUA turned to surveying the labor holdings of state government archives. Here, the committee met with a much better response, receiving some

²⁹ Lewinson does not define what type of material is classified as an archival “item.” He simply notes that the answers to survey questions described a wide variety of material, apparently reflecting the lack of standard terminology for defining different formats at that time. It appears that Lewinson was seeking information on official union records, but apparently received a much broader response, necessitating this vague terminology. Lewinson and Rieger, “Labor Union Records in the United States,” 40.

³⁰ In contrast to the totals for the other institutions, CLUA did not publish a total number for the labor items listed in the 1956 “Guide to the Records in the Labor-Management Documentation Center” of the New York School of Industrial Relations. No explanation is given by Lewinson and Rieger for this omission. Lewinson and Rieger, “Labor Union Records in the United States,” 40.

³¹ Conspicuously absent from the responses are the Catholic University of America Archives and the Rand School Library holdings.

³² Lewinson and Rieger, “Labor Union Records in the United States,” 39–40.

³³ Lewinson and Rieger, “Labor Union Records in the United States,” 41.

form of reply from forty-three states. From the survey results, CLUA concluded that “much early documentation of state labor agencies has evaporated and that more records are being retained in agency custody than are needed for current purposes.”³⁴ Overall, state labor records were “somewhat spotty and for the most part . . . not yet available to researchers.”³⁵

The final task of the CLUA project was a survey of records existing at their source: the labor unions. In this effort, the committee lobbied the national leadership of the movement for its official endorsement of a survey, but this proved to be a difficult task for a number of reasons. The union movement was in the midst of the merger between the AFL and the CIO national federations. At the same time, McCarthyism was at its height, targeting many unions, who were in turn engaged in internal political struggles and jurisdictional raiding. Union ethics also became a major issue; for example, the newly formed AFL-CIO expelled the Teamsters and Bakers unions for corruption. Given external political attacks and internal factionalism, the labor movement’s leadership in the early 1950s gave low priority to the preservation of its historic union records. Consequently, CLUA was unable to get the endorsement of the AFL-CIO’s leadership for mailing a simple historic records survey form to the federation’s affiliated unions.

At this time, a thought-provoking article appeared in the July 1954 issue of the *American Archivist* titled “Raiding Labor Records.” Commenting on the legacy of neglect toward labor records within the historical manuscripts tradition, Henry J. Browne, a member of CLUA, noted, “[o]ne may at least surmise that the conservative and antiquarian leanings of some manuscript curators have not made them prize such fairly recent and at least relatively radical records in their paper pillaging.” He went on to question the motives of the emerging interest in labor history by professors, who seemed to be mainly concerned that collections would “end up in faraway places with scarcely-known names.” Browne rejected this “foster care” approach. For him, the “apparent lack of concern for labor records except as they constitute sources of history can

³⁴ Paul Lewinson, “State Labor Agencies: Where Are Their Records?” *American Archivist* 19 (January 1956): 46.

³⁵ Browne, “Raiding Labor Records,” 262–64. In his discussion of Browne, Gracy downplays the importance of Browne’s advocacy of the creation of internal union organizational archives, versus support for transferring historical labor records to external academic institutions, an approach backed by other archivists and labor historians. At the Catholic University of America, Browne limited his acquisition of labor collections to the personal papers of union officials with strong ties to the church. At the time, he supported the university’s acquisition of the CIO records only as a last resort if the AFL-CIO did not create its own archival program; Gracy, “A History and Reminiscence,” 155. For a comprehensive and analytical account of the history of this institution’s labor collection program, see Joseph M. Turrini, “Catholic Social Action at Work: A Brief History of the Labor Collections at the Catholic University of America,” *American Archivist* 68 (Spring/Summer 2005): 130–51.

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be a disservice to organized labor and even to the historian.” First and foremost, union records should serve the movement’s own “pride in the past and business sense in the present.” The AFL and the CIO should hire professional archivists or records officers to organize and maintain their own archives. As an activist labor priest and archivist at the Catholic University of America, Browne’s perspective stemmed from his concern for the preservation of the CIO’s records, given its pending merger with the AFL.³⁶

Vaugh Davis Bornet, who issued a manifesto for a “new labor history” in the *Historian*, provided a counterpoint to Browne’s argument. Bornet, the director of a welfare research project, was hired by the AFL to evaluate and inventory its historic records in preparation for their microfilming and probable destruction. The AFL wanted to tidy up its records for a move to a new building. Upon finding a massive store of historically important records in the AFL building’s basement, Bornet set out to convince historians that these records could be used “to rewrite and revalue the history of American trade unionism—and with it the history of the United States.”³⁷ Key to his strategy was his contention that “[i]ntelligent use of such archives as those of the AFL, the CIO and the Railroad Brotherhoods can only be made in conjunction with a familiarity with great manuscript, pamphlet, and periodical holdings of libraries outside the labor movement.” Bornet argued that great history can only be produced in great academic institutions. Thus, union records must be transferred to academic institutions in the name of history.³⁸

In the next few years, Bornet’s perspective gained momentum. The Tamiment Institute, the successor organization to the Rand School, launched a new effort to lobby the AFL-CIO to support labor archives. In 1958, the institute brought together librarians, archivists, and historians to discuss the identification, acquisition, and preservation of source materials related to labor history. Subsequently, representatives of these various constituencies founded the Ad Hoc Committee for the Preservation of Labor Archives, which immediately launched a new survey of university and public library labor archives. Unlike the earlier effort by CLUA to create a union list of labor records, the Ad Hoc Committee’s survey had a broader purpose. It was to be used to convince the AFL-CIO to formally endorse the transfer of union records to academic institutions. After a series of meetings between representatives of the Ad Hoc

³⁶ Vaugh Davis Bornet, “The New Labor History: A Challenge for American Historians,” *Historian* 18 (Autumn 1955): 24.

³⁷ Bornet, “The New Labor History,” 10.

³⁸ “News and Notes: Preserving Trade Union Archives,” *Labor History* 1 (Winter 1960): 98; Gracy, “A History and Reminiscence,” 155–56; and Connors, “The Labor Archivist and the ‘Labor Question’,” 66.

Committee and the AFL-CIO, the leadership backed this approach, rather than promoting internal archives for union records.³⁹

In 1959, the AFL-CIO officially endorsed this external approach to labor archives at its annual convention, passing a "Labor Union Archives" resolution that declared, "[o]rganized labor is justly proud of its long fight to improve the living standards of its members and of all American workers. Unfortunately, many of these union efforts have not been accorded their rightful recognition in American history." Therefore, it resolved that the "AFL-CIO recommends that all affiliated unions cooperate fully with responsible institutions such as historical societies, public and special libraries, universities and university libraries, engaged in the promotion of labor history, with the objective of maintaining the aforementioned historical records, encouraging modern practices in their preservation and service, and arranging for their ultimate disposition when no longer current, in suitable institutions of learning." This new policy meant that the AFL-CIO leadership encouraged the transfer of responsibility for the preservation of its historic records to academic institutions. With growing membership, influence and power, the AFL-CIO sought to gain intellectual respectability within academia, which, with few exceptions, had traditionally been hostile to the union movement.⁴⁰

In the succeeding years, a number of institutions took advantage of this new AFL-CIO policy to gradually build major labor archives collections. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, which had begun to revive its labor archives program in the early 1950s, acquired the AFL records with the assistance of Bornet. The traditional historical manuscripts point of view of this new effort is

³⁹ "Preserving Trade Union Archives," 98–99. Gracy sees this development as a "triumph," in which "[a]rchivists, historians and trade unionists were at last joining hands to foster the work." Gracy, "A History and Reminiscence," 156. At the time of the resolution, the academy largely ignored labor history. As Melvyn Dubofsky notes, even "[i]n the mid- to late 1960s, labor history remained marginal to the guild of history as practiced in the United States and to most departments of history. Journal editors frequently returned to me articles that I had submitted with the comment that they published history, not ideology, and that such categories as capital, capitalism, capitalists or workers, labor, class were unacceptable." Melvyn Dubofsky, *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 19. A 1977 survey of public library services for labor unions concluded that "There was a surprising amount of mistrust and lack of understanding of anything connected with unions shown by librarians answering the questionnaire." Kathleen Imhoff and Larry Brandwein, "Labor Collections and Services in Public Libraries Throughout the United States, 1976," *RQ* 17 (Winter 1977): 156. At the time of the resolution, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin was the only state or local historical society with any significant labor collections. It is also interesting to note that the AFL-CIO resolution finally enabled the CLUA to conduct its national survey regarding the disposition of union records. The 1960 results noted that fourteen unions retained an internal historical records collection, while only twelve had deposited these records in public or scholarly institutions. Only the Steelworkers had "undertaken anything that, on the face of the returns, could be called a records management program." By calling for the deposit of historic records in outside institutions, the AFL-CIO leadership discouraged the practice of internal archives, probably inhibiting the early development of union records management programs and the close coordination of union records management and academic labor archives.

⁴⁰ Lewinson and Rieger, "Labor Union Records in the United States," 44.

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captured in a letter University of Wisconsin economist Edwin Witte wrote to AFL-CIO president George Meany regarding the acquisition of the AFL records: “our collection is truly national and there may be some material which you are discarding that we would like to make a claim for.”⁴¹ Within the labor movement, the transfer of the AFL collection gave the society major credibility, allowing it to acquire the records of eleven national unions in the next twenty-five years, including the United Packinghouse Workers, the Teamsters, the Retail Clerks, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, and the United Textile Workers.⁴²

An initiative outside of the historical manuscripts tradition took a somewhat different approach, founding a labor archives program not only to serve the history profession, but also the then-growing field of labor-management relations. In the early 1950s, New York senator Irving M. Ives, chair of the Joint Legislative Committee on Industrial and Labor Conditions, became profoundly concerned about the ignorance and misunderstanding on both sides of the labor-management divide. His solution was state funding for the creation of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Based at Cornell University, the school founded a complementary Labor-Management Documentation Center in 1949. The collection policy of this center reflected the curriculum of the school and was based on eight fields of the course offerings: personnel administration, human relations, collective bargaining, labor law, labor economics, labor history, social security, and industrial training. In the following years, the library acquired the records of nine national unions, including the Railroad Brotherhoods, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.⁴³

⁴¹ Connors, “The Labor Archivist and the ‘Labor Question’,” 71, note 28.

⁴² For descriptive summaries of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin’s labor collections, see Ham, “Labor Manuscripts in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin,” 313–42; Harold L. Miller, “Labor Records at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin,” *Labor History* 23 (Fall 1982): 546–52; James P. Danky and Harold L. Miller, “Sources for Study of the Labor Movement at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin,” *Labor History* 31 (Winter/Spring): 176–84.

⁴³ Leone W. Eckert provides a useful narrative of the early development of the collection policies at the documentation center, particularly on convincing labor unions to donate records. Eckert does not, however, discuss whether the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, or Cornell’s Labor-Management Documentation Center, had ongoing relationships with union organizations to preserve their records during the 1950s. Leone W. Eckert, “The Anatomy of Industrial Records,” *American Archivist* 26 (April 1963): 185–90. For descriptive summaries of Cornell’s labor collections, see J. G. Miller, “Labor Resources in the Cornell University Library,” *Labor History* 1 (Winter 1960): 314–26; Richard Strassberg, “Labor History Resources in the Martin P. Catherwood Library of the New York State School of Labor and Industrial Relations at Cornell University,” *Labor History* 23 (Fall 1982): 553–61; Richard Strassberg, “Sources on Labor History in the Martin P. Catherwood Library,” *Labor History* 31 (Winter/Spring 1990): 59–66.

Boom in the 1960s: The Public Archives Tradition and the New Social History

Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University

The emergence of what was to become the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, represented a major development for labor archives. From its founding in 1959, this institution, with its unique focus on collecting only the records of labor organizations, maintained a close and ongoing relationship with the union movement. In the words of Philip Mason, the library's founder, the goal was to achieve what no other educational institution had achieved to that time, to create a "systematic program to collect and preserve the historical record of unions in the automobile and other mass production industries." In 1962, the United Auto Workers (UAW) declared the Reuther Library to be the official repository for its "records of historical significance" and called on "each union member and local union" to cooperate with the library's archival program. This agreement set the stage to implement Mason's "systematic" approach, which involved two important innovations within the emerging field of labor archives.⁴⁴

The first innovation was a "vertical collecting policy." Unlike previous efforts that primarily collected the papers of national union leaders and the records of top offices and divisions of labor organizations, the Reuther staff set out to preserve a representative sample of records from all levels of the movement. For the UAW, this strategy included a representative sample of about 150 of the approximately 1,650 UAW local unions.⁴⁵ The locals were selected by weighing a complex set of criteria: geographic location, type of industry or worker, employer, place in the union's history, being a home local for a national leader, or center of dissent in the union. The Reuther Library also actively collected records of individual rank-and-file workers. This collecting policy resulted in what Mason called "particularly rich collections of union records."⁴⁶ In addition, the library acquired the national records of dissident organizations within various unions. In the early 1960s, no other institution collected this broad scope and variety of labor records.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Philip P. Mason, "Labor History Archives at Wayne State University," *Labor History* 5 (Winter 1964): 68–69.

⁴⁵ The Tamiment Library launched a similar systematic program for collecting local union records in the metropolitan New York area in 1984–1985. See Dorothy Swanson, "Labor History Resources at New York University," *Labor History* 31 (Winter/Spring 1990): 54–55.

⁴⁶ Mason, "Labor History Archives at Wayne State University," 70.

⁴⁷ Philip P. Mason, "Preserving Labor's History," *American Federationist* 71 (January 1964): 22–23; "The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University," *Labor History* 23 (Fall 1982): 535–37, 540; "The Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University," *Labor History* 31 (Winter/Spring 1990): 146.

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The Reuther Library's second major innovation entailed the integration of its archival program with union records management. Beginning with the UAW, the Reuther staff became advisors to labor organizations regarding the design and implementation of records management programs. Consequently, the acquisition of union material by the library was governed by formal legal agreements, providing for well-organized, regularly scheduled transfers of official records. This complementary records management program was unique among labor archives programs and remains a standard for labor archives today. In addition to the UAW, the Reuther came to provide records management consultation and archival services for nine major national unions, including the Service Employees International Union, the Newspaper Guild, the National Association of Letter Carriers, the American Federation of Teachers, the Air Line Pilots Association, the Association of Flight Attendants, the United Farm Workers, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.⁴⁸

The continued growth of the union movement and the rise of the civil rights and women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s provided a favorable environment for the growth of new labor archives and the expansion of existing programs, as did the emergence of the new social history dedicated to studying American society from the bottom up. Led by David Brody, Herbert Gutman, and David Montgomery, historians finally established labor history as a respectable field of academic study. This trend brought increased academic support for existing labor archives and led to the creation of at least six new labor archives programs by the end of the 1970s.⁴⁹

End of the Boom—the 1980s

In the 1980s, the end of the postwar industrial expansion, the rise of the Reagan conservatives, and a return of large scale corporate union busting ended the boom in labor archives. In this new climate, eighteen representatives of labor, academia, and government archives met in a Conference on the Records of American Labor in 1980. Sponsored by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the conference proposed that a national labor archives service system be established at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies in Washington, D.C. This service would provide consultation and advice

⁴⁸ Mason, "The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs," 535; Ron Chepesiuk, "United We Stand: Preserving the History of U.S. Labor," *American Libraries* 33 (January 2002): 61–62.

⁴⁹ New labor archives programs or collecting initiatives started at the University of Maryland, Georgia State University, the Ohio Historical Society, Penn State University, Temple University, and the University of Texas. See *Labor History* (Fall 1982).

for the establishment of records management programs for unions throughout the country. In addition, this new national labor archives service would lead a coordinated effort for gathering and disseminating information on the extent and location of labor collections. Both efforts were to be supported through the formation of a new national labor archives consortium.⁵⁰

In the ensuing years, these goals were partially achieved; the Meany Center offered occasional courses on records management and published a basic handbook for union records management.⁵¹ Although a formal labor archives consortium never materialized, labor archivists did found the Labor Archives Roundtable (LAR), which succeeded the Labor Archives Committee within SAA in 1985.⁵² The LAR went on to publish a directory of repositories with significant labor holdings in *Labor History* in 1992. The LAR directory complemented the publication of *Labor History Archives in the United States: A Guide for Researching and Teaching*, edited by Daniel J. Leab and Philip P. Mason, which presented detailed descriptions of the major labor holdings of thirty-eight institutions.⁵³

One development in the 1980s that cut across the general pattern of modest coordination and publication, coupled with retrenchment, was the founding of the George Meany Memorial Archives on the campus of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies in 1987. This new institution marked a significant break with the 1959 policy of relying on academic institutions for preservation of union records and creation of labor history. Approved at the 1981 AFL-CIO convention and funded through a per capita tax on the membership, the Meany Archives was seen as a complement to the AFL-CIO's National Labor College, an accredited institution granting a degree in union leadership and administration. Unlike the Reuther Library, the Meany Archives has taken a top-down approach, primarily preserving the records of the national leadership and its administrative divisions. It does not accept the records of nationally affiliated unions or AFL-CIO state or local federations. The Meany Archives does, however, integrate its archival program with records management

⁵⁰ Connors, "The Labor Archivist and the 'Labor Question'," 67.

⁵¹ Debra Bernhardt, *How to Keep Union Records* (Washington, D.C.: AFL-CIO, n.d.).

⁵² Prior to the founding of the LAR, the Labor Archives Committee existed within SAA, 1943–1961, 1969–1973 (as part of the Urban and Industrial Archives Committee), and then again as an independent committee, 1973–1985. Little documentation of the activities of the Labor Archives Committee or the LAR exists within the records of the SAA. It is very interesting to note that the Labor Archives Committee apparently did not exist during most of the 1960s, just as the new labor history was emerging in academia and the labor archives programs in a number of institutions were gaining momentum. Society of American Archivists Records, 1935–[ongoing].

⁵³ Debra Bernhardt and Brenda Parnes, "Labor Archives Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists: A Directory and Concise Guide to Holdings," *Labor History* 33 (Fall 1992); Daniel J. Leab and Philip P. Mason, *Labor History Archives in the United States: A Guide for Researching and Teaching* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992).

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outreach to the national AFL-CIO organizational structure. In general, it has served as an in-house archives and records management program for national AFL-CIO offices and departments and as a resource for the National Labor College and academic research.⁵⁴

In 1997, five archivists from leading labor repositories created the Labor Archives Project (LAP). This project collected information on the accessioning practices, collecting missions, geographical and topical scopes of holdings, processing performances, relationships to union records management programs, and user habits of eighteen repositories with labor collections. It also surveyed twenty national union offices concerning their organizational structure and records management.⁵⁵ Based on the results of these surveys, LAP recommended a number of immediate actions. The most important recommendation called on labor archivists to develop a closer working relationship with the labor movement by encouraging new partnerships between repositories and unions. This new relationship would center on organizing records management training programs for labor records keepers, intervening to save records during organizational mergers, and lobbying the movement to pass constitutional provisions requiring the proper disposition of records. In addition, the project recommended updating and re-issuing the *Labor History* directory of labor archives and the Meany Archives' *How to Keep Union Records* manual, along with establishing a Labor Documentation Action Network.⁵⁶

For the long term, the Labor Archives Project recommended additional actions after the establishment of this network. The first order of business was a systematic analysis of the holdings and gaps in U.S. labor documentation. Next, national, state, and local labor bodies with no archival program should be affiliated with a repository. In addition, the network would explore digital access to labor archives, the preservation of electronic records, and the establishment of a labor archives outreach program.⁵⁷

The continued lack of overall national coordination of labor archives programs beyond the informal efforts of the Labor Archive Roundtable makes it difficult to determine the response to these recommendations. Although a formal Labor Documentation Action Network never materialized, many labor repositories have gone forward with implementing DACS, MARC, and EAD based cataloging programs and Web exhibits. In addition, the original labor

⁵⁴ Katharine Vogel, "The George Meany Memorial Archives," *Labor History* 31 (Winter/Spring 1990): 117–23.

⁵⁵ Thomas J. Connors, "Preserving the Historical Record of American Labor: Union-Library Archival Services Partnerships, Recent Trends, and Future Prospects," *Library Trends* 51 (Summer 2002): 87, 89–97.

⁵⁶ Connors, "Preserving the Historical Record of American Labor," 88.

⁵⁷ Connors, "Preserving the Historical Record of American Labor," 89.

archives directory has been updated and posted on the Roundtable's Web site and a new edition of the *How to Keep Union Records* manual will be published in the near future.⁵⁸ The reaction from the labor movement to the project's recommendations has been less ambiguous. As one participant noted, the attempt to get the backing of the AFL-CIO leadership for the project was not successful as "a hearing proved difficult to obtain."⁵⁹

Despite the lack of national AFL-CIO support for this initiative, institutional momentum has meant the continued slow growth of labor archives. By 1996, thirty of the seventy-eight national affiliates of the AFL-CIO had in-house archives programs, or agreements for archival services with outside repositories.⁶⁰ Eighteen academic institutions or historical societies had major labor holdings containing over 3,200 collections comprising over 125,000 linear feet of records and employing a staff of forty-two labor archivists.⁶¹

Examining Our History, Theory, and Current Practice

The successful record of the labor archives project, founded over a century ago by Richard Ely, does not mean that we professionals in the field should not critically examine our history, theory, and current practice. To date, most

⁵⁸ http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/labor/labor_archives_directory.asp, accessed 24 January 2007.

⁵⁹ Connors, "Preserving the Historical Record of American Labor," 89.

⁶⁰ Connors notes that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the American Postal Workers "reported maintaining limited in-house archives programs." "Preserving the Historical Record of American Labor," 90. Mason indicates that the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the National Association of Letter Carriers, and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) also had internal archives in the 1990s. Philip P. Mason, "Labor Archives and Collections in the United States," *Labor History* 31 (Winter/Spring 1990): 11. The 1992 SAA Labor Archives Roundtable directory of labor archives indicated only three national unions with internal archives: the CWA, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, and the United Paperworkers International Union. Bernhardt and Parnes, "Labor Archives Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists: A Directory and Concise Guide to Holdings." The CWA records were subsequently transferred to Wagner Archives at New York University. The Paperworkers are now part of the United Steelworkers, but have apparently maintained their own archives. The current updated Web version of the SAA Labor Roundtable lists only the last two national union archives. Patrizia Sione, "Directory of Labor Archives in the United States and Canada," http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/labor/labor_archives_directory.asp, accessed 24 January 2007. Note that the George Meany Archives only maintains the records of the national federation and some defunct affiliates, not the records of any current nationally affiliated unions. Vogel, "The George Meany Memorial Archives," 117.

⁶¹ Connors, "Preserving the Historical Record of American Labor," 93. A current estimate of the total number and volume of labor collections is not possible because this information is absent from many of the entries in the SAA Labor Roundtable Web directory. It is also not possible to compile an up-to-date list of officially designated union repositories because this information is missing from many LAR directory entries. It is possible to get a general sense of the overall national disposition of labor-related collections. Of the forty-six U.S. repositories listed in the directory, twenty-seven are university affiliated, eight are state or local historical societies, five are unions (one national federation, two national unions, two local unions), three are museums, and two are national government institutions. Sione, "Directory of Labor Archives in the United States and Canada."

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writings describe the labor holdings of various institutions and fall under the category of what O'Toole calls "how we do it good" literature.⁶² In over a century of practice, only a handful of scholarly articles examine the history, theory, and practice of American labor archives.

Only two articles give professional overviews of the history of American labor archives: first, "A History and Reminiscence: Archives for Labor in the United States," by David B. Gracy II, and second, "The Labor Archivist and the 'Labor Question': Two Steps Forward, One Step Back," by Thomas Connors.⁶³ Both articles were written about two decades ago and are primarily descriptive narratives. It is time to update this history and make it more analytical. This new labor archives history should follow the mantra of the new labor history. It should be based on primary sources about archivists' activities and it should critically evaluate the history of the field in light of its unfolding theoretical debates and practical experience. For example, the influence of the historical manuscripts tradition on the early efforts of Ely and Commons is obvious. More difficult to discern is how the interplay between this tradition and the emergence of the public archives perspective influenced the development of labor archives. This paper touches on this issue at certain points, but a serious answer to this question will require in-depth primary research.

Fortunately, Joseph M. Turrini has produced an excellent sample of this research in his "Catholic Social Action at Work: A Brief History of the Labor Collection at The Catholic University of America."⁶⁴ Turrini critically examines the history of this labor archives program in light of its evolving collection development practices and acquisition policies in a way that is useful and thought provoking in light of the current problems facing labor archivists. His scholarship should become a model for many future articles on the history of the field.

Unfortunately, only two authors significantly discuss archival theory in the context of labor archives. A decade ago, in the first, "Documenting Labor for a New Generation of Scholars," Margret Raucher explores the impact of the new social history on description and collection policies at the Reuther Library, where the rise of the new labor history produced a shift away from "old-style institutional/occupational/biographical topics" toward "newer themes of race, gender, ethnicity, class and community." As the Reuther staff became

⁶² O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, 47. Most disappointing are the articles written by Philip P. Mason, which are almost entirely descriptive in nature, providing little theoretical, methodological, or practical insights for the field. See Philip P. Mason, "Labor Archives in the United States: Achievements and Prospects," *Labor History* 23 (1982): 487–97 and "Labor Archives and Collections in the United States," 10–15.

⁶³ Gracy, "A History and Reminiscence," 151–65. Connors, "The Labor Archivist and the 'Labor Question'," 61–72.

⁶⁴ Turrini, "Catholic Social Action at Work," 130–51.

increasingly aware of this trend, the library launched a major project to revise its finding aid descriptions to reflect the demands of this new scholarship.⁶⁵ Raucher, however, notes that there is a danger in uncritically accommodating to the influence of the new labor history. In her words, “[b]y accepting the broader definition of the worker posited by this new generation of labor historians, we run the risk of designing a collecting policy so diffuse as to be meaningless, not to mention the ethical dilemma presented by cross-thematic collecting.” She concludes, “labor history is no longer just union history, and the story of the American worker cannot be reconstructed exclusively from the records of organized labor. The house of labor is so big and its scholarship so resourceful, though, that we labor archivists need not fear our own irrelevance in the post-industrial age, if we cast our collection net wide enough.”⁶⁶ Raucher’s article reflected the broadening scope of labor archives in 1980s and 1990s, adjusting to meet the demands of the new social and post-modern historians.

In 2005, James P. Quigel authored the second significant article examining archival theory in relation to labor archives, “Reconstructing or Deconstructing Labor Archives? Shaping Labor Collection Development in an Uncertain Future.” In it, Quigel discusses a wide variety of factors influencing a documentation strategy for labor at the Historical Collections and Labor Archives (HCLA) at Pennsylvania State University.⁶⁷ He describes the increasing subordination of labor archives to the evolving general mission of university archival programs. Quigel observes that many university libraries have “restructured by consolidating and integrating labor archives within the mainstream of special collections activities and initiatives.” He goes on to note, “As resources are diverted to new collection development priorities, it becomes harder to acquire significant labor collections that have been the core strength of the HCLA. With many industrial unions in decline, prospects for funding their own labor archival programs are dim. From the standpoint of the libraries’ administration, the investment of resources in developing large institutional labor collections and providing reference and outreach service to client unions is simply not a cost-effective proposition. Unions do not fit the profile of the well-heeled corporate donor that the university seeks to cultivate.”⁶⁸ Quigel’s solution is to redouble efforts to strengthen ties to the labor movement through records management and outreach programs. At the same time, collection and appraisal policies should

⁶⁵ Margaret Raucher, “Documenting Labor for a New Generation of Scholars,” *Labor History* 38 (Winter 1996–1997): 67–75.

⁶⁶ Raucher, “Documenting Labor for a New Generation,” 75.

⁶⁷ James P. Quigel, Jr., “Reconstructing or Deconstructing Labor Archives? Shaping Labor Collection Development in an Uncertain Future,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3 (Fall 2005): 25–47.

⁶⁸ Quigel, “Reconstructing or Deconstructing,” 34–35.

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be more refined to match the continued importance of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and community within history.

Only one major article addresses the day-to-day practice of labor archives, and it was published in 1979. In "Labor Union Grievance Records: An Appraisal Strategy," Richard Kesner discusses an attempt to create a sampling strategy for handling the grievance records contained in the UAW collections at the Reuther Library.⁶⁹ First, he frames the project's strategy within the professional literature on appraisal and sampling. He then provides a very detailed and informative narrative of the project. Kesner concludes that sampling is not appropriate for grievance records due to their complexity and variety. A practical solution to the typically large volume of this type of union material lies in a better definition of vertical collection policies in relation to these records. In other words, controlling the volume of grievance records should be done through a better selection of the local unions targeted by the collection program. In this way, the volume of records can be controlled while a representative horizontal sample can be preserved in the archives. Thus, there is a systemic, rather than a sampling, solution to this problem.⁷⁰ Kesner's discussion of appraisal and sampling provides a good starting point for updating a strategy for handling the exploding volume of modern labor records.

Conclusion

This review of American labor archives is done in the spirit of promoting a framework for future research. Labor archivists have achieved great practical success, but lack a proportionate validation of their history, theory, and practice in the professional literature. Labor archivists could be of particular service to the archival profession as a whole by presenting their experience with vertical sampling schemes, the integration of records management and archives, and the impact of the new social and postmodern history on describing institutional collections. In the end, all archivists face similar problems. By discussing solutions to these problems in historical and theoretical contexts, labor archivists can better share their thoughts with the entire archival community.

More importantly, an expanded professional dialogue could help labor archivists address a wide variety of new issues posed by the digital age. Should the idea of a national documentation strategy be revived to use the increasingly scarce resources available to labor archives effectively? Is knowledge management an approach that has relevance to labor archives? How can a union's

⁶⁹ Richard Kesner, "Labor Union Grievance Records: An Appraisal Strategy," *Archivaria* 8 (Summer 1979): 102–14.

⁷⁰ Quigel advocates the same solution. Quigel, "Reconstructing or Deconstructing," 38.

electronic records management systems be integrated with a labor archives program? What new services can be developed to make historic union records accessible and useful to union leaders, organizers, and members engaged in contract negotiations, legal proceedings, arbitration cases, and grievance resolution? How can Web sites be developed to bring the rich history of labor to the digital shop floor? And conversely, how can union members be engaged in documenting their own history through the development of blogs and wiki technologies? By exploring new ideas, implementing new digital strategies, and sharing this experience, labor archives can regain their position on the leading edge of the profession and better serve all their constituencies.