

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: A CHALLENGE TO CRAFTSMEN

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As one of the founding fathers of this renowned organization, I presume I should say something about its origin. As many of you know, it all started because of Joe Frantz, the distinguished American historian at the University of Texas. During the academic year 1953-54, he obtained a foundation grant to come up to Evanston and observe Howard Bennett and me as we tried to teach business history to crowded roomfuls of Northwestern freshmen. As you can readily imagine, Joe and Howard and I had countless bull sessions as to how best to present business history to the freshman mind, and I'm sure we learned as much from Joe as he learned from us.

At any rate, toward the end of the year we invited half a dozen of our faculty colleagues interested in business history and six or eight businessmen from Chicago to sit down together for an afternoon and evening. By that time Northwestern University already had a Business History Committee to encourage and co-ordinate writing in the field, and we wanted to display for Joe the thinking that that Committee had done, and also to use the occasion for strengthening our liaison with business.

As I recall it, at that time we placed emphasis on company history because we regarded it as the first step in approaching the broad field of business history. Certainly we looked upon it as a step toward industrial history. Perhaps it is worth saying parenthetically that of the Northwestern Studies in Business History, the first six volumes were evenly divided between company and industrial history. Let me say too that in my opinion business history is definitely not simply company history, but that company history - along with entrepreneurial history - constitutes the lowest common denominator - or the building block, as others have put it - on which all else depends. I shall come back to this point

later. To get back to 1954, one reason for bringing historians and businessmen together was that we still felt it necessary to sell the idea of solidly written history to the businessman; we may have felt it necessary also to convince some of our academic colleagues of the opportunities that were awaiting the historian in company files.

At any rate, our gathering on the Evanston campus that spring afternoon and evening was a great success, as I think Hal Williamson and Don Kemmerer will testify. Dean Donham of our Commerce School gave a short talk after supper, and in the conversation that followed several people suggested that we meet again the coming year. The person that took this most seriously was Al Steigerwalt, then of the University of Michigan. During the next year he undertook to keep us in touch with one another through the medium of circular letters patterned after the Lexington Group mailings.¹ And he wound up the year by inviting us all to Ann Arbor for the second annual meeting.

For eight years Al served as the hard-working secretary of what came to be called the Business History Conference. We were invited to meet, usually in the early spring, in various locations in the Middle West. After his stint of devoted labor, he turned the secretaryship over to Ross Robertson of Indiana, who ably carried the ball for us for some nine years until Fred Bateman came along in 1971. Meanwhile our numbers have grown until today we have some 250 on our mailing list.

And now, through the friendly guidance of Hal Williamson, we have become a more formal organization. I have been, and to some extent still am, skeptical of this development. I recognize the desirability of having clearly defined responsibilities and procedures, but I am mindful also of the virtues of informality; I hope our group will never lose the spontaneity and fellowship more typical of a conference than of an association. I am deeply sensible of the honor you have paid me in electing me your first president. I yield, as gracefully as I can, to the wave of the future and sincerely hope that our association flourishes in its reincarnated form.

So much for ancient and recent history. What I have to say next concerns the present and the future, and centers upon the subject of company history. Why, at this late date, you may ask, discuss company (and entrepreneurial) history? Haven't we explored its nature, its role, its rewards, and its hazards? Of course we have, but I think that today we are inclined to

take for granted or, more often, bypass such company history as we have at our disposal. In 1967, in a forward to Arthur Johnson's second volume on the pipelines, Ralph Hidy observed that most of the early volumes of the Harvard Studies in Business History dealt with histories of firms. He went on to say that this emphasis on company history was neither unreasonable nor illogical "during the early years of the new discipline."² The implication was, of course, that as the discipline matured, it should reach out in new directions. This it has done; Ralph himself was partly responsible for ventures into regional investment decisions and into the general realm of government and business. I applaud these developments; in fact I'm assigning Art Johnson's and Barry Supple's work on Boston capitalists and Steve Salsbury's model study of the Western Railroad in one of my courses next year.³ But much as I applaud these great leaps forward, I am concerned nonetheless about elementary company or entrepreneurial history. Let me suggest some grounds for my concern: In the winter 1969 issue of Explorations in Entrepreneurial History, Robert Paul Thomas presented an article entitled "The Automobile Industry and its Tycoon." In a sense it attempts to answer J.R.T. Hughes's The Vital Few, and in doing so reaches what strikes me as an extreme position. Says Thomas: "individual entrepreneurs. . . don't matter. . . Entrepreneurial historians have made a mistake in concentrating upon case studies of individual entrepreneurs, in examining the individual trees rather than the forest. . . The proper unit of study for entrepreneurial history is the competitive environment, the smallest of which probably coincides with the economic concept of an industry."⁴ One may well ask what place there is for entrepreneurial or company history in such a scheme of things. Hearteningly enough, the other side of the argument is as vigorously maintained. In the preface to his superb study, The Great Richmond Terminal, Maury Klein observes feelingly that "broad generalizations flourish best where little detailed information exists to contradict them."⁵ Klein, as you may know, is seeking to throw light on the economic development of the post-Civil War "New South"; he does so by examining the goals, motives, and tactics of specific businessmen in a dominant company. If we had more studies of this sort I believe we would have the underpinning we need for the broad generalizations we all like to make from time to time.

I would argue, in other words, that looking over the wide field of business history - even to the international aspects represented in this year's program - we still need more of the building blocks that company or entrepreneurial history

at its best represents. We need histories that not only establish the significance of a given firm but establish the place of that company in its context. And I am continually impressed and somewhat astonished by the tremendous opportunities that still lie untouched. Let me illustrate this from the field I know best.

This past November I was in Washington working in carrier association libraries. (Incidentally let me say that these libraries, such as at the American Trucking Associations, the Air Transport Association of America, and the Association of American Railroads, are veritable gold mines. They have much material not available elsewhere and they have trained librarians to help find it. Of course, some of this material is biased in favor of the particular carrier, but even the nature of these biases is revealing). But to return to the opportunities for business history: there are some 1,600 common carrier trucking firms in the United States; as far as I can discover, there are competent histories of exactly three of these outfits,⁶ and none whatever pertaining to the more numerous contract and private carriers. Without more company histories how can one hope to produce a history of for-hire trucking, let alone an appraisal of the key role of the private carrier? The same situation prevails among the airlines. There are, apparently, only three company histories,⁷ while the most systematic and scholarly account of the United States airlines is in a book on world airways published in 1964 in England.⁸ So far as I can find, there is nothing on any bus company, not even the great Greyhound Corporation. It would be interesting to find out why. As you know, the oil pipelines as a whole have been diligently studied by Arthur Johnson and, in a somewhat different context, by Harold Williamson. Although each of these men had to operate within an industry-oriented conceptual framework, a look at their documentation indicates their debt to the several excellent company histories in their area.⁹

Of course in the field of my beloved railways, historians have been busily plowing away for the past two generations. If we had time it might be rewarding to speculate why this is so. Two reasons occur to me at once: (1) Since between about 1855 and, say, 1920 railways so dominated the intercity carriage of freight and passengers, they simply generated more history, and (2) in doing so they left voluminous records, many of which are relatively available. At any rate, quite apart from the enormous buff literature there are at least fifty competent railway company histories, some of them outstanding. And, I should add, monographs are

still on the way. Craig Miner's account of the Frisco has just come out; ¹⁰ G. R. Stevens's single volume on the Canadian National and Maury Klein's history of the Louisville & Nashville are in the hands of the publisher; studies of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific are well along; while work is under way on the Missouri Pacific, the Illinois Central, the Santa Fe, and the Canadian Pacific. And these are only some that I happen to know about. It is on the basis of this sort of company history that scholars like Albro Martin, George Miller, and John Stover have been able to interpret the industry with assurance and accuracy.¹¹ What we need in the transportation field are more company histories of the non-rail carriers. If we had them we could do a much better job of understanding their role in our national development. And it even could be that our policy makers might then have a far better idea of how to untangle our ungodly transportation mess. I don't think history need be utilitarian, but I certainly don't think history ceases being legitimate just because it may happen to be utilitarian.

You might gather from what I have just said that the only field worth exploring is transportation. True enough we Americans spend about 20 percent of our gross national product for transportation, a fact which should establish its importance. But all one has to do to find the names of companies that might be interested in having their histories written is to look through the impressive array of Newcomen Society booklets. Now granted, these are capsule histories, usually undocumented and often not more than a set of subjective reminiscences. But the publications of this society indicate that the participating companies had, and possibly still have, some interest in their own history.

This brings me to a contemplation of the future role of our organization. After all this is an exciting moment in our history. We are just in the process of transforming ourselves from a most informal to a more formal organization. I think we should take advantage of that fact to do things on a scale which might be beyond the competence of a purely informal group.

Now, I take it for granted that we will continue to have an annual meeting, and my only suggestion there would be that eventually and occasionally we venture to each coast to make it clear that we are a national rather than a regional

organization. I hope we can continue meeting on college campuses. They lend, I think, an air of learning and of informality that we should cherish. I hope also that we can resume publishing the proceedings of our meetings. This is something that heretofore has had to depend upon the host institution. This has meant that the formats have varied widely, as has the cost. Those of us who have published proceedings, however, have been besieged for copies long after they have gone out of print which leads me to think that what we have to say appeals to a circle even wider than our own membership.

I think, however, and I am sure many of you agree, that we have responsibilities and opportunities far beyond simply having a meeting and publishing the proceedings of what we do there. I would say, in general terms, that we have the all-embracing function of keeping our members in touch with each other and with what is going on in the business history profession. I am fully mindful that for many years the "Editor's Corner" in the Business History Review has given important but limited information along this line. I think that in addition to listing books and articles coming out, available archives, and upcoming meetings, we want to know what work members are doing, what their special interests are, and the like. Consequently I should like to see us circulate a twice-a-year newsletter carrying this type of information.

We all know a letter of this sort is entirely practical. The Lexington Group has been issuing one for exactly thirty years, and it has always been handled by a single person. If we in this Association should decide, now or later on, to attempt a regular quarterly or semiannual publication, I suppose this professional and personal information could be put therein, much as in the "Historical News and Comments" section of the Journal of American History. But the launching of yet another journal when we have the Business History Review strikes me as superfluous academically, and extremely risky financially. For the time being I would vote for two secretary's newsletters each year, and let our more formal editorial efforts expend themselves in publishing the proceedings each year.

Ever since it began, the Lexington Group has availed itself of a device to gather information for the newsletter that I commend to your favorable attention. This is a "Membership Questionnaire." It is a single sheet only, asking each member to give his or her up-to-date address and professional affiliation, a brief comment concerning research, titles of new books

and articles that have come across the respondent's desk, and any professional news or inquiries that seem worth passing along.

So much then, for meetings, the proceedings, and a newsletter. I should like also to see this Association act as a clearing house in four areas:

1. For information on companies that have records and are willing to have historians work on them.
2. For members of our Association seeking a history to write.
3. For contracts between scholars and companies.
4. For contracts between authors and publishers.

Let me say a word about each of these categories:

1. Thanks to the archivists, we already have a "Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada," published in 1969 by the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Business Archives. This directory is based on 725 questionnaires to which there were 216 replies. Of these, 133 were included in the final listing. There is, for each company, its name and address, the name of the person responsible for the archives, the date when the archives was established, a brief summary of material collected, and an indication of its size. Then, most important of all, the directory indicates whether and to what extent the records are open to scholars.¹² I would suggest we make a card file of this Directory and then, through reports from our membership, keep this file up to date and extend it. We might, for example, get in contact with the many firms who have appeared in the Newcomen series. Or we might cull the names from Fortune's list of 500 largest concerns. Indeed, in an earlier draft of this paper I was so bold as to suggest that we might ask for a foundation grant to compile an all-embracing inventory of available business records. But, as I have just pointed out, the Archivists have already made a magnificent start in this direction, so I am willing to settle for a continuing commitment on our part to keep the Association's roster of companies with available records up to date and growing. To put in a plug for my adopted homeland, I would like to suggest that the Business Archives Council of Canada, headed by James Bonar in Montreal, can give us valuable information as to available business archives north of the border.¹³

2. To keep an up-to-date register of our members' fields of interest, it is necessary only to keep the completed Membership Questionnaires sorted in order and readily available. A card file index by fields might be useful for ready reference. In other words, I think it is as important to put companies in touch with business historians as it is the other way around.

3. This Association should, I think, assist members in the negotiation of contracts for the writing of a company or industrial history. Hammering out a mutually satisfactory arrangement is by no means a simple job, and our experience over the last decades (and even over the last twelve months) indicates that as yet we have not learned to avoid all the pitfalls. This is neither the time nor the place to go into the details of contract making, but I think our Association, presumably through its hard-working secretary, should collect as many contracts (omitting dollar figures) as possible that have already been executed. Copies of these should be made available to any member of the Association for his or her guidance.

4. I would recommend the same procedure when a scholar is ready to make his contract with the publisher. Here again there are many details to be thought of in advance, and once more I should suggest that our Association collect as many sample contracts as possible and keep these for reference use by our members.

Now, whether a secretary could handle all these tasks or not without assistance I don't know. We could, I suppose, set up committees, one to keep the business archives file up to date, and another one to handle the two sorts of contracts. But in these cases I don't think committees are the answer. For one thing, these ought to be every-member operations: each one of us should report new companies whose archives are available; each one of us should pass along new types of contractual arrangements. And if the Association is to be a clearing house in these, its activities had better be centralized. This points right back to the secretary; maybe the best thing we could do is to provide enough part-time secretarial assistance so the secretary can handle the various jobs I've outlined. Let me add that I have no rigid notion as to how these functions should be carried out; I simply feel strongly that they should be handled by this Association.

I have, I know, put a tremendous amount of emphasis this evening on company or entrepreneurial history. But I

have also said that I do not restrict business history to these categories. Business history also obviously embraces industrial history, the regional history of business, business vis-a-vis government, business on the national and international level, and the history of whatever other kinds of business there may be. I simply happen to think that company and entrepreneurial history constitute the building blocks on which all other business history ultimately rests. In these fields we in this Association have a long docket of unfinished business. This, I maintain, is indeed "A Challenge to Craftsmen."

Footnotes

I am deeply indebted to my colleagues in United States History at the University of Western Ontario, Messrs. William Blocker, Richard Fuke, Thomas Guinsburg, Robert Hohner, and Craig Simpson for reading critically and discussing this paper. Their suggestions improved it immeasurably. For such shortcomings as remain, I alone am responsible.

¹This group of railway historians originated at a meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in Lexington, Ky. in 1942. Since then it has met at least once annually with a learned society (as with us this year.) Between meetings its members keep in touch through spring and fall newsletters. The present secretary (and only "officer") of the group is Professor Richard Barsness of the School of Business, Northwestern University.

²Ralph Hidy, "Foreword" in Arthur M. Johnson, Petroleum Pipelines and Public Policy, 1906-1959, Cambridge 1967, p.v.

³Arthur M. Johnson and Barry Supple, Boston Capitalists and Western Railroads, Cambridge, 1967; Stephen Salsbury, The State, the Investor, and the Railroad, Cambridge, 1967.

⁴Robert Paul Thomas, "The Automobile Industry and Its Tycoon," Explorations in Entrepreneurial History, Vol. 6, No. 2, (Winter, 1969), pp. 141-142.

⁵Maury Klein, The Great Richmond Terminal, Charlottesville, 1970, p. vii.

⁶Wayne G. Broehl, Jr., Trucks, Trouble and Triumph: the Norwalk Truck Line Company, New York, 1954; James Filgas, Yellow in Motion, Bloomington, 1972; Samuel W. Taylor, Line Haul, The Story of Pacific Intermountain Express, San Francisco, 1959.

⁷Robert W. Mudge, Adventures of a Yellowbird: the Biography of an Airline (Northeast), Boston, 1969; Trans-World Airlines, Legacy of Leadership, New York, 1971; Brad Williams, The Anatomy of an Airline (National), New York, 1970.

⁸R. E. G. Davies, A History of the World's Airlines, London, 1964.

⁹Arthur M. Johnson, The Development of American Petroleum Pipelines, 1862-1906, Ithaca, 1956, pp. 253-285; A. M. Johnson, Public Policy, op. cit., pp. 504-544; H. F. Williamson, et al, The American Petroleum Industry, Evanston, 1963, pp. 849-890.

¹⁰H. Craig Miner, The St. Louis-San Francisco Transcontinental Railroad: The Thirty-fifth Parallel Project 1853-1890, Lawrence, 1972.

¹¹Albro Martin, Enterprise Denied, New York, 1971; George M. Miller, The Railroads and the Granger Laws, Madison, 1971; John F. Stover, The Life and Decline of the American Railroad, New York, 1970.

¹²Society of American Archivists, Committee on Business Archives, "Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada," n.p. 1969; for a description of this project see: Robert W. Lovett, "The Status of Business Archives," in The American Archivist, vol. 32, no.3 (July, 1969), pp. 247-250.

¹³The Business Archives Council of Canada, "Report to the Membership....", Montreal, 1971, pp. 6-11.