Business Archives in the United States

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I have long been an admirer of business history as it is written in Great Britain. Peter L. Payne explained the advanced state of the art in his splendid paper delivered at the 1978 meeting of the Business History Conference. Among the reasons cited for scholarly excellence is the availability of primary sources. English and Scottish scholars work with detailed surveys of business records by industry and by region, the National Register of Archives, the British Archives Council, university archives, company-sponsored archives, government records, and records of nationalized industries -- all available in a small country with a functioning public transportation system. For example, Patricia Hudson recently published a catalog [3] describing 120 firms and six cloth halls that constituted the West Riding wool textile industry from the 16th to the 20th centuries.

In the United States, however, history and vast geographic size have worked against this kind of concentration, coordination, and congruity of business records. While Americans have most of the same impulses and institutions as the British, the incredible mobility of American business over time has scattered the archival remains far and wide across the face of America. It is only rarely, therefore, that a region (New England), and industry (textiles), and an institution (the Baker Library) are matched so well for business history research [6]. It is normal to find surviving records in the area where they were created. This business archives "location theory" is only marginally useful to industry-wide research -- even in textiles -- because of wide dispersal, shifts of industry concentration over time, and company mergers. The latter phenomenon explains the location of Union Iron Works records from San Francisco in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and California Powder Works archives in Wilmington, Delaware. In the circumstances, it is understandable that the present knowledge of surviving records in the United States is neither systematic nor profound. What follows, therefore, is a brief, impressionistic overview of several types of institutions in America that do possess the actual business records of firms: corporation archives, university libraries, private historical agencies, and governmental agencies.

CORPORATION ARCHIVES

The most up-to-date information available on company archives comes from the 1975 *Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada* [15], a follow-up survey by Gary D. Saretzky [13], and the recent National Historical Publications and Records Commission's *Directory* [8]. These sources provide information on less than 200 US companies that answered one, two, or three of the survey questionnaires. This is an incredibly small number of companies nationwide. This showing is all the more frustrating if one looks closely at these records from the standpoint of administration, size, type of materials, and their accessibility for research. Archives are administered by librarians -- or someone using a similar title in 21 percent of the cases. Archivists make up 13 percent of the administrators, the exact same percentage of collections with no one listed or a person listed without any title. If public information people, corporate secretaries, six historians, and two museum directors are added to the librarians and archivists, there is still only a 51 percent chance of connecting with someone sympathetic to business history research. "Archives" are run by people bearing 51 different titles.

The contents of archives vary from Crown Zellenbach's annual reports and house organs to Pan American's 80,000 cubic feet of "minutes, financial records, correspondence, personal and family papers, reports, house organs, pictorial material, and typed oral history material" [15]. My general impression is that the archives containing meaty manuscript materials are in the distinct minority. Most of the company collections seem to have a public relations slant. Furthermore, whether or not any collection is available for historical research is moot in 40 percent to 50 percent of the cases; they are restricted to internal corporate reference use only. Twenty percent of the companies open their collections to the public and, as one specified, to "verified scholars"; often it is necessary to make an appointment. Another 31 percent of the firms open their files on a case-by-case basis. The scholar must persuade the librarian, archivist, or whomever is in charge to grant access. The motivation for this practice will vary from company to company -- all the way from protecting privacy to holding down costs.

The tension between business need for privacy, efficiency, and profit, and the scholarly need for access to permanently retained data has existed for a long time. At the end of World War II, a group of scholars and industrialists created the non-profit National Records Management Council with Rockefeller Foundation support to bridge the gap. The mission was to show business how to handle the growing tide of paper work more efficiently and, at the same time, isolate records of permanent historical value. These selected records -- less than 5 percent

of all -- would provide data for most of the queries posed by historians and for all ongoing corporate needs. A "time capsule" [1] was devised to provide guidance to companies and their records managers. Unfortunately, the records management part of the arrangement took on a life of its own, and the academic influence was diminished if not extinquished. The non-profit council eventually became the company, Naremco, Inc. Within the last few years, that firm circulated a brochure entitled "Can your records go to Washington?" The major recommendation was to have a rigorously enforced destruction schedule that would anticipate FTC or other governmental agencies' subpoenas.

I am not against records managers; I am a charter member of the local chapter of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators. As the saying goes, some of my best friends are records managers; several stunning collections have come to Eleutherian Mills Historical Library as a result of this connection. In most cases, however, the records manager marches to a different drum than the archivist does. His charge does not include the accumulation of permanent records to document the activities and evolution of the corporation. The techniques needed to stay ahead of the tidal wave of transient, transactional business records are applied with too little discrimination to important reports, studies, committee minutes, statistical surveys, and more that would prove useful to the historian in the future -- well beyond the one to seven year business need to retain the records. There is a variation of Gresham's Law working here to the distinct disadvantage of business and economic historians: the monumental bulk of unimportant records is driving out documents of value.

Let me put this even more strongly. Effective records management could be used to identify and save important historical records. But an increasing number of uninstructed or unsympathetic practitioners are becoming increasingly self-assured professionals; they are the ones who determine that pitifully little will remain in a business-run archives. Cost effectiveness is being employed tactically in retention or destruction schedules to win the "battle of the bulk" while the strategy of winning the war of public acceptance through understanding business contributions to American society is being neglected.

One further point needs to be made before leaving the topic of scholarly access to business records under company control. It has not been my intention to give the impression that there are only 200 opportunities for research in business-held records. Over 2,000 questionnaires were not returned. Thousands of other firms -- untouched by records managerial zeal -- undoubtedly await discovery and exploitation for business history ends. The best example of records not mentioned in the SAA *Directory* involves the entire railroad industry. The Eleutherian Mills Historical

Library conducted a survey of Conrail records with funds provided by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. The impetus for the survey was the possibility that the merger of the seven Eastern railroads into Conrail on April Fool's Day 1976, would be the occasion for thoughtless, mass destruction of records. The published survey report of Hugh Gibb and Duane Swanson [2] locates and describes over 400,000 cubic feet of records from Cleveland to Boston. A large percentage of these massive collections is still in danger of loss and most is unavailable to scholarly use. Various educational institutions have begun to collect some of this material, but the residue is well beyond the handling capacity of nonbusiness institutions that have become allies to the business historian. It is to these organizations that I now turn.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Even before Edwin F. Gay and Arthur H. Cole acquired the Slater Collection for the Harvard Business School in 1916, Harvard University had absorbed business and economic materials into special collections of several libraries. Part of the growth of the Baker Library manuscript collections came about from consolidating these business collections in one place. The Baker Library, with the support of the now defunct Business History Society, was so successful nationally in collecting business archives that it had to specialize regionally by the mid-1930s. Some collections were actually returned to the region of their origin. The size of modern business records has forced every university library which collects business history materials to place geographical -- and sometimes subject -- limitations on what is collected.

In the post-World War II period of federal government support and encouragement of higher education, many special collections and university archives expanded into new library facilities. The proliferation of graduate programs offering Ph.D.s in history also lent impetus to collecting research materials. Even where the collection policies were general in nature, business records and the papers of businessmen from the immediate area became part of holdings. Cornell University, Rutgers University [16], the University of Kansas, the University of Oregon [14] and the University of Washington come immediately to mind. Several institutions, in addition to Baker Library, even placed special emphasis on business culture and records.

Syracuse University used the generous federal support of higher education in the 1960s and early 1970s to embark on a business records program of unprecedented scale. Building on Harry H. Pierce's interest in railroads and transportation, the large staff collected and processed thousands of cubic feet of

records. They filled one floor of a large industrial building near the Syracuse campus and crowded the cellar of that same structure with unprocessed records on pallets before the chill winds of economy in higher education began to blow. Studebaker-Packard archives were added to New York Central; Delaware, Lackawana, and Western; Erie; and other railroad records. At present, the library staff is attempting to return some geographically out-of-scope records to the place of origin.

The University of Pittsburgh, under the guidance of Sam Hayes, established the Archives of Industrial Society. Although the present holdings are impressive in size and content, it is my impression that space constraints have inhibited the all-out collection of business records of the Pittsburgh area. The University of Akron is involved in a dual program of interest to business historians. The university archives is a regional component of a statewide network to collect historical records in a systematic and coordinated fashion [5]. In addition, the university also has a long-range involvement in documenting the history of Akron, the rubber capital of the world. Whatever B. F. Goodrich shortcomings may be in lighter-than-air advertising, the company more than makes up for it in their responsible attitude toward historical archives. The University of Akron American History Research Center has charge of 500 cubic feet of significant B. F. Goodrich records, 1868-1970. General Tire and Rubber Company has turned over 100 cubic feet of legal records, 1940-73, covering synthetic rubber technology and manufacture.

Any treatment of university achievements in records collecting, no matter how brief, would be incomplete without some description of the entrepreneurial activities of Gene M. Gressley at the University of Wyoming, Laramie. He has been extraordinarily successful and logical in his pursuit of regional themes. The Transportation History Foundation has aviation, railroad, and bus company records; the Western History Research Center features water resources, reclamation, ecology, mining, geology, sheep raising, and cattle raising; and the Petroleum History and Research Center focuses particularly on western oil exploration, but it has national and worldwide components.

Improbable, but nevertheless impressive, have been Gene Gressley's activities on behalf of the Archive of Contemporary History and the American Heritage Center. A quick reading of the University of Wyoming report to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections reveals numerous personal collections in the entertainment and music world -- comedian Ken Murray, actress Carroll Baker, movie producer Richard G. DeRochemont, singer Mimi Benzell, and band leaders Bob Crosby, Eddy Duchin, John Scott Trotter, and Hugo Winterhalter.

PRIVATE HISTORICAL AGENCIES

The rubric, "private historical agencies," is used to embrace historical societies, museums, historic houses, outdoor restorations, and other institutions preserving and interpreting history in some manner. The business historian will find data of interest in every category. The most familiar to researchers is the historical society, but sometimes museums specialize in industry, transportation, technology, or other subjects of interest. Even a historic house built by a successful businessman can act as a magnet for relevant manuscript materials.

The most common denominator of the 5,000 organizations listed in the *Directory* [7] of the American Association for State and Local History is geography: the historical societies and agencies in the United States are normally related to towns, counties, and states. Although business and economic history seldom has top priority, records of local firms have been collected. Societies are more likely to preserve manuscripts than museums, but professionally staffed museums do collect in their areas. For example, Discovery Hall of South Bend, Indiana, retrieved the Studebaker-Packard automobile records from Syracuse University; and the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, North Andover, Massachusetts, concentrates on its principal subject matter, textiles.

The Eleutherian Mills Historical Library is a historical agency specializing in subject matter -- American business, industrial, and technological history -- and concentrating its manuscripts-collecting geographically in the Mid-Atlantic region. Most of the 1,600 collections with 11 million items of manuscripts and archives have been described in detail by John Beverley Riggs, Curator of Manuscripts [10, 11, and 12]. Not included in Dr. Riggs's descriptions and not yet available for research is the enormous, recently acquired Pennsylvania Power and Light collection of some.3 million items. The collection includes 1,400 separate corporate entities and covers the evolution of electrical power generation and distribution from about 1880 to 1921 in eastern Pennsylvania.

BUSINESS ARCHIVES IN AGENCIES OF GOVERNMENT

Tax money at all levels of government preserves business archives and records as part of other projects and programs -- seldom on purpose. Public libraries, state historical societies and archives, and various federal agencies, in addition to the publicly supported universities already mentioned, end up with important research materials. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission has awarded grants to such institutions to make business archives more available for research. In Texas,

Wisconsin, and Connecticut, in particular, city public libraries have received funds to survey and collect the industrial and business heritage of their communities.

In the Midwest, many state historical societies are quasi-private institutions with goals to preserve private as well as public records. Regional archives programs, similar to the one already mentioned at the University of Akron, have been implemented in several other states. Government regulatory bodies at all levels collect data on, investigate, and survey business activities. Bankruptcies often leave a residue of valuable records. The recent publication of the *Guide to Manuscript Collections in the National Museum of History and Technology* [17] indicates another federally sponsored source of useful data. The various curators at the Smithsonian collect business and other types of records to document the artifact collections. It is not surprising, therefore, to find bits and pieces of company archives listed in the *Guide*. The heavy emphasis of these collections is, of course, mechanical and technological -- blueprints and patents rather than ledgers, daybooks, and other economic files.

CONCLUSION

Implicit throughout this paper has been an invidious -- and somewhat unfair -- comparison between the status of business archives in Great Britain and the United States. Differences in history and geography have played a key role in determining the present situation in each nation; but, granting those differences determined by history, British scholars and record keepers have developed a common cause unmatched in the United States. Two obvious ways to improve the American situation are (1) to collect and make available knowledge about the location and status of business archives, and (2) to encourage the preservation of and access to these records by business concerns as well as the traditional repositories.

I urge the Business History Conference to support a program to gather, organize, and disseminate information on the location and nature of business archives. There is precedent in ethnic and women's history for support from federal and other granting agencies to conduct a nationwide survey. Such a survey would go beyond new questionnaires and the gathering of information already known about collections through published announcements and guides. Visits would be made to a large number of institutions. It would be the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library Union Catalog of Business Collections on a national scale. Each summer for a number of years, the library sent graduate students out to regional historical agencies to describe 3,000 collections on NUCMC forms. The library has provided subject indexing by means of Termatrex,

an optical incidence information retrieval system. Careful definition of the sources of business history, improved technology (looking to fit in with national bibliographical computer systems now in development), and a lot of financial support would be essential to a successful national survey and register of business archives and records. Dissemination of this information might take the form of a published guide and/or access to a central computerized file at the national level.

Second, the Business History Conference should encourage the proper housing, organization, description, and availability of research materials. To do this, the campaign has to be pushed on two fronts: convincing companies to place records in repositories and repositories to receive them. Many of the latter have small staffs and limited facilities. In addition, the importance of business history as an area of research must be sold with missionary zeal, because traditionally many historical agencies placed their main collecting emphasis in political, social, and military history.

An alternative strategy might be a reprise of the National Records Management Council effort: to convince more companies to do a responsible job with their own archives. This might be sold as another aspect of social responsibility -- somewhat lower in priority than the environmental and consumer programs, but certainly on a par with many community activities.

Since almost one half of business collections presently in business hands are for internal use only, ways will have to be found to reassure nervous business managers about the positive benefits of research by scholars. In 1966 at a Baker Library symposium of the materials available for the study of business and economic history, Alfred Chandler called for the certification of business historians as a way to allay the fears of businessmen [4]. Would the Business History Conference be the best vehicle for this?

As an anglophile much impressed with the rich resources available to students of British and Scottish business history, I call for the creation of a United States Register of Business Archives as a modest first step in the program laid out above. The hidden agenda of this nationwide effort would be to make academic institutions and companies more aware of the need to preserve the records of business contributions to American life and culture.

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