History, Business Records, and Corporate Archives in North America

by **CHRISTOPHER L. HIVES***

In 1938 a young archivist writing in the fourth issue of the *American Archivist* offered the following observation:

> The historian of the future who seeks to interpret our contemporary life without taking into account the shaping forces of modern business will but touch on the fringes of the subject. For more than a generation people have spoken of two capitals, Washington and Wall Street.... We are careful to preserve the records of one capital, but we have sadly neglected the other.[1]

Although almost fifty years have passed since Oliver W. Holmes penned these remarks, the potential of archival programmes in the corporate sector remains largely unrealized. This paper examines the close association between early efforts to preserve business records and the rise of business history and it considers the current situation in light of the historical evolution of business archives.

In the early part of this century historians left their mark on the development of business archives just as they influenced all facets of archival development. One might suggest, however, that the relationship did not enjoy the same success in the business world as in the world of public records. The historians' tendency to justify archival programmes as resources to facilitate the writing of history did not generally stimulate businessmen to preserve corporate archives. Consideration of the early development of business archives suggests that alternative avenues need to be explored in order to make preservation of such archives more relevant to business in the future.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians in the United States and Canada expressed little interest in business and economic history. They preferred instead to concentrate on political and constitutional subjects. In assessing their approach, R.A. Shiff suggested that the historians of the period were "too European oriented with primary emphasis on soldiers, politicians, and ecclesiastics."[2] The first commentators to

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1 Oliver W. Holmes, "The Evaluation and Preservation of Business Archives," *The American Archivist* 1 (1938), p. 173.

2 R.A. Shiff, "The Archivist's Role in Records Management," *The American Archivist* 19 (1956), p. 114.

turn their attention to the rise of business following the American Civil War viewed capitalism as inherently evil. The muckraking reformers developed the notorious "robber baron" *persona* by portraying the evil and distasteful activities perpetrated by businessmen at the expense of the common man. In commenting on the muckrakers' approach, historian Allan Nevins observed that "the uglier passages in business history were emphasized, the brighter chapter forgotten. The fact that business morals, like political morals, were in a state of evolution upward was ignored."[3] More interested in political reform than objective scholarship, the muckrakers produced many influential works such as Ida Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), Gustavus Myers's *History of the Great American Fortunes* (1907) and *A History of Canadian Wealth* (1914), Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), and Matthew Josephson's, *The Robber Barons* (1934).

One of the major factors hindering the development of objective business history, in addition to the obvious bias of the early commentators, was the absence of adequate documentation. One observer notes, "American corporate business grew to maturity behind a protective screen of closed books and locked files, thereby breeding a mutual distrust between itself and historical judgment."[4] Businesses rarely bothered to collect, sort, and preserve their historical records; they often opted for the supposedly simple and safe means of records management — destruction. This problem grew out of the nineteenth-century tradition which held that the internal affairs of a business were a matter of legitimate concern to that firm alone. There was little interest in opening records to the prying eyes of outsiders.[5]

The evolution of large, vertically integrated business firms early in this century and the concomitant increase in the records they generated gave rise to a periodic "housecleaning" of old documents which had fulfilled their administrative use. Even when retained, records were often stored in whatever facilities could be secured, which usually left them at the mercy of fire, mildew, vermin, or equally unpleasant ravages. Viewed as liabilities, these older records would be destroyed periodically to make room for more recent accumulations.

Lack of corporate documentation, either by design or chance, forced those interested in studying business history to turn to published sources, including court records and reports of various government investigations. In historian Ralph Hower's view, writing "the history of business from such sources is much like writing the history of marriage from the records of divorce courts. It yields part of the story — an essential part — but one that gives little inkling of the whole truth."[6] The tendency either to destroy company records or to deny access to outside researchers grew out of and perpetuated a negative view of business. Ironically, fear of injuring the corporate reputation prevented the generous access to those materials necessary to produce an objective account of American business. For these reasons, the unflattering view of emerging modern corporations continued to mold attitudes in the early twentieth century.

3 Allan Nevins, "Business and the Historians," in Ray Allen Billington, ed., *Allan Nevins on History* (New York, 1975), p. 73.
4 O. Lawrence Burnette, *Beneath the Footnote* (Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1969), p. 104.
5 Gerald T. White, "The Business Historian and His Sources," *The American Archivist* 30 (1967), p. 20.
6 Ralph M. Hower, "The Preservation of Business Records," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 11 (1937), p. 38.

Although a powerful force in the first quarter of the century, the muckraking literature did not go unopposed. This period witnessed the advent of objective business history and the emergence of important primary resources principally from the university whose name has become synonymous with the study of business. The idea of collecting business manuscripts for research began on a very limited basis at Harvard University shortly after the turn of the century. Interest in preserving business records was further enhanced by the formation of the Harvard Business School under the direction of Edwin F. Gay. In 1916, the Harvard Library reported its first sizeable acquisition when it obtained the business records of Samuel Slater who, at the time of his death in 1835, was generally regarded as the leading textile industrialist in the United States.[7]

The establishment of the Business Historical Society in 1925 further stimulated support and encouragement for the collection of business records. The society sought to facilitate the historical study of business around the world and to publish the subsequent research for the use of the contemporary business community.[8] Such an undertaking first required the collection and organization of the documentation necessary to support the proposed projects. The preservation of business records was further encouraged two years later with the construction of the Baker Library at Harvard University. Intended to house research collections for the School of Business, the library also served as the official repository for the material collected by the Business Historical Society.

For a brief time, the Baker Library acquired historical material from all parts of the United States, and some thought was given to making it a national repository for business records. However, as the flood of records began to outstrip the facilities of the library, such grandiose plans were judged to be impractical. Although forced to limit acquisitions to records from New England, the pioneering efforts of the Baker Library established the importance of preserving business records.

Through the efforts of individuals such as Edwin F. Gay, Norman Gras, and Henrietta Larson, who were based at Harvard in the 1920s, the field of business history became increasingly refined and more objective in outlook. Gras emphasized the need to employ a balanced approach in the study of business history. He defined the objectives of the emerging discipline as an "honest attempt to learn and set down in an orderly fashion the facts and ideas which have underlain the organized plan of using capital and employing men in order to serve society's needs."[9] The pursuit of the objective history advocated by Gras depended upon the willingness of business to provide access to its records.

By the second half of the 1930s, it had become apparent that the Baker method of collecting business records was not practical given the ever-increasing volume of material. In addition, companies were becoming concerned about physical removal of records from their premises because they required the records for operational purposes or feared the records might be used against them in some way.[10] As their recognition of the difficulties in collecting business records grew, historians undertook to convince large

7 Arnold Wells, "Samuel Slater: Father of Our Factory System," in Edward C. Bursh, Donald Clark, and Ralph W. Hidy, eds., *The World of Business* (New York, 1962), p. 1086.

8 "Our Primary Purpose," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 1 (1926), p. 1.

9 N.S.B. Gras, "Are You Writing a Business History?" *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 28 (1944), p. 3.

10 Oliver W. Holmes, "Some Reflections on Business Archives in the United States," *The American Archivist* 17 (1954), p. 300.

companies to preserve their own records. This, then, represents the beginning of the corporate archives movement and the gradual shift away from the idea of large, centralized collections of business records as a solution to the problem of providing adequate documentation for objective business history.

In his support of this new direction to preserve the records of business, Oliver W. Holmes suggested that a pamphlet by Ralph Hower, sponsored by the Business Historical Society, should be widely distributed to companies. Hower's pamphlet stressed the importance of preserving corporate documentation for three distinct groups — business itself, historians, and the general public.[11] In approaching the issue primarily from an academic perspective, Hower heavily favoured research requirements. He rejected both indiscriminate destruction and total preservation of corporate records. In the former case, researchers would be forced to rely on personal recollections or outside sources which would likely yield an inaccurate account of events. In the latter case, researchers might be discouraged by having to dig through mounds of routine documents.[12]

One of Hower's recurring themes, the need to relate the objective story of business, reveals more than an interest in history as an academic exercise; it reflects something of the period in which he wrote. He was deeply affected by the tendency of business literature to muckrake as well as by the profound effect of the depression, which left a lasting negative public impression of the role of business in society. Hower strongly believed in preserving business records so that accurate accounts of business could counter what he perceived to be a very real threat to the prevailing economic order, in which he evidently had faith despite the ravages of the depression:

> Business must finally face the fact that the public ultimately will decide whether private enterprise is to continue or is to be stifled in favour of some other economic system. If private enterprise is worth saving, business records will help us prove its usefulness. It is clear too that the public may, if it acts without information, ultimately destroy a valuable institution which has been painfully developed over hundreds of years and can be rebuilt only at a great cost. It is, therefore, to the advantage of both the public and business that the historical records of business be preserved and studied.[13]

Hower was the first person to emphasize the potential ideological value of archives as "arsenals of history," as it were, for business.

In addition to supporting the formation of corporate archives, Oliver W. Holmes also recognized the need to preserve the records of defunct and small-scale operations. He advocated the idea of establishing cooperative central repositories organized by industry and geographical location. The archival records accumulated in this fashion would facilitate research into vast warehouses of knowledge if, as he calculated, business was willing to tax itself at five million dollars per year.[14] Although corporate archives failed to move immediately in the precise direction envisaged by Holmes, the Society of American Archivists did appoint him and Henrietta Larson of the Business Historical Society to its Business Archives Committee in 1938. From this vantage point they witnessed the initial stirrings of a corporate archives movement.

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11 Hower, "The Preservation of Business Records," p. 37.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
14 Holmes, "The Evaluation and Preservation of Business Archives," p. 183.

The concept of corporate archives, first mooted by Holmes, did in fact become a reality in the 1940s. Fearing that the valuable records of his company were not being properly maintained, Harvey S. Firestone, Jr. decided to implement an archival programme at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in 1943. The immediate purpose for establishing the archives was to preserve the wartime production records, which would provide a valuable source for future historians writing about the war effort of American business.[15] An astute businessman, Firestone saw in the implementation of an archival programme the opportunity not only to chronicle the growth of his company for posterity, but also to provide an accurate administrative picture of past problems and the methods employed in their resolution. By reflecting past business experience, this new corporate tool could then be used in formulating future policy. In 1943 the company secured the services of historian William Overman, who became North America's first corporate archivist.

In the 1940s, the problems presented by the rapid accumulation of business records became particularly acute. Carl McKenzie, a businessman, observed that the ever-increasing volume of material threatened to retard administrative and clerical operations.[16] He cited the "larger size and complexity of the business unit and the paternalistic attitude of government" as two reasons for the changed conditions of business records.[17] He believed that businessmen were beginning to realize the importance of developing more systematic procedures to resolve the problem in the future. To solve the problem, he urged the development of systematic retention and disposal of corporate records based on the implementation of a classification scheme to ensure the destruction of redundant material.[18]

As evidence of the growing concern on the part of both businessmen and historians for more effective records management, the editor of the *Journal of Economic History* requested Arthur H. Cole, librarian at the Harvard Business School, to write an article outlining the practical problems inherent in the preservation and accessibility of business records.[19] In his article, Cole identified two distinct areas of concern: "the bulk of physical quantity of recent business records and the lack of [a] mechanism for equating scholars' demands with librarians' supplies."[20] Cole simply meant that historians and archivists had failed to identify those records which would be the most useful in the course of historical research. He concluded that while it might be possible to house most business records produced before 1890 in existing library and archival repositories, the sheer volume of modern materials rendered this option untenable for all but a tiny fraction of such records. Cole appreciated the need for extra space and staff to handle these records, the lack of standards and recognized procedures for handling and setting up business archives, and the high cost of storage relative to the low frequency of use.[21]

Cole also made reference to the so-called "Clough-Cochran" approach to preserving business records. Reacting to the limited success in encouraging businesses to maintain

15 Julia N. Eulenberg, "The Corporate Archives," in Katherine Aschner, ed., *Taking Control of Your Office Records: A Manager's Guide* (New York, 1983), p. 184.

16 Carl McKenzie, "An Experiment in the Retention and Preservation of Corporate Records," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 27 (1943), p. 4.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 "Business Manuscripts: A Pressing Problem," *Journal of Economic History* 5 (1945), p. 43.

20 Arthur H. Cole, "The Accumulated Development of Unsolved Problems," *Journal of Economic History* 5 (1945), p. 44.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

their own records, historians Shepard B. Clough of Columbia University and Thomas C. Cochran of New York University focussed their efforts on the New York metropolitan area, which, said Cochran, contained a "greater volume of important records than any similar section of the United States."[22] They suggested that past attempts to preserve corporate documentation "barely ruffled the surface of the vastness of papers reposing in vaults, private libraries, and storage warehouses."[23] Consequently, Clough and Cochran organized the New York Committee on Business Records in 1943.

The committee, which sought to make businesses more aware of the significance of their own records and to provide practical assistance in developing preservation programmes, circulated a questionnaire to those business executives indicating interest in the project. The questionnaire delved into the organization and extent of corporate records, policies regarding disposal, plans for writing company histories, researcher access restrictions, and reception of outside advice concerning the disposition of material.[24] Clough and Cochran proclaimed the need for a new breed of professional who would "help the officers in establishing wise records policies so that those manuscripts will be preserved which contain information essential to the legal department, the business analyst, the historian, and to supervise the classification, storage and day-to-day handling of the records."[25] Cochran suggested that these new professionals should be trained in business history and economics and that they should also understand library methods as well as record handling and storage problems.[26] Columbia and New York Universities established a special joint internship programme in business archives training. The programme included courses and a practicum in the management of business manuscripts and business libraries.[27] Students completing this training and a course in business history would be recommended as qualified archivists. Cochran complained that too few of those working with corporate records had ever studied business history. He envisaged that the deficiency would be rectified as awareness of the programme spread and companies hired "young scholars who may write business history as well as manage the records."[28]

This tendency to emphasize the writing of business history had an important bearing on attempts to preserve corporate records. From the advent of the Business Historical Society through to the founding of the New York Committee on Business Records, historians such as Hower, Clough, and Cochran all believed that academic research and writing would prove to be useful records-keeping tools. This is understandable given the prominent role assumed by historians in the movement to preserve business records. However, attempts to justify the preservation of business records as a means of facilitating the writing of history may explain, in part, the limited success of business archives; this approach attracted businessmen with an interest in history but held only moderate appeal for the general corporate community.

22 Thomas C. Cochran, "New York City Business Records: A Plan for Their Preservation," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 18 (1944), p. 59.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Thomas C. Cochran, "New York Committee on Business Records," *Journal of Economic History* 5 (1945), p. 60.

25 Thomas C. Cochran, "Plans for Internship in Business Archival Work," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 20 (1946), p. 95.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 95-6.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

This judgment is not intended as an indictment of historians. Without their efforts there would have been even less incentive to preserve business records. One must also recognize that the influence of historians in archival development at this time was not unique to business archives. Indeed, many archivists of the period viewed themselves as historians and there was little attempt to distinguish between the two professions. Nevertheless, it might be suggested, albeit with the benefit of hindsight, that the early proponents of business archives might have enjoyed greater success if they had emphasized the administrative function of archival programmes within the corporation. In this regard, they would have benefited from the advice offered by archivist Margaret Cross Norton who, in 1929, advocated that archives ought to be created to promote administrative efficiency and only secondarily to serve the needs of the historical profession.[29] Norton's ideas fit comfortably between those of the two individuals who have been most instrumental in shaping North American archival theory. Like Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Norton believed that records should be preserved for the use of the administrative body which created them. She went further by adding that the long-term interests of historians would be best served if archival records were preserved as an administrative tool.[30] Rather than discouraging the use of government records by historians, she chose to emphasize the practical administrative aspects of archival programmes over the less obvious benefits for historical studies. Like Theodore Schellenburg, Norton held that the archivist should play an active role in the management of records, but she disagreed with his assertion that archives should be justified primarily for their cultural or research value rather than for administrative reference.[31] Unfortunately, her ideas were largely subordinated to the research-driven approach which continued to dominate the efforts to establish business archives for many years.

Despite the example provided by Firestone and the enthusiasm generated by Holmes, Cole, Cochran, and Clough, only a handful of companies such as Time Inc., Armstrong Cork, INA, and Eastman Kodak established corporate archival programmes in the 1940s. It appeared that the historical justification for corporate archives was not sufficiently attractive to induce companies to establish archival programmes on a wide scale.

The late 1940s witnessed the emergence of a number of diverse, loosely associated committees which would unite to form the National Records Management Council and eventually supersede the history-oriented approach to managing business records. For many years the problem of business records had been dealt with by the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Industrial and Business Archives, the Economic History Association's Committee on the Collection and Preservation of Business Records, and the American Historical Association's Committee on Business Records. The idea of forming a single body to consider the issue of corporate records grew out of a special meeting of the American Historical Association in 1946. Devoted exclusively to a discussion of the pressing matter of business records management, the session was attended by members of these committees, representatives from the Special Libraries Association and the American Library Association as well as by leading businessmen. During the session, a representative from the Economic History Association tabled a motion to "establish a

29 Margaret Cross Norton, "The Archives Department as an Administrative Unit in Government," in Thorton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 4-5.

30 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (1922; reprint ed. London, 1965), p. 123.

31 Theodore Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York, 1965), p. 28.

secretariat, probably in New York City, to serve as a clearing house for data in records management and the history of American business."[32] Those in attendance generally felt that the project would become self-supporting within three to five years through the fees collected for records management services, historical studies, and storage and processing of material in records centres. Cochran and Cole formed an informal committee which secured the initial funding for the programme from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1948. The newly created council sought to ensure that the "valuable experience recorded in the essential core of modern records is preserved, the records preserved are in an accessible and usable form, and the experience there is organized, evaluated and interpreted."[33]

In the early 1950s, the council published "Operation Time Capsule: A Technique to Preserve the Memory of Business," which demonstrated how companies might deal effectively with the pressing problems presented by the rapid accumulation of modern business records. In describing the nature of the programme in 1956, R.A. Shiff stressed the need to eliminate the "needle-in-the-haystack character of modern records" and, in so doing, extract the historically significant records from the profusion of routine records.[34] Concerned about documenting the whys and wherefores behind the decisions and actions documented in the records, Shiff also felt it was important for "Operation Time Capsule" to make "provisions for the creation of new records where obvious gaps exist."[35]

The council succeeded so well in selling the concept of records management that in the 1950s its tax-exempt status was revoked when it became recognized as something more than a non-profit organization seeking to promote the preservation of business records primarily for academic research purposes. Records management became increasingly popular with businessmen by demonstrating cost-savings through reduction of the volume of records maintained. This change in orientation resulted in the resignation of the scholars on the board and the subsequent reorganization of the council into a commercial company called Noremco. Interest in preserving historical business records waned as a more utilitarian records management focus superseded the previous research orientation of the old council. Henceforth, the impetus for establishing archival programmes lost much of the organized lobby of historians which had spearheaded the movement for over twenty-five years. Businesses were left largely to their own devices; no new approach was developed to meet the challenges of records management for purely financial purposes.

Important changes within the historical profession also contributed to a decline in the influence of historians on the preservation of business records. As Francis Blouin observes, in the postwar period an increase in government-collected data combined with the use of social science methodology facilitated aggregate investigations of business using theoretical models which replaced the former focus on individual company histories.[36] This development caused a split between business and economic historians and the "strong coalition of interests that argued for resources (both financial and intellectual) to

32 E.J. Leahy, "Report of the Committee on Institution and Business Archives," *The American Archivist* 11 (1948), p. 62.
33 "National Records Management Council," *The American Archivist* 9 (1948), p. 382.
34 Shiff, "The Archivist's Role in Records Management," p. 119.
35 *Ibid.*
36 Francis X. Blouin, "An Agenda for the Appraisal of Business Records," in Nancy E. Peace, ed., *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance* (Lexington, 1984), p. 62.

collect and preserve the records of U.S. business history began to break apart along disciplinary and methodological lines."[37]

The 1950s did witness a slight renewal of interest in corporate archives as the Texaco, Ford Motor, Eli Lilly, Proctor and Gamble, Bank of America, and Coca Cola companies all established archival programmes. However, a survey in 1958 revealed that fewer than twelve large companies had hired professional archivists.[38] In the early part of the following decade, "business archives went into the doldrums"; only a few new corporate repositories were established.[39] Perhaps this may be attributed to the social atmosphere of the 1960s when unrest, particularly amongst a younger generation hostile toward the influence of big business, prevailed. The experience of this period so depressed interest in business archives that the Society of American Archivists disbanded its twenty-eight-year-old Business Archives Committee in 1966.

The late 1960s did offer some encouraging signs for corporate archival programmes. In a questionnaire distributed to some seven hundred businesses throughout the United States, 113 reported some degree of archival retention, "even if it consisted of only one file drawer in the office of the secretary to the chairman of the board."[40] Archivist David Smith attributed the interest in historical records to the nostalgia craze, the large number of unemployed history graduates (some of whom were able to convince businessmen of the need for archives), the approaching American bicentennial (which renewed interest in history), corporate anniversaries, and the increasing number of lawsuits brought against companies which required efficient access to non-current records.[41] In her explanation of this renewed interest, Linda Edgerly has suggested that an expanding awareness of the role of business in society, particularly since the early 1960s, prompted North American corporations to retain documentation beyond that strictly required by law.[42] Consequently, those records which illustrated the "process and circumstances of past decision making and the mutually dependent relationship of business and society assumed new importance."[43]

The 1970s witnessed new archival programmes at Walt Disney, International Harvester, Anheuser-Busch, Corning Glass Works, Wyerhaeuser, Wells Fargo Bank, Deere and Company, Gerber Products, the *Los Angeles Times*, and Atlantic Richfield. During this decade alone, the number of corporate archives doubled while the ranks of business archivists quadrupled. Although still a rare breed, they were "no longer in danger of extinction" — a fate which might have befallen them in the 1960s.[44] The SAA reinstated the Business Archives Committee (which was soon superseded by a professional affinity group), sponsored numerous workshops on establishing corporate archives, and also published a useful manual by Edie Hedlin in 1978.[45] This was followed in 1981 by Karen Benedict's *A Select Bibliography On Business Archives and Records*

37 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
38 David R. Smith, "A Historical Look at Business Archives," *The American Archivist* 45 (1982), p. 275.
39 *Ibid.*
40 Robert W. Lovett, "The Status of Business Archives," *The American Archivist* 32 (1969), p. 248.
41 Smith, "A Historical Look at Business Archives," p. 275.
42 Linda Edgerly, "Business Archives Guidelines," *The American Archivist* 45 (1982).
43 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
44 Smith, "A Historical Look at Business Archives," p. 275.
45 Edie Hedlin, *Business Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago, 1978).

Management. By 1980, the SAA's business archives directory listed over two hundred business archives and sixty corporate archivists.

While the developments described by Smith and Edgerly provide for cautious optimism for the future, archivists must also be concerned about recent changes in the corporate world. Heated business competition, borne of deregulation and the pursuit of limited resources in a time of recession, has contributed to a cost-conscious environment which has and will continue to reduce funding for business archives. In addition, the old family-owned manufacturing firms, once the primary supporters of archival programmes, are falling upon particularly difficult times as the faltering economy exacts a heavy toll. The expanding service sector will provide some funding for archives but most service sector firms tend to be ahistorical in outlook. Increasing merger activity has reduced interest in individual corporate identities. Such fundamental transformations must be noted by archivists with an interest in the corporate sector and ideas about business archives must reflect these changes. Some proposals for new directions for business archives programmes to meet the challenge of the recent economic climate will be offered later in this article.

Business archives in Canada have not shared the moderate success of their American counterparts. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that corporate archives, largely within major financial institutions and some utilities, began to appear. A number of factors might explain this slow development. Companies in Canada are smaller and lack the resources of the huge corporations in the United States. Many of the larger companies in this country are American subsidiaries and often archival programmes have been established in the head office rather than in the branch operation. Another factor is that business history has not enjoyed the same popularity in Canadian academic circles as it has in the United States. Consequently, there has not been the same impetus to preserve business records.

Like their American counterparts, Canadian historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focussed their attention on political and constitutional matters. There was little scholarly interest in the records of business until well into this century. Even by the 1920s, when Canadian historians began to turn their attention to economic considerations, their interest did not centre on the study of individual firms or industries. Rather it found inspiration in Harold Innis's "staples thesis." Innis attempted to explain Canada's unique development by studying the impact of a succession of staple exports (such as furs, fish, and minerals) upon an evolving nation and its institutions. The "staples thesis" dominated Canadian historiography for many decades and tended to direct historical inquiry away from the study of individual firms or even sectors of the economy which might have employed the use of business records. Furthermore, no academic institution comparable to the Harvard School of Business emerged in Canada to stimulate the study of business history. In 1972, David S. Macmillan lamented that Canada had not shared in the developing interest in business history that had grown over the previous twenty-five years in the United States, Germany, France, Britain, and Australia. He expressed surprise that in Canada, "a country which owes more than most to private enterprise and initiative, there should have been a comparative neglect of business and entrepreneurial history."[46] Business history has not yet become a sufficiently prominent field of study in Canada: there are neither journals nor regular conferences dedicated to its

46 David S. Macmillan, ed., *Canadian Business History* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 1-2.

systematic exploration.[47] Although business history has been slow to develop in Canada, there was an attempt in the 1960s to preserve business records which is reminiscent of the efforts of the Business Historical Society between the 1920s and 1940s.

In May 1968, the Business Archives Council of Canada was established "to encourage the preservation of business records and to promote the study of business history."[48] The council was directed by a national board of seventeen members drawn largely from the academic community. Designed as a forum for promoting discussion between businessmen and historians, the council sought to coordinate the collection of business records in designated regional repositories and the establishment of in-house archival programmes. Unfortunately, the movement "failed to expand its membership or to attract significant sponsorship" and ceased operations in 1973.[49]

The council suffered from the same problems which plagued the Business Historical Society earlier in the century. Businessmen were not convinced of the need to preserve corporate documentation to write history because they expected few tangible benefits to accrue to their firms. In addition, even among academics there was not widespread recognition of the merits of studying business history. The results of a Canadian Historical Association survey in 1982 indicated that only 11 per cent of respondents reported that they had used business archives.[50] This low percentage may reflect a general lack of interest in using business records or may be a function of the current inaccessibility of material. The survey also indicated that business history rated as the most neglected field in the discipline based on the number of respondents drawing attention to the need for further development.[51]

Past experience in both Canada and the United States has underscored the weakness of justifying the preservation of business records primarily to facilitate outside research. Looking beyond the notion of business archives as raw material for the research of historians, Australian archivist R.W. Ferrier urges his profession to

> ...assume a much closer identification with, and incidentally, a more responsible position in, the administrative hierarchy, and a greater participation in the activities of his organization than has previously been accepted. Archivists have previously played a rather passive part in the affairs of firms. This is no longer desirable or feasible; they have a definite contribution to make and they must be given the responsibility and opportunity to make that possible and effective.[52]

Such a transition involves the adoption of an interactive approach rather than the passive collection of historical documentation often evident in the past. This requires that the archivist consider ways in which archival resources might be made more relevant to current operations and adopt a broader notion of the potential applications of the archival programme. Such an expanded outlook would benefit not only business archives but also

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47 During the summer of 1984, the first Canadian Business History Conference was held at Trent University. The conference proceedings appear in the fall 1985 edition of the *Journal of Canadian Studies*.

48 Susan Riley, "Archivists Escalate the War on Paper," *Records Management Quarterly* 3 (1969), p. 29.

49 Peter E. Rider, "Business Archives Notes," *Archivaria* 1 (1975/76), p. 94.

50 Canadian Historical Association, *Newsletter* 9 (Autumn 1983), p. 6.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

52 R.W. Ferrier, "The Archivist in Business," *Business Archives* 37 (1972), p. 18.

those in other institutional settings including hospitals, labour unions, universities, and municipalities.

In assuming a more active role the business archivist should think in terms of marketing strategies. Historically, the term "marketing" has been associated with business firms engaged in "hard-sell" tactics to convince consumers to purchase their products. More recently, however, there has been a shift away from "selling, influencing and persuading, to the concept of sensitively serving and satisfying human needs."[53] More concerned with identifying and providing those products of use to consumers, this orientation has been extended to the non-profit sector and has created a sizeable literature.[54] Business archivists might consider incorporating some aspects of marketing strategies in their quest to provide more tangible services.

An archivist can publicize the establishment of the corporate programme and simply wait for the representatives of the various departments to avail themselves of his service, but this is not likely to occur. Instead, it is incumbent upon the archivist to identify potential uses of archival resources and proceed to communicate them to his diverse corporate audience. To accomplish his goal, the archivist begins traditionally by acquiring a sound knowledge of the organization of the company and the strengths and weaknesses of its collection of archival records. He then must identify the numerous potential markets within the organization, and finally he must package his "product" to suit the particular requirements of potential users. Pricing the product is an important consideration in this undertaking. Pricing here does not refer to costs in normal monetary terms but may be measured in the length of time required to retrieve requested information. John Curtis and Stephen Abram have observed that "value added in the information age is created through access to information more than the information itself."[55] Consequently, the position of corporate archivist should not be entrusted to a long-time employee with an interest in the history of the company. Instead it should be filled by a professional archivist with a firm understanding of archival principles and information retrieval. This, perhaps, is the most important aspect of archival operations, for without effective and efficient access to information, the value of a programme is severely limited.

A final and key element in approaching the operation of a corporate archives from the marketing perspective is the need to maintain close links with the various departments throughout the organizational hierarchy. This is necessary so that the archivist can monitor changes in requirements brought about by the inevitable corporate reorganizations. In establishing "feedback systems," the archivist is able to refocus his efforts and adapt his productivity accordingly. Failure to be sufficiently responsive in an ever-changing environment might prove fatal to an inflexible archival programme. Such interaction with the various departments on a regular basis would also aid in the formulation of archival appraisal criteria. In monitoring information requests, the archivist can develop a clearer perception of those records deemed important to the operation of the organization and likely to be of permanent archival value.

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53 Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy, "Broadening the Concept of Marketing," in Patrick J. Montana, ed., *Marketing in Non-Profit Organizations* (New York, 1978), p. 13.

54 Three representative examples of this literature include, Christopher H. Lovelock, ed., *Readings in Non-Profit Marketing*, (1978); Philip Kotler, *Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations* (1975); Patrick J. Montana, ed., *Marketing in Non-Profit Organizations* (1978).

55 John Curtis and Stephan Abram, "Special Corporate Libraries Planning for Survival and Success," *Canadian Library Journal* 40 (August 1983), p. 227.

Corporate archival programmes have enjoyed a wide range of clientele. Linda Edgerly observes that the archives serve company chairmen and corporate officers as well as "attorneys, economists, systems analysts, production experts, scientists and others interested in industrial research, marketing and advertising specialists, stockholders, scholars and journalists."[56] In the course of serving company officers corporate archival programmes may contribute to policy formation, legal matters, advertising campaigns, public relations, employee orientation, historical studies, information management, and other activities of the company.

The commonplace notion that old solutions may apply to current problems has application to the use of business archives. As H.L. White has noted, it is no longer possible for senior executives to pass on necessary knowledge and experience by word of mouth because they require "actual evidence of how things were done, what problems were faced and how they were overcome."[57] George Smith also observed that "what ultimately gives managers confidence in their decisions is their accumulated knowledge of the way things work — their experience. Out of their sense of the past managers necessarily formulate visions for the future."[58] An archivist occupies an advantageous position. He may assume an active role in the development of managerial policy based on past activities as documented in the archival records and, in so doing, nurture the growth of a corporate memory. A company depends on its memory for efficient functioning for it "relies on its own records and information systems to provide management with incisive documentation upon which to base decisions."[59] The corporate archivist must be able to provide records involving past decisions and, more broadly, to document the context and circumstances within which these decisions were rendered. Through these actions, the archivist might effectively contribute to modern decision-making.

The corporate archives may be used to provide documentation for patents, articles of incorporation, records of mergers, and other material of importance to the legal department. For instance, the Walt Disney archives has been called upon numerous times to provide evidence of the company's previous use of characters and trademarks which have been knowingly or unknowingly violated.[60] An archives can save a company a great deal of money by providing evidence for legal cases involving trademark litigation, class action suits, and so on. The maintenance of important corporate records in a proper archival system ensures prompt access to required information and minimizes the time spent searching for needed information.

The advertising department may also benefit from the holdings of an in-house archives. One classic example is the Ford Motor Company archives which preserves a letter sent to the company in 1934 by gangster Clyde Barrow. Extolling the virtues of Ford's V-8, Barrow indicated that he stole one whenever possible. His testimony later formed the basis for a Ford advertising campaign.[61] In a more general vein, marketing and business history

56 Edgerly, "Business Archives Guidelines," p. 269.

57 H.L. White, "Preserving the Past is Good Business," *Bulletin of the Business Archives Council of Australia* 1 (n.d.), p. 2.

58 George Smith and Laurence E. Steadman, "Present Value of Corporate History," *Harvard Business Review* 59 (1981), p. 164.

59 Dennis F. Morgan and Maryanne Nawoczenski, "Memory Loss: Combatting Corporate Senility," *Records Management Quarterly* 19 (July 1985), p. 6.

60 David R. Smith, "A Mouse is Born," *College and Research Libraries* 39 (1978), p. 493.

61 Douglas A. Bakken, "Corporate Archives Today," *The American Archivist* 45 (1982), p. 283.

professor R.W. Pollay argues that archival material could be useful to companies on a daily basis:

> Records which allow for the easy identification of previous marketing strategies and tactics can serve a number of functions for the account executive or creative teams working on a client's account. They serve as an excellent source of material to rapidly brief a new member of the account team. They permit a long-term continuity or marketing strategy as opposed to changes in direction with every change in personnel. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, they allow for the accumulation of knowledge about the product, its consumers and its promotions, thereby permitting advertising efforts to become increasingly effective.[62]

Broad categories of material must be retained to realize these goals including "legal and other formal records, documents showing client relations, campaign development and execution, items showing technology, publicity, correspondence and ephemera."[63]

Corporate archives can also aid in promoting better public relations.[64] Wells Fargo, for instance, relies heavily on its history/archives department to emphasize its ties with the early American West and pony express and to project an image of reliability and long service.[65] Other corporate archives, after implementing satisfactory access policies, have permitted some outside researchers to utilize designated corporate records. This often contributes to a greater sense of understanding between the company and the general public and may help to mitigate the lingering distrust which has more or less carried over from the muckraking era.[66] The archivist serving in a position of public relations must respond to requests for information emanating from company personnel or individuals outside the organization. The archivist can go beyond merely providing documentation and become an active participant in its utilization. By understanding the complex material stored in the archives, the archivist may suggest directions for certain projects undertaken by the advertising or public relations departments.

An archival programme can play an important role in employee orientation. At Walt Disney, where great emphasis is placed on the tradition, image, and character of the organization, all new employees are sent to the archives to participate in an orientation programme. They learn about the history and development of the organization and, thereby, acquire an appreciation of the company's past accomplishments.[67] Knowledge of the historical evolution of a corporation enhances the ability of the employees to

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62 Richard Pollay, "Maintaining an Archives for the History of Advertising," *Special Libraries* 69 (1978), p. 149.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 150-51.

64 Richard Eells, "The Corporate Image in Public Relations," in William T. Greenwood, ed., *Issues in Business and Society* (Boston, 1964), p. 107.

65 Margaret Price, "Corporate Historians: A Rare But Growing Breed," *Industry Week* (23 March 1981), p. 87.

66 In a recent book, Douglas Dickson observes that business over the years has failed to meet adequately the challenges posed by public relations. In the past, companies, suspicious of the motivation of the public, have either resorted to secrecy to repress information about operations or have tried to "whitewash" their actions by manipulating public opinion and using public relations to obscure the facts and cover up their mistakes. Dickson argues that companies should instead be engaged in candidly relating their experiences and gradually building up the respect and trust of the public which would then be able to withstand any future crisis. See Douglas Dickson, ed., *Business and Its Publics* (New York, 1984).

67 Smith, "A Mouse is Born," p. 494.

understand current circumstances and also appreciate future developments. David Clutterback suggests that both archives and museums provide "a sense of job security that comes from knowing the organization has a long and successful history."[68]

Corporate archives can also provide a unifying force particularly within large companies. Because archivists interact with all levels of the organization in fulfilling their mandate to acquire the permanently valuable records which chronicle the activities of the entire company, they provide a focal point to integrate the diverse functions of large operations. In providing something of an overview of the company, archivists can present a greater sense of understanding and unity. Archival programmes could contribute toward the development of a strong corporate culture which is one of the major features of successful companies identified in recent books such as Thomas Peter's *In Search of Excellence.*

Simply defined, corporate culture is "a set of values and beliefs shared by people working in an organization. It represents employees' collective judgments about the future based on past corporate records and punishments, villains, myths, successes and failures."[69] A clearly defined corporate culture gives employees a better understanding of their position within the corporation and of the jobs they must perform. In organizations with weak corporate cultures, employees lack security and confidence in their jobs and tend to waste time figuring out exactly what they should do. As one observer of the role of information in the corporate culture suggests, "Organizations characterized by weak corporate cultures do not provide an environment conducive to change and adaptation. Different parts of the company may be working at cross purposes; employees worry more about politics than getting the job done."[70]

There is a place for the use of archives in company publications. The average annual report consists of an income statement and balance sheet and reviews other areas of progress over the past year primarily for the benefit of the stockholders. However, annual reports often circulate to employees and the general public. Annual reports have become increasingly noted for their "pictorial excellence and general readability, in contrast with their solid statistical nature in former years." This has led to a growing recognition of their public relations value.[71] Careful use of archival photographs and preparation of articles based on past company records could enhance their message. This would not only provide a change from the necessary statistical information but would also yield a sense of the company's pride in past achievements and convey a sense of stability. The use of archival material is particularly appropriate in the commemoration of special events including corporate anniversaries, significant acquisitions, or important retirements.

More broadly, an obvious advantage of implementing an archival programme is to ensure the preservation of those permanently valuable corporate records necessary to write an objective history of the firm in the future. Merely retaining the documentation is not sufficient to write an accurate history. Archival material must be systematically collected, thoughtfully arranged, and carefully indexed to ensure maximum access. The preparation of an objective history may produce an important corporate tool. Executives

68 David Clutterback, "Turning the Relics of the Past Into Today's Assets," *International Management* 32 (1977), p. 65.
69 Miriam A. Drake, "Information and Corporate Cultures," *Special Libraries* 75 (1984), p. 263.
70 *Ibid.*, p. 265.
71 *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Systems and Procedures* (1966), p. 31.

could more readily appreciate the company's history in order to assess better the current state of the organization, if they are armed with knowledge of past successes and failures. A balanced approach would remind the public that even large companies are directed by people subject to human failings. Of course, the preparation of a corporate history should not be the principal raison d'être of an archival programme. Company executives are easily tempted to believe the value of the past can be periodically summarized in histories written at important anniversaries or similar junctures. Such thinking often defeats rather than supports the proper purpose and use of archives.

Several authors have tended to restrict archives to a role in the provision of historical services.[72] For example, although he recognizes that it is not sufficient for archivists to make claims for the intrinsic value of history, George Smith urges them to formulate historical problems and develop "historical products and services that bear on current concerns of business management."[73] While certainly an important aspect of an archival programme, one might question whether in fact the archivist is bound only to the provision of historical services and products. In a corporate setting, archivists' knowledge and skills lead them to a role in records and information management. The vital function of the archivist in the corporate environment, as elsewhere, is appraisal. Effective use of archives requires early and accurate identification of permanently valuable records. The split between records management and archival functions in the 1950s and 1960s has tended to disguise the fact that effective disposition of records transcends the boundaries between current, semi-current, and archival records. There is but one resource to manage. Archivists must participate with other managers and users of the records in the preparation of retention and disposal schedules as much in the business as well as in the public sector.

The proposed transition from a passive, history-oriented perspective to an interactive administrative role for the archivist does not imply a reaction against the historical profession or the historical underpinnings of archival development. On the contrary, history has been and will remain a vital element in the training of future archivists. What is proposed here, however, is that the archivist be something more than an historian. Necessary training for those interested in corporate archives might include archival administration, history, records and information management, automation, and business practice. The need to strive for a more comprehensive foundation for the profession is not unique to archives. A recent article by Lawrence J. McCrank strongly urged public historians to keep pace with the burgeoning array of information services jobs and the necessity for history programmes to "change substantially to accommodate more ancillary studies not traditionally identified with history."[74] While embracing the new electronic technologies, McCrank stressed the importance of historians studying information

72 There are a number of articles which have explored the use of corporate history as a management tool. More recent examples include, Enid Hart Douglas, "Corporate History — Why," *Public Historian* 3 (1981); Richard Foreman, "History Inside Business," *Public Historian* 3 (1981); George Smith and Lawrence E. Steadman, "Present Value of Corporate History," *Harvard Business Review* 59 (1981); George Smith, "Dusting Off the Cobwebs: Turning the Business Archives into a Managerial Tool," *The American Archivist* 45 (1982); Julia N. Eulenberg, "The Corporate Archives: Management Tool and Historical Resource," *Public Historian* 6 (1984); Candace Floyd, "The Historian in the Grey Flannel Suit," *History News* (May 1984); Thomas A. Rumer, "Corporate History Can Be Public Relations Gold," *Public Relations Quarterly* (Fall 1984).

73 George Smith, "Dusting off the Cobwebs: Turning the Business Archives Into a Managerial Tool," *The American Archivist* 45 (1982), p. 288

74 Lawrence J. McCrank, "Public Histories in the Information Professions: Problems in Education and Credentials," *Public Historian* 7 (Summer 1985), p. 8.

science, records management, and archives administration to prepare them best for future careers.[75] If such a direction is appropriate for public historians, is it not safe to argue that archivists too should look beyond the confines of traditional historical training for archival work?

Adopting an expanded perception of archival functions will help to promote the idea of archival programmes in the corporate world, but other problems still remain. One of the most obvious difficulties in studying the subject is the dearth of practical business archives literature, particularly in Canada. The general absence of case studies renders it rather difficult to make any definitive statements about how corporate archives have developed or where they might be heading in the future. The best Canadian study to date is by Chris Norman, who reviewed the development of archival programmes at Ontario Hydro and the Labatt Brewing Company. Although Norman focussed on the link between business archives and the writing of business history, he pointed out the need for archivists to interact with other levels of the organization and empasize the administrative services to be offered to the company.[76] Norman also stressed the importance of the archives becoming an "integral part of a records programme, whereby newly created documentation of an enduring nature can be identified and ultimately incorporated into the company collection."[77]

Ironically, both the Ontario Hydro and Labatt archives have scaled down and/or reorganized their operations since Norman's article appeared. Archivists need to know more than we do now in order to understand why corporate archives fail to thrive. Most existing literature on the subject tends to belabour the obvious — business archives are a good thing and we ought to encourage more businesses to establish them. A few others grapple generally with the problems corporate archives face or the success they have enjoyed. We need to determine how programmes are started, what their goals are, and what successes and failures have been encountered in the pursuit of these goals.

If past attempts to justify the establishment of corporate archives primarily as a tool for historical study have met with only limited success, then surely archivists must look beyond the purely historical justifications and consider other tangible contributions which might be made to the current operations of the corporation. While certainly not unimportant, the cultural aspects of business archives should be combined with other potential administrative functions. This is not, however, to suggest that corporate records should be maintained exclusively for the use of the company. For the value of preserving corporate material would greatly diminish if it were not ultimately made available for outside research. Part of any progressive archival programme will certainly include an effort to overcome persistent concerns about the release of corporate records to outsiders. The question, then, is really one of priorities — first showing the company the tangible administrative returns possible from an archival programme in order to secure the necessary funding. Thereafter, the archivist can work within the organization to secure eventual access for outside researchers.

The transition from a passive, history-oriented operation into an integrated, recognized business activity does not require that the archivist be transformed into a cost-effective

75 *Ibid.*

76 Chris Norman, "Business Archives and Business History," *History and Social Science Teacher* (December 1983), p. 93.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

technocrat. Instead, the archivist's objective is to help instil a rounded concern for the efficient management of current and semi-current records and the preservation of the necessary archival documentation to chronicle the company's growth for the firm's own sake and for the benefit of society at large.

The corporate world has been one of the toughest environments for archival programmes to establish footholds and certainly many problems remain. Among these are matters of access, the fear on the part of some that the establishment of in-house archives must jeopardize archival integrity, and the extent to which the archivist should endeavour to transcend the traditional barrier between archives and records management. Despite the difficulties which persist, reality dictates that businesses must be convinced to preserve their own records. Consequently, archivists must strive to formulate a progressive view of archival programmes. By developing new strategies and functions for archival programmes within their respective organizations, business archives (and archives in general) can become something less of a "hard sell."