

## RECORDS OF THE CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY

by  
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My paper on "Canadian National Railway Records", written in October, 1963, and recently published in the Special Transportation Issue of the **Business History Review**, Spring, 1965, provides some of the material for this paper, which aims at bringing that progress report up to 9 June, 1965. That paper was aimed at the business manager. Here, an archivist is attempting to speak less formally with fellow archivists. To the business manager, I suggested that there was something to be said for the idea that a business was not only responsible for living within the law, for remaining financially accountable, but also for accepting, within limits, some "historical accountability". A means to indicating such good corporate citizenship would be through the deposit of its basic records not in current use, in some appropriate archival depository where access could be granted to responsible scholars. The usual public records act concept cannot be applied to business records. Trade secrets, competitive information and the like must be protected. But the historic fact is that the excesses of the muck-rakers of another day have forced the business administrator to hide his important and valuable contributions to our lives and times under a bushel. The time is long past due when the contributions of the business community to our way of life should be fairly delineated.

There are, of course, other, shall we say, subliminal suggestions in that paper. For example, no business man will fail to call in a lawyer when he faces legal problems, an economist when he wants to plan his firm's future activity, an engineer or architect for a great variety of production and construction problems. Why not an archivist when records forestall progress?

But, let us turn rather briefly to the Canadian National records experience, with which I am more immediately concerned. It would be well, however, to indicate in advance that what is offered here is not presented as a pattern. Perhaps it can be characterized as an account of the manner in which a corporation, charged with solving transportation problems, has faced up to unavoidable archival problems.

CN President, Donald Gordon, wrote in the foreword to volume 1 of G. R. Stevens' history of the CN predecessor companies in 1960, "I had no sooner assumed office than I realized the historical background of Canadian National Railways to be of great interest and importance . . . I felt it essential that I and my officers should have such records available. It also seemed to me that Canadians should be told how so many and such varied properties came into their possession . . . We intend to place this great body of material, which covers not only the railways but their political, economic and social background, at the disposal of the public."

Able scholars and writers have narrated the story of the Canadian National and its predecessor corporations in much more than outline, although it is clear enough now that there are major gaps in that story for which documentation exists.

There were a number of things which encouraged action on CN records collections a few years ago. G. R. Stevens had been at work for most of ten years in preparation and writing of his two volume history of the CN predecessors (1836-1922) and difficulties of access to records not in current use had become evident. The introduction of work study techniques, of records and other management surveys, of organizational studies, of operational research techniques and the like, had led to the adoption of a systematic records disposition program, to the establishment of a modern Records Service centre and to the adoption of a Canadian version of the Interstate Commerce Commission Regulations concerning particularly, the disposition of records. Some concern, that historical materials might be caught up in the orderly destruction of records program had been evidenced by the formation of a standing Headquarters Committee for the Preservation of Historical Records.

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Within CN, there had been generated recommendations for the employment of an archivist. My own employment on 1 July, 1962, had some elements of "chance". I began a six weeks cram session on the organization and administrative history of the CN and its predecessors. On the basis of my findings, I recommended a one man archival program on 17 August, 1962, which, I still find a bit surprising, has been followed almost to the letter.

My basic finding was that the predeliction of some key company officers for deposit of company archival material not in current use in the Public Archives of Canada was a sound one. From that premise, most of the remaining recommendations followed quite naturally. The one issue presented to the newly formed Archival Program Policy Committee, the President and the Board of Directors for approval was the question of depositing CN records in the Public Archives of Canada.

My first proposal was that a formal agreement be entered into between the Company and the Dominion Archivist, and that essential procedures be developed for such deposits. The Agreement dated 28 January, 1963, provides that the CN "deposit all archival materials with the Public Archives of Canada." Both parties are to co-operate in the survey and transfer of such materials and in the production of guides to the holdings transferred. CN officials are to have ready access to deposited materials and "period loan" of exhibit material on formal request. The simple procedure for effecting deposits requires that the Archivist recommend, and the Secretary of the Company or the Vice-President concerned, approve such transfer on the basis that they are not necessary for "current" operations. The Comptroller, who under Board of Directors directive, has authority to approve destruction of records, is provided with an information copy of all proposed deposits.

It should perhaps be added that in recommending that the Public Archives of Canada be the depository for CN historical records, we were not unmindful of the research interests of the many regional provincial and local institutions maintaining research libraries, manuscript and archival collections. It was our intention that such interests be served by means of the published guides of the Public Archives and the microfilm and loan services under the established policies of that institution.

The second proposal called for the preparation of and insertion in the **CN Management Guide on Policy and Authority** of a statement on archival policy and authority. A draft is ready but some further studies of staff and operational records are required before its formal adoption will be urged.

The third proposal was for supplementation of the **CN Regulations** governing the destruction of records, with positive regulations for the preservation and orderly deposit of archival materials. A working group has been engaged on this revision most actively during the past month. No drastic or full scale revision is involved at this time. What has been agreed upon to date is that the Archivist will review certain key records disposition proposals, under the **Regulations** rather than by informal arrangement, before the Comptroller authorizes destruction and that certain descriptions in the schedules will be clarified because experience has indicated they can be misinterpreted. I believe it would be fair to say that while progress on this particular proposal has been slow, it has been material, and the gains are in effect, without waiting on the actual issuance of the revised Regulations.

Like most large enterprises, the CN has had considerable experience in the use of electronic data equipment, and present plans call for graduation into a new generation of such equipment within the relatively near future. From the very start of the CN Archival Program, there has been full recognition of the fact that the archival products of the computer can be programmed into the archival depository in miniaturized form as part of the "Management Information System" without the necessity of attempting to retrieve particular print-outs some day in future. I do not anticipate computer-produced minute books, or significant correspondence but I do anticipate that the bulk of the fiscal and operating records and many of the staff records worth keeping will be in the form of print-outs, miniaturized.

My fourth proposition grew out of the fact that over the past century, railway officials have had to have at finger-tips concise legal, organizational, administrative histories of the companies for whose management they were

responsible. The latest of a series of such "For Administrative Use Only" Synoptical Histories of CN companies was nearing completion when I came to the CN and I was drafted into seeing it through the offset press in 1962. Since then, I have found the records of some 35 companies not included in the volume which covers roughly 650 different corporations. Similar historical accounts have been prepared, and the Archivist has responsibility for preparing additions, corrections and changes from time to time. If this huge volume had not been available, the Archivist would have had to write its equivalent. I suppose that one day, he will be called on to do a complete rewrite of the 8004 pages. At any rate, here is the basic material needed for the type of introductory historical sketch normally used in the Public Archives of Canada Guides to the records in its custody.

My fifth proposal was that the Archivist conduct an inventory of extant records in CN custody, giving priority to corporate records and then to staff and operational records. The corporate records inventory was completed for the most part between August, 1962, and 27 March, 1963. Corporate records of companies domiciled elsewhere than in Montreal (St. Albans, Vt.; Detroit; Winnipeg, etc.) were inventoried during the second phase of the inventory, which has been pretty much a full-time activity since January, 1964. In the meantime, the bulk of the extant corporate and operational and staff records prior to 1923 have been forwarded with descriptive inventories to the Public Archives in Ottawa where accession numbers have been assigned, and where the inventories serve as interim finding tools. An index by company name, showing type of record, has been prepared for the first 23 of the 30 deposits forwarded to date. A cumulative index for deposits through the end of this year is planned which will show in addition the inclusive dates for each type of record.

A sixth proposal was to locate and describe in brief guides any significant accumulations of records relating to CN and its predecessor corporations in governmental custody in the possession of other corporations, individuals, and in libraries, or manuscript depositories, other than in the Public Archives of Canada. In the furthering of this objective, many of you may well be of assistance.

The seventh proposal was to collect and list CN and predecessor company imprints. By arrangement, this listing is being done in the CN Headquarters Library. The Archivist's role has been one of locating and placing in the hands of the Librarian, copies of such imprints in quite substantial numbers. Our appeal for such imprints has been to employees and former employees. No funds have been budgeted for purchasing such printed materials. I should add that the CN Headquarters Library, with its Regional offshoots in Moncton, Toronto, and Winnipeg has a remarkably fine collection of materials on all aspects of transportation. No serious scholar in the field will be discouraged from its use, providing it be recognized that operational and planning requirements of the CN must take priority.

During the past two years I have visited major records offices on the System from St. John's, Newfoundland, to Vancouver, British Columbia, in an effort to plan the most effective use of time with the collections of greatest significance. For some months to come, my time will be devoted to the evaluation of something over a box car of the records of the Grand Trunk Pacific, Canadian Northern and Canadian National Colonization, Agriculture and Land Department records, dealing with the townsites as well, from Winnipeg to the Western Ocean.