Georgia Archive

Volume 8 | Number 2 Article 3

January 1980

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In the spring of 1978, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside's Archives and Area Research Center, a cooperative venture of the university and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, undertook a survey of manufacturing records retained by business firms in the two cities which it primarily serves--Racine (100,000 pop.) and Kenosha (85,000 pop.). The two cities have over one hundred firms with fifty or more employees, including such nationally known companies as American Motors Corporation, J. I. Case Company, In-Sink-Erator, Modine Manufacturing, Snap-On Tools, Walker Manufacturing, Western Publishing, and S. C. Johnson and Company. The survey, funded by a grant* from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), was a first step in developing an Archives of Industrial Society, a project that still continues. The university's location in the heavily industrialized area of the Chicago-Milwaukee urban corridor, its commitment to the study of modern industrial society, and the Wisconsin State Historical Society's concern for Wisconsin business history made the project a natural one for the Archives.

One of the major purposes of the project was to test a method for surveying noncurrent business records in a regional context. The project sought to update and expand data about businesses in the region which

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*Anyone wishing a final copy of the grant report, including appendices of items used in the survey, should contact the author.

had been surveyed by the State Historical Society in 1949-1951; to inform manufacturers of UW-Parkside's interest in documenting the industrial development of the area; to locate and identify surviving archival material in the custody of companies; to survey records management practices of the firms; to begin to create an access system to records in private custody; and to persuade firms contemplating destruction of historically significant records either to retain and organize the material permanently or to transfer it to UW-Parkside's Archives.

During the year-long grant period, the Archives staff planned to survey all the major manufacturers in the area, develop inventories of their noncurrent holdings, and persuade firms to retain their historically significant records or deposit them at UW-Parkside. The Archives planned to provide staff to conduct records inventories on the premises of each cooperating company in order to minimize the companies' commitment of personnel to the project. The use of Archives staff for on-site inventories would also produce, both for the company and the Archives, detailed inventories of their noncurrent records.

The project proposal specified the creation of an advisory committee composed of university personnel and business leaders to provide suggestions and to serve as liaison with the business community. The Manufacturing Records Survey Advisory Committee included seven prominent area businessmen, three from Kenosha and four from Racine; seven members of the university community including the project director, associate director, and chancellor; and the state archivist. Business representatives were selected on the basis of the size and significance of their companies, their own role within the corporate structure, their past association with the university, and their commitment to community activities.

During its initial luncheon meeting, hosted by the university chancellor, the committee decided that the survey should concentrate on those seventy-five local manufacturers having 150 or more employees. To introduce the project the staff sent to the chief executive of each firm a letter, a project statement, and a self-addressed stamped postcard requesting the name of a contact person in the company. The letter asked specifically for a contact familiar with all aspects of the firm and associated with the firm over a number of years. After three weeks a second letter was sent to those executives who had not responded. Of seventy-five firms approached, fifty-one responded and forty-three agreed to grant an interview.

From the information provided on the return postcard, the staff developed a contact file listing the company's name, address, contact person, and telephone number for each respondent. The staff later entered in this file summaries of all conversations and other communications with each firm. The contact file was also useful in recording who was responsible as the project moved through various inventory stages.

The initial interview with each cooperating firm's representative usually began with a presentation by the project staff on the purpose of the survey. The staff took a copy of the project statement, a preliminary checklist of business records which the State Historical Society of Wisconsin regards as worthy of retention, and additional information on business archives. The company representative usually reviewed the statement and checklist and raised some general questions about the project. The staff formulated clear answers to potential questions before conducting any interviews.

The staff realized that the interview might well provide the only opportunity to meet with some of the company representatives. Therefore, while trying to persuade a representative to cooperate in the project, the staff also sought information which they might not be able to secure later if the representative declined to participate further. To obtain information suitable for comparison and analysis, the staff developed a series of interview questions. The first set of questions focused on the history of the company, including names of founders or significant company executives and important events associated with the firm's development, the manufacturing interests of the firm, any significant product or marketing diversification, and the focus of the firm's economic activity--regional, national, or international. Interviewers also asked whether the company had produced a history, anniversary publication, or chronology. The second set of questions concerned the firm's records retention practices. This segment of the interview concentrated on determining the existence of a records retention schedule and identification of those charged with its implementation, the rationale governing records retention practices (e.g., legal, administrative, or fiscal), and the physical location of records, their condition, and retrieval methods.

The State Historical Society's checklist of business records proved useful in determining which records business representatives identified as worthy of retention. Participants scanned the checklist, identifying those records which their companies retained, transferred to other corporate sites, or destroyed regularly. As the survey progressed and the first inventory had been completed, the staff was able, during the initial meeting, to introduce this inventory as a sample.* The interviewer also requested copies of available company histories and the current records retention schedule and asked that the Archives be placed on a mailing list for news releases, product brochures, annual reports, and other general information.

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*All specifics which would have identified the company were deleted, however, in order to assure both the cooperating company and the interviewee that confidentiality would not be breached.

Originally the project proposal provided a timetable involving two successive stages. Following the interview stage, during which the staff contacted firms and interviewed the company representatives, the project was to proceed to an inventory stage, during which the staff would physically inventory the records of all participating firms. As the project developed, however, it proved neither practical nor possible to proceed through the stages as they had been planned, especially because some firms asked that inventories be conducted immediately.

The initial interview generally concluded with an invitation to the firm to proceed with an inventory of its records. The staff developed three alternatives for the records inventory: on-site inventorying by the project staff, a company supervised walk-through of storage areas, and a questionnaire. Actual on-site inventory of storage areas by the project staff generated the most accurate and consistent inventories. This method was also the most useful for participants, and in most cases the staff produced the most detailed inventory that had ever been made of the firm's records. Without committing personnel to the project, the firm could get an overview, on paper, of its storage areas and, on that basis, could decide which could safely be destroyed.

On-site inventorying also allowed the staff to gain first-hand information on the condition and quantity of the noncurrent records of businesses. Many companies retain records in a haphazard fashion, often well beyond the periods designated by their own retention schedules. The completed inventories reflect a general disorganization in the retention of department files--a disorganization which could only hamper reference use of these materials, even by company personnel generally familiar with the records.

The on-site inventory method followed standard records management procedures; diagraming each storage area, numbering boxes and cabinets in sequence, and briefly noting the contents and inclusive dates of each. While printed inventory forms were useful at the beginning of the survey to train the staff, none could be used on site without adaptation. Forms used in accessioning records or inventorying smaller collections were not generally useful because of the wide range of material the staff encountered in surveying uncontrolled storage areas.

The second inventory alternative, a walk-through of the company's storage areas by the staff and a company representative familiar with the noncurrent records, allowed the company to supervise the inventory process, restricting those records it considered confidential. At the same time the project staff had an opportunity to view the materials and ask specific questions to determine the description, inclusive dates, and quantities of each record group. The staff then compiled this information into record groups and series.

The third approach involved a detailed questionnaire prepared by the staff and completed by the company representative most familiar with the company's noncurrent records. The questionnaire reflected the staff's experience in conducting its first on-site inventory early in the project, a review of business record inventories in the Division of Archives and Manuscripts at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and the advice of the university representatives on the advisory committee. The final questionnaire was lengthy, comprehensive, and included the major record groups of most manufacturers. For convenience, it was designed to be divided and circulated to company divisions and completed by those most familiar with different noncurrent record groups. Even so, most firms appeared unwilling to deal with areas which were no more than dumping grounds for inactive records. In addition, seeing the exhaustive questionnaire discouraged most interview participants who were unable or unwilling to devote personnel to the project.

In general those inventories generated by questionnaire were the least accurate. In these cases record groups were not consistently described by respondents, and it was difficult for most respondents to assess the approximate quantities of materials retained in each group. Firms frequently provided little or no description of their records, did not estimate annual volume accumulations, and hesitated to indicate which records they filed with the government. A questionnaire, for all its shortcomings, however, may be the only way to obtain information about the records when a firm declines to permit an on-site inventory. Any such questionnaire should be combined with a personal interview or a telephone survey to introduce the goals of the project, the staff, and the potential benefits to participants.

Once the staff finished an inventory or received a completed questionnaire, they prepared a detailed typed copy of that inventory for review by the company's representatives. Some provided information deleted in earlier submissions when specifically asked to do so. Unfortunately, however, most firms did not comment on the draft summaries of their inventories or suggest significant changes. Finally, after incorporating suggestions received from the company, the staff prepared a revised inventory. From the original forty-three interview sessions, the project generated twenty-three inventories, fifteen by questionnaire or walk-through and arranged by record group, and eight by on-site inventory which described records by physical location. Although this represents approximately a 50 percent response rate, the quality of the inventories varied greatly.

There were two major causes of reticence among those businessmen who did not agree to participate in the project: fear of breach of confidentiality and a lack of interest in business history. Businesses were generally willing to disclose the age, volume, and general description of their record groups if they had such information readily available. If they did not, they were often reluctant to permit the project staff to review the records because such a review would obviously require analysis of the records. They appeared fearful that outside personnel might discover and disclose specific information about the firm which might compromise it.

Confidentiality is extremely important to competitive businesses in which reaching or maintaining a given share of the market rides on innovation and tactical maneuvering. The staff consequently took pains to assure businessmen that such detailed information would not be published. To encourage openness and confidence, for example, interviews were not taped although the interviewer did take notes. Immediately following each interview the staff transcribed the notes and summarized the participant's responses to questions.

Most company representatives also questioned the significance of business records to the archival and academic professions and hesitated to release any information about their records, expressing the fear that such documents would be misinterpreted by an outside researcher. Answering these inquiries posed the greatest difficulty for the project staff who had to assure companies that information collected from them would have restricted access while at the same time indicating to the representative that the inventories would serve some purpose. The staff emphasized that it was interested neither in evaluating the financial condition of the firm nor in locating personal information about personnel. The purpose of the survey was rather to determine the kinds of records manufacturers retain, for how long, and in what quantity in order to provide scholars with an idea not only of what records companies feel are important but also what material might likely be available for future research. As the staff became more confident in approaching companies, more expert in fielding their questions, and more experienced in conducting inventories, businessmen showed more willingness to share information.

In seeking the cooperation of business, the assistance of the advisory committee was indispensable. It was crucial to have a committee composed of representatives who came from important firms and who also had a long-standing commitment to the community. Some members of the committee were of considerable help in obtaining the cooperation of survey participants. Four representatives of large concerns, for example, took time to call or write other business acquaintances and encourage them to participate. However, the major effort of persuading firms to cooperate rested with the project staff itself.

While questions about confidentiality seemed to be the major stumbling block to participation, the staff often had to overcome a simple lack of interest by businesses in order to achieve even minimal results. Scholars and businessmen operate from two different perspectives. Corporate executives have little time or interest in lengthy explanations or discussions of an academic venture. To work effectively with them, the archivist must be able to explain his proposal concisely and present a crisp description of how he wishes the respondent to participate, how the results will be used, and how the business might benefit from cooperation. Although some businessmen might be amateur historians by avocation, in their professional role they are concerned directly with the present and future, and most find little utility in retaining detailed records of past performance. In the conduct of business, history is the profit-loss record of the pievious year. To historians and archivists, the view of the past is far different; they are more concerned with preserving and using historical records than in disposing of them.

Generally, potential participants who saw little value in business history would not participate beyond the interview session. An extreme example illustrates the problem. One of the first postcards the staff received came from a manufacturer who agreed to an interview. The contact individual named on the return postcard was the firm's retired treasurer who periodically made an appearance at the corporate headquarters. Unfortunately, the staff did not realize that the interview would not be with this contact person but with the owner of the company, an elderly gentleman who had controlled the firm since its creation. He not only saw no benefits in the project for his company, but actually felt insulted by the entire survey which he regarded as an invasion of privacy. Consequently the interview did not go well and this company did not participate further in the survey. In such a case it is wise to recall that the survey staff also represent the university and any discussion had to be terminated diplomatically.

The project staff later dealt with the corporate secretary of that firm's leading competitor. He routed the questionnaire to all company departments, collated the information, and returned it to the project staff. The staff also received copies of the company's old annual reports and other informational booklets. The firm's responses to questions on the value of business history reflect the ideal attitude which archivists hope to find in the business community, "Educating the public on how companies get started, grow and how they function in general can only benefit the business community."

After six months all of the respondents to the initial letter of introduction had been contacted by phone or in person, and most had been interviewed. At this point the project director convened a second advisory committee meeting to review the progress of the project. During this meeting members of the committee examined a flowchart which indicated those firms which had not responded to either the first or second mailing, those which had participated in an interview, those which had agreed to a records inventory, those which had completed an inventory, and those which probably would not participate in the survey. The committee made plans to contact business acquaintances who may have been hesitant to participate in the survey, to assure them that the project had the support of other executives. In addition, members examined questionnaires and reviewed and commented on the possibilities of using the form as an alternative to the on-site and walk-through inventory procedures. The advisory committee's discussion assisted the staff in evaluating the methodology of the initial survey, in working with reluctant business representatives, and in directing the project through the inventory process.

Part of the budget originally intended for hiring graduate students had not been expended, and the advisory committee felt that the survey might profitably be extended to other businesses including smaller manufacturers and banking institutions. The staff had already invested considerable time in developing a questionnaire, had publicized the project widely, and had established fruitful communication with several members of the business community. To have terminated the project without attempting to see if it had applications beyond the major manufacturers risked sampling too small a cross section of businesses to draw meaningful conclusions.

With NHPRC approval the staff expanded the project. They prepared and mailed a questionnaire and individually typed letters, explaining the purpose of the survey and naming participants from the earlier phase, to forty-five smaller manufacturers which had not originally been included in the survey. This questionnaire was shorter than the original one but had been refined on the basis of information received from earlier responses. In final form it ran two pages, the first presenting general questions on the history of the company, records retention procedures, and the names of those most familiar with the firm's history. The second page listed major business record groups and asked respondents to check those which had been retained.

Only four companies returned completed questionnaires by the requested return date. The staff contacted the remaining forty-one companies and received nine more responses. After consultation with university advisors and a banking representative, the staff developed another version of the questionnaire which was mailed to twenty-three area banks.* The staff received only two completed questionnaires and again conducted a follow-up telephone survey which yielded nine additional questionnaires.

The staff also developed another approach to locating business records using the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's 1949 survey of over fourteen thousand Wisconsin manufacturers, businesses, and retail stores. Using that survey, the 1950 and 1978 city directories, current telephone directories, and information supplied by the advisory committee, the staff identified those local companies which were no longer in operation and compiled a list of possible contacts from those firms. The staff hoped to learn of the existence of any historical records from these defunct or relocated manufacturers. More important, the staff wanted to determine the likelihood of records surviving the demise of an enterprise. The survey letter briefly indicated the purpose of the survey, named some of the participants in the project, and noted the endorsement of the two local Chambers of Commerce. This survey reached forty representatives from fifty-seven defunct companies and generated twenty-two responses of which three indicated that they had any surviving documents. These results indicate clearly the need to acquire business records while companies are still active or are in the process of changing ownership or dissolving.

Throughout the entire project the staff continued to publicize the project through presentations before business organizations and through the news media. Presentations before the Rotary Club and the Kiwanis

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*The survey staff decided to omit savings and loan associations, credit unions, or other commercial lending agencies because most of these in the area are less than twenty years old.

Club made it possible to discuss the survey within the framework of business history and the wide range of subjects for which a knowledge of business and economic history is important. Individual meetings with presidents or executive directors of local Chambers of Commerce and the Manufacturer's and Employers Associations provided the same opportunity. Newspapers published press releases when the project received initial funding from NHPRC and again when the advisory committee was appointed. Contact with a reporter interested in the project produced a full-page story, with accompanying photographs, based on an extensive interview with one of the business representatives on the advisory committee. The effectiveness of such educational efforts cannot be measured, but certainly in conjunction with the entire survey they have informed business leaders of the university's interest in preserving the business history of the region and of the importance which scholars attach to business records. This was one of the project's objectives and it may, in the long run, be more significant than any immediate results.

There is really very little pattern to the responses received from business which might indicate firms most likely to cooperate in a survey. While smaller family-owned companies were often more conscious of their history, larger corporations were generally more willing to participate. Working with higher level company executives usually was more fruitful than working with public relations representatives. Much of the success of the project rested on the ability of the staff to present the survey, defend its legitimacy, and persuade skeptical business executives to participate. The desire of local corporate officials to cooperate with the university, which was expanding its business program, was another contributing factor.

One common ground could be found between the archivist and the corporate representatives: records management. Even corporations uninterested in business history had a general concern for the questions of records retention and records disposal. To be effective both in the interview and actual inventorying, therefore, the archivist should be trained in some basic records management procedure and be equipped to determine the most efficient and consistent manner of inventorying records.

Finally, the task of appraising and acquiring business records from existing firms must be part of an ongoing education process initiated and maintained by interested archivists. Unless archivists deal more directly with business, there is little probability that noncurrent business records will be preserved for future research. Even with such dialogue the immediate prospects are not bright. Yet not to initiate that contact is to abdicate archivists' role as custodian of the significant records of the society of which they are a product.