

A SCHOLAR'S VIEW OF UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Laurence R. Veysey

While working on "The Emergence of the American University, 1865-1910," for my doctoral dissertation in American history at the University of California at Berkeley, I visited the archives of eleven leading universities. My study was an investigation of major trends in thinking about the ideal nature of the university in this formative period of university education in America, and it was also a comparative look at the actual policies and practices of about a dozen leading academic institutions during this fast-changing span of time.

The word "comparative" should be emphasized. The aim was to see all, or almost all, of the major academic establishments side by side, to see what they had in common and in what respects certain of them might truly claim to be unique. It was for this reason that I had an unusually wide contact with university archives.

Many scholars in the past have gone through the archival material for one university, usually their own, and on the basis of it written a history of that particular university. This procedure has resulted in some very fine volumes of academic institutional history, although it has also sometimes resulted in the uninspired chronicles which we are all familiar with, the kind that are often produced for academic anniversaries. When using just one archive, however, the author of such a local history never really knows in what respects he is merely recording what was typical of almost any academic establishment at a certain point in time, or in what respects he is dealing with situations that are unusual and deserve to be singled out for major attention. To try to overcome this difficulty—the sense of handicap that comes from restricting oneself to any single institution, be it Harvard or be it a state teachers college—this speaker set out to use many archives. The experience provided a comparative view of American universities in the late nineteenth century and a similarly broad view of American university archives in the present day.

Before turning directly to the archives as a scholar happened to see them, it should be pointed out how the use of eleven archives, rather than one, contributed directly to a better understanding on my part of the American university in the late nineteenth century. The experience of using the eleven archives together taught me that it is

The author is a faculty member of the Department of History, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

extremely wrong to think of a university archive as relevant only to the history of the institution which happens to house it. For example, it is incorrect to think that the Yale University archive is relevant only to the history of Yale. Because incoming letters more often tend to be saved than do carbon copies of outgoing ones, the average collection of correspondence will tend to be richer in materials arriving from other locations than it will be in materials which reflect the activities of the home base. Now, of course, presidential files contain so much in the way of inter-office memoranda that it would be wrong to underestimate their richness for documenting the histories of their own institutions. But every archive will have wonderful "finds" in terms of letters relevant to the history of other universities. Thus, to name just one example, some of the best material on the University of California in the 1870's and 1880's exists in the form of letters to be found in the James B. Angell papers at the University of Michigan. And in the reverse direction, the George H. Howison papers at the University of California contain some of the most candid descriptions of the Harvard department of philosophy in the days of William James and Josiah Royce, simply because several graduate students at Harvard wrote back to Howison, their undergraduate mentor, with their impressions and observations of Harvard, since Howison was an entire continent away. Or, to take one more case, some of the most major documents in the Edward A. Ross academic freedom case of 1900, which involved the administration of Stanford University, are to be found today in the archives of Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, and, of course, the University of Wisconsin. This point should be rather obvious since all it means is that university presidents and professors were constantly writing to each other. But the result is that just about every major university archive should be combed by anyone doing a history of any other university. Or, to put it another way, each university archive is an extremely valuable depository of information, potentially at least, for every other major academic institution.

This fact has certain further consequences. For one thing, it means that unfavorable and controversial documents cannot be restricted or held from view nearly as easily as might otherwise be assumed. The university which restricts access to some of its own holdings cannot be assured that scholarly silence will result; instead, it must be prepared to accept the consequences of a history written on the basis of the materials which can be found at other archival locations. This material, by its nature, is often more gossipy and less fair to the institution's side of the story than is the material to which the institution is restricting access in its own archives. Thus the fact that incoming letters make all archives relevant to the history of all academic institutions means, in the first place, that there should be a reduced incentive on the part of any archive (or any academic

administration) to inhibit the use of its own archival material. To do so may only result in a poorer, more distorted history being written on the basis of the fascinating but partial material which is available in other locations.

But, secondly, the fact that no archive tells just one institution's story has another, more important consequence. It means that every university archive should be conceived as a depository of materials which are national, not local, in scope. There is a frequent tendency, illustrated perhaps most splendidly at Cornell, to link university archives with local or regional history. Often this is a thoroughly logical combination in terms of practical and budgetary considerations, and it is also true that much of the material in an academic archive does tend to have only a local value. But this is not the whole story, and in fact I am going to argue that this is not an archive's most important role. Again the incoming correspondence, which indeed may sometimes even be world-wide in scope, makes any academic archive a national institution. Every scholar, every professor is part of a national network of scholarship in his own area or discipline—indeed, especially in the sciences, part of a world network. Every administrator, every president is similarly part of a national network of academic institutions, public and private, which have all sorts of mutual ties and relationships. Even a memorandum which is purely local and intra-campus in its apparent scope may illustrate a method of handling a certain problem or of setting a policy on a basic matter which will strike the academic historian as having truly national significance. Or, to put this last point another way, both the similarities and the variations which purely "local" material of any sort may reveal have a very broad significance. In this respect academic history is not different from economic history or the history of religion. The records of a local business firm, or of a local church, may hold some interest in terms of the particular community of which they are a part. But they are more apt to be prized for the light they throw on how an enterprise or how a religious congregation conducted itself at a certain period of time in America. And it is precisely this sort of significance which is the most important one, in all probability, for the files of most academic institutions. In summary, any university archive is an archive of at least national scope, and in two different ways—first, because of its incoming letters, which actually document the history of geographically distant people and institutions; second, because of the broader illustrative significance of material which may seem, at first, to be merely local material. Now, of course, in practice all this will depend on the richness of holdings of an archive. But even a new archive, beginning with nothing, will soon have material in it of this potentially broader significance. In fact, it is almost inevitable, for American universities are going to be extremely interesting institutions in the late

twentieth century, and not all the excitement is going to escape being set down on paper. Any institution, new or old, is going to be part of this American academic landscape of the late twentieth century. Fifty or a hundred years later, the "local" significance of the material saved in a new archive may have vanished, along with the last survivors who can remember the individuals involved. But these "local" records are the stuff of which national social and institutional history is later constructed.

This brings us to a final point suggested by the research I did in the history of the American university in its formative period. Each university archive is a gold mine for the histories of other academic institutions and is deserving of a national rather than local conception of its role, regardless of how young an archive it is. In addition, the value of university archives for research in intellectual history—the history of ideas—as distinct from the history of institutions should be emphasized. Here, of course, interest centers on the collections of the papers of prominent professors housed in archives. Although the late nineteenth century was a period when it was easy to get a speech published in pamphlet form if you were a professor, since printing costs were cheap, it is surprising how many speeches—some in typescript and some in longhand—from that time one encounters in archive collections which were probably never published in any form. For the natural scientists and the social scientists, especially, these unpublished speeches, which exist only in the archives, are of great value for the historian of ideas. For example, the papers of Thomas C. Chamberlin are at the University of Chicago. An astronomer and geologist, Chamberlin had an extremely keen mind and gave many addresses, a number of which were not published, in such areas as the relations between science and religion. It is only thanks to the archive at the University of Chicago that the philosophical observations of this unusually important and alert figure in the natural science of his day have been preserved. Then, too, one finds a good deal of material relevant to the history of ideas in letters as well as speeches. All in all, the university archives, when they preserve faculty papers as well as presidential and official files, are major repositories of source material in American intellectual history. As this fact becomes more apparent, the use of the archives from this point of view is bound to increase.

Here a practical suggestion or two should be interposed. The first is a rather general one, namely that a university archivist should be especially active in soliciting materials—personal papers—from the academic faculty, as distinct from the official record-keeping organizations in the university. These need not be the papers of well-known or famous professors. One of the most important gaps I sensed in visiting archives was in precisely this area, particularly

for professors of the late nineteenth century. Only at Harvard, and to a lesser extent at Yale, Columbia, Cornell, Wisconsin, and Chicago, are the materials truly rich in this area. It is too late to do much about the late nineteenth century in this respect, but many of the most interesting American professors are still very much alive today, either teaching or in retirement, and they should be encouraged to turn over papers to the archives. The late twentieth century, into which we are moving, is going to be regarded as one of the richest and most fascinating periods of American history, and in particular of American intellectual history. It is not too late to begin capturing and preserving a record of the life of the mind as it goes on in the universities of this period. Nor is it only a few very well-known faculty people whose papers—that is, personal correspondence, speeches, and so on—are worth preserving. We need a sense of the average as well as a record of the great and the unusual. Fifty and a hundred years from now, historians will want to know what it was like to have been a professor in late twentieth-century America. They will want to know what professors did and what they thought, in not just one but every conceivable academic discipline. It may seem a bit far-fetched, but just as at Harvard, every professor who is given a tenure position at a university should be contacted by the archivist, at the time he is given tenure, and urged to donate his papers to the university archive, either upon retirement or in his will. Meantime, if that has not been done, and there is a backlog of living professors of all ages who have not been contacted by the archivist for this purpose, these people should be appealed to systematically. Of course a professor has every right to destroy his personal papers. But enough men will doubtless be willing to donate them, perhaps after preliminary weeding, to make the archives far richer than they now seem to be in this kind of material.

In answer to this suggestion, it may be objected that facilities are not available for housing and maintaining the papers of large numbers of professors, which would multiply enormously as the years passed. To this sort of objection I can only reply that the storage problem is a physical one which falls outside the scope of my remarks (And microfilm works wonders, of course.). It can only be stressed that it would be greatly desirable to get such a large-scale program under way, within the limits of whatever means are available. It is the papers of professors which will, without a doubt, be given the highest value by the scholars who make use of archives during the decades to come. This is not just because the men who will use the archives and write the histories are themselves professors, and so have a biased inclination in that direction. Instead it is because of the basic fact that academic institutions are far more similar to each other than are academic disciplines. Therefore,

although the official files and papers which record the progress of an institution are extremely important, there does ultimately tend to be a sameness about them which will make them relatively less interesting a hundred years from now. Of course, the official files of an institution should be preserved in the archive. And these files, with their value for the administrative history of that institution, have an importance which far transcends the level of merely local history. But these official files, from president, dean, and regents or trustees, will ultimately have far less that is distinctive, original, imaginative, and exciting in them, than will a similar amount of cubic space devoted to professors' papers. And, furthermore, in practical terms, the official files are usually easy to get. Indeed, at a few institutions one faintly begins to suspect that the archive has been made little more than a kind of attended storage vault for such materials.

For these reasons, it is urged that archivists go about actively seeking to balance collections with the papers of professors, in as wide a variety of the disciplines as possible. For it may be well argued that the highest function of a university archive is to attempt to preserve as full a record as possible of the thinking that has gone on at a particular campus. This means a record of the thinking of professors, in the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. It also means a record of the thinking of administrative figures about the nature and role of the institution they superintend. Because the academic disciplines are more varied, one from another, and because their thinking tends to be more abstract, a record of academic thought will be given the highest degree of attention a half century or a century from now. And this record of academic thought will be most of all a professorial record. It is here where a better job could be done by the university archives than is now being done at most campuses.

Soliciting the papers of the faculty on a large scale is one important way of correcting this imbalance. There are other ways too. One is by making a better effort to gather the published speeches and articles of local faculty members, as part of an archival undertaking. Very often when such speeches appear in obscure or unlikely places, they are going to be overlooked later. This is one rather easy means of expanding the archive's holdings in the area of professorial thought. All members of the local faculty might be asked to send one reprint of each of their publications to the university archive as a regular matter of policy, to be enforced by frequent reminders, and excepting only major books which are easily accessible in a library. Also, the equivalent of a local oral history project devoted to professors should be started. Now that tape is so easy to use and to store, there is every reason to collect academic thought in this form. Here, of course, a problem presents itself concerning the selection of a

willing and able interviewer. Because many archivists would not feel themselves qualified to do the interviewing, and because most professors might find it difficult outside their own disciplines, this program may be difficult to launch. But if there is anyone available in a particular discipline who will interview some of his colleagues, the result may repay all the labors involved. Indeed, one could picture a kind of forum, or group discussion, participated in by all the members of a department at a particular institution. In such a discussion, recorded by tape, the department members could engage in a free appraisal of the state of their own discipline, and even (if there were a sufficient atmosphere of trust) an appraisal of their own university! In this last connection, though, perhaps the results would be more honest and more comprehensive if such a group were to appraise other universities and simply skip over their own!

These, then, are a few specific ideas about how one might try to correct the existing overbalance in most university archives in favor of administrative materials, and instead center the archive to a larger extent on faculty materials. But we should be less concerned with the techniques than with the basic point that it is the worth of the archive for intellectual history, primarily for the history of the various academic disciplines, which is going to be the most permanent worth of any university archive. If the university presidents of our own day were commanding figures such as Charles W. Eliot or Woodrow Wilson, this judgment might be less confidently rendered. But, as things go, there appears to be no doubt that the faculty as a group will seem far more interesting than academic administrators as a group, when both are glimpsed in retrospect a hundred years from now. Furthermore, the materials dealing with the various academic disciplines will contain far more excitement per pound, so to speak, than materials dealing with the pyramid of academic bureaucracy.

The various observations and suggestions made up to this point stem from my particular experiences as a researcher, visiting archives in order to gather material for a dissertation. During this experience, however, I learned something about the universities' history and also about twentieth-century American university archives. Therefore, let me present a direct view of university archives, at least as they struck one scholar not too long ago.

When traveling from archive to archive in 1960, usually spending somewhere between one and three weeks working in each, it was possible to compare the archives of the major institutions. The requirements of my research were essentially the same everywhere, so as I kept posing the same questions and demands I could not help noting variations in the way these demands were met. Now, of course, I was treated courteously almost everywhere, and in most cases the archival staff went out of its way to be of help. So I do not mean

variations at that level. But there were fairly well-marked variations in terms of what might be called the style and atmosphere of a university archive. In fact, when my trip was finished I felt that the archives in which I had worked could be classified into three basic types, each quite different from the others. The first type could be called the "old shoe" archive, an archive with a well-worn, comfortable, traditional flavor, where nothing is too tidy and yet everything fits and is easily accessible. The "old shoe" archive is usually run by one person who gives it a strong sense of individual dedication and direction and who has been around for a long time, and knows many of the professors, perhaps even the presidents, from personal contact. This person knows from memory where everything is located and, not only that, has a fairly pronounced idea of how much use it has. Stepping into this kind of archive, one has the feeling of entering into the archivist's own domain—a domain that is almost personal in its character. The archivist has brought this world into being and, perhaps even a bit jealously, stands guard over it, maintaining its integrity against the sense of intrusion. Usually such an archivist has a deep sense of loyalty to the institution.

In contrast to the "old shoe" archive, the second type of archive was marvelously well appointed. The "old shoe" archive had usually been down at the heels; not the second kind, though, which is peculiar to the East Coast, so far as I know, and which might be called the "Ivy League" archive. Here the custodianship of documents has been associated with a literary quality of prestige. The archive is arranged with what might be called an Anglican air of formality. Whereas the "old shoe" archive had been an almost private world, reflecting the personal knowledge and will of the archivist, the "Ivy League" archive was a public domain, a world of portraits and portfolios on open display. Here the constant effort seemed to be to make a certain impression. In the "old shoe" archive the visiting scholar had once in a while threatened harshly to intrude into the archivist's day-dreams, but in the "Ivy League" archive the danger was rather that a visiting scholar might in effect regard the contents of the display cases with an ungentlemanly seriousness.

There was, however, a third kind of archival atmosphere, one probably more common than either of the first two. This was what could be called the spirit of the "professional" or "bureaucratic" archive. In the "professional" archive, service is rendered in an impersonal manner to all alike. Files and indexes and coding systems abound. Precision and classification are the watchwords. The archivist is neither a one-man ruler nor a litterateur, but rather an official with certain stated public duties and responsibilities.

These are the three types of archival atmospheres I detected, however, practically no archive partook exclusively of only one set of

characteristics as I have described them. These three types represent tendencies only. For instance, to name only the Harvard archive, whose excellence is so proverbial, one finds at Harvard something of the "Ivy League" sense of dignity and formality, something of the comfortable working atmosphere described as "old shoe," and then, in addition, the best indexing and the best and most elaborate job of classifying materials encountered anywhere on my journey. These last traits are the hallmarks of the "bureaucratic" or "professional" attitude. And most of the other major archives would similarly provide a blend of characteristics, although a bit less strikingly.

Still, these can be recognized as definite types of atmosphere, possibly in libraries as a whole as well as in archives. Which, then, if he had any choice in the matter, would the scholar prefer? Would he find his needs better served by the "old shoe" archive, or by the more genteel one, or finally by the "bureaucratic" one? Emotionally, on first reaction, many scholars would opt for the "old shoe" atmosphere of informality and traditionalism. Bureaucracy is a bad word, and nobody is supposed to like it. But actually, as one thinks the matter over, one begins strongly to suspect that the ideal archive, from the scholar's point of view, might lie about halfway along the spectrum from the patriarchal to the "professional." One certainly does want the respect for efficiency, the sense for arrangement, the careful cataloging, and so on, which are rightly identified with a professional attitude of responsibility. A filing cabinet is better than an archivist's memory, even if the archivist has been around for several decades. Yet on the other hand one also wants the ready knowledgeability about contents, the "feel" for substance, the familiarity with the local scene, and the willingness to cut some corners occasionally on matters of procedure, in order to speed things up reasonably—all of these qualities being identified with what has been labeled the "old shoe" archive. Perhaps, then, halfway in between these imaginary polar opposites one might get the virtues of both and the liabilities of neither. At any rate, it is this sort of blend which most scholars would appreciate.

And this brings me directly to the final point. What does the scholar really want from an archive? How does an archive look to the scholar who is interested in working with its materials? The scholar appears to want two things—first, and more than anything else, efficient working conditions; second, a minimal sense, at least, of warmth and sympathetic helpfulness. But let us try to make the scholar's needs a bit more vivid by picturing the life of such a scholar for instance a graduate student working on his dissertation, as he goes on a research trip which may include university archives.

For the younger scholar, unless he has private means or unusual foundation support, the matter of his budget while on the research

trip becomes all important. The most important single item in his budget is the length of time necessary for the trip. This is time spent away from home, and, unless he has friends to stay with in the city where the research is being done, every day spent in an archive means another night's hotel bill. This rather primitive economic motive lies behind the mood of frenzy which can sometimes overtake the young scholar while he is at work in the archive, particularly if he finds far more material to "get through" than he had first imagined. In order to conquer the most material in the least amount of time, the scholar will make all sorts of fine calculations and what seem like petty demands on the archival staff. First of all, unless he is an extremely slow typist, he will certainly want to type his notes while looking through the documents. He will be concerned as to what hours the archive is open. Indeed, he will often do his long distance traveling (from one archive to another) on a weekend, so as not to waste the hours the archive is open. And of course he will expect documents to be delivered to his desk with a rapidity unknown in European archives—simply because he has experienced the efficiency of American libraries and has based his expectations upon this sort of standard.

Bearing all this in mind, you can probably picture the young scholar arriving on a Sunday evening in the city where the archive is located, checking into a cheap hotel or a rooming house or staying with friends, and getting ready perhaps by going over his notes to recall the various collections he already knows about and wishes to see, figuring in advance the most efficient order of business. Upon arriving at the archives the next morning, he will initially examine the working set-up, inquire about typing, and surreptitiously discover whether he must rent a typewriter from a local shop or whether an extra machine from the archive office will be lent to him, as sometimes is the case. Next he will want to make an informal assessment of the archive's holding in the areas of his own interest. At this stage he will be completely dependent on whatever catalogs, indexes, lists, and so on, the archive has been able to maintain, in conjunction, of course, with the archivist's memory. This process of preliminary assessment may take anywhere from a few hours to a day and a half, depending on the complexity of the categories of information that are relevant to the scholar's research. He is anxious to reduce this time to the minimum, so as to get his actual research under way. Here the existence of intelligent indexes and summaries can be of enormous help. Even a bare list of the names of all the correspondents of a man whose papers are in the archive can help greatly. And it is at this point that the "old shoe" sort of familiarity with the materials on the part of the archivist can really save important amounts of time, hence contribute, ironically enough, to the efficiency that one

also associates with the impersonal card file. When this preliminary process is finished, the scholar will have emerged with a concrete idea of his workload at this particular archive. Usually he will have discovered more material than he originally thought would be relevant, and so his sense of anxiety at getting through the boxes as rapidly as possible will have become heightened.

Next, usually with his typewriter, the scholar will set up what amounts to a production line. The documents will lie on one side, the blank note cards on the other. The scholar will become a veritable machine, plowing through boxes of documents, mentally sorting their contents at a rapid pace into relevant pieces onto his cards. He will usually work as if he were somehow possessed by a demon. All scholars seem to agree that the weeks one spends in archival research are a strange interlude in one's life, a unique form of existence never before experienced and perhaps impossible to duplicate in any other way, even by the often equally intense task of doing a bit of scholarly writing. Perhaps the most accurate way to picture the silent scholar who sits with a remote look on his face at one cluttered table in your archive is to think of him as a combine machine whose owner is being paid at piecework rates, yet for whom there are severe penalties if the quality of the ingestion is allowed to become slipshod. The boxes of documents are rows of corn whose extent had been surveyed at the preliminary stage already described. Now they are being uprooted, sent through the machine, the husks thrown back, and the occasional kernels being gathered onto those note cards. At the end of a good day's work the worker stops wearily, noting with satisfaction both the rising pile of note card kernels by his typewriter's side and also the growing heap of husks—a heap which is in his mind's eye only, since the documents with which he has finished have gradually been returned to the archive shelves.

The closing hour of the archive, incidentally, may not be the end of the scholar's working day while on one of these trips. After dinner the day's note cards may be sorted, so that this task will not pile up at the end. Or the evening may be spent in the main library stacks, running down books and pamphlets which were not obtainable in other university libraries along the way. But this is not the uniform after-hour activity. After one of these days spent as a human combine machine in the archives, the normal reaction is to want to see a movie or else go quietly to bed. Still, the odds are that the scholar averages a longer working day, as well as a more arduous one, than does the archivist. The fact is that, while the archivist is following a relatively steady routine, day in and day out, the visiting scholar who sits in the archive is going through what is for him probably a rather rare experience, a peculiarly intense manner of life which he might well find it difficult to sustain for longer than a few weeks or months at a stretch.

All this, then, has been a plea for understanding. The wandering scholar may seem to have an odd glint in his eye as the archivist observes him; he may betray all manner of symptoms of impatience, or he may at times lose the ability to speak coherently with the human beings who happen to be around him, because he has become so thoroughly immersed in the world of the documents. The archivist should be tolerant. More than this, the scholar will be everlastingly grateful to the archivist for all the small and large things which enable the human combine machine to proceed eight hours a day at top rate of speed. Efficiency, together with sympathetic understanding, is what the scholar most of all seeks from a university archive. This brief description of how the archive figures in the scholar's life should make the scholar's sometimes desperate craving for efficiency seem more comprehensible. If the archivist is aware of the strange, speeded up life the scholar is enduring while on his research trip, the archivist may find it possible to greet his sometimes eccentric requests with exactly that sort of sympathetic understanding which is the best known lubricant for these problems, even if it is not a specifically professional one.

An archive exists, then, both for the actual scholar of the present moment and for the potential scholar of a century from now, as best we can visualize him. The present day scholar will always insist that the archivist's primary duty is to posterity, to that imagined scholar of the next century who may find a meaning in the documents which we are unable to perceive. In the meantime, though, the immediate visitor to an archive will be very much involved in the prosaic problem of obtaining maximum poundage of document inspection for a given hotel bill. To cater to the wants of scholarship, the archivist thus has both a lofty obligation and a seemingly prosaic one. Scholarship asks that documents be actively and carefully collected and preserved; it also asks that they be fed on momentary demand into a human assembly line. Fortunately, the existing practices of the eleven university archives with which I am familiar show that both the long-range and the short-range obligations to scholarship, the major task of document preservation and the minor but vital one of providing an atmosphere of efficiency and human sympathy, are indeed mutually compatible. It is not really necessary to sacrifice either goal to achieve the other. For the task of building and maintaining a university archive has already been done most splendidly in the past, and not just once but again and again. For this fact the scholar of all people has the deepest reasons to be grateful.