

## War and the Record of War

---

History is being made with unbelievable speed; and keeping the record is distracting to archivists whose business it is to see that none of the record is lost. Problems of man power and ammunition supply and food production are not the only ones. War brings headaches to nearly all.

Archivists belong to a profession nearly new. Students, librarians and research workers have only recently become fully aware of the great importance of the keeping of records of public transactions. Busy people do not want to be bothered with keeping the printed or written pages used in their business transactions. It is the business of archivists to see that valuable records are preserved and made available. An important part of that profession is to educate the public to an understanding and appreciation of the value of archival material of many kinds.

The United States has the organization known as the National Archives, and a building costing several millions for keeping the records. Vast quantities of archival material have been taken out of Iowa for housing at the national capital because Iowa had no place to keep the same. New York built a state archival home at a cost of a million or so, after a fire which had burned up war records of a value many times greater than the cost of the new buildings. Illinois did the same. Alabama has a new state archives building.

A national association of archivists is functioning, and national conventions are being held, in association with historical meetings of nation wide scope; the last one was held in Richmond, Va., in October, 1942, to which reference will be made later.

The best we can do is to slip Iowa into the side door to listen and to learn. But real progress has been made in Iowa in the matter of arousing interest in keeping the records. Some day when the results are reckoned up, it will be found that a good start has been achieved.

War records work was commenced actively and definitely, under the shock of the Pearl Harbor disaster, by the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, and it has been continued right along almost without any special facilities. It is essential that this be done. Other states, as well as the federal authorities, are at work on the job. Excellent cooperation has been had from all the various agencies engaged in war work.

Progress in this line has been made possible by the Department having secured for its use, as an annex and addition to the archives department, under lease, a large edifice only a block away from the State Historical building. At best this is only a stopgap, and not nearly large enough; but it is a step in the right direction. Without this annex to the Iowa state archives, less progress would have been possible.

The Iowa State Department of History and Archives had caused to be made sample plans for an archival annex to the present building in harmony with plans adopted at the time of the capitol extension and made a part of the state law. Such a special building will undoubtedly be built sometime, capable of air and heat conditioning, and fireproof, with facilities for the proper conduct of an archives department. But the war upsets all plans.

The United States government was fortunate in that the magnificent National Archives building had been completed and the administrative force set up before the commencement of the war. The sudden and immense increase in record making incident to war preparation has but emphasized the value of the start made. Not least of the good things accomplished has been the formation of a national association of persons interested in archives and the holding of annual conventions.

At the convention of the Society of American Archivists held in Richmond in October last, the conspicuous theme was that of meeting the new problems involved by the advent of war, and especially the relation that should exist between the federal and state archival activities. In view of what is being done in war work, it

was also a matter of much discussion as to how to reduce the volume of records being made.

Among the notable papers read, one by Mr. Robert H. Bahmer, of the Navy department, presented at the outset some startling statistics. In opening, Mr. Bahmer said:

"Of all problems of records administration high lighted by the present expanded activities of the Federal Government none deserve consideration more than those relating to the disposition of records. Those acquainted with the rate of record accumulation prior to the war were rightfully concerned lest the flood of records overwhelm everything and everybody in its path. Today this apprehension has become outright fear. Half a dozen examples will serve to illustrate what has happened as a result of the war.

"We know, for instance, that on February 1 of this year (1942) the Navy department had something like 16,500 four-drawer filing cabinets in use; since February 1 over 5,000 five-drawer cabinets have been issued for use in the filing of records--almost a third of the number in use eight months ago.

"We have a report also from the bureau of supplies and accounts which shows that the quantity of forms issued has almost tripled in the last year, and that an even greater increase will be registered next year. Certain individual forms show even greater increases; a certain inspection report, for instance, had a normal issue of 1,700,000 before the war; this year 15,472,000 copies of this form were used.

"What is happening in the Navy department is not unique; every emergency agency and most of the old line departments are suffering the same growing pains. One need only observe the number of new government buildings, temporary and permanent, erected in Washington during the past two years. The Navy department alone has half a dozen. These buildings are all rapidly filling up with records; and something, I believe, ought to be done now by way of planning for their future. Some-

thing must be done if we are to avoid intolerable confusion at the close of the war."

At the same meeting, Lt. Commander W. F. McCormick, also of the Navy department, spoke at length. One small quotation from his paper will be pertinent. He said we had often heard of "people keeping records;" but in these times it might be changed to "records keeping people;" that is, in many instances, "keeping" them from efforts essential to the successful prosecution of the war.

"The office space occupied by records," he said, "is most important. It has been estimated that there is enough space occupied by government records in Washington to satisfy the square feet requirements of the Navy and War departments under present conditions. It would be most interesting to know the relationship of space occupied by records to space occupied by office personnel on a national basis. Perhaps such comparison would bring home to us the importance of records from a space standpoint. It was most enlightening to learn a short time ago that foreign countries many years ago established definite methods of record control through governmental agencies. The British, for example, have established retention schedules for every record throughout the entire Navy. Perhaps the fact that space was much more at a premium there than has been the case in our country explains why they are ahead of us in this work."

All records of public transactions, whether in war time or peace time, have a potential value as archives, and there is a relation between them all that can not easily be severed. This was the basic thought of the Department in taking up promptly the task of securing all available records as to war activities in Iowa, especially all that relate to the unofficial or semi-official agencies. This work was projected under the aggressive direction of Kenneth E. Colton, of the Department, but just at the time when it was well under way, he was called into the service as a member of the Army of the

United States. At the last moment he attended, on behalf of the Department, the convention of the Society of American Archivists, at Richmond, October 26 and 27, 1942. What follows is a brief and hastily prepared report to the Department from Mr. Colton upon his observations at that meeting.

The meeting convened Monday morning, October 26, R. D. W. Connor, President of the Society, presiding. The morning discussion focused on the problem of planning a permanent program for federal records in the states based upon O. W. Holmes' discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of a regional collection and administration of federal records by the various districts, the advantages and disadvantages of a purely state geographical administration, and the advantages and disadvantages of a purely centralized control in Washington. Although considerable disagreement ensued, the complexity of any combined administration on a state-federal basis seemed clear. This discussion also included the problem of physical housing of records by the national government in Washington. The problem of federal support to state archival agencies in building construction was also explored. The discussion, though not definitely decided, indicated the trend of thought in the national archives. This writer's conclusion is that the choice will lie between expansion of the physical plant at Washington and a state-federal program. The problem involved was the question of state records and state history, because many federal records have no significance outside their geographical application. At this discussion the question: to whom belong the records of the current war agencies, arose. The national archives, it was explained, had not the authority to command any agency as to the disposal of its records. Its only right was that of an inspector of all federal records, hence it seemed clear that the final disposal of these quasi-state and quasi-federal records depends upon the national head of those organizations. The suggestion was made and accepted for favorable consideration by Doctor

Buck of the national archives that state archivists or other responsible public agencies interested in preserving official records be designated as deputy archivists of the national archives. This status, if granted, would permit them to approach the heads of any of these agencies and discuss with them, with legitimacy and authority, the need of the care of their records, and to help plan ways and means of their eventual disposal.

The classification of these quasi records came up several times during the conference and received generally the same answer.

The afternoon session of the conference was extremely pertinent to the Iowa State Department of History and Archives. Lt. Commander W. F. McCormick, U. S. Navy Reserve, discussed in an extremely intelligent fashion the problem of reducing the volume of records and the necessity of distinguishing between the degrees of permanence of department and commercial records. Robert H. Bahmer also of the Navy Department continued to discuss the problems of selectivity of records and means and methods by which papers of varying degrees of administrative importance and historical importance can be distinguished.

Of notable significance were the remarks of Mr. Veneman of the National Committee on Records of War Administration. This committee, working under the direction of the director of the project, is interested primarily in compiling a consecutive record of the administration of our current war agencies, such record to serve as a guide for later study by administrators in peace as well as in other critical periods.

The contrast between some of the needs for a comprehensive study of history and the problems of a records administrator to prevent himself from being buried under an avalanche of paper was interesting and one not being solved by a quick cavalier decision.

It seemed pertinent to assume that if the federal government felt it necessary to prepare an administrative

history of its own agencies in the war, perhaps the same might be true of our states, even perhaps of Iowa.

Tuesday morning's program concentrated upon the discussion of war time programs for the conservation of cultural resources. Doctor Overman of Ohio discussed ably and well the program of collecting World War II records in his state which is being rapidly enlarged and is doing the best job of any in the Union.

It is the considered opinion of the writer that the proposed program in Iowa is as good as that offered or proposed in any state among the membership represented, although the Iowa program is still hypothetical and in the paper stage.

It was interesting to observe the relatively small consideration granted the matter of roster rolls, and to note that greater stress and importance was placed upon getting records of the social reaction of communities and people to the war, and the psychological factors as well. Some discussion was had of the need of obtaining letters and diaries of war time officials and military men although the discussion added nothing to that already considered in Iowa.

It may be noted here that there generally was a disinclination to have an excessive clipping service, due to the immense amount of duplication involved and indexing and classifying required, and the general fragility of such a record together with the impossibility of anyone clipping intelligently unless possessed of an historical background or a clear insight into the needs or wants of the time. In one sense the clipping fragmentizes a unity, for a day's or a week's paper presents that community for one brief period of time in all its aspects as it adjusts itself to war, such as mercantile establishments, amusements, fiction, comics, advertisements generally, as well as the more obvious items of war agency activity.

The afternoon session of Tuesday, October 27, considering the varied subjects on the agenda were pertinent to the Iowa department's problems; particularly

helpful were the discussions of Harold Burt of the Connecticut State Library and of Mr. Miller of the New Jersey State Archives who presented the matter of quality of paper, carbons, ribbons and microphoto extensively. They were extremely cordial in personal discussions of the matter and were profuse in their offers to aid or assist us in our problems wherever possible.

Conclusions drawn from the two days' meeting of this society would produce the following suggestions:

First, the advisability of the State of Iowa establishing an archival records commission with membership of the Iowa State Department of History and Archives and the Superintendent of the state printing and others, to examine the needs of the various state departments so far as records and forms are concerned, with power of approval or rejection of forms, prepared by such state agencies, as to their size, composition, and material. The records commission should also have the power to canvass the problems of each state agency to learn which of these records are of permanent value, which are of temporary significance, and which are purely routine and unimportant. The Superintendent of the state printing should be included in such a commission because it will be through his cooperation that standards of paper, carbons, ink, and the like can be made effective. It might be desirable to include the Secretary of the Executive Council or other representation from that body on such a commission, for ribbons, carbons and the like, which should be investigated, are among supplies furnished departments by the Executive Council.

Second, that the state archives law might well be amended to provide for an examiner of records, whose function would include the continual survey, in consultation with state agencies, of their records and their preparation for archival custody. Such an examiner of records should also be granted the power of inspection and examination of county records, where his duties would be the checking of standard records, paper, ink, carbon, ribbons, adequate storage facilities, and forms



of classifications. The officials of New Jersey and Connecticut have been particularly successful in these respects. The work of an examiner of records would logically be the outgrowth of the work of the archival commission which would have established standards.

Third, that the State of Iowa plan now for the time when the archives building addition will have been built and ready for occupancy. The State of Iowa should seek now to secure some relatively young individual who has a normal expectancy of fifteen or twenty years' active service to administer its archives division. Such an individual should possess a background of history and government of more than ordinary or nominal character. After one year's service with its own department, it would be worth while for the State of Iowa to grant a leave of absence for an internship in Washington, D. C., to familiarize himself with all aspects of archival administration, and also to give him opportunity to attend courses of instruction in the only school in the country for archival training,--that maintained by the staff of the national archives in conjunction with one of the Washington universities. On his return to the Iowa Department, such an individual would be able to give to Iowa the quality of service which would quickly demonstrate the worth of such training. Such a program would insure continued and generous support from the legislature because the members of that body would have confidence in the administration of such an agency under such a man, knowing that needless and valueless material in state records would be eliminated, that proper steps of preservation would be taken, that care in cataloging and indexing would be exercised, that the needs of administrators and historians would not go unrecognized.

It would definitely be worth while for the State of Iowa to plan to attend all future meetings of the Society of American Archivists. The society is small enough and yet is so selective in its interests, i.e., archives and archives training, that the results of such conferences are unusually helpful in practical methods and

practices of efficient management. Moreover, Iowa possesses a residium of an honored recognition for the pioneer work of C. C. Stiles in the development of archives administration. It would certainly be regrettable if Iowa were to permit this early work by an untrained man to lapse, now that this work has become a proper field for specialists.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.