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The Records of Business and the Urban Historian

The nascent National Business Archives Program, part of the Systematic National Acquisitions Program (SNAP) at the Public Archives of Canada will soon release several new collections of manuscript and other materials of interest to urban historians. The business archives program was officially announced to the business community via the Financial Post in early February of this year, although unofficially begun before hand. Dominion Archivist Dr. Wilfred I. Smith said in the announcement that business records were obtained in the past by a hit-or-miss process and declared that this very weak area of acquisition would be considerably enhanced if the business community would co-operate in helping the Public Archives acquire and preserve records of firms and individuals of national importance. Dr. Smith noted that "an individual or a company whose records are not preserved, or are not available and accessible, is going to be forgotten." His appeal provoked a generous response and as a result the negotiations for several significant collections are presently nearing completion. But for successful continuation of the program, it is important that the scholarly community assist in the location and acquisition of other significant collections of business materials. It is particularly appropriate that this appeal be directed to urban historians.

Among the most important selection criteria for the acquisition of business materials are the following: Are the records of inter-provincial, national or multi-national organizations, institutions, associations? Are the papers a collection or about an individual or individuals who are either persons of Canadian residence or citizenship who have held international, national or extra-provincial offices or positions? Are the papers of individuals, organizations or corporations which may be local, provincial, or regional in nature, but which are representative of commercial, financial or industrial activities which are of national significance? And, finally, are the records because of certain special features (for example very large bulk) impossible of service or maintenance at other repositories? These criteria are open to interpretation and are intended to serve as a useful guideline.

For example, the records of such international and national firms as the Bank of Montreal, Canadian National Railways, Baring Brothers and Company, and Algoma Steel Company are fairly typical of the first criteria and the papers of such persons as Sir James Dunn and Lawrence Freiman fit the second guideline very well. Perhaps the best example of papers illustrative of the third and fourth criteria are those of the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation which was essentially an operation confined to the Yukon Territories. The YCGC stepped in after the Klondike Rush and begun to purchase rights to dredge and mine gold in the Dawson City area around the turn of the century and continued its operations into the sixties. As a matter of interest to the urban historian, the company not only had the largest revenue-producing industry in the vicinity but when the plant began to close down it was 'discovered' to the surprise of some members of the town government that the company also owned and operated such things as the power generators which not only generated power for the dredges on the river but supplied power to the town as well. This collection is also an excellent example of the interpretation of the criteria when archival jurisdictions overlap and it becomes necessary to effect some sort of compromise. In the case of the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation Records some of the records were stored in a Vancouver warehouse and the balance were still in the Yukon. At the donor's wish, the Vancouver records were forwarded here and arrangements were made to ensure that the Dawson City portion of the records were also sent to the Public Archives. This was agreed to by the new Yukon Territorial archivist with the proviso that any records of a strictly local nature would be returned and any records which both repositories wanted could be copied, hence satisfying the needs of both archival repositories and the donor.

Another example of records of interest to the urban historian acquired through the business archives program are those of Sir James Dunn, especially those records relating to his involvement in Algoma Steel Corporation in Sault Ste. Marie from the early thirties to the mid-fifties. The effects of the ups-and-downs of Algoma Steel on the

city's economic and distribution systems is mentioned from time to time in letters from the mayor and other members of the city government to Sir James. Another group of papers records an entirely different aspect of the life of a city. The papers of Lawrence Freiman, a very recent acquisition, amply demonstrate the role of the businessman in the cultural life of the city of Ottawa. Freiman's papers overflow with various tidbits about the development of the national capital in the 1950's when he was a member of the Federal District Commission and later when he advised upon some of the centennial celebrations in 1967. Freiman, and his family, have also been avid supporters of the arts in Ottawa since the early 1940's, and his papers record the development of the National Gallery of Canada, the Ottawa Philharmonic Society (which later became the National Arts Centre Orchestra under the baton of Mario Bernardi) and the National Arts Centre which was built under Freiman's direction. Freiman was also involved in one way or another in many other organizations: B'nai B'rith, Canadian Welfare Council, the Zionist Organization of Canada, and the University of Ottawa Board of Governors, among others. Mrs. Freiman's papers, included with those of her husband, and those of Lawrence Freiman's mother and father go a long way to enabling researchers to look at the growth of cultural life in Ottawa. And, while all of these papers cannot yet be made available for research for the present, they will become a valuable resource of use to the urban historian in years to come.

Other recent acquisition could be mentioned. A much smaller example of a general merchant's operations from 1847 to 1924 were not long ago acquired. Besides providing information on the interests of the Henry Elliott Family of Hampton, these also provide such useful things as inventories of a general merchant's store and indications of who he relied upon for his supplies in Albany, New York and in Montreal. Other samples range through time and hopefully will eventually cover the nation. At present, though, it is quite spotty. Altogether there are some twenty-five national and international firms which have been contacted and only one firm has rejected our pleas for preservation of their records. Others, while not all by any means, have indicated an

interest in turning their records over to the custody of this or any other outside archives, have been prodded into action and are forming their own archives and it is our express wish that these be open to the researcher. Often we have been able to provide some assistance and suggestions about establishing a proper archives.

If the Public Archives does not have the records, and a particular city, town or village, or a particular firm or individual is approached by a researcher, we would like to hear what was found, particularly if the records are not being cared for in a proper fashion. We are also anxious to hear if a vast quantity of records are found so that we can arrange to make copies of selected portions. In this way we will be able to continue to acquire material, in this way we will build up a knowledge of the archival repositories which are privately run and controlled. Eventually, it might even be possible to publish a guide not only to our holdings of business papers but a guide to business papers across the country similar to the present Union List of Manuscripts.

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