

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

BUSINESS RECORDS

OF LATE YEARS historians have discovered the "forgotten man." For a long time they had confined their attention to the politicians, the warriors, the writers, and the pastors; history was largely a matter of laws and wars, of books and churches. But it is now growing more and more apparent that the life and growth of a country depend far more upon the workaday efforts of the millions who farm, manufacture, transport, and trade. Politics, religion, and war can at best make the frame for the picture, lay down the rules of the game, clear obstacles from the path (or put them there). The picture has to be painted, the game has to be played, the path has to be trodden by the labor and enterprise of the whole people.

Take any rural area: its history is that of the farmers who settled it and cultivate it. Take any small town: its history has probably been far more influenced by the mill, the general store, the bank, the creamery, and the railroad depot than by all the men who have represented it in St. Paul and Washington. Take any large city: its growth and welfare (or its stagnation and woe) depend on the skill, foresight, and enterprise with which manufacturers, traders, bankers, and transporters have gone about their job, have exploited the natural resources and geographical position, and have wrestled with the immediate or long-run problems.

The influence of economic developments on social and political history can be seen on every hand. America would have been a different place if it had not had Ford, Carnegie, McCormick, or Eastman. The history of these large firms is admittedly a vital part of American history at large. But

in similar manner the story of countless farmers, factories, merchant houses, stores, lumber firms, mines, banks, and even small shops is the raw material out of which the real history of the Northwest will some day be written.

That raw material has to be sought in the records which businessmen of all kinds make in the course of their work. Congressional investigations, state inquiries, statistical reports, trade journals, and newspapers tell some of the story, but by no means all. If we wish to know what farmers, manufacturers, and merchants did, why they did it, how they did it, and with what result, it is to their letters, diaries, account books, and the like that we must turn. These records may seem to have no historical value to the men who make them, and are usually destroyed sooner or later. Yet in the hands of a skilled economic historian they can be made to throw a flood of light on the history of agriculture, manufactures, commerce, transportation, or finance. The letters and account books of an Italian merchant who died five hundred years ago have given us a vivid picture of business life and problems in the Middle Ages. A few account books of a London merchant who died about the time of the American Revolution have proved a veritable gold mine of information about trade across the Atlantic. The ledgers of an Ontario general storekeeper who died in 1800 give one of the best pictures we have of pioneer village life and trade; and a few stray farmers' diaries have illuminated the life of the Minnesota frontier.

Apart from their contribution to the general history of a period or area, business records help us to study the history and problems of business itself. From them we can seek answers to such questions as: Who organized the enterprise? How and where was the capital raised, and how was it invested? What was the state of the market and of competition? Did the firm furnish a new product or service, or a new way of handling an old product or service? Where was the necessary labor found and how was it organized? What wage policy was adopted? What were the price

policies, the terms of credit, and so forth? What were the special problems which had to be solved? What effect did depressions exert, and how were the storms weathered? What were the financial rewards of the enterprise? How long did it carry on? If it closed down, why? If it carried on, what is its present position? Has it grown always or did it become stabilized at a certain point of size? Why?

Such questions have more than a historical value. The answers to them may be worth much to the younger generation which is preparing itself for a business career. And they might influence our discussions of the relations between business and government on the one hand, and between business and labor (or the consumer) on the other. But even their historical value is great, for they let us get a clearer picture of the efforts and enterprise, the hopes and fears, the problems and perplexities, the rewards or disappointments of those who built the world we live in.

The business records which have proved to be most valuable are articles of incorporation, account books of all kinds, letters (both incoming and outgoing), production or sales records, periodical financial statements, wages lists, agreements with labor unions, and price lists.

It is hoped that businesses in the Twin Cities will cooperate with the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota in the preservation of their records. They can do so in the following ways:

First, by reporting to the society or the university any old records which they possess, whether of existing firms or of those which have disappeared. Some Twin City firms are almost as old as the state itself, and their records are part of the story of the building of the state or of the whole Northwest. It is especially important that these be preserved and that their existence be known to historians.

Second, by depositing in the society's manuscript collection or the university's library such records as have ceased to be of business importance. In general few records dated prior to 1900 are likely to be kept for reference and might be

transferred; and the date might be fixed much later. The records could be transferred subject to any conditions which their owners cared to impose; for instance, it might be stipulated that records should not be accessible to research students until the papers were fifty years old; or that any study based on them be submitted to the business concerned for its approval (or otherwise) before it was published.

Third, by discussing with the society or the university the problem of preserving and disposing of present or future records. While in general the historian today is concerned to save and get access to records bearing on the early history of the state, the letters, accounts, and the like, of 1939 will be old records in 1989. The mass of records accumulating today is enormous, and when these papers become "dead" it would be impossible for any library to provide storage space for them all. But it might be possible for the libraries and the heads of a firm to work out a method of selecting sample papers or important records.

Fourth, by offering facilities for work by accredited students on papers which a firm desires to keep in its own hands rather than transfer to a library.

In one or more of these four ways—by reporting, by transferring, by preserving, and by making accessible—businesses in the Northwest can aid greatly in the study of the development of our region and even of the nation. Twelve years ago Harvard University established a chair of business history, and a Business Historical Society was formed to seek, preserve, and collect business records. As a result, most valuable collections of papers have been saved and found, and studies of John Jacob Astor, of Jay Cooke, of the first Bank of Massachusetts, and of other important business enterprises have been published. What Harvard is doing for the East, we can do for the Northwest if the material is saved and made available.

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