

LOCAL RECORDS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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The assumption that an article on this subject would hold interest for the readers of Archives & Manuscripts, many of whom have similar problems, is based on the fact that in Western Australia, largely on account of its geography, the problems are clear cut. There can be no argument at the present stage of the country's development, with its vast areas and small scattered population, but that the collection of local records in a central repository is wise - in fact necessary - if they are to be preserved. In another hundred years or so the position will perhaps have changed, and it may be possible to establish regional repositories for local records; these in the meantime will have been preserved, and, as many of them have been accepted on deposit, there should be no question of refusal to make them available to an appropriate regional repository when such can be established and maintained on a proper basis - microfilm copies being made if required for use at the central repository.

For the reader who is not familiar with the scene in Western Australia, just a few words about the background. In 1945 an Archives Branch was established at the Public Library of Western Australia, to accommodate both the State Archives and private papers of Western Australian interest. Despite the inadequate space and storage facilities, a large quantity of both types of records were transferred and work went ahead on their arrangement, and the provision of finding aids to make them more readily available to students. When, at the end of 1955, the Public Library - re-named the State Library - was placed under the control of the Library Board of Western Australia, it was decided, in the re-organisation which followed, to bring together in one section of the Library all the material relating to Western Australia - the records from the former Archives Branch and the books, pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers dealing with or produced in Western Australia. The whole, which remained under the control of the archivist, was re-named the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, in honour of the former Principal Librarian and historian of the State, and given new and attractive quarters on the ground floor of the State Library building. This, then, is the central repository to which local records at present are brought.

Now what are these local records, and how do we obtain them? There are, first of all, those which are part of the State Archives - the records kept by the various branch offices of government agencies throughout the country - mainly, except in a few of the larger towns, at court houses, police stations and the offices of mining registrars. The same arrangements made with the head offices of departments in Perth for the transfer and disposal of records apply to the country branches, to which appropriate circulars and instructions are sent. Except where these relate to current records, however, they are hard to apply, and officers in the country cannot easily, as do their colleagues in the city, refer any problems to the archivist. Difficulties

such as this are overcome in various ways; officers may be requested to send in all records which they hold earlier than a certain date; a senior member of staff from head office may be able to call at the branch and give advice; or best of all, the archivist may be able to visit it and set aside the records required.

Also to be considered for transfer to the Archives are the records of local authorities - road boards and municipalities in this State - the oldest of which were established by legislation in 1871. Though not controlled by directions from the Premier for the disposal of their records as are the government departments, a large number of local authorities have already deposited their minute books which are more than ten years old, and in this they have been encouraged by the Local Government Department, which has made a specific recommendation on the subject in its Bulletin. The association between the Library Board and road boards or councils over the establishment and maintenance of local libraries has also been useful as a means of contact, and arrangements for the transfer of records have often resulted.

In addition to the material which forms part of the State Archives, we have local records of a great variety from non-government sources - the records of organisations (some of them no longer in existence) formed to promote the welfare of the district such as progress associations, education and hospital committees, agricultural societies, voluntary fire brigades etc. etc; cultural organisations, for example musical and dramatic societies, mechanics institutes or literary and debating societies; then there are sporting clubs, political groups and the churches; finally there are private papers - personal records such as diaries, letters and reminiscences for past years, and in more recent times, farm and station journals or local business records.

To obtain material from such sources is one of the main problems. A direct approach can be made by letter, but this has disadvantages - the existence of the organisation is not always known, the number of letters which need to be written is overwhelming, and in any case such letters are all too often disregarded by the recipients. Publicity can be given through the press, radio and addresses at appropriate gatherings, to the importance of local records and the need for their preservation, but again this will only give results in a limited number of cases. The archivist or his assistants can visit districts in turn and make a direct approach to the people and organisations concerned - this is by far the most successful way in which to obtain material, but it can be time-consuming, and, where the distances are great, costly.

In Western Australia all three methods have been and still are being used, but whenever it is possible to fit in a visit to a district this is done, even in some instances arranging for staff on holiday in a suitable area to prolong their stay officially by a day or two to make the necessary contacts and inspect available records. Five long trips, lasting from one to two weeks, have been made by the archivist, extending to Northampton along the western coast and to Esperance on the southern coast. There have been two visits to the Eastern goldfields, centred round Kalgoorlie, and one to the Murchison goldfields, as far north as Cue. Each of these journeys, with visits

to nearby towns off the main route, has involved about 1000 miles of travel. Apart from this, a number of one or two day visits have been paid to less distant country areas.

The success of such trips, whether long or short, depends to a great extent on the preparations made beforehand. Arrangements are usually made for government departments to notify their country branches of the archivist's impending visit, and the co-operation of local authorities is sought in advance. It is essential for the officer making the trip to acquire as thorough a knowledge as possible of the history of the district before visiting it, particularly of the people and the organisations which have played the main part in its development, so that the minimum of time is wasted in tracing those likely to have useful records, or at least knowledge of their whereabouts. Shortly before such visits, local press and radio publicity explaining their purpose has been found useful. News of records already donated or deposited by someone in the district often has a stimulating effect on others, who do not wish to be outdone. The best results of all are obtained if one of the local residents, particularly one who has some standing in the community, will undertake to prepare the way for the archivist's visit by getting in touch with people likely to have material and generally stimulating interest.

A trip in 1955 through the northern wheatbelt to Northampton (344 miles from Perth) arose in the first instance from a request made by the Resident Magistrate at Geraldton for the archivist to examine old records at the Courthouse, where the first Government Resident was appointed in 1850. In addition to his magisterial duties, the government resident in Western Australia (later the resident magistrate), usually held the offices of sub-collector of revenue, government land agent, district registrar, and in ports such as Geraldton, sub-collector of customs. In some cases the offices of resident magistrate and district medical officer were combined. As a result the courthouse contained as well as court records, a great variety of other material, particularly where the original or at least a very early building is still in use, most valuable records have been transferred to the Archives. Unfortunately in Geraldton, the courthouse records had not remained undisturbed through the years, and although much useful material was found, there were no records from the earliest years and many broken series. Thanks, however, to the interest in local history taken by the Resident Magistrate and his efforts to locate other records in the district, one of the largest and most varied accessions of documents from any one area resulted from this visit.

In addition to the material from the Courthouse, valuable early records were found at the Police Station - not only police records kept at the local station and district office records, but also documents from the Greenough Police Station, closed many years before, and convict records from the former depots and ticket of leave hiring stations at Geraldton and in the surrounding district, which had been brought in to the Geraldton Police Station when they were closed over 80 years earlier. Local government records, from three authorities dating back to 1871, were found in the possession of the Geraldton Municipal Council and the Geraldton Road Board, the latter

having also the records of the Greenough Road Board with which it has been amalgamated in recent years. Then there were records of a variety of local organisations - the majority of them no longer in existence, such as the Volunteer Rifles, Mechanics Institute, Agricultural & Horticultural Society, Lawn Tennis Club, Cricket Club and Education Committee, and some of the business firms - the Geraldton Brewery Co., the Victoria Flour Mill and Gale & Monger, General Merchants. Finally twelve large collections of private papers, and numbers of photographs and maps, were obtained as a result of visits which had been arranged to the descendants of pioneer families of the district, many of them still living on the properties taken up 100 years before. Some of these consisted mainly of farm or station journals, recording activities on the property and giving details of seeding, harvesting, shearing etc., but contained little else. Others, like the set of diaries which were found belonging to Major Logue, of which there is one for every year from 1853 when he went to Geraldton district, until his death in 1900, give in addition a good picture of family and social life.

Some of these collections of private papers were given by the family concerned, others were deposited on indefinite loan, and others again were lent for microfilming, the owners to call for them on their next visit to Perth. Of the latter, only one set of records has been collected, and the remainder are still in the Library, although over 5 years have elapsed. It is often found that families who lend records for copying in the first instance decide to leave them in the Library, content with the feeling that they can reclaim them if they should ever wish to do so.

Several days were spent on the return from this trip to Geraldton and Northampton to allow time to call at the older towns on the route and pay visits to old-established properties. In some cases the results were fruitful, in others the too-familiar story was told of records accidentally or carelessly destroyed a few years earlier. The importance of preserving records of recent development is not overlooked during such trips, and on this occasion a call was paid on Mr E.F. Smart of Mingenew, well-known throughout Australia for his success in the development of light land, to discuss records of his work and their preservation.

Contacts made during such trips have been found to give useful and quite unexpected results at a later date. An amusing sidelight to this trip was the bewilderment of a commercial traveller whose path kept crossing that of the archivist and who eventually asked "What are you in?" to be even more bewildered by the reply "Archives".

The Geraldton visit has been described in some detail as the material which resulted from it is fairly typical of what can still be found in country districts. Visits to goldfields areas differ in that private papers relate more to mining than pastoral or agricultural pursuits, and among government records there is a further important category - those kept in the office of the mining registrar. In the early years the Warden, in addition to his responsibilities in the Warden's Court, had similar functions to the Resident Magistrate in other

districts, and we again get a variety of records from his office.

On the goldfields are a large number of ghost towns, once busy municipalities; government records from these were in most cases taken to the nearest district office, but material is still occasionally found in abandoned police stations and mining registrar's offices, and a few boxes of private papers have been discovered in derelict buildings, though in most cases such material has been short-lived owing to weather and insect pests.

Records of many large mining companies still operating in Western Australia were investigated during one of the goldfields visits and notes made of their nature and scope. Personal calls were paid to the managers of several old-established companies, and the need to preserve records emphasised; it has been found useful in such cases to draw attention to the importance of business history and to suggest that consideration should be given to the production of a history of the company concerned; not only is the publication of such a history a worthwhile project in itself, but in its compilation what is valuable in the company records will be discovered and can be set aside for preservation.

In addition to the direct approach made to several mining companies, the assistance of the Chamber of Mines was sought and through them, accompanied by a letter from the President commending the project, a circular letter indicating the more important records series and the need for their preservation, was sent to the member companies. We all know from experience that such circulars are often filed and forgotten, but they are still worth-while for the few cases where the suggestions meet with interest and are carried out. The records of such organisations as the Chamber of Mines itself, which has its head office in Kalgoorlie, were readily made available for examination by the archivist. In such a case, where the quantity is great, the important series were listed, with notes on their nature and scope, and information obtained about conditions of access; it is then possible to indicate to students whether there is material relevant to their topic which will be available to them - an important consideration when great distances are involved.

It might be argued that trips to country districts may be required for the collection of private papers, but that they should be unnecessary where archives are concerned. Certainly much material was obtained from the country prior to any tours, as a result of circulars sent from the head offices. It is surprising though how much additional material was later found at offices which reported they had sent in all their early records, and at others which replied that no old records were in existence. There are various reasons for this; in some cases, despite definite instructions on a circular, officers make their own reservations and are quite sure that certain material is useless, so either neglect to mention it or fail to include it when packing records for transfer; at other times material is either deliberately or genuinely overlooked. It may be obvious that it will be unpleasant and difficult to sort and pack, and the staff are busy with current work; it may be stored elsewhere and its existence forgotten. Approximately half the old police records in the Archives have been located

in disused stables or store rooms at the back of the police station, or in cells in old lockups. Dirt, spiders, and even snakes are sometimes invoked in the hope of keeping the inquisitive archivist away from such spots, but persistence is almost invariably rewarded by the sight of a heap of old occurrence books and other records in the corner of a cell or in one of the chaff bins in the stable. To date no snakes have appeared, though the dust and spiders are usually genuine.

Apart from the actual location of records which for one reason or another have been overlooked, personal visits are important for the contacts made. Junior officers generally spend a considerable time in the country, moving from one district to another as they climb the career range, before being transferred to a post in the city. Once their interest has been aroused, and they have grasped why the archivist wants records preserved and how they can be used, they give continued help as they move from one place to another. Police officers, for instance, met in the more accessible areas of the State, have frequently been responsible for the later transfer of material found by them in the interior or far north; similar assistance is given by mining registrars and clerks of court; auditors, who necessarily travel in the course of their duty, have also been helpful.

The most valuable assistance through the years has been received from magistrates stationed in the various district of the State; by virtue of their position in the community they are influential; they have been found almost invariably to be interested in records, quick to appreciate the importance of their preservation and enthusiastic about local history generally. If a question arises about records in his district which cannot be dealt with in the ordinary way, a personal letter to the magistrate may often solve it. Recently, for instance, it was reported that in an abandoned building in the ghost town of Cossack, on the northwest coast, was a collection of records of a Japanese firm which dealt in pearl-shell prior to World War II, but it was difficult to get any information about these documents. The Secretary of the local Road Board stated in answer to an enquiry that they were only business records and not very old, but as he had obviously not examined the material this did not help greatly. A letter was sent to the Resident Magistrate at Carnarvon, whose district extends some 600 miles further north and who periodically travels through it by air, asking him if he could investigate the matter when next in the locality. About six weeks later a letter was received from him to say that he had examined the records, considered them useful, and had them removed to the Roebourne police station for safe-keeping pending further instructions. The value of such assistance with records over 1400 miles away need hardly be stressed.

In referring to assistance given with the collection of local records, the co-operation of students doing work in regional history for a higher degree must be mentioned, as much valuable material has been located and found its way into the Library as a result of such research. Teachers also, working on local history projects, either themselves or with their classes, have been most helpful. In recent years it has been

the practice for the archivist to address every group of students from the teachers' colleges before they finally graduate, about work in archives and the collection of private papers, so that young teachers know where and how they can get information about local history, and are aware of the importance of collecting and preserving records.

It is realised that much of what has been said above will duplicate the experiences of colleagues in other parts of Australia; they have the same or similar problems, and may in many instances have evolved other and equally successful ways of dealing with them. It is possible though that some of the methods adopted in Western Australia will be found useful in other States, and it would certainly be interesting to hear of the progress which has been made in the collection, either regionally or centrally, of local records in the older States. We have noted with interest, for instance, the publications which have recently been issued by the University of Tasmania, and it would be good to know more of the background to this useful work of recording private collections which is being done for the University by Miss Janet McRae.

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NEWS NOTES FROM THE COMMONWEALTH ARCHIVES DIVISION

A General Conference between Central and Regional officers of the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library was held in Canberra from 16th to 20th November, 1959. The main business was the consideration of proposals for the improvement of accessioning and arrangement practices.

Miss M. Rendle has now left the staff of the Archives Division in Melbourne.

After long consideration the Commonwealth Government has decided to implement the recommendations of the 'Paton' Committee. This means, inter alia, that it has decided to separate 'the present Division of the Library concerned with the records and archives of the Commonwealth Government' and to make it 'a separate agency of the Government, within an appropriate Department, under the direct control of a Minister'.

Since these decisions were announced, the Prime Minister has accepted ministerial responsibility. The functions of the new agency are expected to be broadly similar to those now exercised by the National Library as Archival Authority and arrangements are being made for effective separation later in 1960.