GOOD HOMES AND NEWER USES FOR OLD RECORDS

By Gaston Litton*

Every thought which the human mind has ever entertained was conceived in some such setting as the community in which each of us now lives. Every deed, good or bad, was performed within the limits of some neighborhood such as the one in which each of us was born and grew up, or in which we will spend our remaining days. All history—ultimately a chronicle of events involving persons at particular places—must have a local habitation. Since the world is the sum-total of its communities, it follows that the local scene is not entirely local but, in a greater or lesser degree, partakes of all world experience.

The study of each local community should enable us to see the pattern of the larger mosaic of world history, and it should protect us against today’s multiple voices which insinuate that an understanding of the world emerges from the recital of contemporary divorces, murders, baseball games, accidents, and rumors of another war. A survey of our community’s experience, enabling us to see that these phenomena constitute the problem rather than the approach, should also give us the poise with which to meet the constant crisis of current events.

High-speed transportation and long-range communication, which have brought this generation great mobility and a widened range of every day living, have weakened and all but destroyed a highly desirable feeling of attachment to our environment. This condition, pointing up the individual’s need for something more enduring than the tax collector’s demand and the austere bill of rights, will be remedied when once again we sink our emotional anchors in our community’s past. An interest in a community and a growing respect for its founders, becoming the fuel for a holy flame of patriotic love for our state, our nation, and the world in which we live, is a necessary antidote to general unrest in this generation.

Our community is constantly changing, although we may not realize the fact. As the old way of life passes, its physical manifestations also disappear. The ideals of life which the members of

* Dr. Gaston Litton, Archivist in the University of Oklahoma, delivered this paper on the program of the Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Historical Society, at Stillwater, Oklahoma, May 26, 1949. Dr. Litton, who is directing the manuscripts program at the University, points out in this speech some of the uses to which archival materials are put and he calls upon Oklahomans everywhere to aid the archival agencies of the State in the assembling and preservation of the significant materials reflecting the history and contemporary life of Oklahoma.—Ed.
our community held in yesteryear diverge from those of the present generation. The habit of parting reluctantly or impatiently with the old ideas, and assuming new ones, is characteristic of community behavior. It has always been thus; surely it will always continue to be so. Powerless to halt the course of destiny, we had best submit and understand.

Understanding our community and the changing pattern of its history has occupied the attention of most of us at one time or another. The lone Yankee farmer has wondered how it happened that all his neighbors in a certain township were of Southern origin. The town merchant, lamenting the increase of tenancy among his customers, has sought the causes for the consequent loss of trade. The members of the local D. A. R. chapter, wishing to erect a marker to the memory of an Indian scout or early settler, have searched for the dates and places which would establish beyond any doubt the wisdom of their decision. A traveler, surprised at the location of a highly specialized industry in a community, has delayed his journey while he searched out the explanation. The city park board, for reasons of civic pride, has required specific information on the person who founded the system of playgrounds and parks. The well-to-do families of the city, following an obscure custom of eating their Sunday dinner at a hotel, have inspired searches by members of a local club for the origin of that social practice.

To satisfy any of these inquirers with full evidence, to study any phase of local history, presupposes the existence and availability of adequate source material. Such material, if assembled in sufficient quantity and variety, will show what made the community desirable as a place of settlement, and which racial and religious groups peopled it. The growth and expansion of the community in terms of its residences, its arteries of communication and transportation, and its commercial prosperity, should be revealed in these records. The community’s educational and cultural institutions, its museum and art gallery, its charitable and correctional institutions, should be represented in the records. The organization of the local courts, the community’s war participation, its general professional life, and its local government, should be covered by complete files. And, finally, the collection should be rounded out with documents concerning the community’s older families, and the personalities responsible for its progress.

The source of much community information is the memory of living man—which, fallible and perishable as it is, can be tapped for historical purposes by means of interviews, or through letters of inquiry, and by questionnaire. Newspapers are a wonderful source of information on a locality—though, of course, within the limita-
tions of deadlines and other factors which direct newspaper reporting.

There are, fortunately, a great many other sources of essential facts. Their discovery and identification reach the core of this inquiry. The external forms, which the facts of local history assume, constitute tomorrow's treasure and heritage and they are almost without number. A dozen or more types, which are easily recognized by the layman, are the basic categories into which they fall.

There are broadsides—those loose printed sheets distributed by hand to proclaim the coming of circuses, announce the opening of toll gates, advertise the sales of farms and farm implements, publish the dates of coming elections, and even call for the celebration of national and state holidays. Broadside are important because they reflect early customs and because they mirror early printing and communication methods. The old handbills are sought by archivists for the anticipated use of social historians.

Maps and plans of towns often reveal changes in the development of communities, and sometimes point out the location of villages which have disappeared entirely. Musical and dramatic programmes, funeral cards, invitations to balls, and even Christmas greeting cards revive for us the social life of earlier generations. Business cards, calendars, pictorial advertisements and letterheads of commercial houses remind us of the existence of early industries, financial houses, and trading practices. Descriptive booklets and travel folders of railroads or steamboat lines add their bits. Anniversary editions of newspapers often contribute names, dates, and other details which are not available elsewhere.

Reminiscences of older residents, by those who have taken the trouble to prepare them, provide information of a very personal and intimate nature which must not be ignored by the writer who attempts to interest the general public in the past. A first step in the collection of this form of material is to encourage early settlers to write the stories of their lives.

Local histories are often issued by county councils, women's clubs, religious bodies, and interested individuals; brochures giving gazetteer information are occasionally put out by newspaper advertising and circulation departments, as well as by chambers of commerce and the public information departments of the larger companies. Such publications perform bibliographical and biographical service to scholarship.

Photographs are constantly needed and for a myriad of uses. They are used annually for calendars, Christmas cards, or even stationery. Throughout the year they are needed to illustrate house
organs, brochures, articles for papers and magazines. Anniversary celebrations would be impossible without the usual historic photographs; and they are even called for by national advertising agencies to illustrate displays and campaign material. Individuals copy them to illustrate their lectures, theses and books, and to verify historical data. Bets and lawsuits have been settled by pictures. Artists obtain ideas for murals, portraits and advertisements from photographs; composers often request pictures to illustrate the covers to their songs; draftsmen and architects use them as sources of building details. Photographs of old houses, bridges, roadways, inns, schoolhouses, pioneer personalities and professional people, industries and institutions, and other persons and things—whether the pictures were copied on glass plates or on more flexible film—when assembled in quantities will enable the archivist to meet the vastly complex and urgent requests from writers who would interpret for us our community life.

Other very important sources of historical fact are diaries and journals—daily records kept by the meditative and reflective members of the community, accounts in which life is recorded as it passes in review. Any writer will affirm the statement that such documents do not need to be the records of distinguished persons. There is great future value for research in the diary kept now by a baker, barber, or bus driver—if he has been observant and can translate his vision into words.

Many families—both humble and great—have packets of old letters which are gathering dust in trunks in their attics and closets and cellars. These should be gathered into repositories where, with other manuscripts, they will cast a new light on the early days of our communities.

Carlyle's dictum that "The history of the world is but the biography of great men" stresses the importance of the papers of soldiers, statesmen, and scientists. The history of our nation could not be understood nearly so well if we had been deprived of the use of the papers of such great men as Washington, Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Madison, and Lincoln—to name only a few. Yet more and more we are turning to the view that there is meaning—deep and inescapable meaning—in the portrayal of the life and thought of the common people, ordinary folk, the humble and obscure, those that "God must like because he made so many of them." Their records throw light—sometimes a very bright light—on the significant movements of our history. The great are, in a large measure, products of their time and environment. All leaders are influenced, not only by their immediate associates, but by public opinion and by their contacts with individuals outside the mass of men. From the standpoint of this indirect influence alone the records of supposedly unimportant individuals have large value.
It is often hard to convince the owners of family letters that such documents have any historical value. "We haven't had any governors, senators, or generals in our family. We are not histori- cally important," they will tell the archivist. Or he will be met with this remark: "Our things would not be of any interest outside the immediate family; they are just family or personal letters."

Records of the great have an undeniable appeal to the imagination of the masses, but in many ways the run-of-the-mill stuff is even more revealing to the writer and more interesting to his readers. Materials of this category are also likely to be, on the whole, more reliable as far as the knowledge of the writer extends—for the writer had no thought of possible publication. That often influences the writings of men in public life, particularly in high positions. This material has other values because it throws light upon the life and thought of the people from every angle—on illness, disease, and medical practice; on recreation and amusements; even on what people wore and that they ate; with illuminating sidelights on war, politics, public men, and measures. Since this personal point of view exists only in the obscurity of the unknown journal and packet of unpublished letters, it forms a picture of society and a record of civilization which cannot be ignored.

A body of economic fact is most certainly embedded in the records of the lone merchant, the itinerant trader, the general store owner. Their day books, under the relentless scrutiny of the historian, probably could be made to confirm or deny the truth that customers in pioneer days not only purchased the necessities of life but also coveted and acquired silk gloves, fine cloth, linen handkerchiefs. Mercantile ledgers should be especially valuable for a study of the methods of settling accounts. It is known that money was scarce in the West and that farmers paid for much of their goods by bartering pork, wheat, honey, furs, corn, hides, and similar items with the merchants. The extent to which this also was true of Oklahoma pioneers must await verification, which will be possible when mercantile ledgers have been assembled. Invoice books should give the best possible picture of the stock of goods carried in western stores, as well as data on the size and growth of the stores. The location of the wholesale markets patronized by the merchants, and the volume of yearly purchases, could be ascertained from their order books. The letter books of early business men, when they are found and assembled, will undoubtedly be the best general picture of such mercantile activities. Routes of shipment, wholesale centers patronized, the relations with the forwarding firms, the story of steamboat disasters, holdups, and other transportation problems which bothered the storekeeper before the railroad era, should come to light in this correspondence. Records of early mills, gins, and factories have similar historical value.
In the more recent period, sound films of political rallies, polling places on election day, parades, or other unusual events in a locality's life, which are taken in some Eastern cities, have a particular kind of historical value which entitle them to preservation in our archives. Transcriptions of radio programs of local interest are being preserved by the archivist who is alert to the effectiveness of audio-visual materials in teaching. The meetings of the City Council of New York City used to be broadcast over the city's radio station, WNYC. The meetings of our governmental bodies, ordinarily sober and restrained, are traditionally recorded in published form, but transcriptions of meetings which are broadcast could hardly be ignored by the thorough student of public affairs. Moving picture sound tracks, phonograph records and radio transcriptions help give a picture of our daily lives, and the archivist cannot pass them by as he makes his appointed rounds. The actual places, people and events can be both seen and heard—as they actually existed or occurred—not as interpreted by an observer.

The geographical frontiers of the United States have been closed for many years. The intellectual and spiritual frontiers, however, must remain open as long as the Republic lives, or national decay will set in. As Shakespeare put it, "What's past is prologue." The past does have a way of repeating itself. These recurring crises may often be met best by the scrutiny of the reports left behind by those keen minds who read the invisible ink of the future with vision which had been sharpened by the light of peril.

The casual observer says that there is plenty of archival material to mirror the past. Yes, but much of it is being destroyed through carelessness, indifference, ignorance and by the impersonal clutch of climate. Time, the great destroyer of records, eliminates much that is unimportant. But time is also guilty of destroying much that is important, if its significance is not recognized. The presumptive right of anyone to say, "This is and this is not material for research" must be challenged. In this day of the typewriter, carbon copy, and other multiple forms of recording, when it is becoming more and more a problem to find space in which to preserve materials, the tendency is to destroy the old as the new records accumulate. The value of many records is not generally recognized. Age should not be the only or determining factor which should decide the preservation or disposal of materials. Value is an elusive quality, and no archivist would attempt to make a decision involving the disposal of records on his own initiative. This is action requiring the advice of those who know the conditions under which the industrial records came into being, or the genealogical background of the family which produced them, and who know of the existence of related materials.
Every depository of manuscripts should have its own field of collection and its own goal fairly well determined. Only a very few, if any, institutions seek to acquire and preserve manuscripts without limit of geography or subject or both. Ordinarily, state or regional boundaries and subject limitations within these areas determine the area of collection. Governmental archives, by far the largest single body of materials, are automatically eliminated from attention by most repositories. Those of us who have elected to serve scholarship by assembling archival materials at the University of Oklahoma aspire to become worthy of those who have preceded us and who have pointed the way. The program of graduate study, in many fields of the humanities, and the press, which is an essential accessory to the large purpose of the State University, at once lay broad and general canons of selection for the guidance of the Archivist of the University. But the word of the Archivist and his deputies is pledged to the creed that they shall avoid intrusion upon the areas already preempted by any sister institution. We are confident that we who would do this great work of noble note, like Ulysses and his companions, must be “one equal temper of heroic hearts” for, “tho’ much is taken, much abides.”

An intelligent and enlightened public can assist tremendously in the collection and preservation of research materials. Individuals can aid, first of all, by not destroying their records. The archivists are legion who have crossed the paths of the Robert Lincolns, sitting before their fireplaces, going through the papers of their father, “sorting and burning” those which to them seemed “too personal” to be preserved. The writers are legion who have lifted their eyes from the slim folders of surviving materials and sighed in vain for those items which unfortunately went up in flames before the archivist reached the scene and halted the destruction.

In searching for manuscripts the archivist embarks upon a strange expedition. He plays a kind of hide-and-seek game with the past. He often hopes to recover objects left behind by a person long dead. The one who hid the treasure—in many cases a woman—probably sat with the papers at her feet wondering what to do with them, asking the questions, “Are they worth keeping?” or, “Should I give the books away and burn the letters?” She may have discarded the books and destroyed some of the letters but kept the rest in the belief that they might someday be of interest to someone. But where should she put them—in the back room or in the attic? She chose a remote resting place for the records. Years later the archivist stumbles across them in his search, poking here and there, getting hot and tired and dirty, this morning or tomorrow afternoon or twenty years from yesterday—at last finding what has been lost. As often as not, before the archivist
as arrived to open the chest, even before he has learned of the whereabouts of the treasure, the precious contents have been reduced to a heap of waste by rats or dampness. Many individuals daily postpone the making of decisions concerning the future of their precious materials. Thus, unwittingly, procrastination betrays them into the hands of Fate—Fate, which has been notoriously cruel in destroying records of some great civilizations and mercilessly possessive in claiming all records of other cultures.

Archives include potentially everybody in the world and, in consequence, embrace every conceivable human interest. It is literally impossible in a modern state to be born or to die, and practically impossible to go through a large number of other experiences, almost equally common, without becoming a figure in archives of some kind; indeed, there are few activities which produce writings and do not survive as archives in one or another form.

Faced with this mass of material, so vast and yet so diversified, the archivist employs his best technical knowledge—often his skills as a linguist, sometimes his knowledge of bookkeeping, photography, or library science. From the tasks of sorting, the archivist proceeds to documentary preservation, and from that he advances to the equally difficult technical job of analysis and description. The result of this professional attention is an organized and usable collection of materials, safe against the ravages of time and against the uncertainties of private possession. Such a collection often includes a small body of records of enduring historical interest which is all that survives of an old state bank, a tribal court, a glass casket factory, or a pioneer physician whose humanitarian impulses were matched by a reflective mind which turned his observations into a diary. Assembled in good homes, these old materials will be put to countless new uses and give us a truer, more faithful history than was ever available before.

The supreme and most difficult task of the archivist is to hand documents on to posterity without adding or taking away, physically or morally, any part of their content. Always on the alert to prevent disarrangement, disfiguring, or destruction of any unit of his collection, he must at the same time permit and facilitate their use and handling. The archivist must not turn scholar, or at most he may do so only occasionally and with strictest precaution, for every scholar has an axe to grind, a theory to establish, a statement to prove. A personal interest is incompatible with dispassionate conduct in sorting, arrangement and preservation. The "sanctity of evidence" is the doctrine of the archivist. He must not fear dust any more than he does hard work—but he is not a gravedigger. History never dies, but maintains a position
as closely banded to the present and the future as the foundation of a house bears to the structure itself or to the people living in it.

Hidden in the multiple records of our past, and awaiting assembling, are the facts from which we can discover the imperishable truths which will destroy the barriers of ignorance and intolerance and move ahead the frontiers of knowledge and forebearance. To this enterprise the cooperation of every citizen of this state is invited, and there are few, indeed, who are without the power to make some contribution.