

## Genealogy

### Our Innocent Arsonists

*Stanley Pargellis\**

Not long ago an elderly woman walked into my office, said she had been cleaning up the old house and had found something the Library might like to have. Digging around in her purse, she produced three small books. One of them was a nineteenth century pocket edition of Shakespeare, worth ten cents if it had not been torn; the others were little better. Curious about old houses, I questioned her, to learn that her family had settled in Michigan in the 1830's, was related to the Chases, and that that very morning she had carried out into the back yard and burned a bushel-basket full of letters to her grandfather from Philander Chase, the first Episcopal bishop of Ohio and later of Illinois, founder of Kenyon College. Almost no letters of Bishop Chase have survived; what we know of him comes only from his autobiography. We have now lost another chance to learn more.

Two years ago the priest of one of the oldest Catholic churches in Illinois, in one of the oldest towns, climbed up into the convent attic, found there as he says, "quite a number of old papers," ordered them taken down and destroyed. Among them were in all probability documents relating to the extraordinary individual who built the church and the convent a century ago, a Dominican priest, Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, in whom burned no scant measure of that divine genius which can fashion the poor materials of a primitive pioneer community into structures of proportion, grace and dignity. Unknown today to the Midwest which he once enriched, Father Mike, as his parishioners called him, will, if his bungling successors continue their work, sink deeper into the shadowy limbo of oblivion from which, on this earth, there is no recall.

Now the lady and the priest were, for all I know to the contrary, kindly, even good people. I may be wrong. Perhaps her smile of regret when she learned what she had done was assumed; perhaps that patient, well-meaning exterior

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really hid the heart of a firebug. Perhaps that morning she had pranced about and gloated over the pyre in the backyard. For pyre it was. She burned that morning, not a human soul, but the record of one. She put in her mite—and enough of them add up to much—towards keeping the human race a race of animals. Dogs, I believe, have no knowledge of the history of dogs. Their memories extend to their own individual experiences only, at what doors they may expect the best handouts, at what hours they may reasonably plan on being taken for a walk. Dogs, of whom I happen to be extremely fond, are nonetheless uncivilized beings, and partly because they have never developed their memories to extend beyond their own time and place, to take in the experiences of all dogs. They have no knowledge of the great dogs of the past, no Washington dogs, or Lincoln dogs, no dog heroes or dog artists, no dogs from whose achievements they may take courage and comfort, and resolution to continue. They have no recollection of a race of dogs which, beginning long ago with nothing but teeth and paws, conquered the earth, and now and then came so close to conquering themselves that they can still hope, no picture of dogdom in slow and torturous movement towards some goal as yet unknown and undefined.

Since the human race has those aspirations because it has those memories, and since those memories are based upon records, whatever destroys the records of the human race destroys also, to some degree, the quality of a civilization. If the Old Library at Alexandria had not been burned in the wars between Caesar and Pompey, if we had had ever since the first century B.C. the records of that marvelous Hellenistic world which went up then in flame, we would have been a little farther along than we are now.

The letters of Bishop Chase or of Father Mike are not exactly the lost poems of Sappho or the complete philosophic writings of Anaxagoras, but there will always be men and women who will wish that they could read them. The world is a little poorer because they have been burned.

These are but two instances of an almost daily holocaust. Of so much destruction through deliberateness or carelessness do I keep hearing that the repetition becomes a little numbing and only the more stupid stories stick in the mind: of a street commissioner shoveling out into his truck the contents of the attic of a one-time public courthouse; of the

southern janitor, in charge of the archives, who made room for new accretions by consigning to the flames the eighteenth century records of East Florida; of rats in a warehouse reducing to fodder the unique papers from which the story of a pioneer business enterprise could be written. With what abandon we destroy our past, matched only perhaps by the abandon with which we destroy our future—our topsoil, our forests, our natural resources.

Prodigal as we are of our older records, it is arguable that the frontier period of our history is better known and better documented than the later, the post-Civil War period. For so long a time, now some fifty years, we have been taught to say that America was unique because we shared the virtues and robust culture of the frontier that we have forgotten the most astounding fact of our history, which is not the frontier, but the growth of an industrial and financial might unequaled in all the records of mankind. We can trace that growth in a fashion through the newspapers, through a few books, here and there through state and national documents; but the real story of it has not been written. We are in the same position in regard to the growth of business enterprise as we would be in regard to political developments if we had no Supreme Court records, no records of Congress, no papers of our presidents or governors—if we had nothing but campaign biographies, newspaper editorials, magazine articles, and such prejudiced materials. Within recent years the railroads of the country have expressed almost unanimous willingness to open their archives to scholars, and in some cities a few business houses, realizing that the truth cannot on any count be as damaging as the lies told about them, have undertaken to set up archives of their own and to keep permanently records like board minutes, ledgers, reports of a general nature, and letters of high officials.

You special librarians in charge of company archives—how many of you can produce those files, unbroken, from the first beginnings of your firm? Men come to me occasionally, wanting to celebrate the fiftieth or hundredth anniversary of the founding of their business by a history that shall be both accurate and exciting. They depart in disappointment, for the bricks of history cannot be made without the straw of manuscripts, and they have none. The records of a few railroads, of at least two manufacturing companies, and of at least one great newspaper have been saved in Chicago,

but no one can ever do the tremendous story of the meat-packers, or of Marshall Field's, or of Montgomery Ward. The essential papers are gone. The lives of most of the men who made Chicago, and I have no doubt that goes also for the men who made Indianapolis, even now approach the legendary obscurity of Charlemagne's peers, of Pontiac's chieftains.

Non-librarians in this audience, if there be any such, may very likely be thinking that I am making a great to-do about old pieces of paper. What depths of human asininity are here being uncovered, they may be saying, and why should a man fuss so about useless, forgotten stuff when the present, and the future, need more thought than ever before. America did not become great through fiddling with old pieces of paper, they say. Well, such critics have a point. I would be the first to admit that the only countries which have done very much towards preserving manuscripts, on a national basis, are the countries whose great glories now lie in the past. Spain, for instance—and maybe now England, where a National Register of Archives has just been set up, with plans for an elaborate card catalogue that will let you spot at once the location of a muster roll of a militia regiment in the 1790's. I don't suggest for a moment that all of us should give up everything we are doing and chase old manuscripts, but I do suggest that the preservation of as much of the past, out of which grew the present, as possible is one of the duties we owe to the future.

Librarians know why. They, better than anyone else in the world, know the meaning of the word "curiosity." They know the unquenchable and infinite variety of the questions which people want answered. How erratic, how unpredictable that curiosity is! How do I make a sidecar cocktail? What is the source of this quotation? Miss Jones, get me the curve of our production figures in 1920. Who built that circular staircase in the old statehouse at Iowa City? (Who indeed, I answer parenthetically, built that staircase—who but Father Mike.) And then the more serious—I shouldn't say more serious, really, because every person who asks a question at a library should be presumed to be serious—but the broader, more sweeping questions: "I am writing a history of the Irish in the Midwest." "Where can I get material on the first steel used in bridge construction in this country, with a complete chemical analysis of its composition?" "I'm trac-

ing the development of tenant farming, and I want some letters from farmers in each of the last four decades of the nineteenth century; where may I find them?" "I'm preparing a cultural atlas of the Midwest, to show the lines of variation in speech and customs in every county. What have you that will help me?" "I'm concerned with the causes of price variation, and I need detailed data on prices in Indiana, in every town, in every year since 1830."

Those folk who think that old newspapers answer questions like these are simple indeed. They cannot be answered fully except from manuscripts, and often in the strangest and most unlikely letter a scholar will pick up the lost clue for which he has long searched. Librarians know well how common that occurrence is, and some of them also know that books which are written out of other books, or out of newspapers, or out of official documents alone are so thin as scarcely to be worth the reading, and certainly not the permanent saving on library shelves. There is a connection between our failure to preserve manuscript materials and the increasning spate of so-called "popular" books—I won't say there are not other reasons.

Let me give you one instance of the value of manuscripts. An Eastern professor turned up at the Newberry a couple of years ago with a completed typescript on the business career of Jay Gould, that fabulous railroad promoter and financier of the 1870's. It had been written out of newspapers because few manuscripts of Gould's were known. In our Burlington Archives he found such a wealth of manuscript material for one phase of Gould's career, including many of Gould's own letters, that he completely rewrote several chapters. One of the railway officials, who had been a little suspicious of the company's decision to open the railway's central-office files to scholars, was completely converted when he read the professor's revised typescript. That part written from newspapers, he said, was shallow, dull and untrue, and in marked contrast to the solidity and interests of the sections based on manuscripts. There is a story to tell doubting businessmen, of whom there are fewer now than before, and to tell doubting Thomases in any walk of life.

Let me return to "curiosity" for a moment. The only development which may curtail it in the future is some form of totalitarian rule, always of course a possibility; yet even under a strangling of free speech as rigidly enforced as in

Nazi Germany the number of scholarly books that was turned out, as evidenced by the books-in-print catalogues, is surprising. In many fields a man could write what he pleased; in some others he needed to include merely a bow and an upraised arm to write pretty much what he pleased. Scholarship even Hitler considered one of the glories of his rule, and the best reason yet given for his refusal to bomb Oxford is that he hoped to see that university, under Nazi control, the center of the world's learning. So the safe assumption on which to proceed is that people will be asking just as many questions in the future as in the past—more of them, we hope. In some areas of study, sociological history, or cultural anthropology, or psychiatry, even in history and literary criticism, not to mention scientific fields where I do not pretend to keep up with research, it is well known that we are only at the beginning of our studies. New worlds—limitless worlds to conquer—in the greatest and most lasting war of all, against ignorance. And for those searchers, now unknown and unborn, these manuscripts so blithely and carelessly consigned to the flames today would have been opening vistas without end.

Is it beginning to dawn upon this audience what I am suggesting Indiana librarians might do? You brought down an innocent entertainer, and look at him—he is uncovering one of those things known as a challenge. Well, if it be a challenge, I'll not hurl it at you. I only want each of you, if you have been turning up a nose at documents, not to turn it up any more. Whenever you see a man about to burn a bushel of letters, or even a peck, stop him, plead with him, cajole with him. Tell him, please, for the sake of his old father, for his dear mother in the auld country, not to burn until somebody who knows about manuscripts has looked them over. Better still, though you may have plenty of influence in Montezuma, Aurora, Ferdinand, or Vevay, urge nonetheless the forming of a committee of those townsfolk who are interested in their town. In Galena, Illinois, an old and a great town in those parts, though no older than many an Indiana town, just such a committee has recently been formed to "seize upon, sort, and appropriately deposit" the town's remaining historical documents. They have printed a letterhead with the names of the sponsors on it, and my guess is that there will not be a single attic in Galena to which they will be denied access. This resembles a recent

development in England, where in Lancashire a similar committee is at last beginning to rout out and to catalogue and to save not merely the routine county archives of every description, but the muniment rooms of the remaining country gentry.

It is my guess that the forming of such committees could be no difficult matter. After all, no one lives for long in a town or even in a city without developing some pride, some affection for it. You need only to tap that pride; and you need have no compunction in tapping it, no sneaking suspicion that you are doing something underhanded and sly. There are still a few pure sentiments left in this country, and one of them is love of your town, love of the curve of the dunes, of the bend of the river, of the winter sunset across the icy fields, of the dogwood in Morgan County, and the knee-high corn in Tippecanoe. Patriotism does not consist of sweeping pronouncements about free enterprise, or the dire lot of the underprivileged, or the necessity of developing cultural relations with the Burmese. That boy in Sicily in 1943 had the right answer, when an officious interviewer asked him for what he fought. "Hell," he says, "I want to get back to Walkerton and start a garage." Don't mistake it; whenever patriotism is dislodged from the soil and the streets to become an ideology, something terribly wrong has happened. Hoosiers know this about as well as any people in the Union. There lies your path—I'm only asking you to help trim its edges, make it fair.

Now, before I finish, a technical word or two. Should you attempt to save everything, every scrap of old paper, every letter, every ledger? In direct denial of all I've said before, I would answer "no." Believing in buying printed books by a high standard of selectivity—and how I believe in it; that's another speech—I believe also in exercising discretion in saving manuscripts. Some of them, however old, ought to be burned. There are plenty of manuscripts—let me hasten to say—that I would refuse to give houseroom to. I don't really believe, for instance, that anyone a century hence will be interested in a letter which says that Aunt Mary has been visiting for the last week, that the Jersey cow had a calf, and that we don't know what in the world we are going to do with James. Unless, of course, James' last name happens to be Riley. My point here, let me make it clear, is that nothing shall be destroyed, by your insistence

and help, until someone who knows about manuscripts has looked them over. If he says to burn them, and your committee doesn't want to, get an advisory opinion. One expert may be wrong. Beware of the isolated letter, unless it is long and full of information. The ideal manuscript collection is a full run of letters and accompanying papers, vast in extent, incapable of being compressed into a single book, but nourishing a succession of seekers, its riches inexhaustible. I doubt if you find many such ideal collections, but I warrant also that somewhere in this state, lying away in someone's attic, is hidden a day by day diary, covering a score or more of years, an Indiana Pepys. When you find it, keep it.

Storage of course is another problem—your problem. I don't believe at the moment it matters very much where documents are stored, if only they are saved. They don't take much space, unless you get fifteen tons of them at a time, as we have done in the Newberry. I am always amazed to see how many letters, pressed out flat, will fit into a dust-proof box that takes no more room on a shelf than a copy of *Forever Amber*. And there are always the historical societies to which you can send your finds—that is the reason, some of you may not know, for historical societies.

Let your cataloguing fit your collection. With great good fortune you may acquire papers of such richness that every single one of them deserves a card, and a folder, to itself. If you get such a collection, I don't imagine you will begrudge the time or expense. But normally, at any rate, again, for the moment, a single card in a catalogue will suffice, provided it gives the character of the collection, the name of the family or company or organization concerned, the number of pieces, and the dates covered.

Well, there you are. There is excitement and high adventure in this business of being a librarian, if you look for it. You are not dealing merely with little things, with trivia. Though I have few illusions that many of you will—some of you may start down the dusty road I have drawn tonight, a road very many great librarians have traveled, their names now forgotten, but their memory green forever in the hearts of the curious searchers they have served.