

The St. Francis Xavier University Archives

by Rev. J. H. GILLIS, Ph.D.

University Archivist, St. Francis Xavier University

The archives are housed in two adjoining former classrooms, 33' x 12' each, well lit. They are not yet described as open to the public, but in fact are open to students of the university who wish to use them, and hence are open for purposes of serious research. The University Administration insists that the university archives are to be given priority attention at the next meetings of the Planning Board, and hence there is a reasonable hope that new quarters will be assigned them within two or three years. By then the two principal sets of documents, academic (1891-1964) and extension (1929-1960), will be in order. The academic files already processed are contained in about 200 boxes, size 12 1/2 " x 9" x 3" and there are about 450 to 500 documents in each box.

The academic files consist of public documents filed up to 1965 in the offices of the university presidents, vice-presidents, deans and registrars. This section contains also a few private documents. Until inherited by the present archivist in 1967, they had been stored in Shannon file-cases. They were in fairly good condition physically, and they were reasonably well-classified by the secretaries who had filed them. The standard norms of archival practice were not applied until 1968: staples had been used and correspondence filed by topic rather than by correspondent. This is now being corrected.

The files of the Extension Department from 1929-1960 are now being processed. These files are not in such good order. There never was one specific person in charge of them. Ten or perhaps twelve secretaries fed into the one file. Too many documents were simply filed, miscellaneous. Two or three years will be needed to complete the ordering of this collection, which we suspect will need at least twice as many boxes as the academic files.

The arrangement of the archives distinguishes "pre-archival" operations from archival. The "pre-archival" section houses the wall display of the graduation pictures of graduating classes from 1895 to 1960. It also houses "Selected Subject Sources" which are four: the *Casket* (Antigonish diocesan newspaper); the *Xaverian Weekly* and the *Xaverian Yearbook* (both of them student publications); and the *University Calendar*. These four sources were carefully scanned up to 1965: from 1852 for the *Casket*; from 1888 for the *University Calendar*; from 1896 for the *Xaverian weekly*; and from 1924 for

the *Xaverian Yearbook*. From these four sources articles were culled on subjects considered of special interest to Xaverians. An eighteen-drawer catalog houses the index cards for these articles, and a bound index was made for the card catalog itself. Students use catalog and index in conjunction with the campus radio; they learn about Xaverian tradition and acquire experience in writing and broadcasting.

I took charge of the archives in 1967 after 14 years as Professor of Classics (Washington doctorate 1938) and 15 as Professor of Philosophy. I had asked for a change, and was charged with "putting order in the academic files in the basement of the Administration Building." I was fortunate in being able to attend the summer course on archives offered by Carleton University in 1968 where I learned the elements – such as not using staples, and classifying by correspondent not topic. Two of us, who were students in the Carleton course and who had been commended to set up archives for our respective universities, decided to pattern our archives on the system used in the public archives of Canada. We sought advice from the P.A.C. authorities, and we were encouraged by their reaction that it would indeed be a "very interesting" experiment.

The P.A.C. considers as public only those documents that deal with the federal governing of Canada. Everything else they consider private, however public its subject matter may in fact be. We, in our turn, substitute for Canada the University of St. Francis Xavier, and for the federal governing of this country, the governing of this university. "Public" therefore is applied only to documents that emanate from the offices of the institutions from the Chancellor and Board of Governors down to officials of the Students' Union. All else is classified "private."

In addition to the principle borrowed from the P.A.C., basic to the F.X.U. system, two symbols used in Ottawa were also borrowed: RG for public documents, and MG for private documents. But apart from this, on advice received from many established archival collections, we used our own system. Everyone seemed to encourage us to strike out on our own if we hoped to be satisfied in the end. The system in use has evoked favorable comment during recent tours of inspection and plans are under discussion concerning the possibility of micro-filming the processed material. We are also discussing computerization of the assembled data.

Those doing research will be glad to know that we keep an official glossary of our various terms, the official directions for the making of our various cards, and the official manual of the procedures followed in various operations. We have also the nucleus of an archival card catalog, which at present contains index cards to all material processed to date. These cards are filed first by symbol, then by notation, then by alphabet and lastly by chronology. Duplicate cards are filed outside the card catalog in numerical

sequence. And finally we have a bound index to the archival card catalog itself

While developing a technique for processing private contributions to the archives we have avoided canvassing our alumni for private contributions. But as soon as the processing of the Extension Department archives is completed – and this will correspond with my own retirement age – I plan a canvass of all alumni.