

## Railway and Canal Accessions

A RECENT acquisition of The Business Historical Society includes, among other things, nearly a hundred old railroad documents and a few pamphlets relating to industrial companies, bridges, canals, and early roads. These comprise annual reports, mortgages, law cases, acts of incorporation, guide books, and other miscellaneous papers.

There is space here to mention only a few items, by way of illustration. An interesting group of reports has to do with a plan devised by some Maine men for transferring the principal highway of European commerce northward to Maine and New Brunswick. In the early fifties, the state was agitated throughout its length and breadth by a project to build a railroad from Bangor to Louisbourg Harbor on Cape Breton Island, the nearest point in North America to Great Britain. This, together with the new Midland Great Western Railway, from Dublin to Galway, Ireland, and the Britannia Tubular Bridge across the Menai Strait, would shorten the distance travelled by ships between Great Britain and North America from the usual 3300 to approximately 2000 miles. A great railroad convention was held in Portland. One of the pamphlets is a long report including the proceedings of the convention and various documents relating to the proposed European and North American Railway. Enthusiasm was running high. The platform of the convention hall was draped with American and British flags, and all the important men of the state, and some from neighboring New England states and Canadian provinces, were there. Unfortunately for Maine, the whole affair turned out to be much ado about nothing.

Since the days of the early Spanish explorers, until the cutting of the Panama Canal, the narrowness of Central America had tantalized commercial and adventurous minds. It was proposed to make, first a canal, and later, a railroad across the Isthmus. The gold rush of '49 rendered a decision imperative. Gold hunters bound for California by sea were streaming across Panama. Surveys for rival routes had already been before Congress, but Congress saw no reason for hurry. However, after 1849 the immediate need of transportation across Central America resulted in the grant of a charter for the *Panama Railroad*. Among these papers now acquired is an enthusiastic prospectus printed shortly after

the charter was obtained, describing the outlook of this road, the resources of the surrounding country, and the favorable conditions it had obtained from the Republic of New Granada. Characteristic optimism refined away the dangers of the climate. The prospectus quotes a physician who was with the surveyors as saying that the fevers prevalent in Panama were more easily curable than those in New York.

Pages more of interesting items could be cited, pamphlets on the Union Pacific, the early southern railroads, the coal railroads, and so on, but these few examples of the sort of material contained in the collection must suffice.

## Tracking the Elusive Document

PROFESSOR ARTHUR H. COLE

THE historian of business encounters difficulties which are in some respects more baffling than those of other historians, especially if he attempts to penetrate the "dark ages" of seventy-five or a hundred years ago. The chronicler of political events has his party platforms, his speeches and private letters, his electoral votes, and the like. The literary historian has his books, pamphlets, and a flood of other material. And in somewhat similar measure the military, scientific, or cultural historian has a large body of data ready at hand. At best, all such digging into the past is complicated and difficult, as any one who has tried historical investigation of any sort would admit; but it seems as though he who tries to piece together a story of business meets additional serious obstacles.

The evolution in methods and manners of doing business leaves small trace. Changes in ways of marketing commodities, for example, proceed gradually and silently. Individuals concerned are so close that they are saturated with the all too familiar details and quite unaware of the constant movement of events. None stops to put down in black and white just what is occurring. Also in such cases as the introduction of new terms of credit, new methods of manufacture, or new types of wage contracts, one may search the printed material of the period in vain for answers as to what really is taking place, when, and why. Again, the history of business is that of many independent or quasi-independent units — factories, distributors, banks, etc. The investigator seeks