

Fruit merchant papers (offered by Charles Apfelbaum) assessment:

Condition: Fragile. The papers are brittle and cracking, and some have definite water damage. They are joined by rusting fasteners (straight pins and paper clips), and while they are grouped individually by invoice or billing unit, they are not fully organized by date. On the plus side, they are for the most part easily legible, especially as the bulk of it is typed. The handwriting of the two men is not particularly easy for modern readers, but can be puzzled out with a little squinting and patience.

Content: This group of papers is basically a fairly continuous set of business correspondence between B. F. Pearce (a fruit broker and distributor who was based in Seattle, but had dealings in Portland and elsewhere on the west coast as well) and George F. Johnston (a grape grower based in El Centro, California and Etiwanda, California). I was unable to find references to either correspondent through WorldCat searches, and I don't know how prominent either was in their community. The (mostly typed) letters and telegrams are attached to bills, claims, and receipts in groupings that reflect individual shipments (billing units - whether they comprised a few railcars or simply one depended on the season). They are dated in a continuous fashion from 1912 (when their business association seems to have begun - there are letters of introduction with which both felt out the other) until 1915. Then there is also a group from 1922 which is interspersed with the earlier letters and would have to be separated out. It seems to reflect either a later association after a break in business dealings, or it could mean that we are simply missing the intervening material. Lending credence to the former interpretation is the deteriorating tone of the 1915 letters, in which B. F. Pearce was apologetic about the low prices he was forced to accept for many of the grapes (though he vigorously defended himself as the best broker in the area), and the discussion by both men about the better prices to be had for grapes on the east coast at that time.

Mostly the correspondence is about the individual shipments - when to send them, any issues with the current railcar (delays, damage to the fruit by the railroad, reroutings of the cars, etc.), and short discussions of the prices and ever-changing market for the different varieties of grapes. There is a limited mention of the marketing of grapes (B. F. Pearce recommends a different boxing practice and presentation for the grapes, specific to Seattle area tastes and expectations), and of the difference between the Portland and Seattle markets (nothing in depth, basically just some Seattle boosterism by Pearce disparaging Portland as a minor city). Otherwise, the correspondents are very businesslike and terse, especially in their telegrams, which frequently are simply lists of varieties (Muscat, Thomson) and prices per crate (\$1.20, etc) or simple acknowledgments regarding receipt of the shipments. There are a few invoices and receipts from other Seattle area fruit wholesalers, as B. F. Pearce in his role as fruit broker seemed to sell the damaged or lower quality portions of some shipments to other distributors when he really needed to unload them and didn't want to affect his own personal reputation for quality. There is also a small amount of correspondence with the railroads about claims on damaged shipments (a service that B. F. Pearce performed for his suppliers). Almost all of the material concerns the specifics of the grape market, but there is occasional passing mention of other fruit that B. F. Pearce was interested in brokering (peaches, cantaloupe, watermelon).

Besides the letters, telegrams and invoices, the only other item of note in the collection is a copy of a pamphlet entitled "Weights and measures ordinance number 32673: governing the weighing and measuring of all commodities in the City of Seattle" and published by the Department of

Public Utilities on March 14, 1914. It is in good condition, though the staples are badly rusted and the cover is somewhat faded. The UW does not have this specific pamphlet, and neither does anyone else as far as I can tell, though there are WorldCat listings (no Summit holdings) for the 1912 and the 1920 version of the pamphlet. This publication is the subject of some discussion in the letters as B. F. Pearce tried to make it clear to his suppliers in California that they must comply with the new regulations regarding the labeling of the crates with a true weight, or they could no longer be sold in the city and might even be barred entry.

Recommendations: In terms of processing, fasteners would need to be removed and replaced with folders (or at least folded bond paper to join grouped items), and then these original groupings would need to be ordered simply by date. I don't think that this would take me more than an afternoon. The major worry would be the simple fragility of the paper, and I don't know of any way to remedy that.

As far as the content is concerned, I'm not sure what to think. There is nothing in these about Washington State agriculture, as the grower concerned is located exclusively in California. They give some hints of the nature of the Seattle fruit market, which could be interesting for someone who was interested in changing prices for grapes (there did seem to be a real fluctuation despite the short period covered in the papers). On the other hand, they are for the most part pretty dry and terse. The few exceptions are the introductory letters, the 1915 letters in which their business relationship starts to break down, and the letters regarding Seattle vs. Portland and the weights and measures ordinances. Most of the letters are instructional in demonstrating simply how the fruit business was carried out at this time on a day-to-day basis - what the issues/challenges/considerations were, etc. The other consideration is the pamphlet, but I'm sure that this individual item, no matter how rare, is not worth what they are asking for the papers. It is not visually that interesting, though the laws and regulations it contains do show the degree to which the government was beginning to organize commerce in Seattle (the letters claim that the city inspector was actually arresting vendors and others for violating the new regulations) - and the accompanying letters provide an interesting and specific example of the business community's reaction.

Overall, this is an interesting little group of papers, but both the state of preservation and the very limited nature of the content gives me pause. Obviously I'll be interested to hear what you decide based on this short description, and I'll try to answer any other questions you have about aspects I haven't considered.