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## The Record of a Spanish Royal Company

THE Business Historical Society has received another splendid addition to its ever growing collection of foreign business manuscripts. This is an eighteenth-century Spanish account book which was found in the city of Havana during the Spanish-American War and brought to this country by an American soldier. This old book, beautiful to look upon with its handsome writing in iron-gall ink on heavy vellum paper, and valuable for the information it contains, is the gift of Colonel John R. Fordyce, a member of the Business Historical Society.

The book belonged to one of those old Spanish Royal Companies which held trading monopolies in various parts of Spain's colonial possessions. These companies were established by royal decree for the purpose of stimulating production in the colonies and trade between the colonies and Spain. Though only an account book and covering an unfortunately short period, 1752 to 1757, much can be learned from its pages of the organization and activities of a type of company so important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There are indications that the company was one of some magnitude. Apparently it held a monopoly of the trade with Cuba, Santo Domingo, and surrounding regions, went as far afield as Trinidad and Caracas, and covered the whole eastern side of what is now known as Central America, then called Los Reynos de Nueva España. The chief enterprises of the company seem to have been tobacco trading and manufacturing, slave trading, ship building and privateering.

Unfortunately a most careful study of the book fails to reveal the full name of the company that kept it. The title page is so frag-

mentary that the name cannot be deciphered. There is also no conclusive information as to just where the book was kept. Certain facts are, however, definitely given. The company is always referred to as the Royal Company and it is chiefly concerned with the Island of Cuba. There is, moreover, enough information in the book concerning the activities of the company so that a study of Spanish grants and concessions of the middle eighteenth century would almost certainly furnish absolute proof of the exact identity of the company and its entire organization and purpose.

As to the administrative organization of this company, there seem to have been two main departments — the “Contaduria” or paymaster’s office, where the entries in this book were made, and the “Thesoreria,” treasurer’s office, upon which drafts were made. One entry of a sum “paid in Cuba by the attorney Sr. Isidoro de Peralta for the expenses of the mail that carried the general account duplicate for May 31, 1756 because the original was lost,” might indicate that there was a head office of the company, perhaps located in Spain, to which the accounts had to be sent. Another fact of interest is that the company repeatedly sent large sums of money to the Factory of Cadiz at high freight rates and at the risk of the Royal company. The nature of the relationship between our company and the Factory of Cadiz is not clear. It is here that our one-sided story leaves us wondering.

Furthermore, it seems evident that some royal official in Cuba audited the accounts of the company, for there is an entry of an amount paid to a workman “for the cost and work of installing four panes of glass in the window of the room where the ministers worked on the revision of the accounts of the company.” There are also in the book many references to the “Real Hacienda,” Royal Exchequer, though the nature of the company’s relationship to the Treasury Department of Spain is uncertain. The entries in this book are only those of expenditures, i. e., drafts upon “El Thesorero,” the treasurer, to cover the multitude of payments, some large, some quite trifling, which arose in the conduct of this company’s varied activities. For the year 1754 the total expenditure of the company was 630,915 pesos. This does not tell us what the income was. The records of money received were undoubtedly kept in a separate book. Yet even from this one-sided account a surprisingly complete story may be conjectured.

The table of contents shows the book to be divided into two main parts, — the first and shorter devoted to accounts to be paid for

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FACSIMILE OF THE TABLE OF CONTENTS OF THE ACCOUNT BOOK OF  
A SPANISH ROYAL COMPANY OPERATING IN CUBA IN THE  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

business contracted before October 31, 1752. This is a statement of unsettled accounts, probably brought over from another book kept under a former directorate. The second part, comprising most of the book, deals with the "expenditures of the present directorate from November 1, 1752 forward." The table of contents further shows that both sets of accounts were subdivided into expenditures for the different departments of the company's activities. The divisions in the accounts are as follows: general expenses, expenses of the presidios, expenditures for produce, expenditures for building and equipping ships, expenses of the tobacco factory, expenditures for merchandise, expenditures for "negroes of royal permit."

A further study of the expenditures in these various departments reveals much of interest. The multiplicity of salaries is extraordinary, beginning with 6000 pesos per annum to the president and grading downward to directors, agents, secretaries, notaries, accountants and clerks; then foremen, military guards, and all the personnel of the fleet. There are also accounts of expenditures for the maintenance of negroes, for hospital and burial expenses, and for a monthly recital of Masses, all of which may be included in payments for labor. In addition to regular salaries, gratuities were given to different employees for services rendered to the company and sums were placed discreetly in the hands of the Sr. Presidente by "El Thesorero" by order of the directors to be disposed of as he saw fit, and the Governor of the island drew a salary as "Juez Conservador" of the company.

In trade, the company's chief interests were tobacco and negroes. It handled large quantities of tobacco, though it is surprising to find that in the purchase of this tobacco the quantity of the individual purchase was always small. This may indicate that the company bought only from the small producer. Perhaps the large plantations had a more profitable way of marketing their product. The company had many agents who bought tobacco for them over a rather wide area. Some of the places mentioned are Cuba, Bayamo, Matanzas, Santo Espiritu, Trinidad and Reyno de Nueva España. Each separate purchase of tobacco seems to have had its grade and price.

The company also maintained a factory, presumably at Havana, where the tobacco was primarily made into cigars, though some was powdered. The powdered tobacco was shipped in cowhide containers and the cigars in specially made boxes. It is curious that the only specific mention of the shipment of tobacco is for the ac-

count of His Majesty. On May 6, 1754, there were shipped to Spain 13,480,800 cigars, especially made for His Majesty, at a cost of 13,929 pesos  $1\frac{1}{2}$  reales. On May 8, 1757, there were shipped 10,390,400 cigars, also for His Majesty, at a cost of 10,697 pesos 3 reales. It seems evident that the company did not expect to be reimbursed for these, for the book contains only expenditures, and the price of the cigars was considered one of the expenses of the company. These cigars for His Majesty did not constitute all the tobacco manufactured by the company, for in the records of purchases there are references to tobacco bought especially for His Majesty's cigars. But the company purchased much more tobacco than this. What was done with it does not appear in this book, probably because it was sold and the amounts received would have been entered in another book.

The company bought and imported slaves by royal permit. Reference is made to purchases of cargoes of negroes. The price of a cargo varied from 27,440 to 49,380 pesos, but there is no indication of the number of slaves in a cargo. However, one or two items gives us an inkling of the price of a slave. On July 20, 1754, "two negroes muleques [negroes between seven and fifteen years of age recently arrived from their own country and knowing none other than their native tongue] were presented by agreement of the directors to two respected persons, by reason of their service . . . value 420 pesos." And on March 31, 1756, there were paid by the agent of the Royal Company in Bayamo 280 pesos, the value of a negro who had been returned to the company because he was mad.

Though the company used some slaves in the shipyard, probably the greater number were sold to plantation owners. In connection with the company's activities in slave trading, the opening entry in the book is of special interest:

First: By the written order of the S<sup>r</sup>. Thesorero don Domingo Ignacio de Gondra, the sum of 273 pesos 4 reales, which he paid in virtue of an order of payment of the S<sup>r</sup>. Presidente don Diego Antonio Marrero dated the 7<sup>th</sup> of Nov. 1752, to don Joseph de Herrera, Master and supercargo of the sloop named "Our Lady of Carmen" for the transportation, from Cuba to this port, of 25 negroes and 50 barrels of flour, which were forwarded by the agent of the Royal Company and corresponds to the sixth shipment sent from Jamaica to that port by the contractor don Edward Manning, in the brigantine "The Young Edward."

In addition to trade in tobacco and slaves, the company also dealt in produce such as sugar, honey, logwood, red ochre and anil,

island commodities, as well as in manufactured commodities brought from Europe.

The company maintained two garrisons in Florida for the benefit of the crown — one at St. Augustine and another in Apalache. The following quotation indicates that the company was pledged to contribute toward the development of colonies in these localities:

To don Augustin de Larra y Bonategui, the value of foods and utensils which he bought from August 22 to September 4, for the subsistence of 372 persons who came from the Canary Islands in the vessels named "The Santiago" and "The Solitude" for the populating of the Province of the Presidio of San Augustin de la Florida, for the account of the 500 families to which the Royal Company stands pledged in the 13th article of its charter.

In regard to these presidios, most of the company's expenditures were for transportation of varying groups of people to those districts and for food and clothing which were apparently bought for the retail shops which the company maintained there.

Closely related to the maintenance of these garrisons was the service of running a coast guard which this company also performed. Since the book contains only accounts of expenditures it is not certain whether the company was paid for this service or not, but in all probability the pay came in the form of a privilege to conduct privateering operations on French and English ships. That they did have this privilege is certain, for there are many times entries which show the payment of certain sums to the representative of the king in Cuba. These sums were described as being one-eighth of the amount taken in prize by the capture of ships of other nations.

The ships of the coast guard were built in the company's own shipyard. The company built and repaired ships, equipped them with guns and furnished them with ammunition and supplies. Some of these ships were built for the company and others for the king. One entry refers to the expenses of a "trial in the Navy Tribunal of this port to prove the cost and expenses incurred in the construction of two ships of 80 guns each, called the 'Phoenix' and the 'Lightning,' for His Majesty."

Of all the company's numerous undertakings, the expenditures connected with this shipyard are by far the heaviest. These expenditures are recorded in the most minute detail. Purchases include lumber from the upper reaches of inland rivers, iron for nails

and other purposes, pitch, sail cloth, oil, hemp, and a dozen other things. And along with these countless purchases of materials go the wages paid to the master workers, carpenters, foremen, coopers, iron workers, glaziers, painters, calkers, rope makers, sail makers, and lantern makers.

As we know, these old royal companies enjoyed certain privileges and in turn assumed certain obligations to the crown. Summarizing — the privileges of this company seem to have been as follows: a trading monopoly of some description, which included trade in goods and trade in slaves; the right to manufacture tobacco, the maintenance of retail stores at various settlements, and the right to privateer. As to the company's obligations, it maintained two garrisons for the crown and assumed the responsibility of furthering colonization; it built ships for the king and conducted a coast guard; it was obliged to pay, to the representative of the king in Cuba, one-eighth of the amounts taken in prize from privateering; it is also likely that the company furnished the king with cigars; and finally the accounts of the company appear to have been submitted to the inspection of royal officials.

Only the surface of this interesting book has been skimmed. Doubtless it will sometime prove a very fruitful field for research.

## A California Commission Merchant

The biographical information in the following article has been taken from a sketch of his father's life written by Mr. Harrison Dibblee at the request of the Business Historical Society.

### PART I

ALBERT DIBBLEE, commission merchant of San Francisco from 1849 to 1895, came of a family that had been among the earliest settlers in America. He was directly descended from Robert Dibblee who settled in Danbury, Connecticut, in 1630.

At the time of the Revolution, of the Dibblee brothers living in Stamford, Connecticut, two were Royalists who escaped to Nova Scotia, while a third, Ebenezer, went to New York and joined the American forces, later settling at Pine Plains. This was the grandfather of Albert. Albert's father was a lawyer. He married Frances Wilson and lived for some years at Clermont on the Hudson. Here Albert was born, February 9, 1821.