

The Firestone Archives and Library

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*Archives and Library
The Firestone Tire & Rubber Company*

THE Archives Department of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Co. was established in March 1943 in Akron, Ohio, for several reasons, both immediate and long range.

Most of the Firestone production in 1942 was for the war effort. Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., then president and now chairman of the board, decided that production records, not only of the company but of all American industry, constituted vital source material for the historian of World War II, material as historically important as the records of the Government and the military services. Without such industrial records no completely accurate appraisal of the Nation's defense and war effort could be made.

Up to 1942 documents of obvious historical value had been preserved by the company. That was true of documents relating to war production. But these were few in number and they were decentralized in various plants and departments throughout the country and abroad. No systematic effort had been made to bring them together and to catalog them. Mr. Firestone believed that much information important to a full appraisal of the company's war work might be destroyed unless steps were taken to preserve the records in one archival center.

Although the preservation of the war records was the immediate reason for establishing the archives, the long-range reasons were equally important. These are implicit in the story of the development and growth of the business itself.

The Firestone Co. was founded in Akron by Harvey S. Firestone in 1900. During the first 20 years of the company's existence the rubber industry in the United States went through a period of great expansion, which involved also rapid growth for Firestone. The extent of Firestone's growth can be measured by the fact that its floor space was enlarged from that of a relatively small office in 1900 to 154,800 square feet in 1910. By 1920 the company occu-

pied 2,081,200 square feet, and from 1910 to 1920 sales increased from \$5,271,040 to \$114,980,969.

Up to the time it began to produce war materiel, Firestone was principally a manufacturer of tires. But by the late 1930's the company was also producing industrial rubber and steel products, foam rubber (Foamex), plastics, and tire fabrics. With the advent of war in Europe and especially with United States participation in the conflict, Firestone began to produce many products for the armed forces. These included synthetic rubber, tank tracks, carriages and mounts for Bofors antiaircraft guns, and airplane wing panels and fuel cells. In 1943 the company utilized 12,000,000 square feet of floor space and sales were \$545,000,000.

At that time, the company's records were contained in approximately 9,000 file drawers in the main office (5,000 drawers in the nonactive files and 4,000 in the active files) and in an uncounted number of files throughout the rest of the organization. The largest part of the historically important items was in the main office files, which had been begun with the founding of the company in 1900. Although many of the early day-to-day records had been destroyed when the company moved in 1911 from its original location to its present site in Akron, a great deal of valuable material was saved. Vital records, such as the company's ledgers, legal documents (including deeds to property, patents, and contracts), secret formulas for compounding rubber, financial statements, and the minutes of the board of directors were preserved. Advertising matter, such as letters, brochures, and published advertisements, was moved to the new location, and the personal files of Mr. Firestone were kept intact.

As the company grew, the bulk of its records expanded. By 1920 the files had so increased that storage became a serious problem. This situation resulted in a company-wide plan designed to curb the growth of the records by reducing those in the files. Under this plan all records that had served their purposes, legal and otherwise, were to be destroyed. Contemplated in the plan was the wholesale destruction of much that was in the noncurrent files and a periodic weeding out of useless matter from current files. The carrying out of the plan was left to department heads. Much that was of no value was disposed of, but the mass of records continued to increase. In late 1929 the total number of filing drawers containing records and papers of all kinds, historically valuable and otherwise, active and inactive, was 11,507.

Obviously, by 1929, the handling, storage, and disposition of this

massive accumulation presented a problem of major proportions. To cope with it, the comptroller of the company worked out with the legal department and department heads a schedule for the orderly disposal of these records. A central files department was created. To it were sent all those inactive records for which there was no current use in the conduct of the business but which had to be retained to meet legal requirements. After these requirements were met, the schedule called for their disposal if permission of the head of the department in which they had originated was obtained. This system, effective in regulating the growth of the records, did not, however, provide for the preservation of significant or historically important documents.

This defect became apparent late in 1942, when Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., contemplated the company's role in the effort to win the war and the size to which the business had grown. At that time he was looking forward also to having a history of the business written to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the company. The documents necessary for this project were in thousands of files; and, for a historian to understand the history of the company and its character as a corporate being, he would have to correlate the most important of the company's records.

There were other considerations making imperative the founding of the archives. In addition to a factual record of the growth and development of the company, Mr. Firestone, Jr., wanted for reference an accurate account of the problems that had confronted the company and the methods used to solve them. This, he felt, would be helpful not only in conducting the daily affairs of the business but also in charting its future course.

It was for these reasons that the writer, then curator of history and Archivist of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, was engaged to head the Firestone archives. Since the Archivist was not only to work in the field of preserving important company records but also to act as a source of immediate reference for the entire organization, the department was merged with the business reference library, which had been founded in 1914, and was placed under the Archivist's administration. Although each division is individually staffed and functions as a separate unit, each complements the reference work of the other.

The papers of Harvey S. Firestone (125,000 items, in 70 file drawers), which had been cataloged in 1937-38, and those of his sons and business associates became the nucleus of the archives. A program of accession for all company records of permanent admin-

istrative and historical value was developed, and a program of expanding the usefulness of the archives was adopted so that the department could be of service to all branches and divisions of the organization.

Meanwhile, the overall records program of the company was re-evaluated, and all records in the inactive files were surveyed in 1943. In this survey much of permanent value was saved from destruction, because many departmental files had been kept far beyond their scheduled life. Several department heads had undoubtedly been reluctant to order destruction of their own files even though they had been kept beyond the legal requirement dates. Many files had been destroyed, however, and presumably much of value had therefore been lost.

The Archivist and the custodian of the inactive files agreed that thereafter no record would be destroyed until it was declared of no historic value. Various department heads also agreed to send directly to the archives all their inactive records of permanent value. Thus the archives became the permanent repository of papers and documents of lasting value. Meanwhile, the basic schedule of planned destruction of records of only temporary value was continued.

Descriptive inventories were made of the files of Harvey S. Firestone, Jr. Inventories were made also of the papers of the late John W. Thomas, chairman of the company from 1941 to 1946, and those of the founder of the company. These files constitute an unbroken line of top management records from 1900 to the present. Files of other executives, departments, and subsidiaries have been similarly described. Each inventory contains: (1) the accession number, (2) a historical sketch of the department or office, (3) the exact title of the file, (4) inclusive dates and quantity of records, and (5) a comprehensive description of the record content.

When the files of Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., are 5 years old they are transferred to the archives. There is no set time for the transfer of records of the departments; the period varies from 3 to 10 years.

The archives has acquired 560,000 documents, 150,000 photographic negatives, and thousands of feet of microfilm and recordings. The records, except for oversize documents, maps, and recordings, are housed on open shelves in metal-edge boxes of the kind used in the National Archives.

Our method of cataloging this material is more extensive than that used in most public archives. This is necessary because when

we are called upon by company executives to produce anything on file we must be able to do so immediately. Photographs and photographic negatives have the most complete index, under such general headings as "persons," "places," "occasions," and "products." In addition to the descriptive inventory of the records series, we also index the more important folders or dossiers on 3" x 5" cards. These cards are filed according to subject and give cross references to the descriptive inventory concerned. When any dossier contains more than one significant or important document, a separate card is prepared for each.

Microfilm has been used to record in another form documents deteriorating with age and to reduce space. All finished drawings made by the engineering department are also put on microfilm. The collection of recordings, which is constantly growing, is mainly of speeches by Firestone executives and of events of interest to the company. In addition, the archives has a large collection of maps of the rubber-producing areas of the world, among them maps of Liberia, where Firestone has had since 1926 a large rubber plantation.

Over the years the business reference library has accumulated 25,000 selected volumes on natural and synthetic rubber, plastics, and automotive transportation, as well as books on money, banking, securities, economics, marketing, accounting, taxation, law, and engineering. The library circulates current copies of 250 technical and business periodicals and binds some of them for permanent reference. Of the library's resources one of the most important collections is its vertical file of some 125,000 reports, pamphlets, and miscellaneous items.

Based on this collection and the contents of the archives, two books have already been written — a biography of the founder and a historical account of the growth and development of the business. Experience has also shown that this ever-growing collection is an aid in forming company-wide policy and in solving the day-to-day problems of managing the business.