

Museum Artifacts in Company Archives

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Merrimack Valley Textile Museum

MUSEUM items in company collections are very much like company archives in that they vary greatly in size, content, and the ways in which they are housed and used. Some museum items are stored in a treasurer's office, some are in display cases in a salesroom or main lobby, some are stored away in an attic. Last, and usually least frequently, some find their way into a well-ordered and intelligible company museum, open to the public, in which the history of the firm is preserved and communicated.

Museum items find varied and often divergent uses. Frequently these items are used as an adjunct to the advertising department for periodic promotional activities, sales efforts, company picnics, or centennial celebrations. Like the question of storage, the use of these materials is often woefully unsophisticated and remarkably shortsighted. The infrequent exceptions only serve to emphasize the rule.

Archivists and museum curators alike are concerned with the problem of storage—free from extremes in temperature and humidity, free from damage by insects or vandalism, and relatively well protected against direct sunlight, dirt, and all the other evils by which old things suffer. Our standards are nearly the same as yours and if you archivists are fortunate enough to obtain ideal conditions for your materials, you will provide ample protection for ours.

We are both concerned with the problem of the use of our materials. We both believe that the materials in question should be saved, and implicit in that belief is the conviction that the materials should be seen, used, and appreciated. Before the materials are used, we both apply some sort of external interpretation. Your interpretation is, I think, more subtle than ours, for museum items require that we interpose ourselves more directly between the object and the public. If you have in your archives museum items for ex-

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hibit purposes, they must be placed in some historical context, a context that results from intellectual activity on your part. To put the problem in terms that are personally familiar, suppose that you are in charge of the archives of the Bigelow-Sanford Carpet Co., an old manufacturing firm which still owns its first automatic carpet loom, and that you are also responsible for an exhibit involving that loom. The specific techniques used to exhibit the loom can differ widely. Ideally, the exhibit should illustrate the historically important aspects of the loom, for instance, that it was introduced as the textile industry was changing from hand to machine power, a period of tremendous significance to this nation. Related labels and photographs might tell something about the loom's inventor or the effect of this technological innovation on production.

The growing number of museums devoted to business and industrial history is potentially a mighty force in the systematic and cogent maintenance of business records. These museums can provide also for intelligent and new uses of business records. The coming years will see new museums devoted to business history and the result will be a greater demand for archival materials in this field. Many of these museums, by the very nature of their activity, will collect business records. What this development means is greater exploitation of business records and their wider use in a quasi-academic environment. Museum libraries having archival materials will become more available for public use. Traditionally, the art museum library has been especially for the use of the curatorial staff, normally restricted to members of the museum and interested students. In a museum of business history, however, the exhibits themselves are often directly based on company records and the museum archives then become an integral part of the exhibit materials. The individual visitor who wants to pursue the subject in more detail is directed to the museum library, where archival material is found.

I would draw two conclusions from the intimate relationship that often obtains between exhibits and archival materials in the museum of industrial history. First is the potential use of archival materials in this situation by a new and different clientele—individual citizens whose intellectual curiosity has been so sharpened by museum exhibits that they seek more information from the museum's library and archives. Second is that this same close relationship between exhibit and archival materials may, in a very general fashion, provide archivists with an angle of attack on the problem of what to do with museum items that find their way into collections of company records.