

# The Western Electric Historical Library

By JOHN BUCHANAN

*Western Electric Co., Inc.*

**I**N 1969 Western Electric will be one hundred years old. The company was founded as Gray & Barton in Cleveland on November 18, 1869. The next year Gray & Barton moved to Chicago; there, in 1872, it became the Western Electric Manufacturing Co., with Anson Stager, Chief of U.S. Military Telegraphs during the Civil War, as its first president. The new company's total capitalization was \$150,000. Eight years later, in 1880, it was "the largest electrical manufacturing company in the United States." Besides carrying on its general electrical business, Western had become a leading manufacturer of telephone and telegraph apparatus and equipment.

The company was reorganized in 1881, and American Bell Telephone, forerunner of the American Telephone & Telegraph Co., acquired a majority interest. The following year the Western Electric Co., Inc., and American Bell signed an agreement whereby Western became the sole supplier of Bell telephones and telephone equipment. However, the company still retained its general electrical business. During the 1880's its operations were extended overseas, and over the years plants and agencies were established in many countries.

Between 1901 and 1913 Western Electric signed supply contracts with the Associated Bell Telephone Companies. Under the terms of this standard contract Western took over the purchasing and storing of all telephone and office supplies for the associated companies.

The history of Western Electric encompasses much more than the manufacture of telephone and associated equipment. We have noted its role as a producer of general electrical goods. At one time it was the country's largest jobber of electrical supplies. Research and development by Western's scientists and engineers led the company into other fields: for example, radio broadcasting equipment, public address systems, sound systems for talking movies, the orthophonic phonograph, hearing aids, and railway dispatching equipment. But because of the growing demands of the

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Bell System, Western has gradually rid itself of all operations not directly connected with Bell System needs. Today, as the manufacturing and supply unit of the Bell System, Western Electric manufactures telephone apparatus and equipment. The company was also an important defense contractor in both World Wars and in the years following World War II.

Western Electric is almost wholly owned by A.T. & T. In 1925 the Bell Telephone Laboratories was formed by the merger of the research and engineering departments of Western and A.T. & T. Each company owns 50 percent of the laboratories.

#### THE COMPANY'S HISTORICAL LIBRARY

The Western Electric Historical Library is part of the Public Relations Organization. The library was begun in 1942 by Frank H. Lovette, company historian, and now consists of two units: the Archives and the Historical Collection.

Archival holdings include sales catalogs dating from 1878; annual reports of both Western and A.T. & T.; instruction bulletins and sales bulletins; volumes of advertisement; plant engineering conference reports; documentary histories of Western's role in World Wars I and II; press releases and company news items; organization charts and general instruction circulars; Bell System publications, including Western house organs; and much miscellaneous printed matter. We believe that we hold the extant correspondence of Enos M. Barton, cofounder of Gray & Barton and Western Electric's third president. We also have some of the outgoing correspondence of Harry B. Thayer, fourth president; and miscellaneous files of the Legal and Patent Division for the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Included in the Barton and Thayer papers and the legal files are many letters of other important Western Electric executives.

The Historical Collection contains a great deal of material originally archival—in other words, documents and file units that in one way or another were separated from records in the offices of origin and eventually were given to or collected by the historian. This material is largely correspondence, memoranda, reports, and news items; and it is complemented by personal letters, reminiscences, clippings, articles, pamphlets, and brochures. There are also several file drawers of photographs, a biographical file, and a small library on the history of communications.

Although we do not have a formal accessions program, we plan to establish one for both the Archives and the Historical Collection. Accessions are coming in, of course, and we by no means discourage

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people from giving us things; but our major efforts are directed toward arranging and cataloging present holdings.

Constant and heavy use is made of our holdings by Western and other Bell System personnel. About half of the requests originate within the Public Relations Organization; the rest come from other organizations at headquarters, from works and plants and Service Division field locations, from A.T. & T. and Bell Telephone Laboratories, and occasionally from one of the telephone companies. Noncompany queries, while not approaching the volume of service given to the company, come in regularly. Within the company we anticipate that the Historical Library will become increasingly important as we near the celebration of the 100th anniversary.

#### ARCHIVAL ARRANGEMENT

We are now arranging the materials in the Archives and the Historical Collection and preparing finding aids. Arrangement in both units follows the record group system. Beginning with the number 100 (Predecessor Companies), we number in order: 101 (Board of Directors), 102 (Presidents), 103 (Committees), and so forth. When a new group is added it receives the next highest number. Group titles and numbers are the same for the Archives and the Historical Collection; a few groups, however, such as Products and Processes, are used only for the Historical Collection. On finding aids, group numbers are preceded by the letters RG for Archives and HC for Historical Collection.

Before discussing finding aids, let me explain HC 124—Products. This particular group is the only one thus far arranged and cataloged, and we started with this group because it is heavily used.

The products are arranged in alphabetical order of their names. Then, under each product, items of a general nature are filed in the order received. (This is similar to the shelf-numbering system used in many historical manuscript collections: collections shelved in the order in which they are accessioned.) After the general items comes material on coded apparatus. For example, amplifiers are coded: 112-A, 147-B, 149-A, 149-B, 151 Type, 153-B, -BW, and so on. Folders containing material on coded apparatus are arranged in numerical order by code numbers. To sum up, then: product names arranged alphabetically; general material on each product arranged as received; items on coded apparatus placed immediately after the general material and arranged by code numbers. We believe that this type of arrangement will best serve our purpose. Generally, we get two types of requests concerning products: (1) What have you got on amplifiers?—or, (2) Do you have anything

on the 112-A Amplifier? After the initial approach the user often puts a more specific question—the date of introduction of a piece of apparatus, or its specifications, for example. This arrangement, in conjunction with finding aids, enables us to show the user everything that we have on a product; or, for the detailed inquiry, to locate quickly a folder containing specific information. On the negative side of the coin, but important nonetheless, we can tell just as quickly if we do not have the item requested. A user may ask for a product by trade name rather than by code, of course; in such cases the card catalog refers, let us say, from Cloverleaf Antenna to 54-A Antenna.

The rest of the groups in the Historical Collection will receive similar treatment. There probably will be slight variations dependent on accessions peculiar to particular groups, as coded apparatus is peculiar to Products. We may have broad categories within groups—History & Description, Organization, and so on. But basically our method will remain the same.

Archival arrangement will follow traditional principles. Records of a group, its subdivisions, and its series will be kept together, and as a general rule the original order will be retained. Now this matter of retention of original order is rather important. My own experience has been that general adherence to this principle is not only theoretically sound but eminently practical. Records received from an organization are often accompanied by finding aids prepared in the office of origin. Rearrange the records and these finding aids are of little or no use, and you will have to take the time and effort to make your own lists and indexes. And, even if there are good reasons to change the original order, most of us just don't have the time and staff to rearrange large groups of records.

#### FINDING AIDS

Our basic finding aid is a card catalog. Although the Archives and the Historical Collection are physically separated, the cards leading users to material in each are interfiled in the one catalog. We use main entries, cross-references, and in some cases added entries. Call numbers are on the upper right-hand corners of the cards for main entries and added entries. HC 124 has been explained. The letter G stands for General. F.1, 2, 3, stand for Folders 1, 2, and 3, and so on. To get a folder from the Product group you would need the name of the product, which is in the upper left-hand corner, and the entire call number. Folders containing items on coded apparatus give the code number in place of the letter G, and within the alphabetical card catalog we are able to

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file cards on coded apparatus in code-number sequence. This is not only a reference aid; it also allows us to spot gaps in product holdings, for we can check our cards against the periodic *Report* on coded apparatus put out by the Engineer of Manufacture. When all of our holdings are cataloged the group number and letter symbols will vary occasionally. For example, records of the Legal and Patent Division may contain information on the 4-B Radio Receiver. In that case the card will direct the user to RG 117, etc., 117 being the record group number for that division.

The checklist is a finding aid quick to prepare, and though it gives minimum information it is a handy tool until you have the time to prepare detailed inventories and calendars. Alphabetical checklists of correspondents, giving only names of writers and addressees and dates, are very useful for series that you believe will be referred to because they contain the letters of important individuals. Another example is a checklist in which file unit headings are listed in order of arrangement. These are often stopgap measures, but if one is pressed by lack of time or staff or both the checklist can be useful.

Descriptive essays written clearly and succinctly may be prepared for records ranging from file units to entire groups, depending upon the importance and nature of particular records.

Once we have finished the job of arranging and cataloging we plan to distribute a rather detailed report of our holdings within the company. The report will include a description of our activities, of what we hope to accomplish, and of the services that we are able to provide. Thereafter, periodic reports of accessions will be prepared and distributed.

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### *Nicht wahr?*

Und ach! entrollst du gar ein würdig Pergamen,  
So steigt der ganze Himmel zu dir nieder.

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Auch was Geschriebnes forderst du Pedant?  
. . . Doch dieser Wahn ist uns ins Herz gelegt,  
. . . Allein ein Pergament, beschrieben und beprägt,  
Ist ein Gespenst, vor dem sich Alle scheuen.

—GOETHE, *Faust*, part 1, lines 1108–9, 1716, 1722, 1726–7.