

Business Archives: A Corporate Asset

Foreword by issue editor HAROLD P. ANDERSON

THERE WAS A TIME when business archives were a lovely bunch of coconuts* —nice things to have around, but nobody quite sure what to do with them. Now, they seem to have as many potential uses as the remarkably practical and profitable fruit of the coco palm —though both sometimes still look like the scourge of the earth.

Business archives are coming of age as more and more companies reap the benefits of one of their most useful and inexpensive corporate assets. Time-worn documents, leather-bound ledgers, long-forgotten cartons of administrative files and faded photographs are being dusted off and integrated with computer print-outs, magnetic tapes, microforms and laser discs, to create information data bases potentially as powerful as any a corporation has at its disposal.

In legal affairs, marketing, advertising, operations research, strategic planning, real property management, per-

sonnel matters, public relations, management education, as well as other areas of corporate activity, the impact of organized historical information systems, i.e., business archives with an information retrieval capacity, is being felt. And in the business world, the base line does not have to be very long. Anything older than about three months is history.

In a way, it is ironic that the emergence of American business archives, which takes a long-term commitment from a corporation, albeit with a view of long-term gain, occurs at a time when many observers are bemoaning the myopic emphasis of modern American business organizations on short-term objectives. In their introduction to the massive, yet entertaining, *Everybody's Business: An Almanac* (billed by Harper & Row as "the irreverent guide to Corporate America"), editors Milton Moskowitz, Michael Katz and Robert

*Lyric, minus Cockney accent, borrowed from "I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts," by Fred Heather-ton, 1944.

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Levering sum it up concisely:

Corporations, like people, are often better understood by looking at their past. In the business world, where eyes are usually fixed firmly on the road ahead, this exercise is seldom performed.

Where the exercise has been performed, and where professionally managed archives with professional staffs have been established, the lessons of history are being organized as building blocks to the future.

Is a business archives an expensive proposition? Hardly. In fact, a business could not have a less expensive asset with a higher potential return than an archives. Business archives contain less than 1/10 of 1% of all the paper records (as well as other mediums of information exchange) that a business ever generates. And it costs virtually nothing to acquire. The information is already owned by the company and paid for through original operational costs.

Knowing *what to choose* for inclusion in a business archives and *how to use* it for productive purposes—particularly on behalf of company programs and projects—are the keys to the success of a business archives program. Having trained archivists and historians, as well as sending current staff for specialized training, helps ensure the success.

With this special issue on business archives, the *American Archivist* will add to the growing volume of professional literature on the subject. SAA has already sponsored three of the most useful tools in the field: *Business Archives: An Introduction* (1978); *Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada* (3rd edition, 1980); and *A Select Bibliography on Business Archives and Records Management* (1981).

This issue may well raise as many questions as it answers. In business archives, as in many areas of the archival

profession where the search for definition more often results in affinity than in real definition, the ever-changing political, legal, social, economic, technical and cultural environments in which we function continually affect our work. Business archives are small cogs in the inner works of corporations, just as many other archives are small parts of larger institutions, whether government agencies, universities, religious communities, or historical societies and museums. They reflect the past and the present and sometimes help shape the future. If there is any characteristic common to business archives, hopefully it is that they accurately preserve the integrity of the corporate memory, that often hazy body of knowledge that combines what really happened with what people thought was happening.

In this issue, the conscious attempts of business archivists to achieve self-definition, or at least affinity, are described by Linda Edgerly, consulting archivist and chair of SAA's Business Archives Group, in her introduction to the SAA's guidelines for business archives. The historical development of business archives is recounted by David Smith, founder of the Walt Disney Archives. An overview of current developments in the field is presented by Doug Bakken of the Ford Archives & Tannahill Research Library. Perceptions of future potential are outlined by George Smith of the Winthrop Research Group, Inc., in an article which complements his recent "Present Value of Corporate History," *Harvard Business Review* (November-December, 1981). Commentary on these articles, as well as incisive perceptions and questions about the state of the art, are made by Deborah Gardner of the New York Stock Exchange Archives and Philip Mooney of The Coca-Cola Company Archives. The thorny question of access

is confronted by Anne Van Camp of Chase Manhattan Corporation's Archives. The impact of computer technology and how to cope with it is reduced to an affordable size by one of the leading experts on automation, Richard Kesner of the F.W. Faxon Company. His article continues his important sequence of publications on the subject. The control of vast collections of visual images in an increasingly paperless office is delineated by Mildred Simpson of Atlantic Richfield Company's Photography Collection. Finally, a case study of a perplexing problem

sometimes faced by archivists, the movement of records from their place of origin, is described by Lynn Bonfield and Karen Lewis of Bonfield Archival Consultants.

The authors in this issue have a wealth of experience in archival and historical work. They have prepared and—apparently unafraid of competitive enterprise—fought for their respective points of view; and the editor is sure he has not heard the end of it. But so be it. The bottom line will be decided by the readers and the users.