

An Historical Look at Business Archives

DAVID R. SMITH

AS HISTORICAL AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS GO, business archives are a relatively recent phenomenon. One hundred years ago, when business and industry in the United States had left the havoc of the Civil War behind them and were growing at a tremendous pace, there were no business archives. Three decades later, the call to the United States to help friendly nations put a stop to the ambitions of Kaiser Wilhelm in Europe led to a major growth in industries preparing war materiel, but still no business archives were established. Two more decades passed before an industrialist had the foresight to begin saving his company's historical files in systematic fashion.

This lack of archival development was not confined solely to business archives. Many of us forget that the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. was constructed in 1934—that is still recent history! Groups of historians had taken part in a long and arduous struggle to have legislation passed that would establish the National Archives. When

they finally succeeded, it marked the beginning of formal archival history in America.

One must remember that in those early days when archives were first coming into their own, there were not only few archives, there were *no* archivists. The first archives established were staffed by historians and others who were trained in the methods of historical research.

It was during this gestation period that the Society of American Archivists was organized, and early steps were taken to establish a set of standards for uniform archival practices to cope with the astonishing quantity of records that was growing by leaps and bounds.

It was not until 1950, with passage of the Federal Records Act, that the National Archives finally began to deal seriously with records management. The archivists had finally come to realize that many of the records they were storing were not of permanent value. But this realization was not unique to the National Archives.

While these birth and growing pains

The author founded the Walt Disney Archives in 1970 and serves as its archivist. He has served as chairman of SAA's Business Archives Committee and is presently Executive Director of the Manuscript Society.

were being felt within the federal government, other archives were undergoing a parallel process of growth. These included not only city, county, and state archives, but also archives of businesses, churches, and universities.

With a greater awareness on the part of historians of the importance of business history, businesses began to receive encouragement to preserve their important records. When SAA's Business Archives Committee was created in 1938, one government archivist wrote in the *American Archivist*, "The historian who seeks to interpret our contemporary life without taking into account the shaping forces of modern business will but touch the fringe of his subject. For more than a generation people have spoken of two capitals, Washington and Wall Street. The relation between these giant concentrations of power are of immense significance to the people. We are careful to preserve the records of one capital but have sadly neglected the records of the other."¹

Businesses in this country began to have real problems with records after World War I, during which expanded facilities and government contracts had generated ever-increasing amounts of paperwork. Bookkeepers and eventually records managers were called upon to handle the crush. Recommendations for disposal of large amounts of little-used records were made by the records managers, and soon a number of companies had set up specific records retention and disposal systems.

Because records managers seemed to be interested primarily in disposing of records as fast as they could get releases

from the departments involved, some historians, and, thankfully, some business executives too, began to wonder if this wholesale disposal of records was perhaps being carried out a little too quickly.

One of the first executives to do anything about his company's records was Harvey S. Firestone. He and his son, Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., began to fear that some records of permanent value were not being retained. Not only were they planning a company history, but they believed also "that certain records would be of value to management for reference in making decisions regarding current business problems as they arose."² They realized that if steps were not taken soon, it would be too late.

To ensure that valuable and useful records were safeguarded and preserved through proper evaluation, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co., in 1943, became the first company to hire an archivist and begin a comprehensive archives program in cooperation with the company's records manager. This first business archivist was William D. Overman, who had for a number of years been curator of history and state archivist at the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society and who later served as president of SAA.³

While Harvey Firestone and his staff showed great foresight, their lead was not immediately followed by other companies. One basic problem was that neither librarians, nor scholars, not businessmen had decided *where* business records should be preserved. Some thought that these files should be in

¹Oliver W. Holmes, "The Evaluation and Preservation of Business Archives," *American Archivist* 1 (October 1938): 171-85.

²Quoted in William D. Overman, "The Pendulum Swings," *American Archivist* 22 (January 1959): 4.

³Overman had worked with the Firestone family since 1937, while still at the Historical Society, on the cataloging of historical papers. See William D. Overman, "The Firestone Archives and Library," *American Archivist* 16 (October 1953): 305-309.

libraries. While some large libraries did have good collections of business records, mostly of defunct companies, the librarians began to realize that where there had once been small businesses, there now were large corporations and even conglomerates composed of several corporations. The collections of their business records were becoming so large and unwieldy that the libraries could no longer afford to either house or maintain them. Large business collections were collecting dust, unprocessed, in the libraries' most distant and seldom-visited storerooms. Arthur H. Cole, librarian of the Baker Library at Harvard, wrote an article in the *Journal of Economic History* in 1945 in which he recommended that businesses preserve their own records.⁴

During the 1940s, very little was accomplished along these lines, with only a few companies—including Time, Inc., Armstrong Cork, INA, and Eastman Kodak—joining Firestone's lead in starting archival programs. Businesses were not convinced of the wisdom of preserving their historically important files. There was only one area where some businesses were saving their history, and this was in company museums. These began around the turn of the century, long before business archives, and by 1943, when a definitive book was written on the subject, 80 companies in the United States had museums of their own.⁵ Some of these museums would later be incorporated into archival programs.

The 1950s saw a slight renewal of interest, and companies such as Ford, Sears Roebuck, New York Life Insurance, Eli Lilly, Proctor and Gamble,

Bank of America, and Coca-Cola began archives. And yet when a survey was taken in 1958, fewer than 12 large companies reported that they had archivists on their staffs.

William Overman, Firestone's archivist, in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists in 1958, said, "There are literally hundreds of business corporations in the United States that can afford to set up their own archives if they are shown how to do it or if they are persuaded that a program for the proper care of their permanent records will pay them great dividends in the long run."⁶ The problem was that no one was doing the persuading. It was not coming out of the historical profession, and it was not coming out of the archival profession.

In the 1960s, business archives went into the doldrums. Only four major business archives were begun. A questionnaire distributed in 1964 to 402 firms elicited a response that only 10 percent were preserving records to any degree, and only a few of these had an archivist in charge. The SAA disbanded its Business Archives Committee and threw business archivists into a group consisting of business, urban, and labor archives. This created strange bedfellows because the latter two were involved with social concerns while the business archives were involved with economic concerns.

The publication in 1969 of a *Directory of Business Archives* by the SAA signalled the birth of a new era. A questionnaire had been sent to 700 firms, with 133 reporting that they had at least some semblance of an archives, even if it consisted only of one file drawer in the

⁴Arthur H. Cole, "Business Manuscripts: A Pressing Problem," *Journal of Economic History* 5 (May 1945): 43-59.

⁵Lawrence Vail Coleman, *Company Museums* (Washington, D.C.: The American Association of Museums, 1943).

⁶Overman, "The Pendulum Swings," p. 9.

office of the secretary to the chairman of the board. Of these 133 firms, only 13 reported having a full-time archivist on their staff, although to that number could be added nine historians and one museum director.

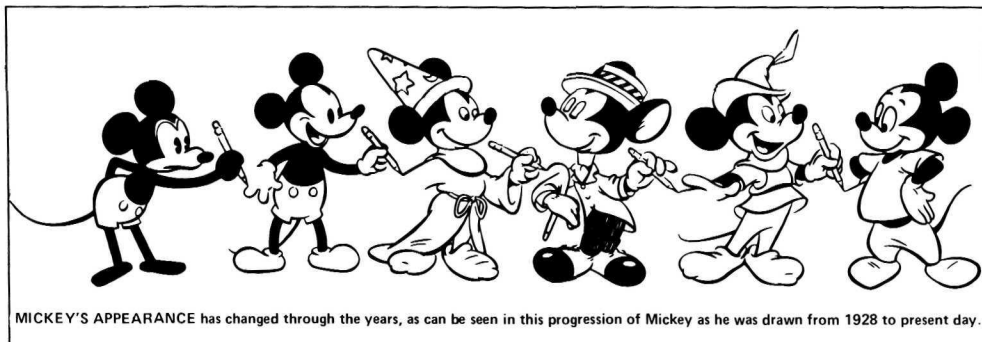
Perhaps, we may think as we reach around to give ourselves a pat on the back, the very act of sending this questionnaire to 700 companies made business executives start to think: "What *are* we doing with out history?" "Are some of our files historically important?" "Should we be considering starting an archives program?"

Of course, there were many reasons for the rebirth in the early 1970s of interest in business archives. The nostalgia craze made instant antiques or "collectibles" out of the relatively recent products of many of our companies. Universities were turning out large numbers of history graduates who, finding jobs scarce in the field of education, helped convince some businesses that they could be useful in an archives program. The U.S. Bicentennial celebrations on the horizon brought renewed interest in history. Many companies were reaching major anniversaries and needed organized collections so that their histories could be written. And, lawsuits against companies were becoming all the more common, making easy access to historical files necessary to company attorneys. Whatever the reason, beginning

in 1970 there was a veritable flood of new business archives.

I can speak from personal experience about Walt Disney Productions. The company had been thinking about what to do with its historical files in 1969. Overtures were made by UCLA to have the records deposited in their library, but this was deemed unfeasible. Not only was there more material than UCLA could possibly handle, but the company needed constant access to the material and needed also to maintain the confidentiality of business secrets. I was hired by Disney as a consultant, and I made good use of the just-published *Directory of Business Archives* to send inquiries about procedures and policies to other archivists. Out of this work came a proposal for setting up an archives within the company, which was soon implemented.

During the 1970s, Disney was joined by a number of other companies, including International Harvester, Anheuser-Busch, Corning Glass, Weyerhaeuser, Wells Fargo Bank, Deere & Co., Gerber Products, Los Angeles Times, and Atlantic Richfield. Within a decade, the number of business archives in the country nearly doubled, and, even more significantly, the number of business archivists quadrupled. Still we are a rare breed, but we are no longer in danger of extinction, which had been a real possibility just ten years ago.



MICKEY'S APPEARANCE has changed through the years, as can be seen in this progression of Mickey as he was drawn from 1928 to present day.

The Business Archives Committee was reinstated by SAA, eventually to be superseded by a professional affinity group, which now has 176 members. The 1975 edition of SAA's business archives directory listed 196 archives, with 30 archivists, and the more recent 1980 edition listed 200 archives, with 60 archivists.

Business archives have come into their own in the last decade, not only with the accelerated growth in numbers, but with the outreach efforts of present members of the profession. In 1974, Edie Hedlin, while at the Ohio Historical Society, prepared an extremely useful tool to send to businesses contemplating the beginning of an archives program. This business archives manual was later revised, published, and distributed under the auspices of SAA.⁷ SAA has also increased the number of sessions of business archival interest at its annual meetings and sponsored several in-depth workshops on business archives in different parts of the country.

We must not be made complacent, however, by all these recent successes. Not only do we need to continue to make other companies aware of the value of an archival program, but we must continue the hard sell within our own companies. With changes constantly being made at the middle and top levels of management, we need to continue our educational efforts to prove the value of an archives. In the past, some business archives—perish the thought—have been known to vanish. This can happen when a company's management has a change of heart, when the company is bought out or merges with another, or even when the founder of the archives retires or dies. Executives must continually be made aware of the value of their archives, so

they do not think that as soon as the company's centennial history has been written, the archives can be disbanded, dispensed with, or destroyed.

One sad situation that occurred recently in Hollywood can be cited as an example. A well known animated cartoon studio was approached by a young animation historian and film buff with a detailed program for the establishment of an archives. His plan caught the fancy of the company's founders, who hired the young man as archivist. He immediately proceeded to collect from warehouses the most important animation artwork prepared by the company over several decades, including samples from each film or series. These drawings, celluloids, and backgrounds were carefully preserved, while all the remainder was destroyed. Various other historical files were gathered, including samples of licensed books and merchandise, and the company's founders took pride in showing off the archives to visitors. After about six months, however, the large conglomerate that owned the company learned of the archives and deemed it an unnecessary expense. Not only was the archivist summarily fired, but all of the artwork and files that he had gathered were collected and destroyed.

We have seen many changes take place in the field of business archives since Harvey Firestone made his move back in 1943. Much of the growth that has taken place can be attributed, at least in part, to the greater awareness of the value of business history. In 1964, Professor Ralph Hidy of Harvard spoke on the importance of business in the history of our country: "During the past 200 years, no other single group in our society has been more influential in raising our standards of living, in setting the

⁷Edie Hedlin, *Ohio Business Archives Manual* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1974); idem., *Business Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1978).

direction of institutional and social changes, in affecting our national policies and international relations. Only by understanding what businessmen have done, and their ways of doing it, can we get a realistic appraisal of the

broad history of the American people.”⁸ In the past four decades, businesses have shown that they can help preserve some of that history themselves, and they have set examples for other companies to follow in the future.

⁸Ralph W. Hidy, “Business Archives: Introductory Remarks,” *American Archivist* 29 (January 1966): 34.

Establishment of Business Archives — Chronology

- 1943 — Firestone
- 1944 — INA
- 1945 —
- 1946 — Time, Inc.
- 1947 — Armstrong Cork
- 1948 —
- 1949 — Alcoa; Lever Brothers; Eastman Kodak
- 1950 — Texaco
- 1951 — Ford
- 1952 —
- 1953 —
- 1954 — Rockefeller Family
- 1955 — Sears Roebuck; New York Life Insurance
- 1956 — Eli Lilly
- 1957 — Proctor & Gamble
- 1958 — Bank of America; Coca-Cola
- 1959 —
- 1960 —
- 1961 — IBM
- 1962 —
- 1963 —
- 1964 —
- 1965 — Gulf Oil
- 1966 —
- 1967 —
- 1968 — Chicago Board of Trade
- 1969 — Educational Testing Service
- 1970 — Walt Disney Productions; Ford Foundation
- 1971 — International Harvester; Anheuser-Busch
- 1972 —
- 1973 — Corning Glass Works
- 1974 — Weyerhaeuser; Nationwide Insurance
- 1975 — Wells Fargo Bank; Chase Manhattan Bank
- 1976 — Deere & Co.; Gerber Products
- 1977 — Georgia Pacific Co.
- 1978 — Los Angeles Times
- 1979 — Atlantic Richfield; New York Stock Exchange;
J. Walter Thompson