

Corporate Archives Today*

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AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED in *Dun's Review* in 1981, entitled "Inside Industry's Archives," reported that the "history of American business is alive and well."¹ Robert Levy, the author of the article, went on to state that archival programs contribute to decision making by executives. It was Levy's belief that the fact that 210 American firms had archival programs, or "maintained in-house repositories of historical records, photographs, and artifacts," constituted a vote of confidence for business history. The very fact that the number of North American corporate archives has grown to several hundred since the establishment of the first ones in the 1940s is ample evidence for the article's main argument. History is alive in many corporations!

On the other hand, one wonders what the impact is on corporation managers who are considering the establishment of a corporate archives when they read in *Dun's* that archives are "a key decision resource." Will their expectations be justified? The archives' performance, in truth, will be much like that of other corporate support departments in terms of promoting marketing programs, facilitating trademark protection, and documenting employee participation. The archives can play a vital role in business.

The article in *Dun's*, and others like it in national business publications, though usually *not* written by archivists, should be carefully analyzed by archivists, because such articles constitute what many business executives are

*For purposes of this article, "corporate archives" is taken to mean business archives programs operating within large, on-going corporations. The term is frequently used interchangeably with "business archives" though it is technically more specific.

¹*Dun's Review* (May 1981): 72-73, 76.

reading.² They often form a future reference source when management asks the staff: "What is an archives?"

While any mention of the word "archives" in a national business periodical is useful in establishing corporate programs, impressionistic articles can perpetuate corporate myths surrounding archival activities. It is common knowledge that corporate archives are not at the top of the priority list of goals in most American businesses. The fact that the first program dates only from the 1940s is ample evidence of this. The growth in the number of programs has been unspectacular, but steady. In 1960, 51 companies had an archives; and nine years later only 13 full-time archivists were employed by corporations. As late as 1977 it was noted in a national survey that "business archives are still relatively scarce, [but] their number is growing."³

The article in *Dun's*, as well as this author's experience in business archives, serve as points of departure to examine the current status of corporate archives.

First of all, what is meant by the use of the term "corporate archives?" This is difficult to define because existing corporate archives programs are as diverse as American business.⁴ Archives vary greatly in staffing, size, and types of material preserved. In the United States they are operated with as few as one part-time employee or as many as six full-time workers. The problem in

definition can be illustrated with companies that have departments they call "archives" that range in size from one consisting of 10 linear feet to another of more than 10,000 linear feet. Items preserved include both two- and three-dimensional materials.

Many businesses typically identify "the archives" as any department (usually within the domain of public relations, the library, general services, or the corporate secretary) that preserves "old" records. The archives often exist on an unofficial basis because some longtime employee has preserved old company records. The material is often routine, but may include old photographs of employees, printed matter such as annual reports, perhaps some correspondence files, varying quantities of early financial records, and assorted plaques and related memorabilia.

Probably the most apt description of what these ad hoc archives acquire and preserve was summed up by one company official who said the archives keeps "a little bit of everything concerning the company that no one else wants to keep."

A true corporate archives is not simply an information operation, nor does it consist of records haphazardly solicited and maintained by a well-meaning, devoted and longtime employee. Nor is a corporate archives a department that saves every piece of

²See, for instance, Margaret Price, "Corporate Historians: A Rare But Growing Breed," *Industry Week*, March 23, 1981, pp. 87-90, which discusses the current fascination with business historians; and John Teresko, "Should You Keep an Archives," *Industry Week*, March 15, 1976, pp. 36-39. Equally informative in discussing a large corporate archives is Janis Mackenzie, "Wells Fargo & Company: Banking on the Past," *San Francisco Business*, (April 1979): 6-11; and Helen L. Davidson, "Operating a Business Archives Department," *The Office* (October 1978): 121-124, 147, 160.

³Helen L. Davidson, "A Tentative Survey of Business Archives," *American Archivist*, 24 (July 1961): 323-327. Some 51 companies of 113 surveyed had archives. Robert W. Lovett, "The Status of Business Archives," *American Archivist* 32 (July 1969): 247-250, noted that 13 firms had fulltime archivists. Gary D. Saretzky, "North American Business Archives," *American Archivist* 40 (October 1977): 413-420.

⁴A useful update on business archives is Charles R. Schultz, "Archives in Business & Industry: Identification, Preservation and Use," *Records Management Quarterly* (January 1981): 5-8, 29. See also: Meyer H. Fishbein, "Business Archives," *Encyclopedia of Library & Information Service*, Volume 3, eds. Allen Kent and Harold Laneour (New York City: Marcel Dekker, 1977).

paper the company created since its founding. It is neither a library that organizes material in an item-by-item system nor a records management program concerned about the destruction of records. A more appropriate description for a corporate archives is a department specifically charged with the systematic acquisition, preservation, and servicing of corporate historical records and artifacts deemed to be of permanent value in documenting the company's founding and subsequent growth.

Corporate archives contain appropriate documentation of decisions made by senior management and key operating executives. Records of archival quality consist of correspondence and reports, summary financial records, printed matter (such as annual reports and in-house publications), graphics, advertising and marketing materials, and memorabilia used in interpreting company products and long-term growth. The archives' scope of material, or indeed, its very size, cannot be established simply by an employee with an "interest" in history. Rather, what constitutes a corporate archives is determined by the corporation's product lines and its own history. The corporate archives is a reflection of decisions made by a company over a certain period of time. Consequently, a corporate archives, like any corporate department, should reflect thoughtful planning, including the establishment of goals and objectives.

A serious problem in the development of a corporate archives is that executives establishing a new program generally want it to follow the example of a well-established archives. While it is true that a new program can learn much from existing company archives, it does not necessarily follow that every archives

should be made to match an older, mature operation. On the other hand, the corporate archives of various consumer product companies, for instance, might have many similarities because the companies themselves have closely related functions.

The wide variety of corporate archives is particularly evident in the Society of American Archivists' *Directory of Business Archives in the United States & Canada* (Chicago, 1980). The directory contains a list of 200 corporate archives, although several of these must be qualified. More than a dozen of those listed are not strictly businesses, but trade associations. Several newspaper "morgues" are also included. And a few of the entries, upon close examination, are merely "in-house publications files." The institutional holdings range in size from "one file cabinet" (approximately 10 linear feet) to several thousand linear feet of records. Some entries represent records management centers while others are large warehouses storing inactive company records.

Though the number of corporate archives in existence is impressive, it does not necessarily mean that "business history is alive and well". It is noteworthy that five states—New York, Illinois, California, Pennsylvania, and Michigan—account for 95, or almost half of the total corporate archives listed in the *Directory*. Canada has 21 programs in operation. What do these figures, when evaluated in terms of the total number of businesses operating in North America, say about the state of business history?

An analysis of the "Fortune 500" list is also useful in evaluating the state of preservation of historical information. Of the top 100 firms ranked by sales, the *Directory* shows 17 have corporate ar-

chives.⁵

Rank	Business
4	Texaco
6	Ford
8	IBM
10	Atlantic Richfield
17	Sun
20	United Technologies
25	Proctor & Gamble
28	Eastman Kodak
31	Boeing
38	Goodyear Tire & Rubber
44	RCA
46	International Harvester
58	Coca-Cola
65	Deere & Co.
84	Weyerhaeuser
88	Firestone Tire & Rubber Co.
99	Anheuser-Busch

Closer examination of six of these firms provides some interesting insights into the development of corporate archives.

The Ford Motor Company established a corporate archives in 1951.⁶ The function evolved from the preparation, with the guidance of an outside consultant, for the company's 50th anniversary in 1953 and in connection with a proposed publication of a company history.⁷

The Archives, staffed at one time by as many as 10 employees, eventually ac-

cessioned more than 8,000 cubic feet of company and Ford family papers. A unique feature of the project was the formation of an oral history program by Owen Bombard, a Columbia University graduate student, who completed more than 300 interviews with the friends and associates of Henry Ford.

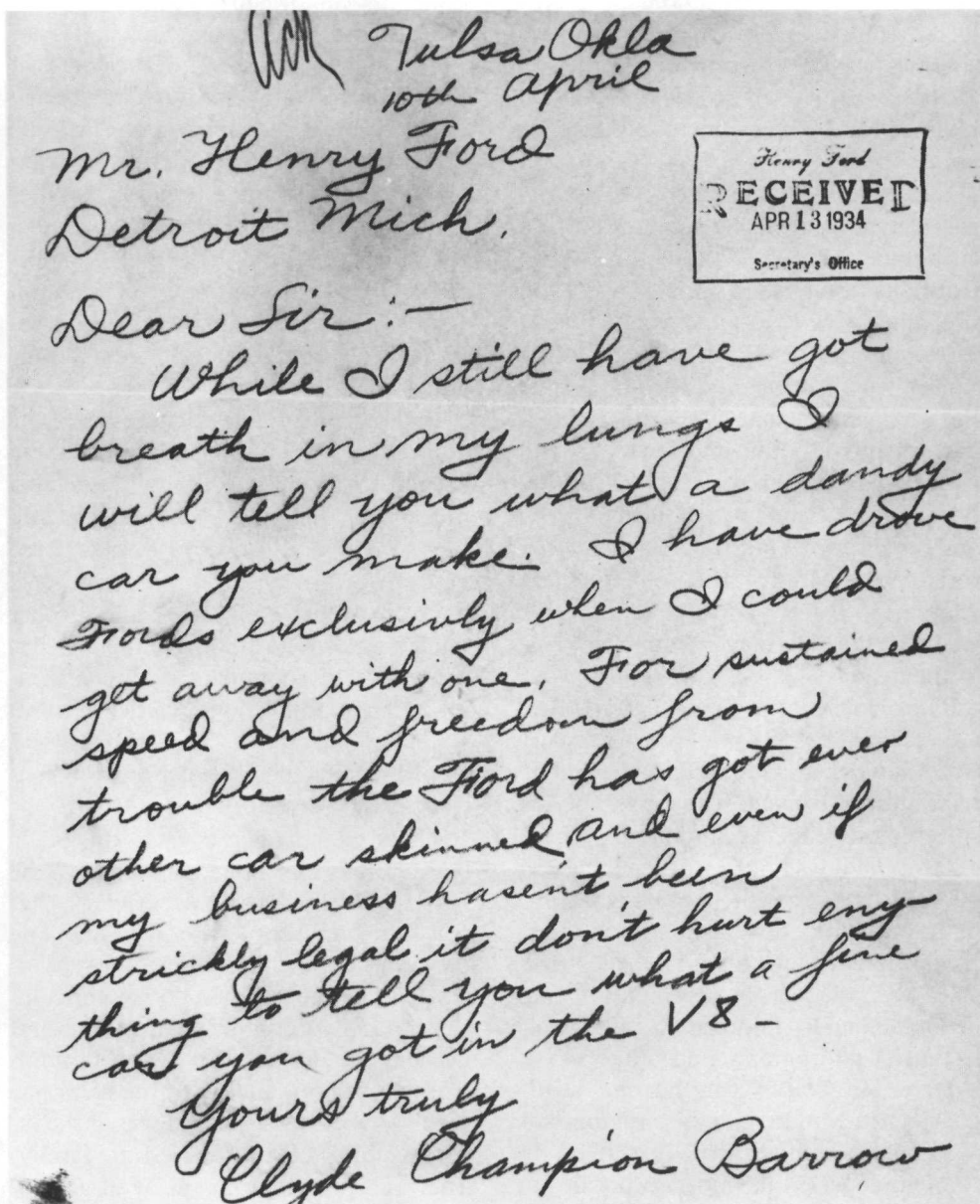
Ford Motor Company maintained its corporate archives until 1964, when approximately 10,000 cubic feet of records, several hundred thousand photographic images, and the oral history interviews were donated to the not-for-profit Edison Institute (more commonly known as Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum). Through the years, these papers have constituted what has become known as the "Ford Archives." However, the company did not donate its complete corporate historical files. The remaining files were retained within the department of general services under the aegis of "Ford Industrial Archives." This department, currently comprised of one full-time employee, preserves a wide range of material, dating from about 1900 to 1970, and is closely allied with a vital records and records retention program.

The Boeing Company's corporate archives was founded in the 1960s and currently preserves approximately 2,000 cubic feet of records, including many photographs and routine material. In the 1970s, the staff level was four and

⁵*Fortune*, May 3, 1982, pp. 260, 262. It should be noted that several other corporations, including General Electric (#11), DuPont (#15), Chrysler (#26), and Lockheed (#57) among others that preserve some historical records. CBS (#94 on the 1980 list, but no longer called an industrial by *Fortune*) could be listed. New archival programs were established in 1982 at Caterpillar Tractor (#37), Nabisco Brands (#60), and General Mills (#80).

⁶Henry E. Edmunds, "The Ford Motor Company Archives," *American Archivist* 15 (April 1952): 99-104.

⁷Allan Nevins and Frank E. Hill, *Ford: The Times, The Man, The Company* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1959); idem., *Ford: Expansion & Challenge, 1915-1933* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1957); and, idem., *Ford: Decline & Rebirth, 1933-1962* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1963).



A letter from a satisfied customer. Archives & Research Library, Henry Ford Museum.

one-half employees; however, subsequent program cutbacks placed the archives under the control of the corporate library and reduced the staff to two full-time employees. One person is

designated as the "corporate historian."⁸

Boeing is financially committed to another aspect of corporate history, namely a museum scheduled to open in September 1982. The Pacific Museum of

⁸For an early view of the Boeing program see Peter M. McLellan, "The Boeing Archival Program," *American Archivist* 29 (January 1963): 37-42.

Flight is under construction, at a projected cost of \$16 million, on the southwest side of Boeing Field in Seattle. A third phase of construction planned for the future includes space for an archives.⁹

Firestone Tire and Rubber Company is frequently noted for having the first corporate archives in the United States (formally established in 1943, though preliminary work began in 1937).¹⁰ At Firestone, as at Ford, the founding family was instrumental in establishing the archives. In mid-1981, the archives had a staff of one and one-half and preserved approximately 700,000 documents pertaining to the company and the Firestone family. As a result of a recent move back to the company's main complex in Akron, Ohio, the archives is well positioned to play an important role in the future.¹¹

The corporate archives of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company was founded in 1960 within the public relations department. The growth in size since that date has been limited, and the current holdings total approximately 200 cubic feet. This consists of "books, company literature, several airship models, memorabilia, and historical records." The records center preserves some historical material, including a large collection of photographic negatives.¹²

Deere & Co., which has its headquarters in Moline, Illinois, established a corporate archives in 1976 staffed by four employees. Like most corporate archives, it has existed in a variety of loca-

tions in the organizational chart. At present, the archives operates under the responsibility of the Vice President of Industrial Relations and Personnel. Deere preserves approximately 3,000 cubic feet of material. The operation makes use of an internal computer system; information is put in machine-readable form and eventually is processed by the corporate information systems department. Access is by tapes sent to Lockheed's Dialog system and by an archives terminal.¹³

International Harvester founded its corporate archives in 1971 within the corporate secretary's office. The department is staffed by two employees and uses several enthusiastic retirees who are paid for preparing inventories (contents of records cartons) and doing other related work. The holdings total approximately 2,500 cubic feet and are accessible by an internal computerized retrieval system. The archives, vital records, and records management functions are centralized at Harvester.¹⁴

The six archival programs that have been briefly examined exemplify the range of rationales and activities that constitute any corporate archives. The programs at Ford and Firestone were influenced by the fact that both companies were family-dominated until several decades ago. Ford was not a public company until 1956, and when the Firestone archives was established, it was at the insistence of the Harvey Firestone family. The archives programs at Walt Disney and Eli Lilly were also aided by the

⁹Boeing's first home, the famous Red Barn (1916), has been moved to the flight museum. Society of Industrial Archeology, *Newsletter* (Winter 1981), p. 6. See also: Pacific Museum of Flight, *Air Museum News* (July 1918).

¹⁰Bernard W. Frazier to author, December 29, 1977. William D. Overman cataloged Harvey S. Firestone's papers in 1937 and 1938, while working for the Ohio Historical Society; subsequently he worked for Firestone from 1943 to 1966.

¹¹Mary Gid, Firestone, to author, July 27, 1981.

¹²Marjory Garman, Goodyear, to author, July 27, 1981.

¹³Archives staff, Deere & Company, to author, August, 1981.

¹⁴Greg Lennes, International Harvester, to author, July 23, 1981.

founding family interest. Other common reasons for establishing an archives are the upcoming celebration of an important corporate anniversary and the "emergency" encountered when a corporation suddenly must deal with an accumulation of old records.¹⁵

The actual operations of corporate archives will continue to vary greatly. The six firms surveyed have staffs of one to four full-time employees and average record holdings of 1,000 to 5,000 cubic feet. While new archives may follow this general trend, other businesses may seek to establish archival programs via contractual services with a consulting firm. A part-time employee assisted by the consultant may be suitable for some corporations' historical requirements.

For basic information on establishing a corporate archives, businesses can turn to the SAA business archives workshops. From 1978 to 1982 more than 150 corporate employees from throughout the United States and Canada attended these training programs. In addition, SAA has recently published *A Select Bibliography on Business Archives & Records Management* (Chicago, 1981), an important information resource; and SAA's Business Archives Professional Affinity Group has issued the highly useful "Guidelines for Business Archives".¹⁶

This brief review of corporate archives operations should prove interesting to senior management, and particularly to lawyers, who frequently contend that archivists want to save every piece of corporate paper. When one contrasts what has been saved with the estimated 8,000 to 12,000 cubic feet of records generated annually by "Fortune 100" firms, corporate archives ap-

pear to preserve no more than one to three percent of the total volume of corporate records.

Given the relatively small percentage of records permanently preserved, senior management may find it difficult to believe the allegation that creating a corporate archives will automatically lead to a series of lawsuits. It is simply not borne out by the experience of the past 40 years. One hopes that more executives will weigh the advantages of permanently preserving records before ordering their destruction out of fear of litigation.

Corporations will eventually discover that a corporate archives, much like any other department, will be productive (or nonproductive) in direct relation to the support it receives. If an archives is given a definite mandate, appropriate staff, and space consistent with its function and the amount of material to be preserved, it will be effective. If it fails to be effective, management should subject the archives to the same analysis given to any problem department within the corporation.

If a company has a highly visible consumer product line, or is planning for an upcoming anniversary, establishing an archives may be a small investment that provides a big return. More to the point, the successful corporate archives *must* have a purpose—and the means to accomplish it. At the very least, the archives should have a professionally trained staff of two or more employees, an annual budget of \$45,000 to \$100,000, and space for several thousand cubic feet of records. The corporate archives may well be an adjunct of a corporate library or a general services department, but most corporations

¹⁵For instance, *Advertising Age*, February 9, 1981, reported that Nieman-Marcus was planning to establish an archives in celebration of its 75th Anniversary in 1982.

¹⁶See pages 270-72 of this volume.

have discovered that the corporate secretary's office provides an ideal home. Finally, the archives should be appropriately supervised, should be evaluated annually, and should be given the same budgetary considerations that other corporate units receive.

More than 200 corporations have

established archival programs over the past several decades. The opportunity for further growth depends heavily on the support that senior management provides to corporate history. One hopes that executives will see that the return from an archival program is well worth the investment.