



Industrial Business Collections: A Retrospective on Acquisitions Practice

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Introduction

As heavy industry has declined in the United States, historians and the general public have begun to embrace industrial history as an important and valuable aspect of our shared heritage. Heritage preservation and interpretation of former industrial sites is evolving in practice at former textile mills, steel towns, and along the numerous “heritage corridors” around the country.

Sites are also documented through historical research materials preserved in archives and records centers. In many cases, company records, design blueprints, photographs, and other documents

are the only surviving evidence of specific industrial enterprises. Archival records are an important means by which historians and the public may explore and understand our shared industrial past.

Industrial records, however, present distinct challenges to archivists, curators, and collecting institutions.



Objectives

- Document the acquisition and selection activities of selected institutions specific to industrial manuscript materials.
- Identify patterns of influence which affect decision-making (institutional, interpersonal, budgetary, format and/or volume of material).
- Inform current archival practice, improve the quality and quantity of industrial manuscript material preserved, and better serve the needs of historians, historic preservation initiatives, and the historical record.

Methods

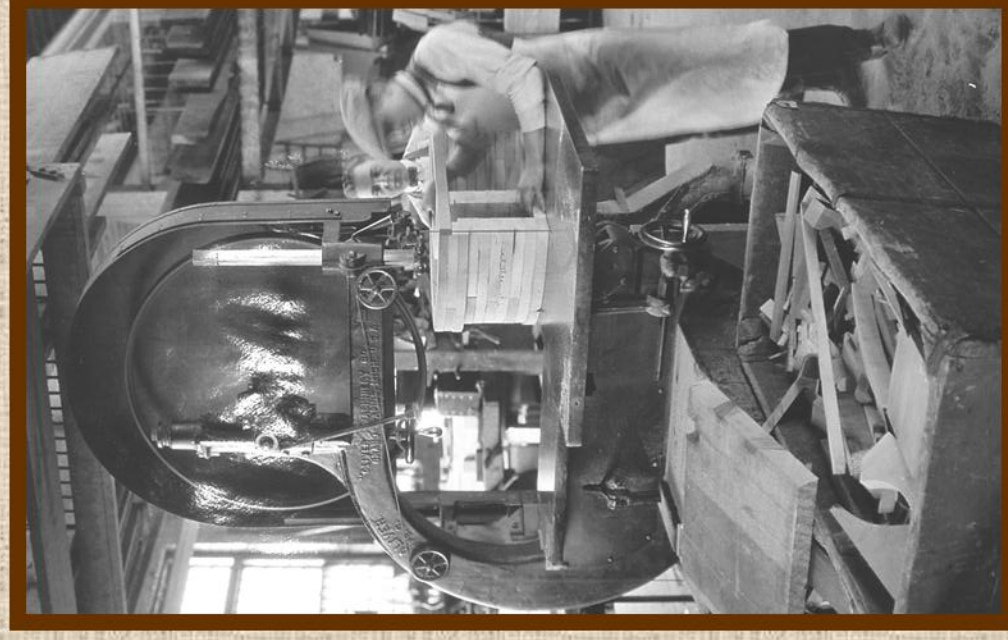
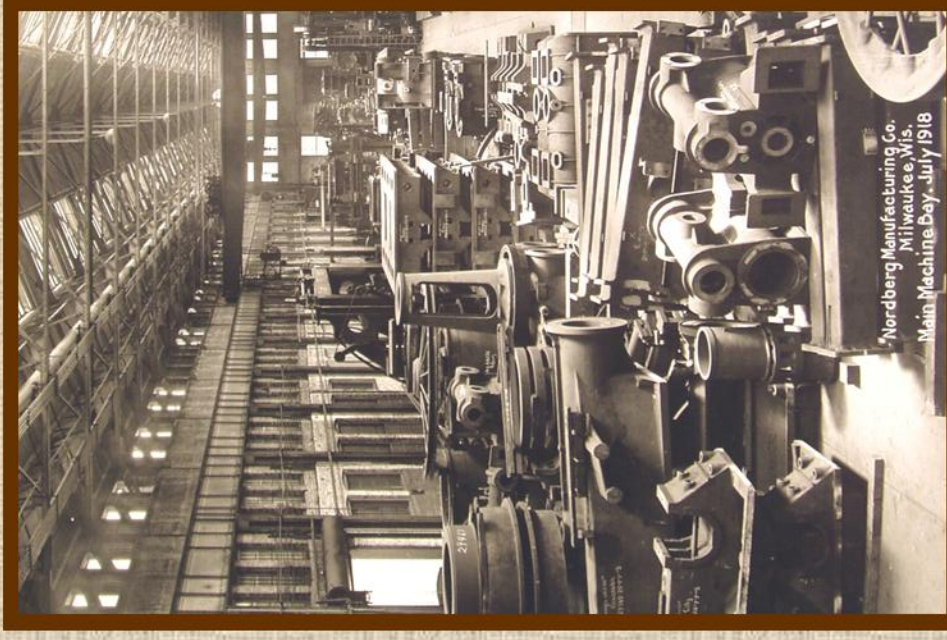
- Historical research with primary and secondary sources.
- Oral Interviews with archivists, curators, administrators, historians, and the historic preservation community.
- Case study analyses of specific collections and institutions holding industrial archival material.

Sample Case Study

Nordberg Manufacturing Company Milwaukee, WI

The Nordberg Manufacturing Company manufactured its first stationary steam engines in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1886. By the turn of the century, Nordberg began production of large steam hoisting engines for the mining industry and expanded into the internal combustion field, building some of the first (and largest) American diesel engines. Over the course of its operating life, the company produced machinery and machine tools for the aerospace, automobile, railway, and oil industries. Nordberg was one of many companies which helped to make Milwaukee a key center for American heavy industry.

From an archival perspective, the Nordberg Manufacturing Company also serves as a useful case study. In the 1970s, Robert Vogel, a curator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, identified a large collection of corporate records worthy of preservation. Working with Robert Johnson, a collector and independent appraiser of large steam-powered equipment, the collection was divided among four archival repositories in 1979, with varying levels of subsequent processing, description and research use.



Michigan Tech Archives Houghton, MI

Independent appraiser Robert Johnson was aware of the developing regional history collection of copper mining records at Michigan Tech through a separate project to preserve records of the former Calumet & Hecla Copper Company. A collection of 250 blueprint drawing sets were transferred, most relating to steam-powered mine hoists, pumping engines, and compressors used in Michigan's Upper Peninsula mining districts. The collection has been rehoused, indexed, and is easily accessible.

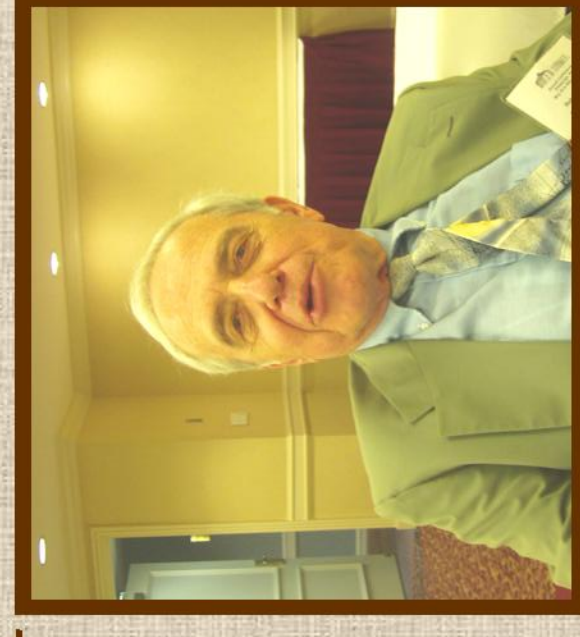


Theresa Spence, retired MTU archivist



National Museum of American History Smithsonian Institution Washington, DC

With Vogel's oversight, Smithsonian acquired several dozen boxes of project proposals, order books, and advertising literature. Hallmarks of the collection include several thousand shop photographs and a selection of several dozen blueprint sets highlighting the main machinery lines of the company. The collection has been rehoused and inventoried, and is easily accessible to researchers at Smithsonian's Archives Center.



Robert Vogel, NMIAH curator emeritus

University of Tennessee Chattanooga, TN

Several hundred drawing sets were transferred to a new industrial archaeology program and include Nordberg projects in the Eastern United States. Following the director's death, however, the collection has remained largely untouched, is not indexed, and is not easily accessible.



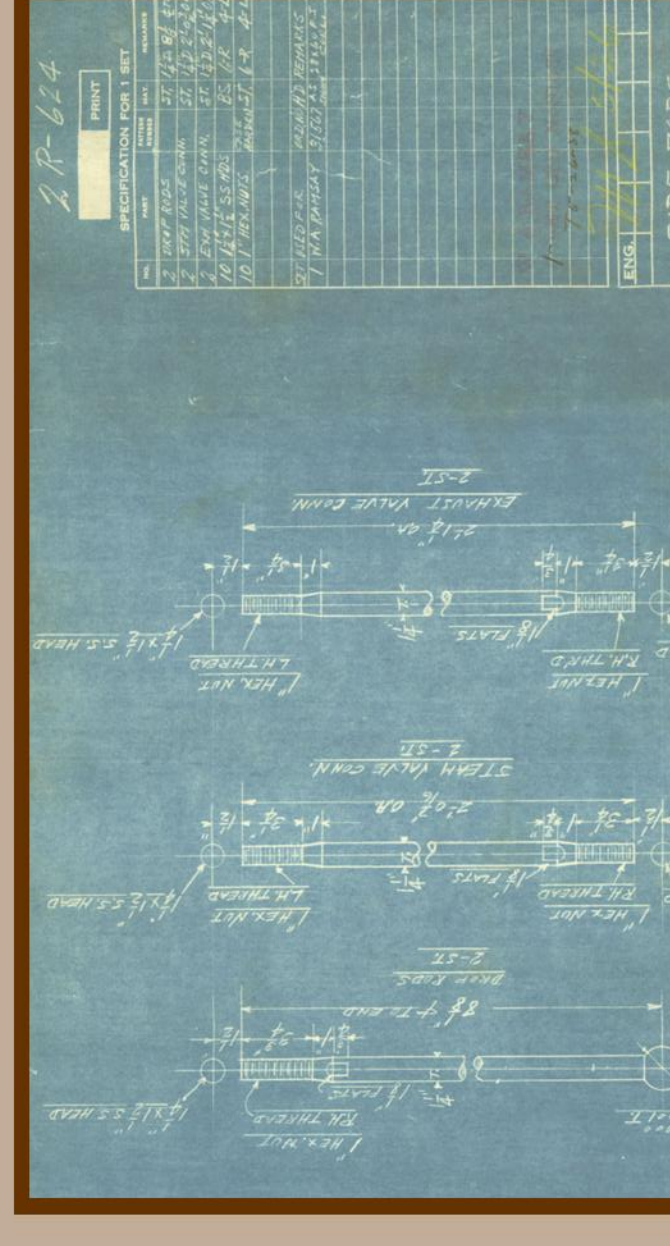
Western Museum of Mining and Industry Colorado Springs, CO

The remaining selection of blueprint drawings, emphasizing Nordberg's work in the Western United States, was donated to this nonprofit organization. The author has yet to receive information concerning the collection's condition, description, or use.

Discussion

- Is collecting idiosyncratic by its very nature?
Do these collections merely reflect the happenstance of timing, budget, personnel, and space?
- Do archival collections adequately document industrial sites, processes, and community?
> *Due to the size of many industrial collections, sampling and selection are often necessary.*
> *Dimensioned drawings often capture designer's intentions, but not always "as built" realities.*
> *Do historians use accounting and financial records which comprise critical documentation of business enterprises?*
- Are we falling short?

There are few repositories able to accept voluminous collections and very few which proactively seek to acquire records of industrial enterprises in the United States.



Future Research

- Examine acquisitions and appraisal literature for previous analysis of the records of business and industry.
- Examine literature of science, industry, technology, and historic preservation for studies which rely on industrial manuscript collections as critical sources.
- Select additional case studies.
- Follow an existing industrial collection from corporate ownership through appraisal, selection, and transfer to a public repository.

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