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Review: McCormick-International Harvester Company Collection McCormick-International Harvester Company Collection by Lee Grady

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Special Review Section: Corporate Archives

At the suggestion of our editorial board, The Public Historian has sought to expand its coverage of the work of our colleagues in the business world. In the February 2011 issue we offered a special reviews section on corporate presentations of history. In this issue we extend that coverage to the work of corporate archives. Because the majority of corporate archives are closed to the public, we offer only a small sampling of this unique form of public history. In addition to a review of content, we asked our reviewers to address the role of the public historian in the corporate context and to answer the question, what might other public historians learn from the efforts of a particular corporate archive?

We hope this special section proves of interest to our readers and spurs further exploration of the practice of public history beyond the public sector. We welcome your recommendations for additional archives to review in future issues.

L.S.

McCormick-International Harvester Company Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. LEE GRADY, archivist. <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/ihc/>

Corporate archives do not normally serve the general public. A notable exception exists in the McCormick-International Harvester Company Collection (McCormick-IHC). Anyone can access the rich resources with a click of their computer keyboard, thanks to the support of McCormick family members, McCormick business affiliates, a historian who dedicated his career to managing the archives, and generous funding from a variety of sources including individuals, businesses, special interest groups, and taxpayers. The massive collection includes more than 12 million manuscript pages, 250,000 photographs, 300 films, and hundreds of artifacts, many of which are exhib-

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Herbert A. Kellar and Clifford Lord (left) in the McCormick Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society. Image ID: 28098 (Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society)

ited at Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) sites, specifically Stonefield, which includes the state's agricultural museum.

The collection began in 1884 when members of the McCormick family memorialized Cyrus Hall McCormick, launching an organized effort to document him and his contributions to early agricultural implement development. By 1915 the family hired a professional, historian Herbert A. Kellar, to manage what by then had become the McCormick Family Association. Kellar expanded the collection to more than one million items by 1951. This includes McCormick family history and genealogy, business records of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company (1848–1902), and three companies that merged with McCormick in 1902 to form the International Harvester Company (1881–1984), namely the Deering Harvester Company, Milwaukee Harvester Company, and Plano Harvester Company. The business records include advertising literature, meeting minutes, financial records, legal and patent records, and payroll records.

The collection moved from the private association to the public historical society in 1951. Kellar curated the collection until his death in 1955 and then his wife, Lucile, continued in his stead until her retirement in the mid-1960s. During the late 1980s the Navistar International Transportation Corporation donated more International Harvester records that ensured an unparalleled documentation of major changes in agricultural machinery innovation, production, marketing, and distribution spanning the 1750s to the 1980s.

A wide range of researchers will find much of interest in the wealth of information in the McCormick-IHC Collection. Curators, rural and agricultural



Digitized IHC photographs provide significant information to users, as in this example, showing men repairing a replica of an 1831 reaper on the set of *Romance of the Reaper*, a motion picture by Fox Hearst, filmed c. 1929 and produced by International Harvester to celebrate the Reaper Centennial. The description includes the complete text of the caption written on the back of the photograph: "1831 reaper. Replacing grain wheel with skid to correct historical error. Left to right: L. K. Swendsen, Deering Works expert; Dan Smith, expert from McCormick Works, and H. A. Kellar." Location: McCormick's Walnut Grove Farm, near Steele's Tavern in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Image ID: WHI-58595 (Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society)

historians, genealogists, elementary school students, international businessmen, advertising executives, gift shop managers, and museum interpreters can orient themselves easily. Preservation takes on a sense of urgency with so many potential users of such a large collection. Finding aids and microfilming helped collection staff realize the dual goals of preservation and access.¹ Digitization has made access even more seamless. Patrons can peruse more than 30,000 selected items via a digital collection accessible through the Wisconsin Historical Society website. They can explore the collection in more depth by perusing 166 descriptive finding aids online, or they can search the entire collection using ArCat, the historical society's archival computer catalog.

1. Microfilm reels facilitated research by cliometricians such as Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, who analyzed McCormick Reaper Orders and McCormick Reaper Sales books to determine who adopted reapers and how they integrated the machine into farming culture during the 1850s and 1860s; see "Beyond the Threshold: An Analysis of the Characteristics and Behavior of Early Reaper Adopters," *Journal of Economic History* 55, no. 1 (March 1995): 27–57.

Antique machinery collectors frequently utilize the digital archives. In fact, their interests in a particular piece of equipment can rival the zeal of genealogists on the trail of ancestors. Collectors account for a significant number of visitors to the lobby exhibits, museums, and public holdings of competing agricultural implement manufacturers still in business, such as John Deere. The McCormick-IHC Collection archivist serves this constituency well, and the International Harvester Collectors Club provides valuable assistance.

Carefully crafted answers to frequently asked questions help owners and other researchers find what they need to know to document or restore their machinery most completely. This includes access to operators' manuals, parts manuals, service manuals, photographs, and advertising literature for particular models. For example, those seeking accurate paint colors for a one-row Farmall corn picker made in 1930 can access the digitized memo documenting the IH Paint Committee Decision No. 82, made on June 13, 1930, to paint specific components of one- and two-row pickers Harvester Blue, Harvester Red, and Indian Red, and to galvanize and varnish other parts. If owners have the serial number for an engine, tractor, power unit, truck, or milking machine, they can search the digitized lists of serial numbers recorded monthly at the plants that manufactured the equipment [Deering Works (1925–1933), Indianapolis and Fort Wayne Works (1934–1944), Louisville Works (1947–1967), Motor Truck (1928–1966), Tractor Works (1911–1944), West Pullman Works (1939–1957), Milwaukee Works (1905–1963), and Farmall Works (1926–1971)].

In addition to the wealth of information on agricultural machinery, engines, and trucks, International Harvester Company produced domestic technology, specifically refrigerators, freezers, and air conditioners, between 1947 and 1955. The collection includes advertising information, operator's manuals, and photographs of these items. Creative staff increased public awareness of the domestic line in 2009 by adapting three advertisements of IHC refrigerators as refrigerator magnets, a use in keeping with the spirit of the original intent.

The archival collection cannot answer all questions that collectors or other researchers might have about a specific piece of equipment such as the exact manufacture date or shipping destination. Researchers can submit requests for assistance in identifying an IHC product. They must provide a photograph and part numbers and pay a fee ranging from \$12.50 to \$17.50 per hour depending on whether the patron is a member of the WHS or not, or lives in Wisconsin.

The interpretation of evidence in the McCormick-IHC Archives reaches as wide-ranging an audience as any archival collection could hope to reach. Teachers who seek to engage their students in primary document research to fulfill the social science standards in the state of Illinois could point their students to the digital archive. There students can read primary and secondary sources to learn more about McCormick family history and the McCormick Harvesting Machinery Company as examples of innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic systems. The best lesson, however, would also have students

consult the collections of the McCormick Museum and the First Division Museum at Cantigny (<http://www.cantigny.org/>) to learn about Robert R. McCormick, who founded the *Chicago Tribune* and who is actually mentioned in the Illinois state standards [16.C.2b (US)].

The McCormick-IHC Collection constitutes the largest single collection that the Wisconsin Historical Society holds. The collection would not exist if it had not been for the proactive measures taken by the McCormick family and the long-time service of Herbert A. Kellar. He worked diligently for the preservation of the family and corporate records that he curated, but he also advocated for more public interpretation of agricultural history. By June 1919, Kellar supported formation of a museum to interpret harvesting machinery and in 1922 he encouraged the Agricultural History Society to publish a guide to help those developing agricultural museums at the local, regional, and national levels. Kellar held numerous committee chair and officer positions in major history and public history organizations including the American Historical Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (now the Organization of American Historians), the Agricultural History Society, the Industrial History Society, and the Economic History Society. He helped found the Society of American Archivists and took an active role during the early years of the American Association for State and Local History. He took his duties to collect, preserve, and interpret history to the general public seriously. The McCormick-IHC Collection exists today because of Kellar's dedication, the WHS's allocation of resources, and the enthusiasm of the diverse audiences who use it.²

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2. Kellar (1887–1955) served as curator (1915–1931) and then director (1931–1951) of the McCormick Historical Association in Chicago, Illinois. He oversaw relocation of the collection to the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin in 1951, and continued as its steward until his death in 1955. "Biography/History [Herbert Anthony Kellar]," Herbert Kellar Papers, 1887–1955, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Don R. McNeil, "Herbert Anthony Kellar," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 1955), 10; Margaret C. Norton, "Herbert Anthony Kellar 1887–1955," *American Archivist* 19 (April 1956), 151–53; William B. Hesseltine and Donald R. McNeil, editors, *In Support of Clío: Essays in Memory of Herbert A. Kellar* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1958); Debra A. Reid, "Agricultural Artifacts: Early Curators, Their Philosophy and Their Collections," *ALHFAM Proceedings 2010*, vol. 33 (North Bloomfield, Ohio: Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums, 2011), 30–52.

Sears Holdings Archives. Sears, Roebuck and Co., www.searsarchives.com

In the late 1990s, Sears, Roebuck and Co. began to stake out its online presence. In 1998, the company's iconic "Wish Book" holiday-gift catalog was placed online for customers, and early in 1999, it launched its online digital archive: searsarchives.com.

The digital archives' homepage boasts that Sears, Roebuck and Co. has