

Entertainment and Pizza: A Winning Combination

by Sharon Arend, Company Historian, Little Caesar Enterprises, Inc.

The holdings of the Little Caesar Enterprises, Inc. Archives document the history of four major Detroit area institutions -- Little Caesars Pizza, the historic Fox Theatre, the Red Wings professional hockey team, and the Tigers professional baseball franchise.

Pizza

Little Caesars was founded by Michael and Marian Ilitch, a husband-wife team, who took a neighborhood pizza restaurant and developed the company into one of the world's largest international pizza chains.

The first Little Caesars opened on May 8, 1959 in Garden City, a suburb of Detroit. One of the prized possessions of the archives is a spiral notebook with the financial figures of the first week's business hand written by Marian Ilitch. With her practical and logical approach to financial concerns, Marian is still the financial wizard behind the business today. Her abilities complement the aggressive and creative approach of her husband, Michael Ilitch, the marketing genius and new product developer.

The corporate archive was established in October 1989. Little Caesars was preparing to relocate its corporate headquarters from the suburbs to downtown Detroit, and Marian Ilitch, a natural historian herself, was concerned that important records would be lost during the transition. I was hired to oversee the move and manage the collections.

Six hundred-fifty cubic feet of documents, 33,500 photographic images, 18,800 slides, 950 videos

and 140 audio cassettes or tapes are maintained in an 1800-square-foot facility. The major part of the archives represents marketing, promotions, public relations, franchise services and training; however, some executive business correspondence and an extensive video library of past television commercials, business speeches and media coverage are available, as well.

Active records are kept in the Records Center, and records management and the archives departments work together. With the exception of records that have a predetermined disposition schedule, documents are not destroyed without first being considered for the archives.

I keep things simple, and as a one-person operation, this is a must. The collection is managed on dBase III Plus. Field definitions correspond with the departmental and subject orientation of the archives. I can scan through a subject or department category and determine what is available, and I can also search by topic. A printed report from the database serves as an inventory of the collection and as the finding aid.

The Little Caesars Enterprises, Inc. Archives is maintained for internal use only. While the marketing, corporate communications and legal departments are the most consistent users, many other departments request information from the archives. I receive approximately 250 internal inquiries a year. Some are simple requests, such as "When did we open our 1000th Little Caesars restaurant?" or "How many

restaurants did we have in 1970?" Other requests require extensive research, such as compiling information on every promotional product Little Caesars has offered since 1959.

Every effort is made to keep the archives fresh in the minds of employees and management. Periodically, I write articles with historic information for inclusion in a bi-weekly corporate newsletter. Photo murals have been installed throughout the corporate headquarters accompanied by information plates that highlight important events in Little Caesars' history. When a new executives are hired, they receive information about the archives. The company celebrates Little Caesars' birthday each year, and in 1995, I developed an extensive historical display to commemorate the occasion.

The Fox Theatre

The decision to move Little Caesars' corporate headquarters to downtown Detroit was prompted by an investment made by the Ilitches in July 1987 when they purchased the Fox Theatre in downtown Detroit's neglected theatre district.

Detroit's Fox Theatre is one of several movie palaces commissioned by William Fox of 20th Century Fox. Built in 1927-28 and designed by noted theatre architect, C. Howard Crane, it is a splendid example of the Siamese-Byzantine style of architecture. In its heyday, the 5000-seat theatre was a venue for films, vaudeville and big band sounds. In the 1960s, it featured local talent such as Motown stars, followed by Kung-fu and horror movies in the

late 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, it was rarely used and had fallen into serious disrepair.

Several million dollars were spent to restore the Fox Theatre to its original splendor. Its re-opening on November 19, 1988 brought rave reviews, and in 1989, it was designated a National Landmark. Today, Broadway shows, concerts, family entertainment, and movie premiers are featured, and it is one of the top grossing theatres of its size in the country. Additionally, the Ilitches restored the Fox Office Centre, adjacent to the theatre, and in December 1989, it became the corporate headquarters of Little Caesar Enterprises, Inc. and Olympia Entertainment, Inc. (also an Ilitch-owned company) and the centralized location for the corporate archives.

The Fox Theatre Collection is fortunate to include old press books, from the mid-1930s through the 1950s, with advertisements and articles outlining the acts and movies that played at the theatre and the promotional efforts surrounding those performances. Some photos and posters also have survived. The company owns the original 1 928 program, printed on parchment, and I have purchased additional old programs at auctions. Old accounting records and approximately 1738 linear feet of musical arrangements remain unprocessed. While not particularly rare, these musical scores as a whole have great historical value in the context of American, theatrical, and musical history, as well as the history of the Fox Theatre. Most scores are mimeographed, but the collection does contain a few rare handwritten scores.

In 1996, the Theatrical Society of America held its annual meeting in Detroit, and we developed a

display for the theatre lobby utilizing the materials from the Fox Theatre Collection.

Red Wings Hockey Team

In 1982, the Ilitches purchased the Detroit Red Wings professional hockey team. At the time, the team ranked near the bottom of the National Hockey League, and season tickets were difficult to sell. In the last fifteen years, the Ilitches have rebuilt the team and established a solid organization. Today, the team is ranked among the most valuable in the NHL, and the percent of capacity attendance at games is the highest in the NHL. In 1997, the team brought home the Stanley Cup for the first time in 42 years.

In 1926, the Detroit Red Wings played their first game at the Border Arena in Windsor just across the river from Detroit. In 1927, the Olympia Stadium in Detroit (also designed by C. Howard Crane) became the Red Wing's home ice, where they played until 1979. At that time, the team moved to Joe Louis Arena, and as a result, most of the franchise's archival records were lost or sold.

The Red Wings Collection consists primarily of ephemera that has been donated or purchased and publications, such as media guides and programs. Some player's contracts from the 1960s and 1970s are also available.

While most sports teams' photographs are managed by their public relations departments; however, with the exception of current player's photographs, the Ilitches requested that the collection of approximately 9000 Red Wings historical images be kept within the corporate archives. Photocopies of all images are made available to Public Relations

Images from the photo collection are heavily used during the hockey season for internal publications, promotional materials and external sports publications. Photographs from the collection were also used in large murals, which were installed in the arena in 1993.

Archival material is displayed in a custom-designed case in the arena. Memorabilia, miniature Stanley Cups, photographs and a game jersey worn by "Mr. Hockey", Gordie Howe, may be viewed by the fans. ESPN featured the display during the Stanley Cup playoffs this year.

Tigers Baseball Franchise
Baseball has enjoyed a long history in Detroit dating back to the mid 1800s. After the American League was formed in 1901, the Tigers became a charter member. Many baseball greats are associated with the team, including Ty Cobb, Mickey Cochrane, Hank Greenberg, Hal Newhouser and Al Kaline.

Ilitch purchased the Tigers franchise in 1992. As a former player with the Tigers farm system, he fulfilled a life-long dream to work with the team. Faced with declining attendance and an outdated stadium, Ilitch has been approved to construct a new stadium, which will be built across from the Fox Theatre.

The Detroit Tigers Collection measures approximately 235 cubic feet. The historical records are maintained in a storage area under the stands at the stadium. Often referred to as "The Gold Room", this area contains the documents representing the day-to-day management activities of the franchise.

The collection includes correspondence from the 1930s when Walter Briggs owned the

team and extensive files of James Campbell, the front office executive for more than 40 years. In addition, all the player's contracts from 1948 to the present are available. Currently, I am bringing all historical Tiger photographs to the archives and have processed 7000 images thus far. Photocopies are made only of the most popular sports figures.

Many people have supported and help build the diverse holdings of the Little Caesars Archives. The public relations departments for both sports teams and the corresponding equipment managers are my greatest sources for collecting sports memorabilia. A local television station assisted in transferring more than 200 reels of baseball films infected with vinegar syndrome to video tape. John Fetzer, owner of the Tigers from 1966-1983, and the Fetzer Institute archivist have been very generous in donating duplicate items to the archives, as well. The archives received many artifacts from a previous team museum, which are displayed during Tigerfest each year. Upon completion of the new stadium, I expect to maintain a permanent Tigers exhibit.

The Little Caesars Archives documents the pizza, entertainment and sports businesses owned by Michael and Marian Ilitch, as well as the careers of professional sports figures. But equally important, it documents the history of an urban society and its leisure activities, and it is an important part of the history of Detroit.