

Uncovering the Past: Re-Creating International Paper Company's "Lost" Archives

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It's paradoxical that the leading manufacturer of the paper products, which historically have been used by most major companies to document their business transactions and operations, until recently, has done little to preserve its own records. Yet such is the case with International Paper Company (IP), which is observing its centennial in 1998. A unique project undertaken by IP over the past year and a half, however, has made great strides in recovering its past.

IP's preparations for its anniversary began in 1995, when it retained The History Factory (THF), a consulting firm specializing in heritage management services for corporate clients, to develop its centennial programs. Among the projects that THF proposed were a traveling exhibition and a book chronicling IP's history. A major challenge existed, however, to the realization of these projects: IP lacked a central archives or record management repository. In part an outgrowth of the relocation of IP's headquarters several times since the company's founding, this situation also reflected IP's corporate structure. Until the mid-1970s, the company was decentralized within two largely autonomous divisions (Northern and

Southern Kraft). But the most important factor was IP's stringent record management policies, which required its corporate offices and company facilities to purge documents and artifacts on a regular basis.

At the same time, however, reason existed for optimism. First, some IP facilities had ignored the company's record management policies and had safeguarded historical materials. During 1996, THF visited selected IP facilities in New York, Maine, Mississippi, Alabama, and Illinois to ascertain the extent, content, and condition of such materials. These forays yielded some significant discoveries, such as six linear feet of historical photographs and employee newsletters at IP's Hudson River Mill in Corinth, New York. Second, during their visits to IP facilities, THF learned that untold numbers of potentially significant documents and artifacts either had been saved by current employees and retirees, or had been acquired by local historical societies and libraries.

To locate privately held historical materials, in the fall of 1996 IP and THF launched a "Discovery Process." The company designated "Centennial Program Champions" at each of its

facilities, charging them with spreading the news internally and externally about IP's forthcoming centennial and its interest in obtaining historical materials to support the observance. To assist Champions, THF prepared a manual, which included guidelines on the types of materials sought, where they might be located, how they might be acquired through donation or loan, and how they would be handled, along with informational posters, employee information flyers, and loan/donation forms. Materials collected under the Discovery Process were to be forwarded to THF for organization, temporary archival storage and for use in developing centennial programs.

By any measure, the Discovery Process was an unqualified success. From November 1996 to July 1997, THF received submissions from more than 500 current and former IP employees, from nearly every state and from as far away as Japan, France and New Zealand. Oral history interviews, which THF conducted with some 200 IP employees and retirees during the summer and fall of 1997, also yielded additional materials. Ranging in size from one page to several record center cartons, the submissions

totaled more than 200 linear feet. They included correspondence; written reminiscences; financial statements and account books; annual reports; employee newsletters and mill publications; advertisements, scrapbooks and ephemera; maps and plats; photographs, slides, and negatives; motion pictures, home movies and videotapes; and sound recordings. The Discovery Process also yielded nearly one hundred artifacts that ranged from commemorative mementos, to tools, implements and a collection of nineteenth-century patent models for paper and paper-making equipment.

Though idiosyncratic and by no means a complete archives, the body of materials assembled by the Discovery Process has proven invaluable to IP and THF. The materials have been used to write and illustrate *Generations of Pride: A Centennial History of International Paper*. The documents and artifacts have also supported research on a range of company-generated historical inquiries, the production of several videos, and the development of a traveling exhibition. Most importantly, these materials will serve as the nucleus for what is hoped will become an "IP Historical Archives," to be increased through targeted collecting efforts. Together with a redirection of IP's records management program, these

steps should ensure the preservation of historically significant materials for the future.