The Flux and Jan Dommer
A Friends' Personality
by Gordon Eriksen

Heraclitus of Ephesus, the last of the sixth-century B.C. Ionian philosophers, was an advocate of something called "flux." Jan Dommer, caught in the unique professional environment of the information age, describes it as "adapting to rapidly changing times." Heraclitus would nod sagely since he believed that everything in the world is dynamic, always moving, always in the strife to achieve a balanced tension.

Jan grew up in Alpena, in a Polish/French Catholic family, on the appropriately named Thunder Bay of northeastern Michigan. Born Janet Marie Murray, she was the eldest of six, with one sister and four brothers. Shortly after her youngest sibling was born, tragedy and change occurred with the death of her father and her mother's struggle to keep the family together. In that family, this meant that the children would also have advanced educational opportunities, which enrolled Jan first in the Alpena Community College and then at Aquinas College, in Grand Rapids, where she earned her B.A. The Heraclitean balance of opposing forces was part of the invigorating '60s climate of the campus as Jan took her degree in sociology with a minor in history.

The young graduate headed to her first position teaching high school sociology and government in Sebewaing, a port town on Lake Huron famous for being an Ernest Hemingway hideaway. Unfortunately for an individual already influenced by the juxtaposition of change and balance, the Sebewaing high school was of the traditional mode, strong on conformity and homework—and probably short on learning. A little of this was enough, and Jan moved to Saginaw which, at that point, had embraced a series of innovations intended to break the lock-step approach to teaching young people—flex time, variable scheduling, one-on-one teaching. As Jan recalls it, "It was a time of fundamental change, an exciting time to teach." Not one to let opportunities pass by, she took the time to study, with the help of a NDEA grant, an interpretation of the American experience at the College of Wooster, and, at the Northwood Institute, Midland, to explore world culture and customs.

Saginaw also provided another significant transition in her life when Jan met Norman Dommer. They were married in 1968, and, in due course, son Matthew made an appearance. The Dommers, being good and serious parents, took the theories of the behavioral psychologists to heart, and, with some modifications, learned by experience, applied the principles carefully. The results are much to their liking. Matt is currently serving his residency as a physician; and, by the time this is published, will be married to another resident. Jan notes quietly that their physician son is a "gift to the community," a caring individual who will do much for his patients.

In 1969, a career opportunity for Norman brought the Dommers to Kalamazoo and Jan a position at Loy Norrix High School. She recalls the time as a "formative career period," when Kalamazoo was in the throes of school busing and integration. Her students taught her that education must be relevant, and that she needed to listen to different opinions as well as to "diffuse the screaming that dominated communication at that time." During this tumultuous period, she began to search for career where diverse opinions and knowledge could be shared, but where she could still interact with people. That career became librarianship, because "libraries are where a multiplicity of opinions survive as well as the means to access them."

Jan applied and was admitted to the library school at Western Michigan University where she earned a Master of Science in Librarianship in 1972—with a 4.0 g.p.a. Jan's interests in the library and information world were not limited to school media centers despite her work history, and the emerging world of automation and computer applications brought her back to W.M.U. in 1978 where she earned a Specialist of Arts with a major emphasis on the "new" technology. In her application materials at the time is a telling comment from the principal at Central Junior High: Jan is a "highly flexible person and responds well to change or innovation."

With that degree in hand, Jan was now "overqualified" for most school media positions. She sought out and took a position in the Reference Department of the library at Bowling Green State University. Here she encountered Francka Povsic who became, as Jan describes her, a real "mentor." Three years under Povsic's tutelage were revelatory. Jan learned that information intelligently sought/collected by a librarian and provided in meaningful forms to a user was essential to learning and research. By the decade of the '80s, technological change had made "meaningful forms" a multi-dimensional concept—and Jan was ready to be a part of the revolutionary flux in libraries and information technology.

The Dommers moved back to Kalamazoo in 1982, but library and/or information positions were not easy to find in a community that had a plethora of library school graduates. As a result, Jan took the innovative step of independently selling information by the package. A new phrase, "information broker," had appeared in the business world. Jan became an information broker; a Gazette article about her new role stated that "information is a commodity to Jan Dommer." Her organization, Midwest Information Specialist, sold her services to anyone who could pay the fee for her product. Among her clients was The Upjohn Company. In fact, as the months passed, it became evident that The Company had need of her services full time and she joined the professional staff in the Business Library that served the major officers and executives of the firm. There, as anticipated, Jan dealt with many kinds of change and a necessity to find the right balance as an information specialist.

During the Kalamazoo years, Jan and her husband have been active in the community, and in assuring that their son received strong support in his medical study. One of her major outside interests was involvement in the Kalamazoo Women's Network which included the establishment of a mentoring service for Network members. Currently, Jan is exploring the means by which the Kalamazoo area can deal with the issue of working women who continue to find barriers to professional advancement. Jan has also maintained ties with Western Michigan University, and became a charter member and officer of the Friends of the University Libraries.

Not finally, but inevitably, another change has come about as a result of the Upjohn merger with Pharmacia. Again, as she did many years ago in Sebewaing, Jan has used the opportunity to step away; she has taken early retirement, and

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Ihling Brothers Everard: Documenters of Business

By Sharon Carlson

Business records represent one important, and often overlooked, element in documenting the history of a region. They also can be a source that sheds light on the larger social and cultural history of a community. Many of us are unaware that the functions of businesses are a major component in our daily lives and affect us in many ways. The records of the Ihling Brothers Everard Company, located in the Archives and Regional History Collections at WMU, provide a compelling example of “company records,” as well as a good case study of how archives may forge successful working relationships with the business world.

The Ihling Brothers Everard Company of Kalamazoo traces its origins to 1869 when Otto Ihling arrived in Kalamazoo. He was from Milwaukee, only 22 years old, had $500 in his pocket, the papers of a journeyman bookbinder, and a dream to start a bookbinding business in the growing village on the banks of a river lined by paper and pulp firms. Kalamazoo proved to be just the right setting for which Ihling had hoped, and he began producing record books for deeds, court calendars, tax rolls, and other public documents. Early in the company’s history, Ihling bound the initial issues of The Michigan Freemason, and thereby established a relationship with fraternal organizations that would eventually expand into the manufacture of uniforms and regalia. The company name also expanded a few years later when Otto’s brother Reinhold and another partner, Herbert Everard, joined the company.

The business activities and resulting records of Ihling Brothers Everard Company present a microcosm of cultural patterns, as well as the business practices of that period. By the turn of the century, a second generation of Ihlings took over the business of documenting business and had begun the manufacturing of fraternal regalia and costumes. Among the archival resources are beautifully illustrated catalogs of fraternal dress. The company’s products led to other marketing products. Ledgers offer information about the various governmental customers purchasing record books; the manufacture of special costumes evolved after many sketches and color drawings had been developed and preserved in the records; anniversary scrapbooks, employee awards, and photographs of company events give insight into the corporate culture.

Predictions of a shrinking market due to societal and business shifts of the 1980s and 1990s influenced the company’s board and stockholders to sell and disband in 1995 rather than seek alternative markets or directions. Membership in fraternal organizations was in decline, the publishing business had been radically modified by the introduction of desktop publishing, and there was considerable competition for the remaining market share. Although four generations of Ihlings had worked in the business and the company had been the life-long employer of hundreds of area residents, the decision was made to close the company.

The process of transferring company records to the WMU Archives and Regional History Collections is a study in archival building and corporate relations. The first contact from Ihling Brothers Everard Company occurred in the late 1960s as the firm was celebrating its centennial and contemplating a move to a new facility. At that time, 35 cubic feet of records were transferred to the Archives, including the earliest business records of the organization. This was followed by intermittent contact in the next two decades. In 1996, the transfer of the remaining business records was negotiated.

Over the course of several afternoons in November and December of 1996, staff of the WMU Collections visited the headquarters building located at Alcott and Fulford. With the assistance of former Company president, Edward Ihling, Sharon Carlson and Sue Husband began an on-site appraisal of the records, many dating to the late 19th and early 20th century. The extensive materials were carefully packed, labeled, and given a preliminary inventory. The result was the acquisition of 145 cubic feet of company records.

The assistance of several student employees was crucial to the actual moving of the records via the University’s elevators, the University Libraries’ van, and book or hand truck to the East Campus location. The students, many of whom were enrolled in the public history program at the University, thought this was a valuable work experience because they gained a sense of how records were created and used, the role of the donor, and how to do preliminary appraisals.

Much remains to be done in the processing of the records of Ihling Brothers Everard Company before they are fully accessible to researchers. They constitute one of the largest collections of “business records” held by the University, and will inevitably become an extraordinary resource for future historians. They are added to such company records as those from Featherbone Corset, Doubleyad, Kalamazoo Railroad Velocipede, and Kalamazoo Paper. University and public researchers may use the materials in the Archives and Regional History Collections, located in Room 111, East Hall. For further information, please call (616) 387-8490.

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intends to see what else might be waiting—just around the corner. For her, retirement does not mean stopping; it only means looking for another piece of the strife, the flux, the ultimate balance between lost and found, empty and full, nothing and all. That, of course, is what the professional woman seeks all of her life. Such a one is Jan Dommer—a Heraclean prototype.