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 Fremason, 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 Ihling 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 fame spread rapidly, abetted by the catalogs and the quality of the products, and Ihling Brothers Everard Company became a nationally-recognized firm. The successful manufacture of regalia for fraternal organizations evolved into production of uniforms for the military, marching bands, and other organizations, which, in turn, led to other marketing products. This part of the business had a significant publishing component that motivated the collection of the publications of various fraternal organizations and corporate newsletters such as Checker Headlights—trade magazine for the famous automobile manufactured in Kalamazoo.

The IBEC company records also contain a wealth of information about the daily activities of the business, including customer relations and the process of creating 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 archiving 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 company 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 Husbands 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 Company’s elevator, 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, Doubleday, 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 Heracletean prototype.