Aladdin Co. Records Donated

Founded in Bay City by the Sovereign brothers, Otto Egbert and William James, Aladdin Homes sold more than 50,000 pre-cut houses from the firm's founding in 1906 until production was suspended in 1982. Through the generosity of a donor, the records of Aladdin Homes, one of Michigan's most significant housing firms, have been presented to the Clarke Library. Included in the acquisition is virtually all of the firm's post-World War II blueprints and architectural drawings and over two hundred linear feet of business records.

Aladdin Homes began simply enough when Bill Sovereign, a lawyer by training, observed the success of a friend, in selling "knocked down" boats by mail. Bill reasoned that if the parts of a boat could be machined ready-to-ship and be successfully nailed together by an amateur, houses could be sold...
the same way. Bill convinced Otto, the advertising man, to give the project a try. On their mother’s kitchen table they sketched out a simple wooden building that could be put to a variety of uses, prepared a two page catalog, and coined the name “Aladdin.” The Sovereign’s contracted with a local saw mill to actually produce their pre-cut building.

Through a combination of good design, high quality, and good marketing Aladdin homes became an important firm in the national pre-cut building market. By 1915 sales had reached $1.1 million. In 1918 the 2,800 Aladdin homes sold constituted 2.37% of the entire number of housing starts in the nation. In 1926 the company production of homes peaked at 3,650 units.

For many years, Aladdin offered its customers homes in a wide range of styles and prices. For example, in 1919 Aladdin’s catalog offered for $638.40 the “Erie,” a sixteen by twenty foot “little jewel” of a house that featured one bedroom and no indoor plumbing. The two story “Villa,” costing $6,759.25, represented the firm’s finest offering in 1919. The twenty-four by sixty-four foot “Villa” featured four upstairs’ bedrooms, a sixteen by twenty-six foot living room that was larger than the entire “Erie,” and such features as a pantry, a sun room, a breakfast room, two fireplaces, and not unexpectedly for so lavish a home, indoor plumbing. After World War II Aladdin focused on producing “affordable” housing. Homes offered in the 1957 catalog ranged from the low cost, two bedroom Alamo #3, with 798 square feet of space that sold for $3,863 to the Hollywood #1, with 1,664 square feet of space and an asking price of $8,373.

In 1917 Aladdin published its first special industrial catalog, offering a wide range of buildings including a complete town housing 3,000 individuals. During World War I Aladdin aided the war effort by selling pre-cut basic training camps to the army. In the 1930s Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal housed thousands of urban youths in pre-cut camps Aladdin sold to the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC). Over the years Aladdin would offer a variety of items for sale in its catalogs, including furniture and various “specialty” items ranging from clocks to Lionel trains. Selling pre-cut homes, however, was always the firm’s core activity.

Aladdin success in selling pre-cut homes was widely imitated by other firms, including the well-known Sears & Roebuck “Modern Homes” which first appeared in 1907 and Montgomery Ward’s “Wardway Homes.” The family owned Aladdin Co. competed successfully with these large rivals. Sears, with its national reputation and extensive marketing network, sold nearly 100,000 pre-cut homes in the thirty years it offered them for sale. During those same years Aladdin sold at least 35,000 units, making it a smaller but active competitor to the national giant.

We are very pleased that this important piece of Michigan’s history will be housed here at the Clarke Library. We invite you to come and use this valuable resource.

Native American Leadership Discussed

On Tuesday, March 19, Mark Keller will speak on a project he has undertaken to explore Native American leadership patterns. Mr. Keller will share the research methodology he employed to identify six generations of leaders from the Swan Creek Black River band of the Chippewa tribe.

The methodology Mr. Keller employed included discovering information in historical documents, undertaking intensive genealogical research, and conducting oral history interviews with the descendents of past tribal leaders. In addition to describing methodology, Mr. Keller will also describe how the research he has conducted can be used to document leadership patterns among other groups.

In the past, Mr. Keller has researched the history of several of Michigan’s Native American communities. He has also taught a course in Native American history here at CMU.

We invite all those who would like to hear this interesting presentation to join us beginning at 7:00 pm in the Clarke Library’s reading room. A reception will follow the presentation. Mr. Keller’s research was supported by a grant from the Michigan Council for the Humanities.
Exhibit Celebrates 100th Anniversary of Automobiles

On the evening of March 6, 1896 Charles King startled onlookers by driving Michigan’s first horseless carriage through the streets of Detroit. King’s outing presaged a revolutionary transformation in the way Michiganders would live and work. As part of the celebration marking the 100th anniversary of the automobile in Michigan, The Clarke Library has mounted an exhibit featuring the automotive industry’s history of mid-Michigan. During the first quarter of the twentieth century a wide number of firms tried their hand at manufacturing cars and trucks. The Clarke’s exhibit recalls that diversity by discussing seven mid-Michigan automotive enterprises and focusing particularly on Transport Truck of Mt. Pleasant and Republic Truck of Alma, two of the more interesting and better documented companies.

Founded in 1913 as the Alma Motor Truck Co., but soon renamed Republic, this firm is the most notable success story among the mid-Michigan transportation companies. Like many firms, Republic started by selling a single, well built vehicle. The firm’s two ton truck was well received and the firm quickly established a national reputation as a quality truck manufacturer.

This reputation served the firm well as the World War I army rapidly gave the firm several large orders for trucks. By 1918 Republic was employing 2,500 workers and had become the largest exclusive manufacturer of trucks in the country. In 1919, every ninth truck driven in America was a Republic.

The firm continued to be prosperous throughout the 1920s, however the senior management that had guided the firm in its most successful years began to leave. An example of this was Frank Ruggles, an early president of the firm, who sold much of his Republic stock in 1920 and left to establish a new firm. New managers proved unable to meet the challenge created by the Great Depression. In 1929, in an effort to survive hard times, the firm merged with the American LaFrance Foamite Co., to form LaFrance-Republic. The merger, however was unsuccessful and in 1931 LaFrance-Republic was bought by Sterling Motor Truck Co. of Milwaukee.

The purchase of LaFrance-Republic by Sterling marked the end of truck production in Alma. Sterling centralized all of its production in Milwaukee, leaving only a parts depot in the old Republic facility. In 1957 the parts depot closed, ending Alma’s last remaining truck-related activity.

Transport Truck Co. of Mount Pleasant offers a useful case study of a small truck manufacturer. Transport was founded in April 1918 by Milton A. Holmes, who had been vice-president of Republic, and, perhaps more importantly, Republic’s general
sales manager. Holmes may have chosen to locate his new firm in Mt. Pleasant for several reasons, but one factor was undoubtedly the $375,000 in stock the city’s Board of Trade pledged would be purchased by Isabella County residents. Pledges, however, never turned into real dollars and for most of its existence Transport was constantly struggling to find ready cash.

Because of Holmes’ association with Republic the public was promised that the new firm would have the expertise to begin immediately assembling vehicles for sale. In October 1918 a 2.5 ton demonstration truck rolled out of the firm’s factory. By 1919 Transport was ready to begin full scale production. The company occupied a 4,800 square foot factory that was designed to produce twenty trucks a day, although the company’s initial goal was a more modest ten. By the end of 1919 Transport offered three models for sale and had produced over 500 vehicles. First year profits were good and hopes were high.

Like many early auto ventures Transport Truck eventually fell victim to bad times and poor management. The economic depression of 1920-1921 slowed sales and caused Transport to operate at a loss. Because of undercapitalization, the situation was particularly perilous since Transport operated on the narrowest of cash margins.

Transport’s senior managers worsened the firm’s financial condition by paying significant stock dividends in 1920 even as the company was headed for an operating deficit and by granting themselves generous salaries and year-end bonuses. As the firm plunged deeper into debt, Transport’s senior officers took a number of questionable steps that maintained or increased their immediate remuneration but would eventually lead to lawsuits against them.

By the end of 1921, despite rosy public figures, the firm was near financial collapse. Although Transport struggled on for two more years, with increased sales in 1922 and 1923 and an expanded model line, the company’s financial situation eventually became impossible. By the close of 1923, the last year in which it produced trucks, the firm owed almost $1.2 million. On March 17, 1924 the company went into court-ordered receivership. In January 1925 all of the firm’s remaining assets were sold to pay debts. Transport Truck’s failure demonstrated the importance of good management and adequate capital.

Automotive Industry in Mid-Michigan will run at the Clarke until April 27, 1996. We hope you will visit the exhibit.
A Final Word

In November results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in American History were released. Mandated by Congress, the Assessment measured the knowledge of United States History among K-12 students nationwide. For people who believe in the importance of history the results were profoundly disturbing.

Only 43 percent of the twelfth graders tested managed to demonstrate a “basic” level of proficiency regarding our nation’s past. Less than 2 percent of twelfth graders were considered to have an “advanced” understanding of history.

Although the results of the test were disturbing, of equal concern was the lack of attention to the test displayed by the media. The fact that many contemporary students have an abysmal understanding of America’s past rated only a brief story on page 22 of the New York Times and caused barely a ripple among Michigan’s newspapers. When standardized tests reveal declining knowledge of math or science among students it is almost always front page news. Hard on the heals of the headlines are long feature articles regarding the impact of a poorly educated public on America’s competitiveness in an increasingly global economy.

The low level of historical knowledge and the lack of interest in the problem both suggest that historical knowledge is being marginalized. For too many policy makers and members of the public “reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic” are public education. This narrow educational focus fundamentally misunderstands and misrepresents the full range of knowledge needed by an informed citizenry in the twenty-first century. Historical knowledge is vital in reaching informed decisions in both our personal and public lives.

In our public lives, an adequate understanding of topics as diverse as local decisions regarding road improvements or the rationale for American involvement in Bosnia depends upon a knowledge of the past. Personally, historical information can play a vital role in choosing what neighborhood we live in, what school our children attend or even where we decide to accept employment. The past defines and shapes the present. Past decisions, private and public, shape our futures as individuals and as a community. Students, educators, and the public all must realize this critical truth.

Those associated with the Clarke Library have spent over forty years collecting and disseminating historical information. To some the Clarke’s activities may seem a quaint anachronism that fondly recalls a simpler time but has no ongoing relevance. However, without the kind of historical information preserved in library’s like the Clarke we are far less able to understand and intelligently address most of the issues that exist within our community or our nation.

History is vital to our understanding of the world. The Clarke plays a critical role in preserving part of that history. All those associated with the library should be proud of the role the library plays and proud of the mission that we collectively advance. Together we make a difference. Together we are among those who demonstrate the relevance of history to everyone’s daily life.

Frank Boles

Photographic Preservation Workshop Planned

On Saturday, April 13, from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., Mr. Tom Featherstone will present a workshop on the preservation of historic photographs. The workshop will cover the identification of photographic types, the causes of photographic deterioration, proper storage and handling techniques, simple preservation steps for damaged photographs, and ideas about how to arrange and appraise photographs.

Mr. Featherstone has served as assistant curator of photographs at Wayne State University’s Walter P. Reuther Library for over seventeen years. He brings a wealth of personal experience and technical knowledge to share with workshop participants.

The workshop registration fee of $25.00 includes lunch. Registration is limited and must be received by April 1. If you are interested in attending the workshop please contact the library at 774-3352.