



Notes from the Archive

Seaver Center for Western History Research
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
August 2019

Welcome to Notes from the Archive, a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department.
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THE COLLECTION

Incorporation Records of Los Angeles County

More than 70,000 incorporation records that date from 1854 through 1978 are now available to researchers. It has taken 32 years to provide an item-level inventory, and there is a story here worth telling.

Since the 1870s, California law has required a corporation to file an Article of Incorporation in the office of the County Clerk where the business transactions are to take place. Each record contains a statement of purpose, a constitution or by-laws, names of directors and/or officers and may also contain financial and statistical reports, amendments, name changes, mergers and dissolution.

In 1987, a year after the Seaver Center opened to the public, the California Historical Society donated over 30,000 Los Angeles County Articles of Incorporation records, and a majority of the items were dated 1854 to 1938. It took ten years of inventory work before this collection became available to the public.

A second donation of records came in 2000 by the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, and these items covered gaps from the years 1903 to 1939. Unfortunately, this group of more than 40,000 records were placed in offsite storage for 12 years at the former May Company Department Store in Downtown Los Angeles.



In the summer of 2012 the lease at May Company was terminated, and the entire collection, housed in record storage size boxes, was shrink-wrapped and transferred to a new collection facility 15 miles south of downtown.



Months later it was determined that the paper records would come to the Seaver Center, however after many years in dark storage, pest management of the collection was necessary. A 20-foot freezer was rented in order to treat the boxes for possible infestation before being permitted to enter the museum.

Seaver Center staff worked closely with our Conservation Department to double-wrap each heavy box in plastic and securely seal each box before piling them into the freezer. The labor-intense process lasted from one hot muggy summer afternoon into the evening at the "west ramp" loading area. After the required seven-day freeze, the same History staff hand-carried each box out of the freezer. In keeping with museum "best practice policies," it was now safe to bring the boxes into the museum.

At the time a storage room was available across from the café kitchen, and this is where the sealed boxes were housed. At some point in time, a volunteer was assigned to re-house contents. He transferred exactly one record storage box each into a set of three archival boxes. When complete, there were about 1,090 archival boxes.

In 2014, volunteers and library school interns began to inventory the contents of the collection. The project received a boost when a processing grant was awarded by the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation to hire two assistants. After the grant funding was spent, a USC work-study undergrad student completed the last of the inventorying - just days before she graduated this past Spring.

Significantly, all the records reflect more than business and political interests. They reveal iconic local industries such as motion pictures; early infrastructure development such as water works; private schools and colleges; and the diverse history of emerging churches, clubs, fraternal societies, and recreational organizations among African American, Chinese, Croatian, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, Korean, Mexican, Native American, and Slavic communities.

The Seaver Center is the only local repository for these records of businesses and organizations that were incorporated at a time when Los Angeles County transformed from an agricultural region to an ethnically diverse industrial center.

Betty Uyeda, Collections Manager

THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Emily Bills is an urban historian and faculty at Woodbury University. She became interested in Los Angeles' telephone history when she discovered that the city had more telephone subscriptions per capita by 1895 than anywhere else in the world. This indicated how much Angelenos valued telephone services as an economic and social tool in a rapidly developing, but spread-out region. The Seaver Center's L.A. County Incorporation Records helped her piece together Los Angeles' complicated corporate telephone history, including who invested in the first telephone company and how far telephone wires connected subscribers during the earliest years. Telephone company founders hand wrote the first articles of incorporation in 1881 and the utility operated in the city without a franchise, stringing telephone wires over rooftops for six blocks in Downtown L.A. Two young messenger boys ran the exchange, listening in on conversations so they knew when to break the connection. Long before Downtown Los Angeles had paved streets, electric trolley service, or automobiles, telephone poles and wires marked the area as the heart of a modernizing city.



Los Angeles also has a rich competitive telephone history. Until 1916 the city had two main telephone companies, a local AT&T subsidiary called Sunset Telephone and an independent concern called Los Angeles Home. These companies refused to interconnect their lines so Angelenos had to subscribe to two different companies and rent two different telephone devices to access the full telephone network—an expense that annoyed almost everyone. Los Angeles' fiercely entrepreneurial spirit also manifested itself in the many independent telephone companies that sprang up across the Southland. The L.A. County Incorporation Records indicate that, starting in 1902, at least two dozen companies filed articles of incorporation, from Pomona, to Santa Monica, to Sunland. The independent United States Long Distance company, founded in 1902, interconnected these separate and successful companies, helping to bind the services—and Angelenos—together.

Her research will culminate in her forthcoming book *Linking Up Los Angeles: How the Telephone Built a City* to be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Helene Demeestere wrote: Incorporation papers were crucial in my research, since most of local documents regarding the ethnic group I was studying were lost during the 1906 San Francisco fire. The French consulate was then located in the Bay area, and my PhD dissertation topic was French immigration to the West. I had to turn to local archives. As a social historian, I needed to delve into the lives of these Frenchmen and women who settled in Los Angeles during the Progressive Era.



From the files I pulled out names that matched with those that the Federal census or Great Registers recorded as "French born". Each document I opened, was telling the amount of capital stock, the purpose of the business, the name of its directors etc., a determinant insight of the French presence and the dynamics of the group in Southern California. From a meat-packing company, a weekly newspaper, a confectionery or a mining company, it showed the diversity of activities of the people I was studying, and the structure of these companies but moreover, an indication of who were the leaders of the community.

The year 1902 was a surprise for there were a great number of incorporations with boards of directors exclusively made of French immigrants. Over the course of six months (May to October), eight organisations were incorporated, all with an identical statement: "for the purpose of social intercourse, amusement, recreation and entertainment of its members and for procuring merchandise and commodities, food and refreshment supplies and distributing the same to its members," and from these eight clubs, two had added the wording "to furnish literature, reading matter." That led me to think that the French community had created their own private organisations to override the new obstacles put on their social lives. Indeed, a December 1901 city ordinance forbade all card playing in saloons, and cards were a major distraction among the French working class. It was also a time when the temperance movement was gaining momentum, and the local government applied more stringent regulations on the sale and distribution of alcohol. That year, not only did the French incorporate many clubs such as The Country Social Club or the Casquettes Blanches, but Germans and Italians as well had created their own ethnic clubs, as was found with further attention given to the box of files.

The content of the incorporation papers have an undeniable value for historians as myself. Furthermore, being able to read the signatures of my fellow countrymen on each file, individuals who, like myself, had chosen to settle in Southern California, added a tiny zest of emotion to my work.

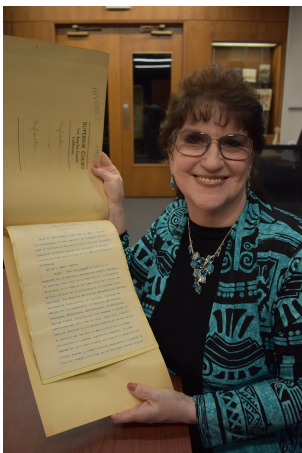
Steven and Patrice Demory are Civil War Living Historians, and they have in the past 15 years portrayed Professor Thaddeus Lowe and his wife Leontine. They appear at reenactments and give educational presentations for various organizations and schools. They have traveled across the country researching the Lowe's at a myriad of different and varied locations, including the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.



Lowe is best known to history as the founder and head of the Civil War U.S. Balloon Corps, the predecessor of today's Air Force, and also as the builder of the Mount Lowe Railway, an electric funicular and mountain railway in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. He was an exceptionally prolific inventor, visionary and businessman. He holds more than 200 patents and was involved in dozens of businesses (such as banks, heating, gas and ice manufacturing) in Los Angeles County and across the country to Norristown, Pennsylvania. He was a nationally known personality of his day, one which the public knows so little about today.

This is what led them to the Seaver Center's voluminous collection of Los Angeles County incorporation records. There were two primary items they were seeking to document. First, Lowe had a vision of building a scientific institute, here on the West Coast, to rival the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia or M.I.T. of Cambridge. His goal was, "To establish and maintain meteorological stations, astronomical observatories, art galleries, buildings and methods for the preservation of documents and records, geological, ethnological, anthropological, natural history, botanical and other museums ..." He continued to outline the establishment of a vast educational institution to teach and grant degrees in these, and many other subjects.

In her "Eureka!" moment Patrice found the incorporation documents of the Lowe Institute. They marveled at the scope of the project and also enjoyed seeing the signatures of Thaddeus, his wife Leontine, and a number of their family members. Due to hard economic times due to the "Panic of 1893" the Lowe Institute was never completed. Which led to their second item of interest: documenting the actual realization of Lowe's vision. In a series of documents, we found that he co-founded (along with other prominent Pasadena citizens) a school in Pasadena called Throop University. This was a vocational school where students learned a trade, the school's motto being, "Learn to do by doing." In a string of documents, they established that Throop University morphed into the California Institute of Technology. Indeed, Lowe's vision had been realized, as he was a co-founder of Cal Tech, one of the premier scientific institutes in the world today. As a bonus to this search, the Demory's also documented his ownership and involvement in many other business ventures. He was truly a "Mover and Shaker" in Los Angeles County.



The special collections of the Seaver Center was integral in enabling these researchers to add yet another layer to the amazing history of Professor Thaddeus Sobieski Constantine Lowe.

Patrick Norton, screenwriter and researcher, is writing about the political and cultural life of Nazi sympathizers in Los Angeles during the years leading up to World War II. Because so many of the people participating in these activities did not want their involvement known, it is often necessary to locate primary documents that show relationships which would otherwise go unnoticed by the public.



When Patrick began this project, the idea of Nazis in Los Angeles seemed absurd on its face, and he thought if the rumors held any truth at all, he would discover an isolated incident or aberration in California's history. But as he unraveled the details, he found the pieces of a story – involving not just a small group of Nazi sympathizers, but actual Nazis, wealthy industrialists, obscure occultists, intelligence operatives, Russian monarchists, Sikh assassins, psychics, traitors, con men, and ufologists – that spanned both continents and decades, even as the story returned to L.A. again and again. By providing sources and documentation that back up what were largely urban legends and oral history, the Seaver Center has been invaluable to Patrick's research into a corner of history that often defies belief.



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The Collections

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The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

Exhibition News



Photo courtesy of Gary Leonard, March 2018

The exhibition Sin Censura: A Mural Remembers L.A. will be coming to a close on August 12th.

Opened to the public in March of 2018, the centerpiece of the exhibition is an 80-foot-long painting by artist Barbara Carrasco called L.A. History: A Mexican Perspective. In early 1981, Carrasco was commissioned by the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles (CRA) to paint a large mural about the history of Los Angeles for the city's bicentennial observance, but was asked to remove several scenes deemed too controversial by the CRA. Carrasco refused to remove important vignettes in the painting, such as the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, so the mural was never displayed during the bicentennial.

Carrasco did much of her research for the mural at the Natural History Museum's Western History collections, which later became the Seaver Center for Western History Research. In her own words, Carrasco recalled:

"This was my chance to show what I wish was in the history books."
—Chicana artist Barbara Carrasco



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