

Efforts Underway to Rebuild HP Archive Destroyed in Wildfire

April 2018

An archive of historical documents created by Hewlett-Packard founders William Hewlett and David Packard was destroyed in October 2017 by a devastating wildfire in Sonoma County, California, USA. Unfortunately, none of the documents had been backed up. No paper backup, no photographic images, nothing digitized. Included in the loss were over 100 boxes of papers, presentations, correspondence, and other records from 1937 to 1995. The contents documented HP's evolution from the beginning of the electronics industry. Valued at USD \$2 million, they represented the heart of HP historic activities.

Despite the loss, efforts are underway to rebuild the historical narrative thanks to the dedication of archivist Karen Lewis; and she is asking for assistance from the HP community.

The WildFires

The Sonoma Valley fires were among a series of 250 Northern California blazes in early October 2017. Twenty-one of the fires became major blazes, among them the Tubbs Fire, which grew to become the most destructive wildfire in California history. It was the Tubbs Fire that destroyed the archive. HP had not made the existence of this cache of documents widely known, and it restricted access. As such, many of the documents lost in the fire had never been made available to researchers. Consequently, the fire consumed a significant piece of the test industry in which HP made its start.

This particular cache of material was stored on the campus of Keysight Technologies in Santa Rosa, California. In 1999, HP migrated its test and measurement division into a new company, Agilent Technologies. Keysight is the offspring of Agilent, which created the new venture in 2014. Today, Keysight is a publicly traded business that manufactures electronic test and measurement equipment and software.

Keysight maintains that it took appropriate steps to protect the archives. It claims that it met the standards for archival protection as set forth by the United Nations and the U.S. Library of Congress. It packed the material in damage-resistant archival boxes and stored them on steel shelving in modular buildings with sprinkler systems. Sadly, the fire was so fierce that it even melted some fire-resistant safes.

Rebuilding the Lost Archives

Karen Lewis began working as an HP corporate archivist in 1987, when she was hired to index some unorganized boxes in preparation for HP's 50th anniversary in 1989. By the time she left HP in 2000 to join Agilent Technologies as its Director of Global Media Relations, Karen had indexed

much of the collection and was in the process of determining what needed to be saved for posterity. Karen says that she has identified most of what was lost. Perhaps the most heartbreaking loss for her were the carbon copies of all of David Packard's outgoing correspondence, stored with the replies he received.

Fortunately, the oral histories still exist. In the past, Karen had hired someone to textualize the recordings of David Packard's speeches; and she has the material in her possession. As for restoration of the destroyed archive, annotated indexes do exist "box by box, folder by folder." Copies are stored throughout the world on a variety of computers, both personal and corporate; and Karen has assumed the task of compiling whatever material she can locate.

One final piece of good news. A large chunk of HP archives was not destroyed by the wildfire. The majority of documents, etc., were stored elsewhere and exist both in physical and digital formats. Archives held by HP were not impacted. The company uses a facility in Atlanta, Georgia, for its corporate archives.

Can You Help?

For more information about Karen and her efforts, read "Labor of Love: Re-creating the burned up HP archives," a recent article in the IEEE Xplore® Digital Library. <https://bit.ly/2GhQW71> Read "California Fires Destroy HP Archives" in the Availability Digest for additional information about the fires. <https://bit.ly/2E3R3Oj>

Anyone with documents or information that may be of value to Karen are asked to contact her at karenlewis@gmail.com.