

Dove sono? Perché salvarli?

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I lettori sanno che uno dei fini della Fondazione Micheletti è stato, fin dall'inizio, la "salvezza" dalla dispersione di carte, documenti, testi, libri, rapporti, spesso "minori", relativi ad eventi che hanno fatto la storia del Novecento, di quel lungo secolo segnato da rivoluzioni tecnico-scientifiche e politiche, attraversato da una folla di persone, molte delle quali non hanno lasciato tracce documentarie, nonostante la loro importanza, di cui spesso si ignora perfino la data di nascita e di morte.

Ha cominciato Luigi Micheletti con la sua straordinaria raccolta di documenti relativi alla guerra di Liberazione, al periodo fascista, alla rivoluzione industriale, e la Fondazione ha continuato la sua "caccia" di archivi relativi alla storia di altri "movimenti", fra cui quello ambientalista.

<www.altronovecento.quipo.it> si propone di riferire la consistenza degli archivi esistenti presso la Fondazione, ma anche l'esistenza e la collocazione di altri archivi, nella speranza di evitarne la dispersione o la perdita. Un conforto all'utilità di questo lavoro viene da un articolo apparso a cura della Chemical Heritage Foundation (<www.chemheritage.org>, 315 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA), archivio storico di documenti e libri legati alla chimica, "pubblicato" nel 2000 col titolo: "Perchè salvare le carte personali?". L'articolo si riferisce all'apertura al pubblico della biblioteca e archivio del prof. Kirk Othmer (1904-1995). Il fondo "Donald e Mildred Topp Othmer" contiene 80.000 volumi, rapporti, documenti, lettere e carte personali, bozze di articoli e manoscritti di corsi di lezioni e conferenze, e comprende l'archivio del Chemists' Club.

Riproduciamo nell'originale tale articolo (<www.chemheritage.org>, Othmer Library).

Why save personal papers

Scientists and engineers study the mechanisms of reactions as well as their products and yields. Likewise, historians also endeavor to understand the processes of scientific investigations, the results, and the social context in which they occurred. New fields of research, the changing roles of academic and industrial chemists and chemical engineers, the growth of professional organizations, and the patterns of patronage are all important elements of the social and institutional history of science and technology.

Anyone who has participated in the founding of a new professional group or been active in a company's committee or research strategy knows that society newsletters and corporate annual reports alone do not tell the full story behind important decisions. The published record of science and technology gives only the finished conclusion of a particular series of steps—it does not reveal those preliminary efforts

that were unsuccessful nor how chemists and chemical engineers conceived of their experiments, plans, and interpretations. The processes of research, innovation, and entrepreneurship are found in the informal documents generated by chemical scientists and engineers in the course of their professional activities. Laboratory notes, interim project reports, correspondence, diaries, photographs, and sometimes family letters can help explain the course of their work.

Who Should Save?

The history of the chemical sciences embraces more than just the stories of its leading luminaries. A comprehensive history requires documentation from individuals across the research and employment spectrum. Everyone from the bench chemist to the plant engineer, the corporate research manager, the educator, and the chemical entrepreneur is vital to weaving a complete

historical tapestry.

What Should be Saved?

Significant unpublished documentation includes laboratory notebooks, professional and personal correspondence, and diaries. Also relevant are successive drafts of publications, course materials (especially for newly developed interim courses), and grant applications as well as interim and final project reports. Material on patent applications (from conception to issuance), interference proceedings and infringement litigation, texts of speeches to both scientific and nonscientific audiences, and notes and minutes from the meetings of committees are also very valuable resources.

Photographs taken with colleagues and students, as well as pictures of laboratories, apparatus, pilot plants, and other facets of the professional environment provide further

valuable historical documentation. Even such items as trade catalogs and commercial publications can be of interest many years later.

When Should Material be Saved?

Some people, not wishing to contemplate their own mortality, put off making a will – to the ultimate disadvantage of their family. For similar reasons, many scientists and engineers put off arrangements for the preservation of their papers – to the ultimate detriment of us all.

Chemistry requires chemicals. In the same way, historians need documents – their “reagents” – if they are to make history out of the achievements of chemical scientists and engineers. To this end, it is best for interested individuals to make an initial approach to an archives now, while the papers are intact and before the matter is put off and forgotten.

It is not necessary for donors to give up physical possession of their records until they are ready to do so. Actual transference of files can be done at the mutual convenience of both parties and may be postponed for a number of years if the files are still actively being used. If a space problem exists, the papers may also be transferred in installments

Where Should Documents be Saved?

There are many institutions that archive personal papers. Universities and corporations often have their own archives created from their faculty, students, and administrative records. State historical societies also accept the papers of scientists and engineers. The best arrangement is usually to preserve papers in the archives of the institution with which the chemist or chemical engineer has been most closely associated during his or her career. The Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF) – its very mission being to preserve the history of the chemical sciences

– is also a viable alternative. If your institution does not have an archive, or, if its archival policy excludes personal documents, please contact CHF. The staff of CHF are well qualified to assist you in deciding upon

the best permanent home for your personal papers.

How Should Documents be Saved?

Archivists do not ask donors to sort, cull, and rearrange their papers before deposit. In fact, they prefer that donors not do so. Archivists believe that the original order of the papers themselves has significance. They may also recognize historical value in documents that scientists or engineers might discard as worthless. The donor can provide vital assistance to the archivist by identifying documents and providing contextual information with which to evaluate the contents of the collection. However, if you find you possess multiple copies of newsletters, correspondence, stationery, envelopes, and the like, a good general rule of thumb is to submit only one copy to the archive.

All archivists will, upon request, return any unwanted materials to the donor. Items of particular sentimental value to the family, such as an important letter of recommendation, can be copied and the original returned. Once the donated materials have been received and an inventory made of their

contents, they will be processed by an archivist. Staples will be replaced by plastic clips, cellophane tape will be removed as much as possible, documents will be placed in acid-free folders and boxes, and a finding aid detailing the contents of the archives and where items can be found, will be generated in order to help researchers navigate through the material.

If necessary, because of classified or confidential materials, archives are willing to place reasonable restrictions on the use of donated materials to protect the privacy of the donor and family. For example, a donor may wish to have part of or

all the collection closed to research for a number of years except with her or his permission. Of course, archives always provide the donor with access to the papers.