REO and the Automobile Industry

A Guide to the Resources in the
Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections

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The purpose of this resource guide is to familiarize visitors of the MSU Archives with some of the available resources related to the REO and other automobile company records. Note that this guide is not a comprehensive listing of all the available sources, but is intended to be a starting point from which visitors can begin their research according to their specific needs.

**REO at the MSU Archives**

REO Motors Inc. was incorporated in 1904 by R. E. Olds and other investors as the R. E. Olds Company. It passed through several name changes and permutations until May 30, 1975, when Diamond REO Trucks, Inc., filed for bankruptcy. In its lifetime, the company built passenger cars and trucks, but it was best known for the latter. The company became dependent on government contracts in the 1940s and 1950s, but by 1954 continuing losses led to a takeover by a group of majority stockholders. From 1954 to 1957 the company went through a series of business crises ultimately leading to its purchase by White Motors and the formation of the Diamond REO Truck Division of White Motors in 1957.

**The Company**

1. **REO Motors, Inc. Records, 1904 – 1976. 00036**
   - 283 Vols., 169 cu. ft.
   - This collection consists of the business records of REO Motors, Inc. and includes: correspondence, financial records, annual reports, minutes of meetings, policy directives, personnel records, blueprints, government contracts, sales and distribution records, operating expenses, and office memos. Personnel records include labor turnover reports (1917-1944), health and safety records (1917-1955), agreements and grievances, appeal board minutes, unemployment compensation cases, and wage records. A full record of correspondence details the company's relations with the U.S. government (1939-1957). Foreign correspondence documents REO sales in a number of countries (1923-1959). Miscellaneous records include business association correspondence, newsletters, and publications. Blueprints provide detailed information on the company's civilian and military products from 1920 - 1972, as well as describing company property holdings (1909-1973). White Motor Company Records, 1922 - 1974, include financial statements, letterbooks, sales information and parts specifications.

   - 1.0 cu. ft.
   - The REO publications collection contains several different publications relating to the REO Motor Car Company. The publications in the collection are: REO Echo (1906-1911); REO Spirit (1928-1953); REO- Items (1952-1953); REO Echo (1974-1988) and REO Spirit (2002-2003). The collection also contains one folder of miscellaneous material relating to the REO Club of America.

   - 5.7 cu. ft., 9 volumes, 5 Items
   - The Olds Papers are divided into two sections. The first section consists of Olds' personal papers. Included in this section are Olds' love letters to Metta Woodward, whom he married in 1899; correspondence related to his philanthropic activities; day books; and 2 journals of the Olds family's European tour. The second deals with Olds' business activities from 1904 to 1947. Included are correspondence series of Olds Motor Works, REO, and several small companies of which Olds was either owner or the major stock holder. Also included is correspondence between Olds and various investment agents. Note: Ransom E. Olds (1864-1950), founded the Olds Motor Vehicle Company in 1896 in Lansing, Michigan. For various reasons, including the high cost of his first line of Oldsmobiles, this first venture in mass producing cars was less than successful. By 1902, however, the company's cheap, curved-dash Olds was a success. In 1905 he sold out his stock in the Olds Motor Company and joined the REO Motor Car Company. He was President and General Manager from 1905 to 1924, when he retired from an active part in REO. Olds was chairman of the board from 1924 to 1936. During the later years of his life, Olds built financial security for his family and himself in stocks, bonds and real estate. Olds was also a philanthropist and donated money to a wide variety of social and moral reform societies. He was a businessman of widely varied interests, assuming a managerial involvement in such diverse activities as automobile manufacturing, peat mining and real estate.
Related Collections

4. Peter Berg Papers, 1983. UA 10.3.106
   - 1 folder
   - Peter Berg papers consist of a paper "Welfare Capitalism and Worker Response at the REO Motor Car Company, 1916-1929," which was written by the donor for History 901, June 1983. The paper discusses the welfare capitalism program at the REO Motor Car Company of Lansing, Michigan. Note: REO Motor Car Company of Lansing, Michigan, was founded by R.E. Olds. The welfare capitalism program was established there by 1919 and flourished throughout the 1920s. Peter Berg was a doctoral student at Michigan State University at the time that he wrote the paper.

5. C. M. Burdick Collection, 1904 – 1957. c00487
   - 10 folders.
   - This collection contains diaries, correspondence, and a biographical sketch of R.E. Olds entitled "That Boy Ranney." Also included is a letter from R. Shettler explaining his unhappiness with Olds over the affairs of the REO Motor Car Company. Some material on Olds’ interest in music is also included. Note: C. M. Burdick was Ransom E. Olds’ personal secretary for a considerable period of time.

   - 1 folder
   - Papers of Lisa Gerber and Mojden Hojjati consist of a student paper written by Gerber and Hojjati entitled "INDUSTRIAL PATRIOTISM: Americanization in the REO Motor Company." They argue that the paternalistic program of the REO Company was aimed at making immigrants better citizens, whereas the program of the Ford Motor Company was directed at increasing production. Note: This paper was written by Lisa Gerber and Mojden Hojjati as a class assignment.

   - 2 items
8. **H. J. Karn Collection, 1910 – 1964. c00184**
   - 1 folder
   - This collection contains notes kept by Bill Taylor during an interview with H. J. Karn, in which Karn describes his working experiences (1906-1916) at the Lansing plant of the REO Motor Car Company. Also included is a brochure describing a 1910 record-breaking transcontinental trip made in a REO automobile.

9. **Lansing Magazine, 1979. c00445**
   - 1 folder
   - This collection consists of the January/February issue of LANSING MAGAZINE. The magazine contains two articles on Ransom E. Olds: "How Lansing Lost and Regained Oldsmobile", and "The Incredible Saga of How R.E. Olds Got the Boot". Also included is an article on Michigan Agricultural College student unrest on the night of 22 February 1911. The magazine also offers an insight into the economic and social life of Lansing, Michigan in 1979.

    - 6.6 cu. ft.
    - This collection contains 13 scrapbooks which span from 1924 to 1991. The scrapbooks are mostly general in content; however, several of them contain newspaper clippings, correspondence and memorabilia highlighting the Neller's social life in Lansing and East Lansing. There is also information on the R.E. Olds Museum and the real estate business in Lansing, and East Lansing. Note: Walter H. Neller founded the Walter Neller Company, a real estate company in the Lansing, Michigan area. He was married to Frances Winifred Harvey and graduated from Michigan State College in 1928 with a B.S. in Applied Science. Frances Neller graduated from Michigan State College in 1928 with a B.A. in Liberal Arts. Walter and Frances had three children, Mary, Suzanne, and Richard. Mary married David Jessup and Suzanne married Ronald Kregel and Richard married Susan Hiler.

11. **Nixon and Starr Family Papers, 1877 – 1923. 00060**
    - .33 cu. ft.
    - Primarily the papers of Bruce Elbert and Ethel Nixon Starr of Lansing, Michigan. Includes household and business receipts and accounts, newspaper clippings and coroners' reports, and letters of condolence. Also various receipts and papers of fraternal orders that both belonged to, including the Order of the Blue Goose, the Knights of the Maccabees, and the Order of the Eastern Star. Of particular interest may be a set of receipts pertaining to B.E. Starr's purchase of a new REO automobile in 1923, and a photograph of Starr in folder 14. Also in the collection are papers of Ethel's brother, James R. Nixon, and her father, John W. Nixon. These include primarily business documents and receipts from John's pharmaceutical business and from James' grocery and dry-goods store, and from the family interest in a citrus grove in
Avon Park, Florida. Note: Bruce Elbert (Bert) Starr was an insurance agent and fire inspector residing in Lansing, Michigan. He died suddenly in 1923. He belonged to several fraternal orders. Both Starrs belonged to Plymouth Congregational Church. His wife, Ethel, was the daughter of John W. Nixon of Jennings, Michigan, a pharmacist. They married in 1904. Ethel's brother, James R. Nixon of Potterville, Michigan, ran a grocery store, and the Nixon family had an interest in the operation of a citrus grove in Avon Park, Florida.

   - .3 cu. ft.
   - The Oldsmobile Club of America, Inc. was founded in 1971 as a way for people interested in collecting, restoring, or researching Oldsmobile to find and share information. Journey with Olds is the monthly newsletter sent to each member of the club. The collection contains an incomplete run of the first nine volumes of the newsletter. There are also some miscellaneous pieces of correspondence.

   - 1 folder
   - This collection contains one booklet and two brochures on the history of the Oldsmobile. It was published for the 75th anniversary of production.

   - 1 folder.
   - The collection consists of the poem "The 25th Anniversary of 4-H Clubs" written in 1940 by Plumb and newspaper and magazine articles from 1940, 1942, 1961, and 1983 about her being judged best in a contest and winning an REO touring car. Note: Florine Folks Plumb was the daughter of William Folks from Hanover, Michigan. At age 11, she entered the corn she grew in a judging contest held at Michigan State University. Her corn took first prize and she won a REO touring car. She graduated from MSU in 1920. She married Harold J. Plumb.

15. Allan S. Thompson photographic collection, 1898-1913. 00186
   - 1866 glass negatives, 3 lantern slides, 1869 negatives, 573 photographs.
   - The collection consists of glass plate negatives, film negatives, and contact prints of images of people, places, and events in the greater Lansing, Michigan area, 1898-1913. Included in the collection are images of products of the companies Thompson worked for. Also included are images that document the Lansing Wheelbarrow Company, including views of the buildings and grounds, men working, the arrival of raw materials via railroad, and the various processes necessary to produce the wheelbarrows, carts, trucks, and hardware. Other businesses documented include the Severance Tank Works, Oldsmobile Motor Car Company, and Capitol Electrical Engineering Company. Thompson also photographed local buildings, homes, churches, water towers, and fire fighting equipment. The collection also
contains images of local parades and carnivals and the Ringling Brothers Circus. Also included are images of Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show. Thompson also photographed his family, the mourning for U.S. President McKinley on the Michigan Capitol Lawn, the visit of Admiral Dewey, and panoramic views of Lansing. Note: Allan S. Thompson was born on May 26, 1866 in Lansing, Michigan. He attended Michigan State University from 1886 to 1890 and in 1889 worked as a machinist in the Lansing Wheelbarrow Company. In 1906 he left Lansing Wheelbarrow to become a shipping clerk in Capitol Electrical Engineering Company. In 1908 he went to work for Oldsmobile Motor Car Company as a clerk and later became a foreman. He retired in 1922 and in 1924 started an importing business, mostly importing fancy baskets from the Philippines. In 1938 he retired from his importing business. Thompson died on September 25, 1953.

- .33 cu. ft.
- Correspondence and miscellaneous receipts and papers of James H. Thompson, a Lansing, Michigan, lawyer who was originally from Evart, Michigan. His business correspondence deals primarily with the giving of legal advice on real estate matters and with the collection of monies due his clients. A particularly interesting exchange is between the Original Gas Engine Company, for whom he was secretary at one time, and Morse Brothers Machinery and Supply of Denver, Colorado. There is also correspondence about various investments Thompson or his clients had made, including the Superior and Boston Copper Company of Houghton, Michigan. Also documentation of two contested wills, that of Nettie Rosencrance and that of E.C. Thompson. Copies of several inquiries for and letters of recommendation and extensive correspondence pertaining to Republican politics, to the Presidential election of 1912, with Triplex Tire Company about endorsing their tires, and the bankruptcy papers for the Elk Cement and Lime Company. There is correspondence with newspapers and magazines about publishing articles and about subscription to their publications, and several clippings dealing with Thompson's Masonic activities. Much of Thompson's personal correspondence deals with the Masonic Order, and also with the history of the Thompson family. Miscellaneous papers include numerous calling cards of business associates, as well as a brokerage newsletter about the mining industry, advertisements for municipal bonds, and an article about interpretation of Sherman Law. Also a program for a 75th anniversary celebration at the University of Michigan and a hand-drawn map of some islands Thompson was considering purchasing. Primary correspondents include Dennis Alward, Charles Townsend, William A. Smith, Francis Clarke, and E.W. Olds. Note: James H. Thompson graduated from Michigan State Normal School (Eastern Michigan University) and got his law degree at the University of Michigan. He was a partner in the law firm of Thompson and Trumbull in Evart, Michigan, before moving to Lansing, Michigan. He was President of the Board of State Tax Commissioners and the State Board of
Assessors, and between 1901 and 1909 he sat on the State Board of Education. He held various executive and counseling positions for the R.E. Olds companies, was legal counsel for the Ann Arbor Railroad, was a member of the Board of Directors and Owners of the People's Bank of Bath, Michigan, and he was Vice President of the Holmes Realty Company. He was active for many years in the Masonic Order, eventually becoming a Grand Master in 1913, and he was a strong advocate and supporter of the Republican Party.

17. Mortimer A. Waldo Papers, 1904 – 1958. 00042
- 1 cu. ft.
- Mainly correspondence, telegrams, records, reports, and journals relating to Waldo's time in Russia with the Young Men's Christian Association and his service as vice-consul from America in Helsinki, Finland, during World War II. These papers paint a vivid picture of the Soviet people and their country and lifestyle. Waldo describes his work and his attitudes toward it, and he gives his own feelings about the World War, and how it affected him and his acquaintances. He discusses the diplomatic circle in Russia and Finland. He discusses the Russian Revolution of 1917 only vaguely, possibly due to censorship (some letters stamped "censored"), but he goes in to more detail about the Finnish Revolution of the same period. Financial records of the Y.M.C.A., loans given, and personal expenses are included. Also personal reviews of books he read and people he met. A number of letters and most of the records are in German or Russian. Post-war materials include correspondence, some in German, speech materials which he presented to the Lansing, Michigan, Rotary Club about his service, and later, visit to Russia, news clippings and a concert program about Michael Press, a Soviet violinist who was at Michigan State University, a transcript of an oral interview with his wife, Eleanor Boyer Waldo, done after Waldo's death, and some tourist information about Japan. Also included is a childhood report card of Waldo's, some Sunday-school books belonging to his father, Alva, and calling cards for them both. A post-war greeting card holds a picture of Waldo's two daughters in their middle childhood. One report from Finland was used by historian Samuel Morison in his report to the United States Department of State on the Peace Settlement. It recommended that the Allies recognize an independent Finland. Note: Mortimer Waldo (1891-1963), the son of a Methodist minister, grew up in the Charlotte, Michigan, area and graduated from Adrian College. He then studied law at Yale University, but left in 1916, before completing his degree, to work with the Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association's Prisoners' Aid Society in Omsk, Russia, until the Russian Revolution. From March to October of 1918, he was American Vice-Consul in Helsingfors (Helsinki) Finland, during their Revolution. After World War I, Waldo returned to Lansing, where he worked as an export agent for the Novo Engine Company and REO Motors. He married Eleanor Boyer in 1925, and in 1931, he founded the Waldo Travel Agency.
- 1 item
- This collection consists of "Discovering Ingham County: A Descriptive Bibliography" by Eugene G. Wanger and published by the Ingham County Historical Commission of Mason, Michigan. The bibliography covers general works on Ingham County; Lansing; East Lansing; Meridian; Haslett; Okemos; Mason; Williamston; as well as a few entries for other places in Ingham County. Also included are Michigan State University; state institutions; R.E. Olds; businesses; private associations; and churches. The bibliography also contains biographical and fiction works, historical files, and historical artifacts. Also included is an index to the entries; a directory of archives, museums, historical and genealogical societies in Ingham County and a list of members of the Ingham County Historical Commission.

- 3 folders
- This collection consists of Jon L. Young's reminiscences, based on diaries he kept as a student at Michigan State College from 1931-1935. Young describes his classes, social activities, and work as a teaching assistant in the History Department. He also talks about his family, who lived in Lansing, and the impact of the Depression, especially on his father, an employee of the REO Motor Car Company. Young also analyzes the unsettled international events of the 1930s. Note: Jon L. Young graduated from MSC with a bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts in 1935. He was a member of ROTC and the International Relations Club.

Other Automobile Companies

- 3 cu. ft., 12 volumes
- Records of the Duplex Truck Company, originally Duplex Power Car Company, including articles of incorporation, correspondence, patent certificates, audit reports, profit and loss statements, stock certificates, meeting minutes, records of labor, and land purchase agreements, circuit court records, and other related documents. Also company advertisements, blueprints, and photographs of their trucks; documents on the company's merger with Warner and Swasey Company in 1955; insurance documents; issues of the magazine SPERRY SCOPE (from Sperry Gyroscope Company, 1935-1949); specifications for other Duplex products; parts catalogs; and a notebook containing a brief company history. Note: The Duplex Power Car Company was founded in Charlotte, Michigan, in 1909. It manufactured trucks and truck-related machinery. The company was reorganized into Duplex Truck Company in 1916, and was bought out by Warner and Swasey Company in 1955. The Duplex Division of Warner and Swasey closed down in 1975. Other Automobile Companies
Other Resources

2. REO Transportation Museum Glass Plate Negatives and Slides image files (automobiles, trucks, motors for 1916 – 1929)
3. Reference Books (Automobiles, REO, Oldsmobile, Ransom, E. Olds)