Archiving the Records of the
Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors – National Auxiliary
– By Lynne Finley

This project began in 2005 following the release of our history book, *A Partnership Unique*. Jeri Ann Browne worked as an editor on the book and had successfully archived the PHCC - California Auxiliary’s and Los Angeles Auxiliary’s records with a local university, California State. She was the driving force in making sure that our National records were properly preserved and made available for research. Over the course of the next seven years, we explored every industry-related museum and every post-secondary school with advanced degrees in Sanitation, Public Health or related fields. There were extensive discussions with several institutions, but none whose program quite fit our records.

In March 2012, Jeri Ann posted on an archivist organization blog that the records were available. We heard back from Tom Connors, Archivist at the Teamsters Labor History Research Center, George Washington University. After discussing our records with him, he directed us to Deborra Richardson, Chair and Curator of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History Archives Center.

Over the course of the next year, we quietly worked with them to define our records and determine if they were a match for their program. Because of their policy to have no publicity until a press release is made, we could not report on these activities. Keeping that secret was a very hard thing to do!

The Museum began a temporary relocation of the entire Archives just after we contacted them in early April, 2012. At that time we provided summary information on the Auxiliary’s history and detailed information on the contents of the collection. Their move was completed on November 12, 2012. On November 15, 2012, Sandy Stack and Lynne Finley met with Ms. Richardson at PHCC’s offices in Falls Church, VA, for the initial review. Subsequently, Cathy Keen, Associate Curator of the Archives Center, did a second extensive review and prepared the recommendation to acquire. The acquisition was approved by their Collections Acquisition Committee on February 5, 2013. The records were physically placed in their facility on February 19, 2013. They are collection #1304. To find information on the Archives and viewing or researching the records, please visit their website at [https://americanhistory.si.edu/archives](https://americanhistory.si.edu/archives).

When you are in DC, make an appointment to see your pictures in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History Archives Center!

The donation is ongoing. They say they are a “Forever Acquirer.” Each year another year of our records are added to the collection. I want to personally thank Jeri Ann for her motivation and lending her experience. I want to thank Auxiliary presidents Terry Giebelhaus and Sandy Stack for their participation and support. I want you all to know that our national treasures are in the hands of some of the finest professionals I have ever had the pleasure of working with. It has been an absolutely fantastic journey!
February 28, 2013

It is with great pride that I announce that the historical records of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors—National Auxiliary have been accepted by the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History Archives Center. The records will remain in the Smithsonian collection for preservation, public access and research. It is a tribute to all who have created this amazing history and now it is available for others to share and learn.

This project began in 2005 following the release of our history book, A Partnership Unique, as recorded by our Historian, Lynne Finley. Our Archives Committee consisting of Lynne Finley and Jeri Ann Browne were the driving force to preserve our historical records, searching several years to find the proper archive facility.

The scrapbooks tend mostly to relate to convention activities and all include photographs taken at conventions illustrating a lot of ceremony, ritual and pageantry. The scrapbooks cover almost every year of the Auxiliary’s existence, dating from 1919. Original convention programs, printed materials and verbatim annual proceedings of their general business meetings are included and provide further detail. The scrapbooks document the women’s activism as it developed and expanded through the years.

The scrapbooks also document the relationships of plumbing product manufacturers to the Auxiliary. These include InSinkErator, developer of the garbage disposal, Bradford White Corporation, American Standard, Kohler, Copper Development, Ferguson, A.O. Smith, BrassCraft and LA-CO to name a few. “These relationships and how the manufacturers capitalized on them are interesting as forms of product and company promotion and advertising,” said Cathy Keene, Assistant Archivist for the Museum.

“PHCC President David Dugger and PHCC Auxiliary President, Sandy Stack’s motto this year is, “Go Big”! and it doesn’t get any bigger than this. It has been an amazing journey,” said Auxiliary Historian, Lynne Finley.

Sandy Stack
PHCC National Auxiliary President

These were the press releases provided by the two organizations announcing the acquisition.

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The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History recently acquired archival materials from the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors - National Auxiliary, which tell the story of both women’s history and small business. The collection includes organizational records and 27 scrapbooks documenting the organization’s 92-year-old history.

Originally named the Women’s Auxiliary-National Association of Master Plumbers, the group was formed in 1919, just one year before the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920. The collection, housed in the museum’s Archives Center, includes photographs, charter books for state chapters and committees, financial records, various iterations of the by-laws, verbatim transcripts of annual meetings accompanied by reports from committee chairs and officers as well as ledger books detailing expenditures and income. The materials date from 1919 through 2011.

“This is the Archives Center’s first collection to specifically document the records of a long-standing women’s organization,” said curator Cathy Keen. “We are delighted the PHCC Auxiliary stepped forward to help fill this gap.” Keen added that the collection, unusually complete and well organized, closely documents the changing roles of women in business and as activists.

While the women originally sought to assist their husbands’ businesses, their responsibilities evolved over time from bookkeeping and answering inquiries to successfully advocating for improved public sanitary facilities, most notably in 1938 with the Texaco registered service station program featuring clean restrooms. The complete collection relates to business history, especially family-owned business, advertising history and the history of technology in plumbing, heating and cooling.

The museum is located at 14th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission is free. For more information, visit http://americanhistory.si.edu.

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National Auxiliary President Sandy Stack, Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History Archives Center Chair & Curator Deborra Richardson and Auxiliary Archive Committee Chair Lynne Finley at PHCC’s headquarters, November 15, 2012.

Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History Archive Center Logo at the time of acquisition.

Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History Archive Center Associate Curator Cathy Keen with National Auxiliary records in the Archives Center, February 20, 2013.

The Deed of Gift & Transmittal Letter. The original is framed and displayed in PHCC - National Association Headquarters, Falls Church, VA. Subsequent donations of annual proceedings and scrapbooks are made each year to keep the collection complete.
How Did A Group of Plumbers’ Wives Change American History?

Initially a social club, the Women’s Auxiliary grew to become one of the nation's most influential organizations in the country

By Leah Binkovitz
smithsonian.com
March 20, 2013

When the ladies auxiliary committee for the National Association of Master Plumbers first formed, it was composed entirely of men. The men were tasked with finding diverting excursions for their wives while the master plumbers association held its annual convention. In June, 1910, for example, the women enjoyed an auto ride, some shopping and a luncheon at the convention held in Chicago. But in 1919, once the auxiliary committee was finally turned over to the women, the organization, which was little more than a social club, would transform into a platform for activism and become one of the oldest women's organizations in the country.

When the American History Museum acquired the organization's archives, the 92-year-old collection became the most thorough documentation of a women's group in the museum's holdings, according to curator Cathy Keen. “We have collections that relate peripherally to women's activism but not any one long-standing women's organization represented in our collection.”

Even before acquiring the right to vote nationally, women were a part of American business from the start, including the plumbing industry. “In those days,” explains Keen, “women in the home tended to be the dispatchers and answered the inquiries, even providing estimates and things like that.” They often kept the books and helped manage their husbands' businesses.

Over time, with the help of the Women’s Auxiliary, their role would transform from support to activism. Working in issues from the environment, sanitation and health and labor, including supporting the Family and Medical Leave Act, the women created a model for social engagement and gained valuable experience lobbying for change over the course of a century.

“They gained business experience and experience working with legislators and lobbying for causes and fundraising,” says Keen, “there are all kinds of ways that they benefited as individuals.”

One of the most notable campaigns was the group’s 1938 partnership with Texaco gas stations to improve the washroom facilities and sanitation. The company even began using its improved bathrooms in its advertising and other companies began following suit. The auxiliary similarly targeted restaurants, food handling stores and grocery stores which sometimes had no sanitary facilities available.

On the 50th anniversary of the organization’s founding, then president Edna Malitz wrote a column for the convention in New Orleans saying, “We have come a long way back to New Orleans—since Chicago, Illinois—28-29-30, 1910—when the “Ladies Committee” consisted of all men.”

Malitz wrote in that year’s report:

*Presidents made their traveling expenses in early years by making and selling chances on handmade quilts that were real masterpieces—until 1947—when yours truly was elected president. Who, not being the quilt making type, graciously was allowed $299 from the treasury. From this gesture expenses of the Executive Board were born into today’s being.*

The materials acquired by the museum include scrapbooks, account and ledger books and the annual proceedings recorded by the historian. One of Keen’s favorite finds was the photographs of people in costume for the conventions. “The conventions had a lot of ceremony and ritual to them,” says Keen. Elaborate industry and company traditions were not uncommon, according to Keen. Many even had songbooks, including the Women’s Auxiliary.

The organization is now part of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors’ National Auxiliary and continues to raise funds for scholarships across the country and engage in social causes.
A scrapbook documenting the history of the Auxiliary includes several pages of past Auxiliary presidents. All images courtesy of the Women’s Auxiliary, National Association of Plumbing, Heating and Cooling Contractors (collection 1304). All photographs courtesy of the Archives Center, American History Museum.

These photos accompanied both versions of the article.

The wife of the PHCC President, Ben Burnette, officially opens the exhibit hall at the 1966 convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Women’s Auxiliary president, Mrs. Murdoch, looks on.

Board members of the Auxiliary presiding at the 1959 convention in Miami.
The Auxiliary’s conventions, including this one in 1960, included entertainment, pageantry and ritual.
Originally called the Women’s Auxiliary-National Association of Master Plumbers—now the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association (PHCC)—National Auxiliary—the organization recently gave some of its archival materials, which document almost a century of women’s history, to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

“This is the Archives Center’s first collection to specifically document the records of a long-standing women’s organization,” Smithsonian curator Cathy Keen said in a statement.

The collection is also the museum’s most thorough documentation of a women’s group, Keen acknowledged in a Smithsonian blog post. “We have collections that relate peripherally to women’s activism but not any one long-standing women’s organization represented in our collection.”

The collection helps document the group’s transition from one focused on social activities to one where women played an active role in supporting plumbing businesses and championing industry issues, such as sanitation.

In one of its most prominent advocacy campaigns in 1938, the auxiliary worked to improve restroom quality and sanitation in gas stations, restaurants, and grocery stores.

“It is an amazing body of history that is unexpected,” said Lynne Finley, the auxiliary’s archive committee chair. The collection “is very concisely documented … . The records show a level of activism that is absolutely unexpected of women in the late ’20s and early ’30s, and it is a documentation of family-owned business and women in America over 93 years. That is a fabulous research opportunity that doesn’t exist currently within the Smithsonian’s collection and is not readily available in any resource that we are aware of.”

Exhibiting this history also benefits PHCC, whose auxiliary is now open to men and women who support the industry.

“It highlights the contributions of the industry to American culture, American health, American safety and environmental issues, the development of our entire sanitary infrastructure,” Finley said, “and a lot of that was the contribution of women in the business, and it is certainly in support of PHCC.”