

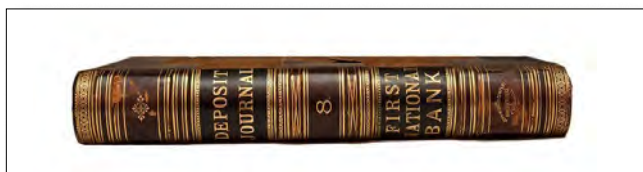
Mixed Media

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Investing in Preservation: My Role as a Corporate Historian at a Family-Owned Bank

By Kirsten Markusic, Centier Bank

The Schrage family is a pioneer family in my hometown of Whiting, Indiana. The family immigrated to Chicago from Hesse, Germany, in the 1840s, but they did not purchase land in the Whiting area until 1863. When Henry Schrage returned from serving as a substitute in the Union Army, he opened his first general store in 1868. He then opened the first post office within that general store in 1871, where his wife, Caroline Wuestendfeldt, worked. After the family sold 50 acres of land to Standard Oil Company in 1889, along with many other German farmers in the area, Schrage used that money to open the Bank of Whiting in 1895 with capital of \$35,000. The total deposits were \$5,698.05.



Deposit Journal 8, First National Bank. Photo by Tim Connolly.

In 1911, the bank moved to its current Whiting location and began its legacy of generational leadership and community involvement. Walter Schrage Sr., a second-generation banker, served as mayor of Whiting from 1914 to 1930 and as the Bank of Whiting president from 1932 to 1941. Wally Schrage, a third-generation banker, became the bank's president in 1941 and oversaw the introduction of new technologies, name changes, and renovations. The bank introduced the first drive-in bank to the area in 1958. It changed its name to First Bank of Whiting in 1960. In 1961, the bank remodeled its primary location and built two new branches in Highland and Dyer, Indiana, over the next 10 years. After Wally passed, his son, Michael, began serving as not only the president but also as chairman of the board. He still fulfills those roles today in the fourth generation of Schrage family leadership.

Under Michael's leadership, the bank changed its name to Centier, an amalgamation of three words:

Century: Celebrating the bank's 100th anniversary in 1995

Center: Founded on Center Street in Whiting

Premier: Striving to be the premier providers of customer service in Northwest Indiana

In 2008, the bank opened the Centier Centre, also known as the Corporate Centre, in Merrillville, Indiana. Centier currently operates 63 retail locations throughout the Northern and Central Indiana regions, employing 850 associates and boasting \$4.8 billion in assets. With the bank's 125th anniversary approaching, it is now on a mission to preserve its more than 170 years of history. To initiate this historic preservation effort, the bank created an internship and contacted local universities with history and library science programs to find students who might be interested in such an opportunity.

I began my journey with Centier Bank in December 2018 after responding to an e-mail forwarded to me by the head of the History Department at my university. The sender of the e-mail inquired whether any students might be interested in organizing, indexing, and cataloging historical data and hard assets. My parents have been banking with Centier for over 20 years. I would soon find out that this bank is one of the reasons my hometown exists, it is why my dad is an oil worker at BP (British Petroleum, formerly Standard Oil), and it is a contributor in making our city home to the Mascot Hall of Fame. I replied to the e-mail, went in for an interview (knowing that I would be starting an MLIS program in August), and went on to accept the position.

While I started as the library science intern in December, I now serve as the bank's corporate historian. In my position, I work in the bank's archives: inventorying items, rehousing materials, and digitizing various object types. Additionally, I answer any reference questions regarding the bank's history and oversee various historical design projects. I also give presentations about the bank at conferences, historical society meetings, and other events.

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And, on top of that, I am responsible for photographing branch grand openings and other special events, such as the brick ceremony that happens annually the week before Labor Day.

I first encountered the bank's history in the "war room." In the early 2000s, a few bank associates tried inventorying all of the items that I am currently working with and eventually ended up storing all of the bank's historical materials there. While the sheer number of items seemed intimidating, it did look manageable. If inventorying and cataloging was what I was there to do, this did look like 6-to-12-month project. However, a comment from a veteran archivist kept playing in my head, "I remember my first 6-to-12-month project. It lasted 3 years." After discussing all of the potential possibilities, the bank liked the idea of having every item digitized, assigned metadata, and made searchable in a database system. And then, very quickly, that veteran archivist's words actualized. Items currently in the war room would not be the only ones I would be working with.



The war room, as Centier Bank calls it, taken December 4, 2018. Photo by Kirsten Markusic.

After a few weeks, members of the maintenance crew delivered boxes upon boxes of photo albums and promotional items they had found in the Corporate Centre. After obtaining scanners, Internet access (which was a challenge while working out of a branch built in 1911), and access to an Omeka subscription, I was ready to dive in. This took about four months, however, so I did not begin digitizing anything until April. In the meantime, I inventoried and sent videos to ScanDigital for digitization and moved from the original war room into a much larger, much redder war room.



The new war room, September 3, 2019. Photo by Kirsten Markusic.

I gained access to an old vault where I keep everything. I even attempt to monitor the temperature and humidity with a \$30 hygrometer despite the shifty Northwest Indiana weather and an old bank infrastructure.



This old vault now stores historical assets, December 20, 2018. Photo by Kirsten Markusic.

As mentioned, I am using Omeka as a content management system, and I have found it to work well with our materials. In September, we switched over to Omeka S from Omeka Classic, and I have found this system to be much more media friendly. I can insert relationships to other items in the CMS. For storage purposes, we uploaded our digitized videos to YouTube, and Omeka S embeds YouTube videos right into the item page. In Omeka Classic, I had to just reference a URL that would then take the user to another web page. I have found Omeka to be a great tool to showcase the bank's history. It is user friendly and relatively inexpensive. Through LibraryHost, we pay around \$1,500 a year for a subscription to the service.

Since April, I have inventoried over 1,000 items and digitized over 800, including photographs, slides, and filmstrips, along with news articles and various correspondence, including a letter from President Bill Clinton congratulating the bank on its 100th anniversary.

I have had the privilege to come across some pretty interesting items, including a steamship ticket wallet from F. Missler, a late nineteenth-century travel agency in Bremen, Germany, and three leather-bound deposit journals from 1890 to 1910. The goal is to rehouse everything and make

all accessible in our Omeka database. The Marketing Department is looking forward to being able to search old marketing materials or employee names by years to obtain pictures for retirement parties. These are just a couple of ways this database will serve its purpose in a corporate environment.



Ticket wallet of the F. Missler travel agency, Bahnhofstrasse 30, Bremen, Germany. Photo by Tim Connolly.

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