

Rhetorical historians and the role of gender and commodification of the past

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Abstract

Rhetorical history is a concept that describes the strategic uses of the past in organizations. To date, this literature has not defined the identities, roles and positions of the producers of such rhetorical histories. Our paper challenges the absence of the “rhetorical historian” through a historical-archival study that introduces the earliest known heritage management firm in the US, HM Baker & Associates (HMBA). The firm was run by two women whose pioneering work in establishing the field has been largely forgotten, despite widespread recognition at the time. HMBA employed variations of common rhetorical history practices and generally worked with mid-size firms as they were unable to be hired by larger corporate clients. Our study identifies the exclusion of female rhetorical historians from the professional markers of success, which led to their firm working predominantly with less well-endowed companies, developing relatively cheap, popular and “crappy” uses of the past. These are rendered invisible in the rhetorical history literature as it elides gender and status of the producers of rhetorical histories in favour of focusing on generalisable processes. We argue that gender is an absent presence in this literature which consistently selects male uses of the past as being of higher value and thus ignores the limited involvement of women as historical producers due to the “crappiness” of their rhetorical histories that we attribute to gender-based exclusion.

Keywords: rhetorical history – rhetorical historians – gender – women – commodification – history

Introduction

The literature on rhetorical history has focused on the strategic uses of the past, and its importance has been demonstrated for the strategic, entrepreneurial and institutional theory literature (Suddaby, Coraiola, Harvey, & Foster, 2020; Suddaby, Foster, & Trank, 2010; Suddaby, Israelsen, Bastien, Saylors, & Coraiola, 2023a; Suddaby, Israelsen, Robert Mitchell, & Lim, 2023b). Yet, to provide strategic accounts of an organization's past, the producers of their rhetorical histories either need to be in a senior position or be enabled by a senior organizational member to provide the rhetorical history. Nevertheless, the rhetorical history literature identifies the strategic nature of these uses of the past as a function of the skilled process by which the past is suitably narrated, and studies of rhetorical histories invariably focus on the process and a close analysis of its results (e.g., Oertel & Thommes, 2015; Poor et al., 2016). In contrast, we argue that the strategic power of any narrative, historical or otherwise, is invariably dependent on the social status of its producer.

This perspective is difficult to appreciate when reading rhetorical history studies, as the individuals behind the production of rhetorical histories are rarely identified. Existing research assumes that they are high-ranking members of an organization, or otherwise individuals with a (semi-)professional status and the explicit endorsement of organizational leaders. These individuals are only rarely named or otherwise identified. By virtue of the settings, industries or time periods, it is often clear that they are usually male. Where individuals are identified, with very few exceptions these are male, and settings are mostly Western, although some studies exist for Japan (another male-dominated business environment). The absence of individuals has been criticised by organizational historians advocating ANTi-microhistory as a means to return individual agency to organization theory

(Deal, 2022; Mills, 2017) and we also draw on historical studies on the exclusion of women historically from the practice of producing history more broadly (Looser, 2000; Smith, 1998).

To illustrate these processes, we analyze the historical case of H. M. Baker Associates (HMBA), a pioneering firm founded in the late 1950s in the US, which operated for about 40 years. They worked with a wide range of companies, mostly small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and are one of the earliest examples of a dedicated heritage and history management firm of which we are aware. Due to the scale and longevity of their operation, and the accessibility of their records in an archive open to the public, HMBA are an excellent historical case to investigate their rhetorical history strategies that were successfully employed across a range of different firms. Whilst the work of external professional organisations such as the History Factory (US), Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte (Germany), Centre for Business History (Sweden) has been acknowledged (Lasewicz, 2015), there has been no significant research into how these organisations establish their professional expertise and create a market for their services. Thus, Bruce Weindruch of the History Factory claimed in his book (Weindruch, 2016) to be a pioneer in the industry, with possibly no knowledge of the significant influence and reach that HMBA had in their day.

Rhetorical history without rhetorical historians

The concept of rhetorical history was introduced to organization studies in an influential article by Suddaby, Foster and Quinn Trank (2010). While rhetorical history is concerned with how the past is used by organizations in the present and for what purposes, it engages relatively little with how the uses of the past are framed by history and heritage management, fields more closely associated with the subject. Public history, for example, has framed the use of the past as a form of consumption (De Groot, 2009), whereas heritage management has viewed it as a form of commodification, beginning with Hewison's (1987) critique of *The*

Heritage Industry as engaging in nostalgic distractions from the failures of the present. This often very negative evaluation of the uses of the past contrasts sharply with the arguments of rhetorical history that understanding the past as a malleable resource returns control to skilful managers (Suddaby et al., 2020, 2023a)

Whether the commodification of the past that makes history more palatable to its consumers always results in ‘dumbing down’ has been challenged in that the combination of entertainment and education need not be mutually exclusive (Armstrong & Coles, 2008). Baillie et al. (2010) highlighted that the vilification of this commodification of heritage has meant that there is a lack of understanding of the process and why it holds such a broad appeal. Nevertheless, that the commodification of heritage has ambiguous outcomes is difficult to dispute. In a recent book on the production, marketing and consumption of cheap stuff in the USA, Woloson (2020) links the production of *crap*, which she defines as not only low priced and poor quality but also as insincere, dishonest, and even cynical, to bowdlerised, nostalgic insensitive and offensive versions of the past. Her argument that commodification is the driving process behind the production of *crap* clearly aligns with criticisms of the commodification of history that portrays a past that never was for cynical and insincere reasons (Hewison, 1987).

However, commodification does not always produce *crap*. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) argued that a central element of the practice of management consultants and other professional services is the commodification of professional knowledge. While some may argue that this commodified management knowledge may indeed be insincere, cynical and poor quality, or at least highly standardised, it would be difficult to consider it low priced (Canato & Giangreco, 2011; Clark & Salaman, 1998; Collins, 2019; Sturdy, 2011; Wright, Sturdy, & Wylie, 2012) – *crap* may be many things, but it is always cheap. Suddaby and Greenwood position this process of commodification as an essential step in the colonization

of knowledge that enhances the professional jurisdiction of professional. Commodification in this context therefore does not only produce value for clients who are willing to pay for it, but also enhances the status of the producers of such commodified knowledge.

Rhetorical history's skilful managers clearly share many attributes with the professional services managers, especially their ability to strategically use their knowledge about the past. Suddaby et al. (2020: 550) do not describe this as a process of commodification, but of as the micro-foundations of dynamic capabilities that enable firms to 'sense, seize and reconfigure around opportunities' by managing the interpretation of the past in the relation to the present and future. The article identifies a new specialised type of consultancy that promotes heritage management services for large corporations, including Weindruch's History Factory (Weindruch, 2016), highlighting that the producers of rhetorical histories may be internal or external to the organization. Beyond this, we know relatively little about who these individuals capable of sensing, seizing and reconfiguring the firm are.

Focusing on the skilfulness of the practitioners of rhetorical histories creates an ideal type of an otherwise invisible producer of rhetorical histories. As a concept developed from the historiographic engagement with key historical contributions such as Anderson's (1993) *Imagined Communities*, and even more centrally, Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) *Invention of Tradition*, this implicit focus on heroic individuals and their skilful use of rhetorical conventions. However, such an argument essentially follows the same logic as the so-called 'great man theory' of history (Carlyle, 1887), in which societal developments are largely ascribed to the actions of skilled individuals, who were invariably elite white men. Hobsbawm in particular was a historian who championed a different type of history, challenging existing 'grand narratives' and views of the past driven by the perspectives of elites (Arnold, Hilton, & Rüger, 2017).

Historians have long been mindful of the need to consider *who* is deemed eligible to talk authoritatively about the past (and, by extension, who is not). For instance, much has been written about how the ‘professionalisation’ of the discipline of history during the nineteenth century was fundamentally a masculine project that simultaneously validated men’s expertise and restricted women’s chances for engaging in historical research, consigning them instead to the role of amateurs or assistants to their husbands, fathers and other male relatives (Looser, 2000; Smith, 1998). Historians such as Garritzen (2021) have shown that there was scope for women historians to circumvent and challenge these patriarchal boundaries, such efforts would often involve parroting or assimilating attributes of the imagined male authoritative self.

However, the literature on rhetorical history in organization studies has remained largely uninterested in the producers of rhetorical histories. While they may be mentioned, their background and identity are rarely central to the analysis. This absence of the individual in organization and management studies has been criticised by management historians, especially from the ANTi-history perspective (Deal, 2022; Mills, 2017). We conceptualize these individuals as *rhetorical historians*, and define them as the producers of rhetorical histories, irrespective of formats: textual histories, speeches, interviews, advertising, museums, events and celebrations, or new product launches have all been considered forms of using the past and linked to rhetorical history (Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Nissley & Casey, 2002; Pirani, 2024; Ravasi, Rindova, & Stigliani, 2019; Suddaby et al., 2023a).

Reviewing the rhetorical history literature

To gain greater clarity on who has been identified as *rhetorical* historians, we surveyed the literature. We conducted a search on SCOPUS with the keyword ‘rhetorical histor*’ and added any further articles that we were aware that were not returned by this search. We are aware of a wider range of articles using a similar framing of ‘uses of the past’ on which we

draw throughout the article, but we limit our review to articles explicitly employing the concept of ‘rhetorical history’ for clarity. Subsequently we reviewed the items to establish in how far individuals are identified in rhetorical history studies, and how much information on their background and characteristics are provided. After an initial survey, we split the articles into groups: conceptual and empirical articles. Table 1 presents an overview of the gender balance and the degree of clarity in the articles.

Insert Table 1 about here

Out of 34 articles, 16 gave no indication as to the gender of rhetorical historians. This was, unsurprisingly, especially the case for conceptual articles (8 out of 9). The next largest group was male (male, majority male, and assumed male) with 15 contributions, 2 articles could be reasonably assumed that a mixed gender group were involved in rhetorical histories, and only one article explicitly named women as the rhetorical historians (Ge, De Massis, & Kotlar, 2022).

Conceptual articles were not only unlikely to comment on individuals but also tended to identify the expected rhetorical historians by function, rather than by any personal characteristics. Issues such as gender and background were therefore mostly completely elided, apart from Suddaby et al. (2023b) which predominantly quotes statements by male entrepreneurs. The only exceptions to this are one company (Etsy.com) and one woman, whose quotation is noticeably shorter than the lengthy quotations chosen for men (see Appendix 1).

We repeated this analysis for the empirical articles (see Appendix 2) which similarly provided often little to no information on the rhetorical historian. More historically oriented publications were more likely to include named protagonists, reflecting disciplinary standards of transparency and specificity as opposed to anonymisation requirements in present-day research settings. However, there are notable exceptions to this, such as Ge et al.’s (2022)

named female entrepreneurs. While empirical articles were more likely to explicitly feature non-US settings (especially Japan), they were similarly dominated by male rhetorical historians where identified. Many (historical) business settings were clearly heavily male-dominated environments, and we indicated where we assumed rhetorical historians were most likely male (see Appendix 2). Much like the conceptual articles, background and gender were not analysed or questioned, with the focus remaining on the rhetorical histories being produced with their producers omitted.

As already discussed, historical research has questioned who gets to write histories and how this influences the content of histories has been widely discussed (Garritzen, 2021). Similarly, organization scholars frequently rehearse arguments about the organizational control of archives (Rojas, 2010; Strati, 2000), and that histories are written by the powerful. However, this critical approach does not extend to the analysis of corporate producers of rhetorical histories, but rather the process of production and an analysis of their content (Foster, Coraiola, Suddaby, Kroezen, & Chandler, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Including named individuals and their specific backgrounds would be messy in this context and limit the generalisability of cases, making theorization more difficult. However, this type of theorizing obscures the power relations that enable or obstruct individuals from becoming, or being acknowledged as, *rhetorical historians*.

This is not an issue unique to the rhetorical history debate. In organization theory, it has long been acknowledged that ignoring gender considerations in favour of seemingly ‘neutral’ abstractions often only leads to ‘gender-absent’ assumptions about organizational phenomena that simply reproduce ‘malestream organization theories’ (Bendl, 2008; Hearn & Parkin, 1983). Fotaki (2013) meanwhile, has persuasively shown how women are — intentionally or unintentionally — regularly positioned as the ‘Other’ within organization

studies, whilst McCarthy and Taylor (2024) have demonstrated how reacting against this exclusion often incurs penalties in the form of misogynist treatment.

Historical research can be helpful in challenging these theoretical limitations in that it provides more contextual knowledge that enables scholars to surface issues of power and exclusion in organizations. We argue that our lens on *rhetorical historians* is important, otherwise research on rhetorical history reproduces power relations by accepting whose activities in and beyond organizations is worthy of investigation (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009; Fleming & Spicer, 2014). This is at least partly the result of the practice of legitimizing knowledge creation through theorization that elides individuals and their idiosyncrasies in pursuit of generalization (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Cornelissen, Höllerer, & Seidl, 2021).

In summary, the *rhetorical historian* is obscured and elided in current research on the uses of the past. Through our analysis of the literature, we established that the absent-present figure of the *rhetorical historian* is male, predominantly white, and often either of high social standing and wealth, or following a masculine challenger role. Alongside this, we find a lack of articulation and engagement with the relatively consistent pattern of either eliding the personal characteristics of rhetorical historians or the lack of analysis of the dominant male-gendered nature of the producers of rhetorical histories. This may be the result of the nature of theorizing in organization studies, which removes the individual from the analysis in service to generalizability. However, this obscures that the practice of rhetorical history is fundamentally shaped by the heroic masculine business attitudes as well as the associated knowledge production processes in contemporary business studies which assume a universal and gender-neutral attitude.

Methodology

In our study we have followed a problematization approach (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) by

interrogating the literature on rhetorical history and highlighting its gender-blind approach. We seek to address this by developing the concept of the absent-present *rhetorical historian*, who is assumed to be there but rarely explicitly discussed. Our case study is a US company which is one of the earliest known cases of promoting rhetorical history services to other companies, led by a pair of female *rhetorical historians* who have been largely forgotten and whose pioneering role as corporate history consultants has been erased from professional memory. Our data collection and analysis focus both on their personal histories and their rhetorical history practices. We highlight how exclusion shaped their business at the time, and whether their rhetorical history practices allow us to elaborate how gender shapes rhetorical histories and historians.

The data for the article was collected from the Helen Baker Cushman Collection, 1933–1984, and the Helen Baker Cushman Business Papers, 1953–1992, both of which are held in Hagley Library, Wilmington, DE. For a list of documents consulted and used in this paper, see Appendix 3 – almost all in-text references in the main section refer to archival documents. Contained within the collections are research files compiled by Cushman and her associates, newspaper clippings, letters and other correspondence with organizations, drafts of publicity material, and other promotional literature. Taken together, these collections provide detailed insights not only into the history-related publicity and consultancy work that the firm conducted, but also the barriers and obstacles they encountered.

We draw on critical source interpretation (Decker, 2022; Kipping, Wadhwani, & Bucheli, 2014) to reconstruct how HMBA worked with clients and how they promoted their services in the trade press. As we are not trying to recount the complete history of the firm, our approach remains analytically structured (Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014) and oriented towards the requirements of contributing to organization theory. We seek analytical rigour by attending carefully to dual integrity, which is the theoretical fluency expected in management

research and the standards of historical specificity and accuracy (Maclean et al., 2016). Consequently, the second author focused on ensuring empirical depth and the first author developed the theoretical framing. In each round, both reviewed, challenged and suggested alternative concepts or different sources to iteratively refine our analysis. Next, the second author developed an initial account of the activities of HMBA based on the archival sources collected. Both authors reviewed this account and developed several conceptual frameworks for interpretation, which were applied in a process of abductive reasoning to the historical sources to generate new plausible theory (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

By cycling through the data and the interpretations in this way, we focussed on how HMBA provided clients with a usable past, but also on the way they were rebuffed by high-value clients, and how they were presented in the national press when interviewed. In the next stage, each author separately coded archival sources. These first-order codes were reviewed and consolidated by the first author. In the next stage, the first author focused on axial coding, which was reviewed by the second author for empirical rigour and alternative theoretical explanations in another abductive iteration. From this recursive process, the second-order themes and aggregate dimensions were developed (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Whilst our data presentation follows the so-called Gioia Method (Gioia et al., 2013) because of its clarity in demonstrating the link between the data and the interpretation, our second-order themes and aggregate dimensions reflect our abductive approach of repeatedly cycling between the data and the emerging theoretical framework. Our interpretation is shaped, by our knowledge of the literature, which also influenced our selection and presentation of the case, and we acknowledge this by explicitly describing our abductive analytical practice

(Augustine & Piazza, 2022), but also by our critical approach sensitised to the absence of gender as a significant category in the literature we reviewed and the obvious omission of an early historical case of professional rhetorical historians suppressed from collective professional memory. To draw out this history of exclusion, and its significant influence on what uses of the past were possible for two women in mid-century corporate America, we include a biographical narrative of both women, their background and upbringing, and their approach to their business, in the analysis. Rather than considering this as just context, we argue that these factors tied directly to the individual rhetorical historians significantly influence what kind of access and opportunities they had, not least because their access to clients was limited to medium-sized firms with no professional historian or archive. We also consider in how far their strategic uses to the past differ from strategies already discussed in the literature.

Commodifying the Past

Etna Kelley and Helen Baker Cushman, the two key figures in the firm of HM Baker Associates, worked extensively with highly value-conscious customers, and this led to a clearly standardised approach in which their knowledge of using the past was commodified. Highlighting how they could generate value for clients was an essential element, and their approaches to larger firms with bigger budgets were rebuffed. As women in mid-century corporate America, their legitimacy and access was clearly limited, and therefore their background and experience of gender-based exclusion form an important part of our analysis. The first section provides a historical narrative of their personal and professional history, before we consider the key elements of their approach to using the past. This focused on the value proposition, connecting firms' pasts to the national history, employing elements of performance and entertainment, and a clear focus on emotionally engaging of the audience.

Women as Rhetorical Historians

Kelley and Cushman worked in a (white) male-dominated environment. The field of history was similarly at the time, whether in academia or in archival or historical roles within private or public organizations (Doe, 2016). Whilst some US colleges did admit women during the nineteenth century, the majority of Ivy League Schools did not admit women students until the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, as late as 1994, the share of women receiving degrees in history in the USA was still just 36.4% (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, n.d.). As historians such as Smith (1998) have shown, this dominance of the white male voice was evident not just in terms of who was able to speak about the past, but also with respect to what sorts of history were deemed appropriate to focus on. The result was that male historians in universities and other seats of higher education claimed to be searching for genderless ‘universal truth’; however, in reality this simply prioritized men's history over women's, white history over non-white, and the political history of Western governments over any other (Smith, 1998).

It was against this context that Cushman and Kelley sought to establish themselves. Etna M. Kelley was born in 1904 and raised in Louisiana in a working-class household (her father had been a railroad laborer). Kelley had moved to New York in the 1920s to take up a secretarial position with the Federal Commission (n.a., 1933). Despite a lack of opportunities to engage in higher education, she appears to have been a highly educated individual and there are various reports of her winning regional ‘spelling bee competitions’ during the 1930s.¹ In addition, she also began to write various short features and articles for publications like *Fortune*, mostly about the marketing strategies employed by Disney at this time (...). Significantly, these feature articles were also written under a male pseudonym - highlighting yet further the obstacles and barriers that women writers had to overcome during this period.

¹ ‘School teacher is winner in big spelling matches of tongue twisting words’, *The Evening Independent* (St Petersburg, Florida) (28th Nov, 1933), p. 1.

Beginning in the 1940s, she began compiling lists of founding dates of American businesses as a pastime, collecting her data from a wide range of sources, including: the Chambers of Commerce, company magazines, local newspapers, industrial registers and contacting organizations directly. She later developed this into a regular publication on corporate anniversaries entitled *The Business Founding Date Directory*. Updated annually, this publication provided alphabetical listings of over 7,000 American businesses, giving names, addresses, types of business, and year of founding. It also included summaries of significant historical events that occurred in different years, along with birth dates of inventors and other prominent business figures.

It was also during this postwar period that Kelley became acquainted with Helen Baker Cushman - a fellow (amateur) historian with an interest in business history. Born in New Jersey in 1922, Cushman was the daughter of former Westinghouse Vice-President Ivan F. Baker. Though she did not have the opportunity to study history at university (like many women of this era, she instead took an advanced secretarial qualification) she was nonetheless passionate about history and was an active member of the New Jersey Chapter of the American Records Management Association, the Society of American Archivists, the Manuscript Society, the New Jersey Historical Society, the Newcomen Society, and the American Historical Association.

In conjunction with Kelley, she established the firm of H. M. Baker Associates (HMBA) in Westfield, New Jersey, in 1958. Positioned as consultants in business archives and records, they provided a range of services to help business clients utilize the past, including: the preparation of written business histories, advice and assistance in terms of establishing and managing corporate archives, and record-searching assistance. By far their biggest and most profitable strand of work, however, was working with companies to help them celebrate significant anniversaries in their existence (e.g., 10-year anniversary, 50-year

anniversary). In addition, they also assisted and provided advice with respect to the organization and planning of other anniversary events, as well as collaborating on several book-length company histories and serving as consultants in the initial setting up of in-house corporate archives. Baker Cushman did historical consultancy work for over 360 American businesses during her long career from 1958 to her retirement in 1993.

Given their marginalized status in the wider field of professional history at this time, both Cushman and Kelley sought to distinguish themselves from other professional archivists and academically trained historians, and public relations specialists. Instead, they consciously sought to promote and push forward a softer and more specialized approach to corporate historical work, presenting themselves to potential clients as either ‘anniversary specialists’ or ‘specialists in the preparation of company histories’ (Cushman, 1972). Indeed, even when she wrote articles in publications by the Society of American Archivists, Cushman still referred to herself as ‘a pioneer and specialist in the management of historical business records’ (rather than an ‘archivist’) (Cushman, 1977). HMBA became a recognizable name in heritage and history management; indeed, one of its leading women, Etna Kelley, was dubbed ‘the birthday lady’, by the *New York Times* (Dougherty, 1973: 73): ‘The birthday lady of American business is Etna M. Kelley, birdlike and grey haired, constantly on the search for founding dates of corporations but very hush hush about her own.’

As the above quotations indicate, informing these efforts at differentiation was a more ‘feminized’ approach to corporate rhetorical history; one that rejected the hard ‘scientific’ skills of the professional (male) historian or archivist and instead promoted the virtues of using the past to engage with people and cultivate emotions. To promote this alternative approach, they pushed the idea that working with a corporate archive required completely different skills and experience from those needed to work with other archives, suggesting that conventional archivists and ‘traditional’ historians did not have the ‘insight’ needed to

navigate this material (Cushman, 1970a). Indeed, Cushman actually recommended that companies should avoid hiring an in-house company archivist as they would likely struggle to work in ‘unpredictable conditions of acceptance and understanding’ (Cushman, 1970b). Instead, Cushman recommended that businesses should instead look to bring in someone who was able to both ‘appraise and arrange the [historic records] to make the most of their value’ and ‘coordinate closely with the work of the promotion department’ (Cushman, 1972).

As the archival records make clear, both Cushman and Kelley did make efforts to reach out and offer their services to larger companies. For instance, in 1977, Kelley wrote to the Director of PR at Ford Motors, outlining the services that HMBA offered and suggesting some ideas for how they might work together to commemorate the firm’s 75th anniversary. The terse response she received — ‘we have had a taskforce working on our own Anniversary since September of 1976 and I do not frankly feel that we want to share our plans and our own ideas with the world at large at this point in time’ (Ford Motor Company, 1977) — speaks to the barriers that HMBA faced in this market and helps to illustrate why they invariably tended to work with smaller businesses that did not have the internal capacity to leverage or commodify their own pasts.

Delivering Value

Making businesses aware of their own pasts was the first step in HMBA’s business model, they also had to convince prospective clients that they could help *imbue value and meaning into that past*. Given the relative novelty of the service they were offering, one of the biggest initial challenges facing HMBA was simply making prospective clients aware that they had pasts that could function as valuable assets. To combat this lack of awareness about the commercial value of the past, Kelley compiled the Business Founding Date Directory, first published in 1954 and updated frequently thereafter (see Figure 6). Published by Morgan & Morgan and priced at \$10

per copy, it provided details of the founding dates of over 9,000 American companies, listed alphabetically, along with addresses, type of business, and any other notable facts. In addition, it also contained contact details for a range of suppliers and services relevant to any company looking to celebrate an anniversary (e.g., publishers, souvenir manufacturers, printers, etc.) (Morgan and Morgan, 1955).

Insert Figure 2 about here

The next step was to work with prospective clients to help them more fully articulate the wider significance of their company, including ‘the part that the firm has played in the development of the industry and the service it has rendered to the community and to the public at large’ (Kelley, 1955). Typically, they would do this by carrying out the relevant contextual historical research on behalf of the firm and then presenting them with the findings. For instance, in 1978, Kelly provided GE’s Director of PR with a selection of old General Electric adverts that she had found that, in her opinion, helped to illustrate ‘the firm’s contributions to the American way of life’ (Kelley, 1978a). Moreover, they also claimed that even if ‘little was known specifically of a company’s early history’, they still had the required expertise to build up an image of ‘what a company must have been like in its early days’ through researching the industry the company was in and the local area at the time of its founding (Kelley, 1955).

Given that they were ultimately seeking to convince business executives of the merits of engaging with the past, Cushman and her associates put a lot of emphasis on the commercial merits of holding commemorative events. This notion of *monetizing the past* — or ‘cash[ing] in on the company’s history’ (Kelley, 1959) — was a recurring theme in almost all of their publicity material and in their correspondence with prospective clients, emphasising how a well-planned anniversary celebration could ‘pay for itself many times over’ (HMBA, 1975). They also provided prospective clients with quotes and figures from other companies that they

had previously worked with to highlight the *commercial benefits of an anniversary celebration*. For instance, in their ‘Anniversary Manual’ they provided a detailed breakdown of how one of their former clients, Montgomery Ward, had enjoyed 3.7% operating profit during their anniversary year along with a quote from their president claiming that the anniversary celebrations had brought about ‘a resurgence of consumer confidence’ (HMBA, 1975).

Reflecting the fact that a lot of their work was with smaller firms that did not necessarily have huge amounts of resources to devote to an anniversary celebration, Cushman and her associates also provided clients with a lot of advice on how to make the most of a limited anniversary budget. For instance, in one piece titled ‘How to squeeze every ounce of benefit out of an anniversary’, Kelley provided prospective clients with a range of practical budgeting tips, such as arranging ‘tie-ins’ with other partners, getting former staff to volunteer, and developing close ties with local media outlets (Kelley, 1956). Likewise, when promoting their own services to prospective clients, HMBA were also mindful of emphasising the economic benefits of using print to commemorate an anniversary, claiming that ‘dollar for dollar, the investment pays excellent dividends’ (Kelley, 1978b). Moreover, they also provided practical tips on how companies could reduce printing expenses, such as getting external publishing companies to underwrite printing costs, as well as offering suggestions for a range of cheaper print alternatives to publishing a full-length history of the firm (such as calendars, programs, catalogues, etc.) (Kelley, 1978b).

Embedding in Collective Memory

HMBA focused consistently on relating their client’s past to historic events of national importance. As Cushman explained to prospective clients, the chief advantage of *embedding a company’s history within national history* in this way was that it increased the emotive value of any firm’s past by linking it to collective memories that held wider sentimental value: ‘the date a company is founded is always a promotional tool; any given year calls up a whole picture

story of inventions, fashion, theatre, song, and politics: an image of the world into which a business firm came into existence' (Cushman, 1977). This was particularly evident in the 'Remember the Year' publications that HMBA produced (see Figure 3). Not only did these documents embed details about the formation of the company alongside details of key (predominantly US) political, social, and cultural events that had taken place in the same year, they also juxtaposed photographs from the firm's history alongside photographs of memorable moments, events, or people from that year (Cushman, 1959a). Thus, through these standardised processes, HMBA were able to produce a document that not only 'impressed' the reader about the 'sponsoring firm's achievements' (Cushman, 1959b), but helped to ensure that past and present, as well as corporate and national history, were effectively combined.

Insert Figure 3 about here

HMBA advocated with their clients to further commodify their past through the *creation of collectibles and gifts*. Typical gifts that their clients produced included things such as matchbooks, stationery, lapel badges, scrolls, and other desk equipment. Often, these would be branded with the company logo, or, better still, the anniversary emblem, to link the firm to the object and provide an 'enduring reminder' of its longevity that pointed both forward and backward in time (Kelley, 1957). Backward, because it marked the anniversary, forward because it suggested that the firm would remain something to be remembered.

The audience for these collectibles differed between companies. Sometimes these gifts would be given out to customers to try and promote brand loyalty, other times they would be shared amongst employees to encourage 'pride in the stability and longevity of their firms' (Kelley, 1957). Occasionally, HMBA would also work with the firm to draw-up personalised gift-giving strategies, as was the case with B. F. Gladding & Co., NY, a fishing tackle maker that presented 70 custom-made clocks (the dials featured game fish instead of numerals) to the 70 customers that had been on the company's books the longest. Producing and distributing

limited-run gifts and collectibles in this fashion would not only help to foster goodwill amongst customers, HMBA argued, it would also help to further embed the organization within the national historical consciousness as these items subsequently often became ‘collectors’ items’ for those interested in US history and ‘Business Americana’ (Kelley, 1957, 1979). They also produced corporate histories, which fulfilled a similar function, but with a greater focus on prestige and status.

Performance for Entertainment

In addition to working with clients to help them narrate their own histories, HMBA also offered advice on how to get ‘employees (both former and present) to become more involved in the celebrations’ (Kelley, 1978a). One reason why this employee engagement was considered so key was because many of the companies that HMBA worked with — typically, regional SMEs — had far fewer established memory resources (e.g., in-house archives, alumni groups) to draw upon than larger and more-established corporations. As such, they relied far more upon former employees to ‘dig out [old] odds and ends’ (such as posters, placards, uniforms, etc.) that could help ‘add sparkle to a company anniversary’ (Cushman, 1982). To encourage this sort of employee engagement, HMBA advised its clients to ‘put out feelers early’ amongst former employees to encourage them to come forward and share and reminisce about their memories of working at the company (Kelley, 1981). They also offered practical tips for *engaging and enrolling organizational members*, including hosting in-house parties, distributing newsletters with updates on the anniversary celebrations, launching competitions specifically for employees (e.g. designing a logo), and giving special recognition to long-term employees (current and former) (Kelley, 1959).

According to HMBA, another advantage of getting employees more involved in corporate memory work was that it — quite literally — helped ‘bring to live’ any subsequent commemorative celebrations through *historical reenactment*. One of the most commonly used

strategies to commodify the past in this way was to get employees to dress up in period costume from the time of the company's founding. This was the approach that HMBA used in their work with the Hergot National Bank of Pekin, Illinois, where all the bank's employees attended work for one week in costume dress from the year 1905 to mark the firm's 60th anniversary (Kelley, 1965). On other occasions, HMBA would advise their clients to organize pageants or plays revolving around key episodes in the organizations' history.

Engaging Emotions

Another core strand of HMBA's work was to advise and support clients on how to use symbols and symbolic resources to give meaning and engage emotions their anniversary celebrations. One prominent strategy they used in this respect was to encourage clients to use birthday cakes as 'symbols' for their 'corporate anniversary observances' (Kelley, 1966) (see Figure 4). More specifically, they suggested that firms should design the cake in such a way that it would 'symbolize [something about] the company or its industry,' suggesting a 'company trademark, product, building, or package' as potential options (Kelley, 1980). In addition, they also pushed for clients to invest the cake-cutting ceremony with symbolic value, pointing to the example of how one hardware manufacturer client had used a power chain saw to cut their cake (Kelley, 1966). Aside from the use of birthday cakes, HMBA also stressed the importance of the anniversary emblem, advising that 'the more meaningful [it is] the better the story you can tell in promoting the milestone it commemorates' (Kelley, 1956). In particular, they stressed the importance of picking symbols and shapes that related to the firm or industry, as well as the merit in using metallic colours so as to help convey 'prestige.' As birthdays mark the passing of time and the number of candles represent age, these were important tools in *underscoring the longevity of these firms.*

Insert Figure 4 about here

To further encourage emotional engagement with the firm, HMBA would also work with their clients to find ways to *humanize the process of time passing*. For instance, in their work with the Philadelphia Electric Co, they recommended marking the anniversary of the creation of the firm's symbol (a cartoon character with lightning-bolt arms and limbs and a light-bulb nose) over the founding of the actual company on the basis that this would have more emotive resonance with customers (Cushman, 1984). Similarly, for Ivory Soap's anniversary, the commemorative campaign centred around the infantile figure of the 'Ivory baby' that had been used in the company's adverts over the years (see Figure 5). By linking corporate symbols to human rites related to the passage of time – birthdays, babies, longevity – these practices humanized organization and engaged the emotions of participants and audiences.

Insert Figure 5 about here

Discussion and Conclusion

HMBA's archival records demonstrate that Baker and Kelley employed a variety of strategic uses of the past, and their business model commodified their skills into repeatable rhetorical history outputs (Remember the Year booklets, gifts and memorabilia, anniversary celebrations, PR and advertising opportunities). This commodification was clearly linked to strategic outcomes for their clients: enhancing recognition, customer loyalty and retention, enhancing revenues. As they are the earliest evidenced firm of professional history consultants, we analyzed their approaches to creating rhetorical history, specifically embedding in collective memory, performance and entertainment, and engaging emotions.

HMBA's consistent approach to corporate pamphlets, PR and advertising focused on linking company's history to national historical events, mostly via dates and Remember the

Year approaches, but also by emphasizing the contribution of firms to national achievements. Rhetorical history research has highlighted this as a key strategy of embedding in a wider historical framework. Mordhorst (2014), for example, showed how Arla carefully balanced two different national identities in its uses of the past, while the involvement of other nations in a national defense company needed to be effectively repressed (Anteby & Molnár, 2012).

Performance and entertainment have not been researched as frequently in rhetorical history, which generally preferences narratives and linguistic data. HMBA's strategy to engage people to actively contribute their memories to the organization, join commemorative events and celebrations, taps into both personal and national rituals (Dacin et al., 2010). In the wider literature on memory studies, these embodied forms of memorialization have been conceptualized further (Connerton, 1989). Our study identifies a wider range of such practices, including celebrations, rituals like cake cutting, and the creation of branded organizational collectibles positioned as future historical artifacts. Such material-discursive practices (Orlikowski & Scott, 2015) have been identified for design and retro-branding, for example in the case of Carlsberg (Hatch & Schultz, 2017) or in the conscious use of idealized historical figures (Fernández-Roca & López-Manjón, 2022).

The explicit focus of HMBA's strategies to engage emotions is perhaps less commonly discussed, nevertheless many elements central to rhetorical histories, such as the focus on founders (Basque & Langley, 2018) and the attachment to past practice and ways of doing things (Ybema, 2014) are clearly anchored in emotional responses. Nevertheless, many key conceptual pieces in rhetorical history highlight the intellectual and functional aspects of these corporate practices (Suddaby et al., 2020, 2023a) as opposed to the feelings they are intended to elicit. However, the tropes employed by HMBA are not novel or unexpected. Babies and birthday cakes serve to symbolize age and the passage of time, as does the use of historical costumes in festivities, providing an organization with a temporal depth. Lowenthal (1985)

referred to this as desirability of ‘antiquity’; that the passage of time itself grants status and legitimacy. Symbolically referencing the passage of time plays into cultural notions that what is old is valuable and may be worthy of reverence, which is valued even more highly in non-Western contexts (Sasaki, Kotlar, Ravasi, & Vaara, 2020; Zerubavel, 2003). Thus, while the specific visual elements employed (babies, birthday cakes etc.) were very personal and emotionally loaded, the aim of signaling temporal depth through the passage of time, which was further reinforced by costumes and reenactment, point to universal uses of the past also employed by companies.

Cushman and Kelley also positioned themselves through the rhetorical strategy of eliciting emotions as uniquely qualified to aid companies seeking to use their history through corporate anniversary celebrations. They consciously positioned themselves as being neither archivists nor PR professionals, but as ‘historical experts’ who could work at the intersection of these professions. Archivists and PR professionals were overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, male at the time they were active, and through the uniquely female-gendered domains of planning celebrations and managing emotion, HMBA could effectively position themselves. There is clear evidence in their archives of their exclusion from business opportunities: using a male pseudonym for a journalistic piece, or the piece about Kelley in the *New York Times* referring to her in patronizing terms as ‘the birthday lady’. When approaching larger, nationally recognizable corporations such as General Electric, they were rebuffed in dismissive terms with a reference to their in-house specialists.

Consequently, HMBA’s clients were mostly SMEs and unlikely to employ their own archivist or PR professional. HMBA effectively created a new type of offering at the intersection of two professions, which particularly appealed to the kind of organization that previously could neither afford, nor had the inclination to maintain, its own historical resources. Here, the focus on *delivering value* to clients with limited resources emerges as a central aspect

to HMBA's practice, and a key driver of their commodified approach to the past. It emerges as central to the niche they carved out for themselves, and it is clear from their records that while they were capable of working on more high-end and bespoke projects (such as the angler's clocks for the longest-standing customers), their gender and lack of professional status excluded them from these opportunities.

Whilst we could argue that the practices of *embedding in collective memory, providing performance and entertainment, engaging emotions* and *delivering value* ultimately led to the commodification of knowledge of how best to use the corporate past strategically, clearly in HMBA's case this also led to commodified rhetorical history outputs. Remember the Year pamphlets, babies and birthday cakes, branded memorabilia, costumes, reenactments and corporate anniversary celebrations all correspond to what Woloson (2020) defines as 'crappy'. They do not appear to share many features with the practices highlighted in the rhetorical history literature, such as the historical relevance of entrepreneurial mission statements (Suddaby et al., 2023b), enhancing strategic dynamic capabilities (Suddaby et al., 2020), authentic uses of historical legacies (Hatch & Schultz, 2017) or honoring or revering the past through craft practices (Kroezen & Heugens, 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020). Nevertheless, HMBA's practices are hardly fundamentally distinct and more a question of emphasis – even product launches for simple staples as branded yoghurts have been shown to reference past national craft practices (Hernes, Feddersen, & Schultz, 2021); managing collective remembering and forgetting may be through managerial narratives (Suddaby et al., 2020) as much as through collective celebrations that highlight desirable and suppress less suitable versions of a company's past.

What differentiates HMBA's crappy rhetorical histories from more high value, high status rhetorical histories are fundamentally access and opportunity. For two women in mid-century US business, these were notably limited. Therefore, their commodification strategies

were value-conscious, highly scalable and oriented towards performance and emotional displays, reflecting their limited access to high value clients, and their need to justify their services and suitability on account of their gender. Consequently, we do not reduce our analysis to their practices, but our framework (see figure 6) includes their background and their experience of exclusion to highlight that the niche they could occupy at the time limited their access and opportunity to grander, more strategic uses of past that are possible with access to the C-suite of major corporations.

Insert Figure 6 about here

Our model therefore includes the rhetorical historian as an individual who is constrained and enabled by their background and status in terms of how they can use the past. The outcome of this process of rhetorical history is always a commodified knowledge of the past that can be used strategically, but this will take radically different forms for high as opposed to low status rhetorical historians: *delivering value* leads to different choices and opportunities in resource-rich vs. resource-poor settings; *embedding in collective memory* may be through the dedication of buildings, sponsoring of educational institutions and corporate histories, or through pamphlets and collectibles; *performance and engagement* may be through museums, exhibitions and artwork, or through costumes and reenactment; finally, *engaging emotions* may be subtle and intellectual through inventing transitions or traditions, or obvious through imagery and references to the past and the passage of time. Our model of how the past is commodified and used strategically therefore contributes a different approach to rhetorical history by including the social position of the *rhetorical historian* as a central element to any discussion of how the past **can** be used.

The concept of the *rhetorical historian* highlights that the literature has overly focused on the process of using the past as well as the alleged skill of strategic managers as determinants. By bringing the individual back into the rhetorical history literature, our study

shifts the focus towards processes of exclusions – minorities, gender, lower social class – as explanations for the relative scarcity of rhetorical history studies in non-Western, less industrialized settings, and we highlight the almost total absence of women as recognizable corporate actors when it comes to leveraging an organization's past. The extremely white, male and Western (and to a lesser extent, Japanese) orientation of rhetorical history studies raises issues of power and in how far future research in rhetorical history should engage with questions of how organizational power is leveraged through the use of the past – something that precursor studies to the development of the rhetorical history concept explicitly addressed (Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993; Ybema, 2014).

The absence of women and minorities, and indeed the individual more generally, which underscores the perceived irrelevance of the *rhetorical historian* as a meaningful actor in the production of the past also mirrors the exclusion of women and minorities from the writing of histories more broadly – ironically a subject of significant scholarly interest in the field the history, which has for decades self-critically engaged with notion of 'grand narratives' produced by white male historians. Not only do we point out the similarities in the way that Cushman and Kelley had to position themselves as female history professionals (or 'birthday ladies'), but our study also problematizes why there is no research into the individuals creating rhetorical histories in general, and into the absence of female actors, or non-Western ones. (While there are a small number of studies into Japanese businesses, it is worth noting that this has always been a very male-gendered environment.)

Our model contributes a better understanding as to why this is the case: only high-status powerful individuals produce uses of the past deemed worthy of researching by organizational scholars. Other, low-status marginal uses of the past are deemed too 'crappy' for further investigation, due to their cheap, commodified, overly emotive, populist and entertainment-focused nature. As organizational research on misogyny has highlighted, challenging or

criticizing the practices that exclude women is certain to elicit a backlash and women need to conform to roles and stereotypes in terms of the work they perform and the work identities they can inhabit. The final contribution of our study is that we demonstrate that the exclusion of women from rhetorical history is occurring at two levels: first, by ignoring the work of women involved in using the past by excluding their rhetorical histories on account of being ‘crappy’, and second, by not considering the issue of gender through eliding the role and background of individuals in the production of rhetorical histories in general to reinforce the unstated assumption that organizational practices and processes are gender-neutral spaces and that the individuals involved should remain anonymous and de-gendered. By including historical research practices into organizational analysis, such as clearly identifying individuals and considering both their individual biographies and their historical context through archival research, we extend the analytical depth of existing scholarship in the field of rhetorical history.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Data Structure

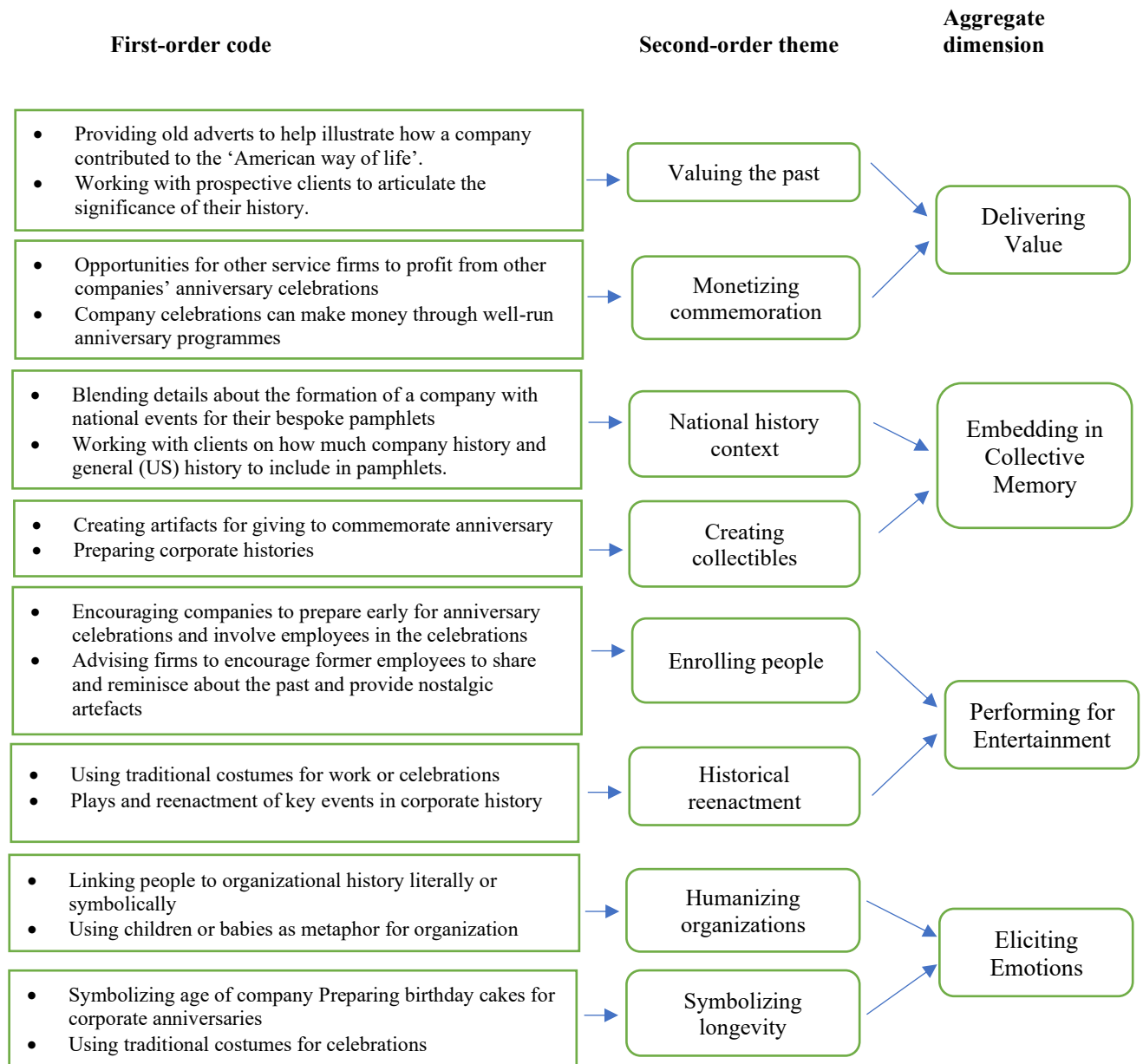


Figure 2: Advertisements for The Business Founding Date Directory
(Morgan and Morgan, 1955)

THE BUSINESS FOUNDING DATE DIRECTORY by Etna M. Kelley <i>A new kind of directory...listing thousands of business firms and giving their founding dates</i> It's Always Anniversary Time	YOUR INVESTMENT IN THE PURCHASE OF THE BUSINESS FOUNDING DATE DIRECTORY <i>Will Give You ...</i> 1 A stimulating, idea provoking, reference book. A comprehensive source of information in the field of Business Americana. 2 A Grade-A list of prospects for ideas, services and products useful to business organizations celebrating their anniversaries. 3 A mailing list of many of the most stable firms in America, over 90% of them in business 40 years or more. If through purchase of the book, you make just one sale to the anniversary market, you will most likely get back many times your investment: <i>The Business Founding Date Directory</i>, most complete chronology of Business Americana compiled up to the present time. \$10.00 per copy. Listing over 9000 founding dates. MORGAN & MORGAN, Publishers, High Point Road, Scarsdale, N.Y.
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Figure 3: Example of the front cover of a 'Remember the Year' pamphlet
(HMBA, 1989)



4152 WEST 123rd STREET • CHICAGO (ALSO), ILLINOIS 60655-1569
Chicago: (312) 928-9000 • Suburban Chicago: (312) 388-9800
Outside Illinois: 800-223-7055 • FAX: 312-388-9312

40th
Anniversary
1949 - 1989

Remember The Year

1949 was a special year. It was the year Admiral Steel Corporation was founded.

Remember the year for the first round-the-world airplane flight, for the world's first commercial jetliner, for the start of coast-to-coast telephone dialing, the discovery of cortisone, and as the year Americans discovered the pizza.

Harry S. Truman, thirty-third President of the United States, was inaugurated in 1949. Truman is reported to have kept two plaques on his desk, one saying, "The buck stops here," the other, "Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest." His inaugural address incorporated the famous "Point Four" program.

Accustomed as we are to the speeds and altitudes of space vehicles today, 600 miles an hour no longer seems an incredible achievement, and anything sent 250 miles up in the air no longer takes our breath away. But man was on his way to space in 1949 when an Air Force plane crossed the United States at an average 607.2 miles per hour, and when a test projectile reached an altitude of 250 miles, both records for their day.

Automobiles on the road included the Kaiser-Frazer, Crosley, Hupp, Hudson, De Soto, Nash, Willys-Overland, and Tucker, plus a few names we know today. New cars built in 1949 totalled 6,253,651, an all-time high up to that time.

(continued)







Above, right: "Lucky Lady II" landing on March 2, 1949, after the first non-stop flight around the world. Far right: 1949 auto. Right: Typical 1949 TV, black-and-white, 10-inch screen, \$280.

Figure 4: Photos of different generations of the ‘Ivory Soap’ baby (Kelley, 1954)

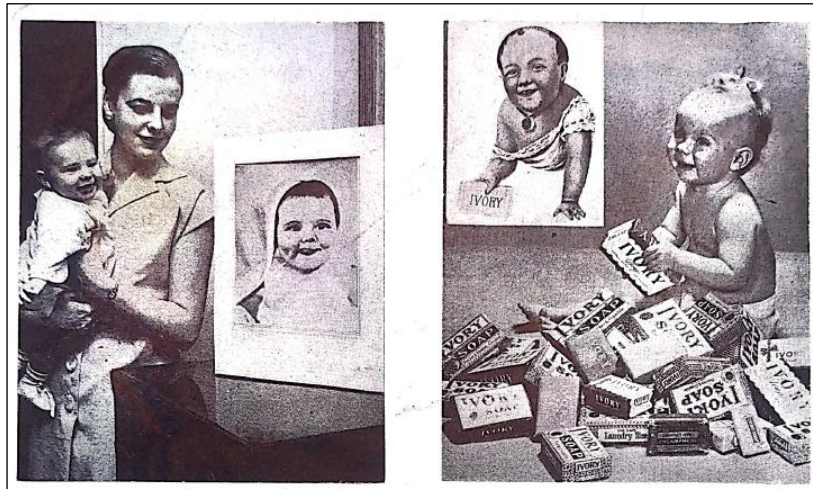
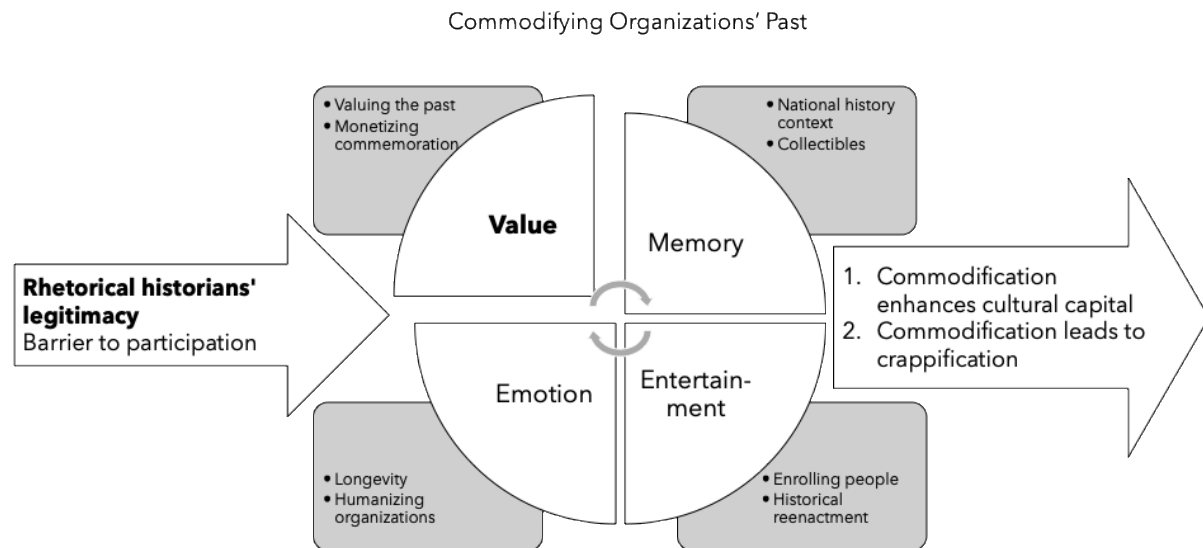


Figure 5: Cake-cutting ceremony for Bingham Photoengraving's Anniversary (Kelley, 1965)



Figure 6: Commodifying the past**Table 1: Summary of gender of rhetorical historians**

	<i>Conceptual papers</i>	<i>Empirical Papers</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Male (incl. majority)</i>	1	9	10
<i>Assumed male</i>		5	5
<i>Assumed mixed</i>		2	2
<i>Female</i>		1	1
<i>Unclear</i>	8	8	16
<i>Total</i>	9	25	34

Appendices

Appendices 1 and 2 are not included due to space constraints for AOM submissions and can be requested from the authors via email.

Appendix 3: Archival Sources

Main archival collections consulted:

- Helen Baker Cushman Business Papers, 2175 [8 boxes], Hagley Museum & Library, Wilmington, DE [HBCBP]
- Helen Baker Cushman Collection, 2130 [4 boxes], Hagley Museum & Library, Wilmington, DE [HBCC]

- Cushman, H. B. (1959a). 'A note about the pictures in your Remember the Year', Box 2, HBCBP.
- Cushman, H. B. (1959b). 'Your Remember the Year Publication', Box 2, HBCBP.
- Cushman, H. B. (1970a). 'Trade-Cards of the Advertising Department' (Oct.), Box 4, HBCBP.
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