AD AGENCY ARCHIVE DONATED TO DUKE LIBRARIES

DURHAM, N.C. – Wells Rich Greene BDDP, at one time among the most successful advertising agencies in the industry, has donated its archive of print and television ads to Duke University Libraries after ceasing operations last year.

The agency created many well-known commercials and product slogans over the years, such as “At Ford, Quality is Job 1;” “I can’t believe I ate the whole thing;” “Try it, you’ll like it;” “Flick my Bic;” “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz;” “Raise your hand if you’re Sure;” “Hefty, Hefty, wimpy, wimpy;” “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk;” and “Trust the Midas touch.”

The archive, which covers the agency’s 32-year history, was donated last summer to Duke’s John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History, a division of the university’s Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library. Library staff members have spent the past 10 months organizing the archive, and it is now available for public use.

The archive is substantial. It consists of 235 boxes of materials that mostly reflect the firm’s creative work, but it also includes some marketing reports and other internal documents. In all, there are tens of thousands of original print ads and television commercials on videotape.

“This is a very rich archive and a strong record of the agency’s work,” said Ellen Gartrell, director of the Hartman Center. “We’re thrilled to house it because Wells Rich Greene BDDP was renowned as one of the most creative agencies in the business.”

Wells Rich Greene was founded in 1966 by Mary Wells and two partners, Dick Rich and Stewart Greene. An intelligent, energetic, and aggressive leader, Wells became known early in her career as the first woman in advertising to break through the industry’s “glass ceiling,” especially after she landed a $12 million account with American Motors Corporation in 1967.
Based in New York City, the company made its reputation with innovative work and experienced intense growth in its first decade of business. Among the firm’s major clients over the years were Braniff International Airways, Cadbury Schweppes, International Business Machines (IBM), MCI Communications, the New York State Board of Tourism, Pan American World Airways, Procter & Gamble, Ralston Purina Company, Royal Crown Cola and Sheraton Hotels.

The agency’s demise began in 1990, when Wells stepped down as chief executive officer and sold out to Boulet Dru Dupuy Petit (BDDP), a French advertising giant also known for its creative work. A number of management problems arose in the years that followed and the firm gradually lost one client after another. The final blow came in January 1998, when Procter & Gamble canceled its contract with the company.

Faced with the prospect of what to do with the company archive and wanting to make sure that its history was preserved, agency executives contacted the Hartman Center, said Jan Sneed, formerly the agency’s executive vice president of corporate communications.

“It was our belief that Duke University has the most comprehensive archives covering the advertising industry,” said Sneed, now an executive at TBWA Worldwide. “We could think of no better place.”

There are few internal documents in the Wells archive because the company shut down in a relatively short period of time and some materials were lost. Gartrell said she hopes to improve the archive in the next couple years by encouraging the agency’s former employees to donate any remaining materials they may have in their possession.

The holdings of Duke’s Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library range from ancient papyri to records of modern advertising. They number more than 200,000 printed volumes and nearly 12 million items in manuscript and archival collections. The library is used primarily by scholars, but is open to the public.

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