

Survey – Takoradi Railway Archives, personnel section

This survey related to the Takoradi Railway Archives, which is the central archive belonging to the Ghana Railway Corporation (GRC), where a pilot digitisation projects has been organised between January and April 2019. GRC are the owner of all the material in the archives, and has given its consent to the conduct of a major project on the archive. The pilot project has focused on personnel archives, which means that all the digitised material consist of personnel folders, and particularly personnel files from the pre-independence period.

Background

The railway organization started in 1901 as a department of Gold Coast Civil Service. Its headquarters was located at Sekondi where construction of Ghana’s rails began in 1898.

The headquarters was later moved to Takoradi in 1934 when a new Administration Block was completed along with the Takoradi harbor in 1927. With the building of the harbor, the railway and the harbour came under the joint administration of Railway and Harbours Administration.

The Company at the height of its operation had a network of about 947 kilometers of metric gauge. For operational purposes the network is divided into Western, Eastern and Central Lines. The Western Lines with a route length of 340 Kilometers links Takoradi Port to Kumasi and Awaso and is by far the busiest. The 307 kilometers stretch from Accra-Tema to Kumasi makes the Eastern Line while the Central line covering a distance of 199 kilometers links together the Western and Eastern lines.

At its peak especially in the 1970s the Railway had staff strength of 11,000. From the 1980s up to the later part of the 1990s the general dismal economic performance of several countries in Africa including Ghana made governments to sign unto loan schemes from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These loans came along with conditionality among which included the downsizing of staff. By 2001 the Railway had staff strength of only 2,500.

Due to the way and manner the railway was useful for the social, economic and political development of the country a special one story building was set aside to accommodate all the documents that relate to the foundation and operation of the Railways. This later became known as the Railway Archive.

From the 1970s until about fifteen years ago the archive was greatly consulted by students, researchers and expatriates. Today it is in need of repair.

Dimensions/Scope

The bigger metal stands measure about twenty four feet high and twenty feet long whiles the small metal stands measure about twenty feet long and ten feet high. In all, there are about twenty six metal stands in the archive eleven downstairs and fifteen upstairs. There are shelves within the metal frames. The compartments made within the frames which are described as shelves vary. Some have as much as eight rows and five columns. By that arrangement each metal frame has about forty shelves and each shelf could take between 70 and 100 files/folders.

Organisation

As is generally the case, the personnel archives are organised in terms of 1 file/employee, held within a thick carton folder. Depending on the thickness of folders – which relate, among other things, to years of service – they are then bundled in thicker-framed binders for protective reasons. Generally, the number of folders / binder is around 6-10. The binders are stored on metal shelves.

Conditions of storage

The archive is housed in a separate, two storey building of about 500 square metres on each floor. The building houses only the archives. The building is in a poor shape, suffering from lack of maintenance. Water is leaking into the building, primarily onto the second floor, where it has damaged both the building and parts of the archives. Cement is therefore falling onto the scaffoldings holding the folders, and water is leaking onto it. The folders are held by metal scaffolding on both the ground floor and upstairs.

The metal stands have been labelled according to activities or actions. Some of the labels read: Personnel Department, Accounts, Stores, Security, Traffic, All Departments, CME- Chief Mechanical/Electrical Department, Electrical Department, and Civil Engineering among others. Out of the units listed above the mechanical and civil engineering have more files because most of the staff of the Railway is with this unit.

In some places, water leakage has led to the destruction of files, and in other places the scaffolding have crumbled altogether. But almost all of scaffoldings are not in sub-optimal shape. They are rusted due to rain water pouring on them. As a result, we estimate that 20 percent of the folders in the archive have been destroyed, and an additional 10 percent have been affected by moisture, but are not destroyed. The remaining 70 percent, is, in terms of the age of the material, in excellent condition.

Approximately 70 percent of the scaffoldings holds personnel files, with the remaining approximately 30 percent holds archives related to finance, haulage, rolling stock, etc.

Age of the material

The material housed in the archive building is the 'dead' archive, meaning employees files are transferred there a few years after retirement. Before that, folders are held in the personnel division, which also has a few metre of 'dead' archive folders, which, for one reason or the other, have been reviewed recently.

The material in the archive are therefore of mixed age leading up from the first years of the 20th century to the first years of the 21st century. The oldest file we found in our survey was from 1904. Because of fluctuations in the number of employees over time, there appear to be relative more files pertaining to the years around and immediately following independence. However, we estimate the 45 percent of the files pertain to the pre-independence period.

Inventory

Two inventory books exist. They are not entire coherent, and not all folders appear to be listed therein. The inventory, as exists, is therefore helpful, but incomplete.

Content and Significance

The folders contain a large number of different materials, including, but not limited to, personnel biographic information of the employees, photographs of employees, administrative documentation relating to their employment, family forms, correspondence between personnel and management

and between different administrative units pertaining the employee, sick and vacation leave slips, disciplinary infractions and punishments, salary revisions, and ad-hoc documentation.

The initial digitization project point to the importance of the Railway and its archive to the labour history of Ghana, West Africa and Europe. The composition of the files reflect the life histories of individuals in Ghana and other West African countries including Europeans particularly from the United Kingdom who have worked since the late 1890s with the Ghana railways. One cannot also disassociate agricultural and mining history- especially the history of farmers and miners in Ghana from the railway. The difference that the railway, with its capacity for bulk transport over long distances, had made to cocoa cultivation and the mining industry in Ghana is very clear and noticeable even in the records at the Railway archive. With an increasing academic and research interest on biographies, autobiographies and institutions as forms of labour history writing, the archive is essentially designed to fill the historiographical gap that has existed over the years. This need calls for an expanded project that will help preserve the remaining documents some of which have already been destroyed beyond repair.