



# THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE JAM HANDY ORGANIZATION TO AMERICAN COMMERCE AND CULTURE

## INTRODUCTION

On April 30, 2001, the Department of English and the College of Arts and Sciences of Oakland University sponsored a presentation on "The Contributions of the Jam Handy Organization to American Commerce and Culture." The event was part of the Detroit 300 celebration of local history and culture. The three speakers were Robert Eberwein, Professor of English at Oakland University; John Rusche, Senior Vice-President, Sandy Corporation; and Bill Sandy, Founder and Chairman of the Board, Sandy Corporation.

John Rusche provided a detailed biographical profile of Henry Jamison (Jam) Handy, 1886–1983, and offered an overview of his important role in establishing the organization that bears his name, one that produced over 25,000 films used in industrial and commercial advertising, training and education. Mr. Rusche noted: "Jam Handy made sure everyone understood his core beliefs. He had signs on the outside of his building that described what the company did and also signs inside the building containing hundreds of helpful ditties for employees, such as 'get it done, get it done right, and have fun while you're getting it done,' or 'visualize communication' or 'make the customer your guest.'" Mr. Rusche showed several clips to demonstrate the importance of the Jam Handy's films.

*Master Hands* (1936), which displays aspects of factory life, was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 1999. According to Mr. Rusche, *Refreshment through the Ages* (1937), an extended advertisement for Coca Cola, "is said to be the first Technicolor industrial film ever made." His final clips were from *Daring the Darien* (1961), a film showing a Corvair's trip from North America to South America designed "to prove the ruggedness of the Corvair," and *Duel in the Desert* (1961), a Chevrolet commercial in which a car and small plane engage in a mini "drag" race on the proving grounds.

Professor Eberwein explained the cultural contributions of the Jam Handy Organization by showing clips of films that demonstrated their impressive technical achievements, such as *Down the Gasoline Trail* (1935), a remarkable example of animation describing the operations of an internal combustion engine. The work is even more impressive measured against the crop of computer-generated imagery cartoons currently being created. In *Victory is our Business* (1942), he found a notable use of editing techniques in which the cutting pattern of shots showing the production of materials needed for the war effort is synchronized with the content of the images. *American Engineer* (1956) was of particular interest for its early use of wide-screen photography (unusual in 1956) and its inclusion of a shot of Northland, at that time the first enclosed shopping mall of its kind in the world. In addition, the outlook conveyed by the film says a lot about American culture, particularly the statement that describes the United States as the most complex engineering project.

Bill Sandy served a special function in helping the audience to appreciate the importance of Jam Handy's contributions not only to Detroit but also to the United States. With a few minor excisions, his remarks are reproduced here. They are an important reminder of the value of oral history in letting us revisit and conserve the past accomplishments of extraordinary individuals.

Robert T. Eberwein



## JAM HANDY

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*Bill Sandy*

I want to put the films you've seen into a context. Film to Jamison Handy was not an end in itself, but a means to an end, one of many ways to reach out and penetrate into the mind of the viewer. One of the mantras of the organization was 'without prejudice as to method.' Where Hollywood used film as a substitute for the stage, a way to entertain, Handy saw it as a window, a way to take the viewer anywhere in the world.

The world was quite different in the times when these films were created. We can go home to the Internet and other computer wonders and eighty channels of television. Barbara Streisand and a cast of ninety can be emoting in glorious color while we "ho-hum" and go back to our newspaper. But tonight takes us back to when movies were rare and magical events. When products like automobiles held so much center-stage fascination that an announcement for a new model was like a public holiday.

In a way, this story really begins on a spring day in 1893. The world was getting ready for the opening of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a world's fair when America was just starting to show its industrial might and ingenuity. Because a seven-year-old lad's father was active in promoting the fair, young Jam was able to take an extended period of time away from school and live at the fair. After a spring and summer immersed in the sights, sounds, color, splash and showmanship of a World Fair, Handy forevermore chafed under the limitations of the classroom and the blackboard.

So when movies and other visual methods emerged early in the Twentieth Century, Handy instantly saw their potential for what we now call distance learning. The timing of his insight was fortuitous in another way. The giant corporation that we take for granted as a business form today had its very beginnings at that time. For centuries, bosses would look over the shoulders of their employees or go into the next room to give their counsel. Now there would be thousands or hundreds of thousands of employees spread over millions of square miles of our North American continent.

So Handy crossed paths with virtually all of the legendary giants of American business history, from men like the McCormicks of the *Chicago Tribune*, to Andrew Carnegie, to Thomas Edison, to Will Durant of General Motors. He helped establish pioneering, mainstream strategies for business to cope with unprecedented size and scale. I emphasize mainstream. For example, General Motors had an ailing division they were on the verge of eliminating. Then a sales manager of the NCR Corporation in Dayton, a client of Handy, came in as general sales manager of that car division. He and Handy developed a quality dealer strategy that through continuing linkages of communication and teaching could let them build a superior retail organization. That division was Chevrolet, which quickly moved into such a dominant leadership position that during the period of my work with Chevrolet, their sales volumes were pretty close to today's sales rates of all of General Motors.

Everybody here works hard. And we all wonder whether anything we do will have a lasting impact. Well, this story that begins in the nineteenth century continues to have a profound influence on business communication in this twenty-first century. There are people still active who learned the business at the Jam Handy organization. You can feel their imprint, in effect his imprint. They not only learned communication and teaching skills, they learned about teamwork and caring about people. So they are passing on Handy's 10 prin-

ciples and values to young people just starting in the business who will extend those ideas for decades to come.

There is no finer example of the legacy of Jam Handy than John Rusche. I was privileged to work with John at Jam Handy and to hire him for Sandy Corporation where he is now a senior vice president. Not only is John a highly skilled professional, but he exemplifies the intangibles of the Jam Handy experience. Not just for this event, but over the years, he has carved out time from a crowded schedule to become a scholar of the work and life of Jamison Handy.

John's last two film examples brought back firsthand memories. The Corvair was Chevrolet's first attempt at a small car and it wasn't doing well in the market place. The decision was made to give the Corvair a performance image. So we took it up mountains and through rivers and across the Darien gap. We did so much of this kind of adventuring that at a focus group, a salesman told us "okay, it can do fine under extreme conditions. Now why don't we just show how well it does on an ordinary road?" For the Darien gap adventure, since nobody had any idea how long it would take or if we would even come out okay on the other side, I budgeted our director and cameraman's time on an open-ended weekly rate. We usually didn't break out costs that way and the client said, "Bill, that's more money than I earn." I asked him if he wanted to trade places with the director so he quickly agreed to our budget.

For those comparison films, such as *Duel in the Desert*, I give credit to a client, Dick O'Brien, who had a lot of imagination and a flair for showmanship. He said "hey, cars are motion machines so let's prove our advantages in action." He also had the resourcefulness to get us open-ended budgets, and to send engineering specialists out to the General Motors proving grounds for months to find product differences and create demonstrations that would make them meaningful. The comparison action series lasted a number of years, morphing into versions that would use the giant screens of motion picture theatres for sales meetings. Chevrolet advantages we spot-

lighted one year would disappear in subsequent models. That wasn't coincidence. Competitors would get copies of those films and tell their engineers to make those disadvantages go away. I tell this story to give credit, as I know Mr. Handy would want to do, to clients. Their imagination and courage, their confidence in visual communication and learning as key to marketplace results, allowed Jam Handy to employ staffs of over 500 people even during the darkest periods of the depression.

Loving history, as a member of the operating committee and the board of directors of the Jam Handy organization, I could wander through the earliest records of the organization. I particularly remember the board minutes of Monday, December 8, 1941. Mr. Handy told his nervous board "all of our projects are being cancelled today or certainly by tomorrow since, after yesterday's Pearl Harbor attack, we're at war with Japan, Germany and Italy. But don't worry, to gear up for the war effort, what we do will be more necessary than ever." That's the way it turned out. The Jam Handy organization produced more films during World War II than all of the Hollywood studios combined.

I joined the Jam Handy organization at a fortuitous turning point for the company and its automotive clients. Started in September 1953 as a writer. I remember that sprawl of buildings along east Grand Boulevard, just a few blocks east of the General Motors building. I remember going up the stairs of the writing department to join sixty other writers. On that stairway were the hallmarks of Jam Handy scripts—"simple, direct, correct, terse and human." Everywhere around you, in signs and the themes and most of all in the expertise of colleagues, there was principled clarity regarding how we were to conduct our business.

The advantage of my starting date was that between the 1945 end of World War II and September 1953, there was somewhat of a slumber in business and communication, a seller's market as industry was busy catching up to shortages. A tough, competitive postwar buyers' market and I arrived in

Detroit in a virtual tie. Giant corporations and their suppliers can turn quickly from bureaucracies to hard-hitting competitors when the climate changes, something we've seen in Michigan any number of times since.

So once again, everybody was in a mood for innovation. As a 24-year-old newcomer, I got some high visibility assignments earlier than might normally be the case. I saw Mr. Handy from afar at company meetings, one of that crowd of 500 "members" as we were called. Mr. Handy was a charismatic and at times acrobatic leader. Punctuating key points with handstands, cartwheels and in other ways demonstrating joy and energy while making his message memorable.

A couple of years later, I accepted a job at a major advertising agency for almost 50% more salary plus exciting creative responsibilities. When I resigned from Jam Handy, I thought the only discussion would revolve around how much notice was expected with the possibility that they'd say "why not leave today?" Instead, I was invited into extended one-to-one dialogues with most of Handy's senior management, including Mr. Handy. Interestingly, money was never explicitly discussed. There were implications that if I stayed, I would get a raise but it would not take me to the level of the Ad agency. With Mr. Handy and others, the focus was on the pioneering nature of Handy's business. So I stayed.

I bring up that incident because having come to Mr. Handy's attention early in my career, the next sixteen years allowed me to have continuing dialogues with the clear-cut pioneer of our industry. When I became vice president of the Chevrolet account and then senior vice president in charge of General Motor's business, I was following directly in the footsteps of work he had devoted his life to, so there was a lot to talk about.

I wish those frequent dialogues had been in his earlier, more vigorous and innovative years. But he was now in his seventies heading toward his eighties, a time of life that I now understand better than I did then. There would sometimes be leisurely wandering and branching, like talking to your grand-

father, and just when I was lost in the words, there would be a stunning pulling together of all the key thoughts, a realization that he had helped me see situations in fresh ways and that our conversational detours weren't detours at all but threads illuminating the complexity of the topic under review.

Still, in a fast-paced creative business, things change. Strengths can become weaknesses. For example, all through the nineteen thirties, forties and fifties, Handy, with no office, would travel the country to get first hand briefing from the field organization. Better than anyone, he had the pulse of what was needed, what should happen next.

As he grew older, in his field travels, younger people he met would treat him as a legend and like an elderly relative, give him happy talk. So he would report back positive comments on our projects when my colleagues and I saw flaws and threats in the business environment. In addition, research methods and computerized linkages had reached a point of such timely sophistication that his reports back from the field lacked the timely relevance of earlier decades.

Now our dialogues turned more and more to changes in the business, for us and for our clients. The positive side of this is the privilege and stimulation of extended discussions with the absolute master of and clear-cut pioneer in our business regarding what might lie ahead. These were substantive dialogues.

When the headman stays active into his eighties and the visual learning industry becomes more crowded and competitive and the company starts to lose money, the topic for concerned clients and the entire senior management team becomes succession planning. I expected to be part of a leadership team that would take the company into the next stages.

Instead, Jamison Handy, who had been an innovator all of his life, put his unique imprint on this important next step as well. One day, to my happy surprise, Handy said in effect "the car companies are fast paced and demanding. I have larger social issues that I want to use our organization's capa-

bilities to address. Why don't you choose some colleagues you have confidence in, raise some money, I'll loan you some more and start your own organization." Thus, began the Bill Sandy Company, with Mr. Handy an early investor. Now suddenly, after eighteen years, I was on my own. The Jam Handy legacy, the very topic of this conference, was not theoretical to us. We had to immediately decide which of Jam Handy's skills and values we wanted to build on, and what we wanted to take in a new direction.

The first and most important thing we agreed on is that we would continue to be a full service organization. We would offer the full range of content concentrations from management development to sales training, plus a complete array of delivery mechanisms from films to television to computer based instruction, shows, meetings, conferences, printed materials, etc. That's not the easiest way to run a training and communication company. The more usual and profitable method is to find one-core product—the one-minute this or the seven keys that and replicate it over and over again. But we grew up the Jam Handy way—to work from client needs and thus be prepared to provide what was needed, when needed and only for as long as needed. We worked hard on staff development, to continue a Jam Handy theme of "have fun while you get the job done." Our staffs would be leaner, with a larger mix of free-lance personnel, consistent with the way the total industry was moving. We prized the value of "innovation." Over the years, Handy had insisted that every project have something that had never been done before. It might be as simple as a clever shipping label, but you always had to be breaking new ground.

And still hearing the echoes of many dialogues with Mr. Handy, we spent a lot of time continually analyzing the kind of organization we wanted to be. That's more than business planning; it's a unique form of cultural planning that we carried forward. What became different at the Bill Sandy Company also was based on my Jam Handy experiences. Having seen over the years that no one activity, no one meeting, no one

film, no one speech every totally solved a problem, we focused on larger scale systems of customer-driven long-term change.

We also put a lot more emphasis on interactive learning technologies. John Rusche spearheaded the largest corporate videodisc program in the world, the forerunner to DVD and all the other great technologies at our disposal today. That concentration was different than Jam Handy, but only because the newer methods were emerging. Jam would have gone wild using them.

This process of thinking through what of Jam Handy we would build on, what we would change, something that occurred not as a one-time thing but respectively over the next quarter century, puts me in a good position to comment regarding which of Jam Handy's contributions provide an ongoing legacy for all of us. What is it that had its roots in the Columbia Exposition of the late nineteenth century that enriches our lives in the twenty-first century?

First, his dream, his creation of what we now call Distance Learning, now mainstream and growing in importance every day, is our best hope to connect our planet's five billion people. He dreamed of teaching thousands, and then hundreds of thousands, via some of the films you're looking at today, and many other techniques of linkage. Now the target audiences can be hundreds of millions, many in remote areas where fresh voices and authoritative content will open up possibilities that will alter aspirations, lives and governance.

Jamison Handy always knew that distance learning had the potential to change lives for the better. Many young people had the mysteries of the business system, of managing, selling, making a profit, stripped away and made hospitable. Jamison Handy captured the romance of commerce and showed how products like automobiles and appliances could be mechanisms of liberation. If education is the most direct route to personal freedom, Handy would be joyful at the scale, reach and sophistication of the methods he pioneered.

In the classrooms of Oakland University, and in schooling everywhere from pre-kindergarten to doctorate level, just

look around you how visual literacy and modern tools of learning are taken for granted. Mr. Handy would smile at today's universal acceptance of making learning interesting.

Something else he pioneered has gone mainstream in American business. Intangibles like customer satisfaction and quality are now core business strategies that define and position the product, creating a visible margin of difference that drives marketplace results. That's an update of the strategy Jam Handy used to propel Chevrolet to leadership by educating and motivating a superior retail organization.

I'd like to believe that such industries as audiovisual communication, interactive software and business learning operate worth a little more pride and professionalism because the thousands of people who learned the business under Jam Handy for over sixty years, spread his principles and even today are passing them on to others.

This last point has direct relevance to some students of Oakland University, most especially English, computer and business majors. Because automobile companies have insatiable needs to motivate and teach widely dispersed stakeholders—and because of the vision of pioneers like Jamison Handy—carried on by Sandy Corporation and other outstanding creative organizations—Detroit is the Madison Avenue, the world headquarters of distance learning for business. That can represent world-class career opportunities without having to leave Michigan.

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Note: Most of the films shown and mentioned are available through the Prelinger Archive ([www.archive.org/movies/index.html](http://www.archive.org/movies/index.html)). This invaluable resource can be used to download and watch films once the necessary software has been installed.