ome 100 boxes of correspondence, speeches, and other documents produced by William Hewlett and David Packard as they built the company considered to be the original Silicon Valley startup were reduced to ashes by the massive fires that took place in Sonoma County, Calif., last fall. ¶ These documents—the collected papers of Hewlett and Packard, containing records of the Hewlett-Packard Co. going as far back as 1937—were assembled before HP began the first of several splits starting in 1999. In recent years, the collection was stored in a modular building on the campus of Keysight Technologies, in Santa Rosa, Calif. (Keysight got custody of the documents when it spun out of Agilent Technologies, which had previously split off from HP.) The collection was hard to access by historians, had yet to be digitized, and was, as we now know, vulnerable to fire. ¶ Much of the collection had been indexed by archivist Karen Lewis, hired originally by HP in 1987 to dive into a few unorganized boxes to prepare for the company’s 50th anniversary, in 1989. She eventually spent more than 20 years with HP—and later Agilent—figuring out what needed to be saved for posterity and then collecting and organizing those documents and artifacts. ¶ So, Lewis says, we mostly know what was lost. Perhaps the most heartbreaking, she points out, are the carbon copies of all of David Packard’s outgoing correspondence, stored with the replies he received. ¶ “Packard was obsessive about that,” she says. “He had copies of everything. As a result, we could see his strategic thinking—for example, his correspondence with Leon Sullivan discussing the Sullivan Principles,” which were used to put pressure on South Africa to end apartheid. ¶ Other correspondence, Lewis says, traced the development of Packard’s thoughts on what it would be like to eventually do business in China and other Communist countries, reflecting his belief that “technology was for the greater good of mankind, it wasn’t just about business.” ¶ It isn’t particularly surprising that these documents, no matter their historical value, were never digitized. “Many archives of that age and size don’t get digitized because the papers are of different sizes and thicknesses,” Lewis says. “It is expensive, and it is difficult to make sure you have the necessary accuracy. So it’s not uncommon to just store them safely and securely in the proper environment for preservation.” ¶ While historians, former HP staffers, and other members of the tech world are mourning what was lost, Lewis is thinking about how to rebuild the historical narrative, even without the original documents. The oral histories are not lost, she says, and she “hired someone to do a full-text inputting of Packard’s speeches at one point, so we’ve got that.” ¶ Putting the rest together is going to be like making a patchwork quilt out of scraps. Fortunately, annotated indexes of at least some of the Packard and Hewlett archives exist—box by box, folder by folder—with copies stored on a variety of computers, both personal and corporate. ¶ With these indexes as a skeleton, the rebuilding begins. “I have some stuff on my computer,” Lewis says, “and other people have copied things.” She’s planning to get together with people at Agilent to get this material to a safe and secure place that is open to researchers, such as Stanford or the Smithsonian. ¶ “I’ll be doing this as a labor of love,” Lewis says. “I don’t have funding at this point, but that’s okay. I had a whole career as an archivist—at Harvard, at HP, at Agilent, at Apple. It’s time for me to give back.” ¶ Anyone with documents or information that might help Lewis can contact her at karenrlewis@gmail.com. —TEKLA S. PERRY

An extended version of this article appears in our View From the Valley blog.

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