OTTO GERDAU COLLECTION, 1876 - 1900
(.15 cubic feet; 3 folders)

History:

Otto Gerdau was the New York agent for the German firm of Heinrich Adolf Meyer. That firm had been co-founded in Hamburg, Germany, in 1818 by Heinrich Adolf Meyer and his father, Heinrich Christian Meyer. The firm specialized in the import and export of ivory and its various substitutes, in both raw and finished form. The company's first factory was built in 1836; a new, larger factory was built in 1864. After his father's death in 1848, Heinrich Adolf Meyer ran the company alone. Meyer was a prominent man in Hamburg. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Kiel in 1865 and was elected to the German Reichstag in 1877. It was through his influence that the Hamburg Aquarium was built.

Otto Gerdau was a native of Hamburg, Germany. After emigrating to the United States, he founded the Otto Gerdau Company in New York in 1872. As the American agent for Heinrich Adolf Meyer, Gerdau imported ivory from Germany. Following Otto's death in 1920, his two sons, Carl and Allan, ran the company. Allan gradually assumed more and more responsibility for the running of the company, and in 1937 he bought out his older brother, Carl. Alan eventually expanded the company's import lines to include rattan, mother of pearl, rugs from India, and marble furniture from Italy, in addition to ivory. After Allan died in 1986, the company was left in trust to three New York religious institutions, who were to benefit from the company's profits. In 1989 the company was sold to a Florida industrialist, and there is no longer any involvement in the company by the Gerdau family.

Scope and Content Note:

This collection consists primarily of materials relating to the German ivory importing firm of Heinrich Adolf Meyer, located in Hamburg. It contains a booklet on "Ivory" published by the firm in 1889, a photographic album on ivory published around the same time, one black and white photograph showing the largest and thickest tusks on record, two photographs showing the firm's factory which were removed from an unknown book, a photostatic copy of the firm's 1876 U.S. Centennial Exhibition catalog, and photostatic copies of notices of the awards it won at the Exhibition. Also in the collection are photoprints of some of the pictures in the photographic album and two copies of photoprints showing the company's exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition. The final item in the collection is a letter -- on Otto Gerdau's stationery, dated April 27, 1877 -- from a Mr. Kaldenberg, denying that he had examined ivory at the New York City Custom House on the behalf of the firm of Arnold, Stines & Company.
Provenance:

The bulk of this material was accumulated by Otto Gerdau in the course of his business and was donated to the Archives Center in January 1990 by his daughter. The original of the photostatic copy of the 1876 catalog is found in the Archives Center's Warshaw Collection (#60), in the "Ivory" category. The two photoprints of Heinrich Ad. Meyer's exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition are copies of originals in the Centennial Photo Collection, Prints and Pictures Department, Free Library of Philadelphia. The two photographs, ca. 1900, taken from an unknown book, were donated in January 1990 by the donor of the E. D. Moore Collection (Archives Center Collection #321).

C. A. Orr
1-21-92
rev'd 8-27-93