John Caples Papers

NMAH.AC.0393

Mimi Minnick

undated
# Table of Contents

Collection Overview ........................................................................................................ 1  
Administrative Information .............................................................................................. 1  
Scope and Contents............................................................................................................ 2  
Arrangement..................................................................................................................... 4  
Biographical / Historical................................................................................................. 2  
Scope and Contents............................................................................................................ 3  
Names and Subjects ........................................................................................................ 4  
Container Listing ............................................................................................................. 5  
  Series 1: Personal Papers............................................................................................... 5  
  Series 2: Publications...................................................................................................... 9  
  Series 3: Speeches and Lectures..................................................................................... 14  
  Series 4: Client Files...................................................................................................... 16  
  Series 5: Business Files............................................................................................... 26
## Collection Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repository:</th>
<th>Archives Center, National Museum of American History</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>John Caples Papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifier:</td>
<td>NMAH.AC.0393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>circa 1900-1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent:</td>
<td>24 Cubic feet (64 boxes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creator:</td>
<td>Caples, John, 1900-1990 (advertising executive)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caples, Dorothy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language:</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collection is in English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

The collection was donated in December 1990 by Caples' widow, Mrs. Dorothy Dickes Caples, of New York City.

### Related Materials

As part of the collection, the Archives Center accepted 22 books on advertising, including copies of Caples' books, some in foreign languages. These books are housed in the Archives Center.

### Processing Information

processed by Mimi Minnick, archivist, undated.

### Preferred Citation


### Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

### Conditions Governing Use

Reproduction fees for commercial use. Copyright restrictions. Contact staff for information.
Biographical / Historical

John Caples (1900-1990) was one of advertising's most influential copywriters. He grew up in New York City, the eldest of two sons of Byron Caples, a doctor, and Edith Richards Caples, a grandniece of W.W. Cole, P.T. Barnum's partner.

After graduation from the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Caples began his advertising career at Ruthrauff & Ryan in 1925, during the decade in which advertising began to assume its modern form, both in style and organizational structure. His first year there, he wrote a legendary mail-order advertisement for the U.S. School of Music. This advertisement, more than a thousand words long, embodied many of the techniques which Caples was later to develop, and is still regarded within the industry as one of the most effective pieces of advertising copy ever written. It began with the straightforward but emotionally insightful headline: "They laughed when I sat down at the piano." The headline became a part of American popular culture, appearing in ads, comics, cartoons, and greeting cards into the 1990s.

In 1927, Caples moved to Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne (BBDO), where he had the opportunity to work alongside Bruce Barton, an advertising legend and pioneer of direct mail. Caples remained at BBDO for 55 years, during which time he reshaped the field of direct response advertising. At BBDO he supervised direct response advertising for DuPont, U.S. Steel, General Electric, United Fruit, Hormel, the Wall Street Journal, Reader's Digest, Phoenix Mutual, Liberty Mutual, Western Airlines, U.S. Navy Recruiting, and many other clients. In his honor, the Direct Marketing Creative Guild established the John Caples Award to recognize creative excellence in direct marketing.

Caples was also respected for the development of innovative copy-testing techniques. He was the author of countless articles and several well-respected books, including Tested Advertising Methods (1932), Advertising for Immediate Sales (1936), Making Ads Pay (1957) and How To Make Your Advertising Make Money (1983). He also served as a recruitment and enlistment officer in the U.S. Navy during World War II. John Caples retired from BBDO in 1981. He died after a long convalescence in 1990.

Scope and Contents

Series Three, Speeches and Lectures, contains Caples' speeches to advertising industry associations and other business organizations, as well as a series of lectures prepared for a college course on advertising techniques that Caples taught at Columbia University Graduate School of Business during the 1953-54 academic year.

Series Four, Client Files, contains correspondence, advertising copy, press clippings, memos, tearsheets, and other business records for scores of clients for whom Caples did work; Readers Digest and the Wall Street Journal are especially well represented. Files are arranged alphabetically by client name.

Subseries A contains client files from Caples' years at Ruthrauff & Ryan (1925-1927).

Subseries B contains client files from Caples' years at BBDO (circa 1946-1972).

Subseries C contains files documenting copy testing and direct mail methods and results. Some of the copy-testing materials are in poster-sized format presumably designed for presentation. Several sets of lantern slides illustrating copy-testing results are also included. Series 5, Business Files, includes BBDO files and correspondence from the 1930s through the 1980s. This series includes many of BBDO's internal manuals and instructions on copy-testing and direct mail, many authored by Caples. This series also contains notes, clipping files, and "tickler" or idea files, mostly from the period of Caple's retirement. Also found here are Caples' many awards and honors from advertising and direct marketing organizations.
Scope and Contents

Series 1: Personal Papers, is divided into three subseries.

Subseries 1.1 contains Caples' diaries in original, unedited manuscript form. The diaries are arranged chronologically. They constitute a notable resource for the study of the advertising industry from an insider's perspective during a period of tremendous expansion of advertising as a force in American business and culture. They document Caple's participation in and reflections on the business of advertising, and detail his acquaintance with noted business and advertising professionals. The diaries record his responses to the major events of his lifetime, such as presidential elections, the stock market crash of 1929, American entry into World War II, the Kennedy assassinations, and the moon landing. Caples recorded conversations and contacts with some of the key advertising and communications people of his time, including Rosser Reeves, David Ogilvy, George Gallup and Harry Reasoner. Also found in the diaries are reflections of a more mundane or personal nature: weather conditions, the best restaurants, whether to quit drinking or go on a diet, and Caples' ambivalence about retiring from BBDO. Caples wrote precisely one page each day from 1928 through 1981. Missing from the series are the years 1935-1940, 1946-1950; 1952-1955; 1957-1962.

Subseries 1.2 contains edited, rewritten portions of the diaries, presumably intended for publication as short-stories or reminiscences. Of particular interest are humorous short stories relating to Caples' years at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD during the early 1920s.

Subseries 1.3 contains photographs of Caples and his family, ca. 1900-1960.

Subseries 1.4 contains personal and family papers, including material documenting Caple's service as a recruitment and enlistment officer for the U.S. Navy during World War II, and a copy of a dissertation about Caples by Gordon White, entitled John Caples, Adman.

Series 2: Publications, contains Caple's published and unpublished manuscripts about advertising techniques, direct marketing, and the advertising industry. Arrangement is according to publication and thereunder by date of publication. This series is arranged into two subseries.

Subseries 2.1 contains articles published in advertising industry publications such as Advertising Agency, Advertising and Selling, Direct Marketing, and Printer's Ink, and for business publications like Saturday Review. The articles typically are of a how-to nature, but also include Caples observations about the business of advertising, including a series for Advertising Agency in the 1950s, titled "Diary of an Ad Man," which drew heavily from his diaries.

Subseries 2.2 contains book manuscripts. Caples was a prolific and respected author in his field, publishing four widely acclaimed books on advertising and direct marketing techniques. Material in this series includes rough and final drafts, illustrative material, and correspondence with editors and publishers. There are also letters of congratulation from friends and letters of praise from readers.

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Arrangement

The collection is arranged into five series.

Series 1: Personal Papers
Series 2: Publications
Series 3: Speeches and Lectures
Series 4: Client Files
Series 5: Business Files

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
  Advertising copy
  Advertising executives
  Advertising, Direct-mail
  Copy writers
  Direct marketing
  advertising

Types of Materials:
  Awards
  Business letters
  Diaries -- 20th century
  Essays
  Tear sheets
  Typescripts

Names:
  Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn

Geographic Names:
  New York (N.Y.)
**Container Listing**

**Series 1: Personal Papers**

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**Subseries 1.1: Diaries (original manuscripts), 1928 - 1981**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box</th>
<th>Folder</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 1</td>
<td>Folder 1-3</td>
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<td>Box 2</td>
<td>Folder 1-4</td>
<td>1931-1934</td>
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<td>Box 3</td>
<td>Folder 1-3</td>
<td>1941-1943</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 4</td>
<td>Folder 1-4</td>
<td>1944-1945; 1951; 1955</td>
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<td>Box 5</td>
<td>Folder 1-3</td>
<td>1956; 196 -1964</td>
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<td>Box 6</td>
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<td>1971-1973</td>
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<td>Box 9</td>
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<td>1974-1976</td>
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Box 10, Folder 1-3  1977-1979
Box 11, Folder 1-3  1980-1981

Rewritten/edited diaries, memoirs and short stories, circa 1920-1963

Box 13, Folder 1-7  Memoirs, undated
Box 13, Folder 8-10  Short stories, 1920 - 1925
Box 14, Folder 1  Rewritten/edited diary entries, 1942-1945
Box 14, Folder 2  Rewritten/edited diary entries, 1943
Box 14, Folder 3-5  Rewritten/edited diary entries, 1943-1944
Box 15, Folder 1-2  January - August 1944
Box 15, Folder 3-4  January - July 1963
Box 15, Folder 6-8  Unpublished memoir: My Life on Madison Avenue, circa 1960s

Subseries 1.3: Photographs

Box 16, Folder 1-3  Photographs: boyhood, youth and family, circa 1900-1920
   Image(s)
Box 16, Folder 4  Travel/vacation, undated
Box 16, Folder 5  Naval academy, circa 1920-1922; U.S. Navy, circa 1942-1944
Box 16, Folder 6-8  Business, 1940s-1960s
Box 16, Folder 9  Photonegatives, undated

Subseries 1.4: Personal, family and financial papers

Box 17, Folder 1  Birth/marriage certificates
Box 17, Folder 2  News clippings re family (lawsuits, obituaries, etc.), circa 1929-1981
Box 17, Folder 3  Caple's family history, circa 1980s
Box 17, Folder 4  Robert Caples’ grade school applications, schoolwork, artwork, etc., circa 1920-24

Box 17, Folder 5  College diary, circa 1918-1919 (fragmentary)

Box 17, Folder 6  Navy Cruise diary, circa 1920

Box 17, Folder 7  Diary entry, September 10, 1928

Box 17, Folder 8  Diary entry, 1940s

Box 17, Folder 9  Personal correspondence, 1920s

Box 17, Folder 10  1930s

Box 17, Folder 11  1940s-50s

Box 17, Folder 12  Income tax return, 1930

Box 17, Folder 13  News clippings re real estate, 1940-1952

Box 17, Folder 14  Where to Dine, 1949, 1955

Box 17, Folder 15  Financial documents: purchase of stocks, 1972-1974

Box 17, Folder 16  Financial documents, map: purchase of New York property, 1954

Box 17, Folder 17  Financial documents: purchase of Park Avenue co-op, 1968-69

Box 17, Folder 18  Financial papers: Famous Authors School, 1971-1975

Box 17, Folder 19  News clippings re social security, retirement, 1970s-1980s

Box 18, Folder 1-2  Naval Service: All Hands Survey and Report, November 28 - December 13, 1944

Box 18, Folder 3  Tested Methods for Getting Ahead, 1945

Box 18, Folder 4  Naval Service: correspondence and publicity, 1942-1945

Box 18, Folder 5-6  Naval Service: enlistment/recruitment office, 1942
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 18, Folder 7-8</th>
<th>Naval Service: personnel documents, 1942-1945</th>
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<tr>
<td>Box 18, Folder 9</td>
<td>Naval Service: discharge papers, 1945</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 18, Folder 9</td>
<td><em>Cruise of the Class 1924</em>, 1933, 1939 editions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 19, Folder 7</td>
<td>Gordon White correspondence, 1971</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Return to Table of Contents*
Series 2: Publications

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Subseries 2.1: Articles

Box 20, Folder 1  
Advertising and Selling, 1932

Box 20, Folder 2  
Advertising and Selling, 1946-1947

Box 20, Folder 3  
New York World Telegram and Sun, 1952

Box 20, Folder 4  
Printers Ink, 1931-32

Box 20, Folder 5  
Printer's Ink, 1951, 1959

Box 20, Folder 6-8  
Ad Agency: "Agency Man's Story", 1951-1957

Box 20, Folder 9  
Articles, undated

Box 21, Folder 1  
BBDO correspondence, re Ad Agency series, 1952-1957

Box 21, Folder 2  
Correspondence re Ad Agency series, 1953, 1957

Box 21, Folder 5  
"How a Classified Ad Got Me Into Advertising", December 1951

Box 21, Folder 6  
"Which Is Better -- Ad Writing or Newspaper Writing?", January 1952

Box 21, Folder 7  
"How I Applied For My First Ad Job", February, 1952

Box 21, Folder 8  
"My Own Personal Comedy of Errors", March 1952

Box 21, Folder 9  
"You Can't Fire Me, I Quit!" April 1952
Box 21, Folder 10  "Adventures in Hunting for An Agency Job", May 1952
Box 21, Folder 11  Bill Orchard's Ad Writing Class at Columbia", June 1952
Box 21, Folder 12  "Two Ads That Started Side by Side", July 1952
Box 21, Folder 13  "How I Got My First Job as A Copywriter", August 1952
Box 21, Folder 14  "Give Me Five Days and I'll Give You a Magnetic Personality", Sept. 1952
Box 21, Folder 16  "Adventures in Writing Mail Order Copy", October 1952
Box 21, Folder 17  "How a Faux Pas Made Me Popular", November 1952
Box 21, Folder 18  "A Happy time In the Life of a Copywriter", December 1952
Box 21, Folder 19  "Twenty-five Years Ago", January 7, 1953
Box 21, Folder 20  "Adventures of An Amateur Public Speaker", January 1953
Box 21, Folder 21  "Imagine Me Teaching at Columbia!", February 1953
Box 21, Folder 22  "Experiences Teaching a Class in Ad Writing", March 1953
Box 21, Folder 23  "Philosophy of an Ad Man", April 1953
Box 21, Folder 24  "Diary of a Young Ad Agency Man", May 1953 - April 1955
Box 21, Folder 25  "A Copywriter Writes About Copywriting", September 1953
Box 21, Folder 26  "How to Work Wonders With Your Subconscious", December 1953
Box 21, Folder 27  "Agency Man's Diary", June - August 1955
Box 21, Folder 28  "Advertising for Immediate Sales", September 16, 1955
Box 21, Folder 29  "How To Attract Prospects", October 14, 1955
Box 21, Folder 30  "How to Make Your Clients Famous", November 11, 1955
Box 21, Folder 31  "Seven Ways to Start an Ad", December 9, 1955
Box 21, Folder 32  "Humor in Copy", March 21, 1956
| Box 21, Folder 33 | "Emotion in Copy", March 30, 1956 |
| Box 21, Folder 34 | "How to Find Ideas for Ads", April 27, 1956 |
| Box 21, Folder 35 | "Poetic Copy", May 25, 1956 |
| Box 21, Folder 36 | "Agency Man's Remarks to Controllers", June 22, 1956 |
| Box 21, Folder 37 | "Three Ways to Make Ads Believable", August 17, 1956 |
| Box 21, Folder 38 | "How to Get More Creative Advertising", August 17, 1956 |
| Box 21, Folder 39 | "Three Inexpensive Copy Tests", July 19, 1957 |
| Box 21, Folder 40 | "Testing Ads With Coupons", August 16, 1957 |
| Box 21, Folder 41 | "Six Ways to make People Act Now", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 42 | "Testing Ad Appeals by Mail", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 43 | "Telling the History of the Product", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 44 | "How to Write Rapid Fire Copy", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 45 | "Five Ways to Make Ads Sell", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 46 | "How to Test Your Copy with a Hidden Offer", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 47 | "How to Get More Replies From Hidden Offers", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 48 | "How to Prove Your Product is a Bargain", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 49 | "Four Ways to make Ads Timely", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 50 | "Testing Ads by Telephone Response", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 51 | "Nine Ways to Make It Easier to Act", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 52 | "Twenty-Five Ways to Increase Ad Inquiries", undated |
| Box 21, Folder 53 | "Twenty-Five Formulas for Writing Headlines", undated |
Box 21, Folder 54  "Applying Mail Order Principles to Media Buying", undated
Box 21, Folder 55  "Direct Response Advertising", undated
Box 21, Folder 56  "Increasing Effectiveness of Stock Exchange Ads", undated
Box 21, Folder 57  "Use Split Run for Accurate Copy Test", undated
Box 22, Folder 1-9  Saturday Review, "Madison Avenue," 1969
Box 23  Direct Marketing, 1972-1984
Box 24  Direct Marketing, 1972-1984
Box 25  Direct Marketing, 1972-1984

Books
Box 26, Folder 1-10  Tested Advertising Methods, 1931
Box 27, Folder 1-6  How to Make Your Advertising Make Money, 1983
Box 28, Folder 1  Introduction
Box 28, Folder 2  Illustrations
Box 28, Folder 3  Stats/negatives
Box 28, Folder 4  Correspondence
Box 28, Folder 5  "How to Write Advertising That Makes Money"
Box 29, Folder 1-6  Small Ads, illustrations, circa 1966-1968
Box 30, Folder 1  Correspondence, Harper & Row, 1936-1972
Box 30, Folder 2  Harper & Brothers, 1936-1961
Box 30, Folder 3  McGraw-Hill, 1937
Box 30, Folder 4  Prentice Hall, 1970-1978
Box 30, Folder 5  Royalty statements, Prentice Hall, 1983-1984
Box 30, Folder 6-10  Illustrations, various books
Box 30, Folder 11  List of books sent to colleagues, undated
Box 30, Folder 12  Other correspondence about books, 1980s

Return to Table of Contents
Series 3: Speeches and Lectures

This series contains Caples' speeches to advertising industry associations and other business organizations, as well as a series of lectures prepared for a college course on advertising techniques that Caples taught at Columbia University Graduate School of Business during the 1953-54 academic year.

Box 31, Folder 1  BBDO convention, 1930
Box 31, Folder 2  Eastern Industrial Advertisers Association, November 7, 1946
Box 31, Folder 3  Ad Club of DC, May 13, 1947
Box 31, Folder 4  American National Retail Jewelers Association, August 12, 1947
Box 31, Folder 5  Industrial Advertisers Association of New York, January 12, 1948
Box 31, Folder 6-7  Life Insurance Advertisers Annual meeting, October 30, 1948
Box 31, Folder 8  Retail Jewelers Association, June 8, 1949
Box 31, Folder 9  Association of Canadian Advertisers, October 21, 1949
Box 31, Folder 10  4A's Eastern Annual Meeting, October 31, 1950
Box 31, Folder 11  Atlanta Ad Club, April 29, 1950
Box 31, Folder 12  Roanoke Advertising Club, January 29, 1952
Box 31, Folder 13  National Association of Travel Organizations, November 11, 1954
Box 31, Folder 15  Financial Public Relations Association, September 28, 1954
Box 31, Folder 16  National Circulation Roundtable, April 27, 1955
Box 31, Folder 17  Association of Business Publishers, April 27, 1955
Box 31, Folder 18  Hundred Million Club, April 7, 1955
Box 31, Folder 19  American Savings and Loan Institute, March 21, 1955
Box 31, Folder 20  American Marketing Association, April 2, 1959
Box 31, Folder 21  Advertising Club of D.C., June 16, 1959
Box 31, Folder 22  NY Art Directors Club, March 22, 1961
Box 31, Folder 23  Ad Club of NY, October 3, 1972
Box 31, Folder 24  Advertising Hall of Fame, April 5, 1978
Box 31, Folder 25  Life Insurance Advertisers Association, September 19, 1978
Box 31, Folder 26  Association of National Advertisers Convention, undated
Box 31, Folder 27  No title, undated
Box 32, Folder 1-4  Columbia University Graduate School of Business, 1953-54, Teaching materials, "A Course in Advertising Writing," lessons 1-19
Box 32, Folder 5  Columbia University Graduate School of Business, course bulletin
Box 32, Folder 6  Columbia University Graduate School of Business, employment documents and correspondence

Return to Table of Contents
Series 4: Client Files

This series contains correspondence, advertising copy, press clippings, memos, tearsheets, and other business records for scores of clients for whom Caples did work; Readers Digest and the Wall Street Journal are especially well represented. Files are arranged alphabetically by client name.

Subseries 4.1 contains client files from Caples' years at Ruthrauff & Ryan (1925-1927).

Subseries 4.2 contains client files from Caples' years at BBDO (circa 1946-1972).

Subseries 4.3 contains files documenting copy testing and direct mail methods and results. Some of the copy-testing materials are in poster-sized format presumably designed for presentation. Several sets of lantern slides illustrating copy-testing results are also included.

Subseries 4.1: Ruthrauff & Ryan, 1925 - 1927

Box 49, Folder 1  Business correspondence, 1926-27
Box 49, Folder 2  Arthur Murray School of Dance, 1923-1925
Box 49, Folder 3  Astor Cigarettes, 1925
Box 49, Folder 4  Richard Blackstone, "New Nerves for Old", 1926
Box 49, Folder 5  Blondex, 1925
Box 49, Folder 6  David V. Bush, "Character Analysis", 1926
Box 49, Folder 7  Hugo French Language School, 1927
Box 49, Folder 8  Elbert Hubbard Scrapbook, 1926
Box 49, Folder 9  Lifebuoy, 1926
Box 49, Folder 10  G.E. Marchand, "The Secret of High Salaries", 1928
Box 49, Folder 11  Personal Magnetism, 1925-1927
Box 49, Folder 12  Science of Culture, 1926
Box 49, Folder 13  U.S. School of Music, 1925
Box 49, Folder 14  Weil Bilt, 1925
Box 49, Folder 15  Proofs, various clients, 1926
Subseries 4.2: BBDO, circa 1940-1970

Box 33  Accent, 1950-1955
Box 33  Air France, 1960
Box 33  Air-O-Med, 1964
Box 33  Aeroflex Laboratories, 1948
Box 33  Alexander Hamilton Institute, 1969
Box 33  American Arbitration Association, 1955
Box 33  American Home, 1954
Box 33  American Optical Company, 1956
Box 33  American Safety Razor, 1951
Box 33  American Standard, 1959
Box 33  American Tobacco, 1958
Box 33  American Tobacco Company Lucky Strike, 1960
Box 33  Anahist, 1951
Box 33  Andersen Corporation (Minnesota), 1963
Box 33  Armstrong Corporation, 1954
Box 33  Audivox, 1957
Box 33  Baptiste School of Dancing, 1946
Box 33  Bank of America, 1957
Box 33  Bank of Virginia, 1946
Box 33  Barca Lounger, 1959
Box 33  Bausch & Lomb Optical Company, 1956
Box 33          Bon Ami, 1950  
Box 33          Boston Five Cents Savings Bank, 1959  
Box 33          Brest-O-Chicken, 1951  
Box 33          Bristol-Meyrs, 1961  
Box 33          Business International, 1958  
Box 34, Folder 1  Campbell Soup, 1957  
Box 34, Folder 2  Carlton Cigarettes, 1972  
Box 34, Folder 3  William Carter Company, 1960  
Box 34, Folder 4  Chicago Daily News, 1959  
Box 34, Folder 5  Chun King Associated Enterprises, Inc., 1959  
Box 34, Folder 6  Conn Organ Corporation, 1958  
Box 34, Folder 7  Consolidated Edison, 1962  
Box 34, Folder 8  Corning Glass - Pyrex, 1957  
Box 34, Folder 9  Corn Products, 1960-1964  
Box 34, Folder 10  The Cream of Wheat Corporation, 1954  
Box 34, Folder 11  Cyclone, 1951  
Box 34, Folder 12  Curtis Publishing Company, 1949-1955  
Box 34, Folder 13  Dennison, 1948  
Box 34, Folder 14  De Sota, 1959  
Box 34, Folder 15  Detroit-Michigan Stoves, 1953  
Box 34, Folder 16  Dodge, 1965
Box 34, Folder 17  Doughboy, 1953
Box 34, Folder 18  Dubonnet, 1946
Box 34, Folder 19  Du Pont de Nemours, 1946-1965
Box 34, Folder 20  Eagle Pencil Company, 1956
Box 34, Folder 21  Easy Washing Machine, 1954
Box 34, Folder 22  Electrolux, 1952-1954
Box 34, Folder 23  Elliot Bowles, 1955
Box 34, Folder 24  Ethyl Cleaner, 1946
Box 35, Folder 1  Famous Photographers School, 1963-1964
Box 35, Folder 2  Famous Writers School, 1962-1964
Box 35, Folder 3  Fedders-Quigan, 1951-1957
Box 35, Folder 4  First National Bank - Boston, 1958
Box 35, Folder 5  Floral Enterprises Inc., 1957-1958
Box 35, Folder 6  Foley Manufacturing Co., 1951
Box 35, Folder 7  Ford Maverick, 1969
Box 35, Folder 8  Foremost Evaporated Milk, 1957
Box 35, Folder 9  Frostilla, 1951
Box 35, Folder 10  General Baking, 1956
Box 35, Folder 11  General Electric, 1946-1962
Box 35, Folder 12  General Mills, 1948-1960
Box 35, Folder 13  Gold Bond Rock Wool, 1947
Box 35, Folder 14  B.F. Goodrich, 1948-1955
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 36, Folder 1</th>
<th>Health Insurance Plan (H.I.P.) of Greater New York, 1951</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 2</td>
<td>Heatilator, 1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 3</td>
<td>Holms &amp; Narver, 1956-1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 4</td>
<td>George A. Hormel &amp; Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 6</td>
<td>Hunts, 1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 7</td>
<td>International Salt, 1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 8</td>
<td>Jackson Perkins, 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 9</td>
<td>Jelke, 1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 10</td>
<td>Johnson &amp; Johnson, 1948-1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 11</td>
<td>Kellog Brushes, 1946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 12</td>
<td>Koppers, 1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 13</td>
<td>Lanolin Plus, 1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 14</td>
<td>Lay Potato Chips, 1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 15</td>
<td>Lehn &amp; Fink, 1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 16</td>
<td>Lever Brothers Gayla Soap, 1952-1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 17-18</td>
<td>Lever Brothers, 1951-1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 19</td>
<td>Libby Mc Neill &amp; Libby, 1951-1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 20</td>
<td>Liberty House, 1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 21</td>
<td>Liberty Mutual Insurance, 1950-1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 36, Folder 22-23</td>
<td>Los Angeles Times, 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 1</td>
<td>Magic Gardens Inc. (Carl Moliter), 1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 2</td>
<td>Maine Sardines, 1954-1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 3</td>
<td>Marine Midland, 1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 4</td>
<td>Mentholatum Company, 1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 5</td>
<td>Minneapolis-Honeywell, 1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 6</td>
<td>Minnesota Mining, 1954-1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 7</td>
<td>Minnesota Woolen, 1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 8</td>
<td>MJB Company, 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 9</td>
<td>Monsanto Chemical, 1947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 10</td>
<td>Mullins MFG. Corporation, 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 11</td>
<td>My-T-Fine (Penick &amp; Ford), 1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 12</td>
<td>Murine, 1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 13</td>
<td>National Association of Investment Companies, 1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 14</td>
<td>National City Bank, 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 15</td>
<td>National Gypsum, 1954-1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 16</td>
<td>National Schools, 1947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 37, Folder 17-18</td>
<td>Navy, 1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 1</td>
<td>New England Mutual Life, 1962-1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 2</td>
<td>New York State, 1962-1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 3</td>
<td>New York Stock Exchange, 1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 4</td>
<td>New York Sun, 1940s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 5</td>
<td>N.Y. Telephone Company, undated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 6</td>
<td>Niagra Mohawk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Box 38, Folder 7  Nixon Richard, 1960
Box 38, Folder 8  North American Aviation, 1955
Box 38, Folder 9  Northern Pacific, 1962
Box 38, Folder 10 Northrup King Grass Seed, 1955
Box 38, Folder 11 North Star, 1947
Box 38, Folder 12 Northwestern Bell Telephone, 1958-1959
Box 38, Folder 13 Ohio - 65, 1964
Box 38, Folder 14 Old Colony Trust, 1948
Box 38, Folder 15 Omega Watch, 1958
Box 38, Folder 16 Oneida LTD. (Community Plate), 1961
Box 38, Folder 17 Pace College, 1950
Box 38, Folder 18 Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), 1957
Box 38, Folder 19 Pan American Coffee Bureau, 1959
Box 38, Folder 20 Penick & Ford, 1959
Box 38, Folder 21 Pepsi Cola, 1965
Box 38, Folder 22 Personal Products Corporation, 1947-1950
Box 38, Folder 23 Peters Cartridges, 1946
Box 38, Folder 24-29 Phoenix Manual, 1960
Box 38, Folder 30 Pilco, 1960
Box 38, Folder 31 Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG), 1948
Box 38, Folder 32 Plasti-Liner, 1949 -1963
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 38, Folder 33</th>
<th>Polaroid Camera, 1949-1950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 34</td>
<td>Popular Science, 1970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 35-39</td>
<td>Prudential Insurance Company, 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 38, Folder 40</td>
<td>Puss N' Boots, 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 39, Folder 1</td>
<td>RCA Record of the Month Club, 1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 39, Folder 2-5</td>
<td>Readers Digest, 1941-1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 39, Folder 6</td>
<td>Remington Arms, 1947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 39, Folder 7</td>
<td>Remington (Mall) Tool, 1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 39, Folder 8</td>
<td>Republican National Committee, 1960-1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 1-4</td>
<td>Rexall, 1946-1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 5</td>
<td>Rybutol, 1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 6</td>
<td>S.A. Gin, 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 7</td>
<td>Schaffer, 1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 8</td>
<td>Schenley, 1956-1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 9</td>
<td>Sea Breeze, 1947-1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 10</td>
<td>Servel, 1957-1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 11</td>
<td>Sheafer Pen Company, 1949-1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 12</td>
<td>Simple Simon, 1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 13</td>
<td>Spirella, 1949-1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 14-15</td>
<td>Standard Oil, 1948-1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 40, Folder 16</td>
<td>Squibb, 1947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 41, Folder 1</td>
<td>Texas Consumer Finance, 1962-1964</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Box 41, Folder 2  Timken, 1959
Box 41, Folder 3  Touch-O, 1948
Box 41, Folder 4  Trushay, 1956
Box 41, Folder 5  TV Guide, 1970
Box 41, Folder 6  US Air Force, 1962
Box 41, Folder 7  US Steel, 1956-1965
Box 41, Folder 8  Underwood Deviled Ham, 1953
Box 41, Folder 9  Warner Lambert, 1960
Box 41, Folder 10  Western Condensing, 1954
Box 41, Folder 11  Wildroot, 1946-1958

Box 42  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964
Box 43  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964
Box 44  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964
Box 45  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964
Box 46  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964
Box 47  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964
Box 48  Wall Street Journal, 1947-1964

Subseries 4.3: Copy testing results
Box 50, Folder 1  Copy testing, General Electric, 1938
Box 50, Folder 2-4  Copy testing, Readers Digest, 1949-56
Box 50, Folder 5-6  Copy testing, Woman's Day, 1947
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 50, Folder 7</th>
<th>Copy testing, Vitamin Corp. of America, 1954-1955</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 50, Folder 8-10</td>
<td>Copy testing, various clients, 1948-1970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 50, Folder 11</td>
<td>Grolier Split Run test, 1970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 55</td>
<td>55 copy testing lantern slides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 56</td>
<td>Copy testing lantern slides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 57</td>
<td>Copy testing lantern slides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 58</td>
<td>Note cards for slide talks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 59</td>
<td>Copy testing results, various clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 60</td>
<td>Copy testing results, various clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 61</td>
<td>Copy testing, various clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 62</td>
<td>Proof sheets, various clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 63</td>
<td>Copy testing results, various clients</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Return to Table of Contents*
Series 5: Business Files

This series includes BBDO files and correspondence from the 1930s through the 1980s. This series includes many of BBDO’s internal manuals and instructions on copy-testing and direct mail, many authored by Caples. This series also contains notes, clipping files, and “tickler” or idea files, mostly from the period of Caple’s retirement. Also found here are Caples’ many awards and honors from advertising and direct marketing organizations.

Box 51, Folder 1-6 BBDO Copy Testing Manual", undated
Box 51, Folder 7 BBDO, Copy Testing Background", circa 1946
Box 51, Folder 8 BBDO, "How To Test Copy", undated
Box 51, Folder 9 BBDO Research Services and Facilities, 1968
Box 51, Folder 10 BBDO Statistical Significance Calculator, 1969
Box 51, Folder 11 BBDO Copy Research bulletins, 1946-1947
Box 51, Folder 12 BBDO, "Copy Cornucopia", 1977
Box 51, Folder 13 BBDO ad writing tips, circa 1944-1971
Box 51, Folder 14 BBDO, “Successful Mail Order Selling, 1952
Box 51, Folder 15 BBDO, "Plan for Testing A/V Direct Mail, 1967
Box 51, Folder 16 BBDO, "FOM Direct Mail Test", 1968
Box 51, Folder 17 BBDO, "Making Small Ads Pay", undated
Box 51, Folder 18 BBDO promotional publications, circa 1927-1962
Box 52, Folder 1 BBDO memos, circa 1930-1971
Box 52, Folder 2 BBDO correspondence, 1930-1932
Box 52, Folder 3 BBDO news clippings, 1937-1938
Box 52, Folder 4 BBDO newsletter, 1950s-1980s
Box 52, Folder 5 BBDO profit sharing plan, 1952
Box 52, Folder 6  BBDO stock, 1957-1972
Box 52, Folder 7  BBDO severance compensation plan, 1983-1984
Box 52, Folder 8  BBDO speeches and articles, 1960s
Box 52, Folder 9  BBDO annual reports, 1966, 1982
Box 52, Folder 10  BBDO employees list, 1982
Box 52, Folder 11  Direct mail file
Box 52, Folder 12  Direct marketing file
Box 52, Folder 13  Direct Marketing Creative Guild
Box 52, Folder 14  Association of Direct Marketing Agencies
Box 53, Folder 1  Awards, 1980-1984
Box 53, Folder 2  Publicity, circa 1937-1987
Box 53, Folder 3  "They Laughed When I Sat Down..." publicity, circa 1939-1983
Box 53, Folder 4  Advertising Research Foundation, 1952
Box 53, Folder 5  ARF/AAF activities, 1968-1969
Box 53, Folder 6  AAAA, 1968
Box 53, Folder 7  Annual Media Awards, 1968
Box 53, Folder 8  Idea file: television and radio
Box 53, Folder 9  Idea file: ad ideas
Box 53, Folder 10  Articles: legal issues in advertising
Box 53, Folder 11  Articles: advertising history, advertising legends
Box 53, Folder 12  Articles, interview: Rosser Reeves
Box 54, Folder 1  1977-1979 data
Box 54, Folder 2  1981 data
Box 54, Folder 3  1982 data
Box 54, Folder 4  Correspondence, 1981
Box 64          Awards

Return to Table of Contents