AUTOMAKERS have not always been the best stewards of the history and heritage of their brands. Some have begun to appreciate fully the value of these assets only in recent decades, it seems.

Likewise, the auto periodicals recording the first draft of that history have sometimes let their own archival materials slip away, the practical challenges of cataloging and storing their work taking precedence over its historical importance. But a few publishers are taking steps to protect, preserve, share, utilize — and in some cases profit from — their history.

The Revs Program at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., has been at the vanguard of the new movement to create an accessible repository of automotive history. The program describes itself as “a new trans-disciplinary field connecting the past, present and future of the automobile. The program aims to put the automobile at the center of the university and raise the quality of academic discourse at Stanford and beyond.”

Miles Collier, the founder of the Revs Institute in Naples, Fla., gave the initial gift endowing the Revs Program at Stanford. On behalf of the institute, Mr. Collier recently acquired the library of Karl Ludvigsen, a prolific automotive journalist.

This week, the Revs Program will announce that Hearst Publishing is transferring the archives of Road & Track magazine to the Revs Program. Road & Track, which dates back to 1947, was perhaps the most influential American automotive publication after World War II. It is considered the first to have taken a mature — almost New Yorker-like — approach to automotive journalism, said Reilly P. Brennan, the executive director of the Revs Program. He said that the magazine at the time used high-quality photography and first-rate writers who might have worked in any field, but chose to write about cars.

Road & Track’s editor in chief, Larry Webster, explained in a telephone interview that transferring the library to Revs would ensure that it is preserved intact and is available for research — seldom the case when it resided in Road & Track’s former offices in Newport Beach, Calif. (The magazine recently moved to Michigan.)

Mr. Brennan explained just how large that library was: 527 boxes weighing more than 10,000 pounds recently arrived at Stanford in two trucks. The collection will be housed at the Stanford University Libraries on the Palo Alto campus.

The goal, he said, will be to digitize, preserve and make available to the public on the Internet a collection rich with items much more diverse than a
stack of back issues. In addition to photographs and hand-drawn graphs (and even gas receipts from road tests), gems like a dinner receipt from an editors’ dinner with Enzo Ferrari are preserved. (Il Commendatore apparently didn’t pick up the check.)

Past owners of Road & Track were not always the careful custodians of history that Hearst is. Ron Sessions, now the senior online editor at Car and Driver, recounts a 1991 incident when Road & Track’s special-edition division was shut down. “Maintenance people went through the offices one weekend and threw anything that didn’t look like a personal item into the Dumpster,” he said. “Back issues, reference materials, everything.”

Autoweek, which is owned by Crain Communications, is taking a different, and more hands-on, approach to its archives. It has no intention to transfer them to a third party, and its plans are more commercial.

“We plan to mine the archives and the history of Autoweek extensively,” said Dutch Mandel, associate publisher and editorial director. “In the near future, all of Autoweek’s archives will be available and accessible to the public for a fee, and special issues will make use of Autoweek’s rich 54-year history in racing and in the automotive world.” Mr. Mandel said requests for access to Autoweek’s archives were frequent and ranged from simple back-issue inquiries to requests for marque- or event-specific information from researchers and authors.

If there’s an automotive equivalent of the Royal Library of Alexandria, it’s the Detroit Public Library. It has acted as the orphanage steps for carmakers and auto executives’ estates with nowhere else to place discarded bits of automotive history.

Jerry Burton, a journalist and author, has been a frequent patron. As a co-author of “100 Years of Chevrolet,” he had access to diaries by Semon E. Knudsen, a former General Motors and Ford executive. “I could tell based on his handwriting if he was having a good or a bad day,” Mr. Burton said. “You can only get that sort of insight by looking at the primary source material.”

Some preservation efforts are devoted to the history of motor sports. The International Motor Racing Research Center in Watkins Glen, N.Y., is a private organization, not affiliated with an institution of higher learning or a publisher, that seeks to preserve, catalog and digitize films, photographs and memorabilia and make its resources available on the Internet. Recently, the group sponsored a retrospective on the prewar Italian racer Tazio Nuvolari featuring items from its collection.

The legalities of wholesale digitizing remain somewhat murky for entities that are neither copyright owners nor their representatives. Because of a quirk in United States copyright law in 1950-63, much of the documentary auto history from that period might be in the public domain; owners of works published during this time had to renew copyrights within the initial 28-year term of protection. Those who did were granted an additional 67 years of protection; the works of those who did not entered the public domain after just 28 years.

For More Information:

Revs Program at Stanford: revs.stanford.edu
Stanford University Libraries: library.stanford.edu
Road & Track Magazine: roadandtrack.com