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Buried treasure: Iron Mountain's secret storage complex

(Boston Globe) Iron Mountain's vast data storage complex 220 feet underground houses historic photos, master recordings by Elvis Presley and other artists, and reams of sensitive business data.

By Travis Dove, for the Boston Globe

By Robert Weisman
Globe Staff / September 2, 2008

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BUTLER COUNTY, Pa. - Mine foreman Chuck Doughty steers his golf cart through a vast labyrinth of limestone tunnels, passing armed guards, bulging gray walls studded with dynamite holes, and storage vaults the size of Wal-Mart's.

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Squirreled away in this subterranean world 220 feet beneath the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania are some of the nation's iconic photos: original prints and negatives of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue, Harry Truman playing the piano for Lauren Bacall, and Ted Williams clowning with Joe DiMaggio before an All-Star game. They are stored along with cultural artifacts, such as master recordings of Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley, and sensitive data from Wall Street investment houses and top-secret government agencies.

All of it is safeguarded in a hidden 145-acre complex owned by [Iron Mountain Inc.](#), the Boston-based data protection and storage services company. Security here is so tight the federal government classifies it just one level below the White House and Pentagon.

Since the 2001 terror attacks, financial firms, medical providers, and other companies have speeded efforts to store important documents offsite. At the same time, as digital data have proliferated and cyber-attacks have increased,



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they have also been scrambling to back up their records at remote locations. And recently, pharmaceutical companies have looked to transfer digital data into physical formats, in case their computer networks are destroyed.

"We are entrusted with some one-of-a-kind collections, very valuable, irreplaceable documents," said Doughty, whose title is "vice president - the underground" but who is often referred to as the complex's mayor. His domain, where he's labored for 36 years, is part of a former US Steel Corp. mine north of Pittsburgh. The site, believed to be the world's largest document storage facility, boasts not only world-class security but a climate-controlled preservation environment ideal for protecting the country's critical data and artifacts.

Iron Mountain has quietly built a \$3 billion-a-year global business managing information for companies and organizations that are required by law to hold onto vital records, ranging from charters to deeds to patents. Some can eventually be disposed - for that, Iron Mountain has a mammoth paper shredding plant in Jersey City, N.J. The underground facility in Pennsylvania is the company's data-storage mecca, attracting a roster of top-drawer customers such as digital image company Corbis Corp., Bertelsmann Music Group, and [Marriott International Inc.](#)

The company acquired the subropolis when it purchased National Underground Storage Inc. in 1998. Iron Mountain has since invested tens of millions of dollars in excavations, technology upgrades, and green energy initiatives, including a geothermal cooling research project with Carnegie Mellon University to recycle water from abutting mines. The water cools the site's 110 data vaults, built into limestone-walled caves that are plugged with heavy freezer doors.

On a recent afternoon in a micrographics lab that is part of the underground complex, employees stationed at giant digital archive machines downloaded customers' data, converting it to microfilm that can be stashed for centuries. At one workstation, workers listened to Madonna's "Vogue" at high volume while methodically turning streams of bits and bytes into microfilm. "We're vogueing," said operations supervisor Christy Cook.

Storing paper documents, digital tapes, and microfilm - plus leasing space to customers such as Corbis, which manages its own storage of prints, negatives, and film reels here - is proving lucrative for Iron Mountain. Sales climbed 15 percent and operating income was up 11 percent in the three months ending June 30, as the company notched its 78th consecutive quarter of storage-revenue growth.

"Companies are beginning to worry about the security of their most vital records," said industry analyst Edward J. Atorino, managing director for Benchmark Co., a New York brokerage firm. "So you're seeing some of these new businesses, like microfilm, percolating below the surface. And Iron Mountain is taking advantage of it."

Richard Reese, executive chairman of Iron Mountain, said there's room for the underground site to expand - in neighboring parts of what originally was a 1,000-acre mine or at two or three alternative locations in nearby abandoned mines - though he wouldn't discuss specifics. "What you see down there is an operation that shows the complexities of our business," said Reese.

Driving through the countryside above, past cornfields, cattle farms, and forest, a motorist can't spot any sign of the Fort Knox of data and documents, until reaching a sprawling parking lot filled with cars and a sign bearing Iron

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Mountain's triangular logo.

Another sign directs those arriving down a slope into an opening in the side of a rocky hill. Inside, security guards check identification badges of about 2,700 employees of Iron Mountain and of the customers that lease space from the company to store records and, in some cases, operate remote data centers. (Iron Mountain also runs its own fire department and water treatment plant.)

The flourescent-lit caves shine some light on the sweeping changes that have reshaped this region and the broader business landscape over the past century. Hundreds of miners, many from southern and eastern Europe, labored underground from 1902 to 1950 hauling limestone - used as flux to drain impurities from pig iron during the steelmaking process - from what was then US Steel's Anandale mine. Today, some of their grandchildren move vital records down to the same spots to be stored and retrieved on demand.

Just as in the past, working below the earth's surface is not for everyone. Even though the Iron Mountain site is the premier employer in this rural county, Leslie Armstrong, its supervisor of employee services, said about two out of 10 applicants ultimately decide they can't hack it in a windowless world. "Most of us get used to it," she said.

For some, an underground job has its charms. Ann Hartman is library and records manager for Corbis, the Seattle-based company founded by Bill Gates. Corbis has operated its largest film preservation center in space leased from Iron Mountain here since 2001. As part of her job, Hartman scans, sorts, files, and retrieves photos from the company's massive Bettmann Archive.

It's a daily history lesson: Here is Warren Harding shaking hands with Babe Ruth. There are construction workers lunching on a crossbeam at a New York high-rise. There is also Richard Nixon bowling and Ronald Reagan sharing a laugh with Queen Elizabeth.

Prints and negatives for these and thousands of other photos are stored in a freezer-like vault cooled to 45 degrees with 35 percent humidity. The vault also houses banks of card catalogs, glass plates in wooden crates, and rows of file cabinets crammed with photos of historic figures (or actors who have played them in movies), athletes, and celebrities: Jennifer Lopez is across from Thomas Jefferson; Martina Hingis has a place next to Hootie & the Blowfish.

Displaying the famous print of Einstein with his tongue out - from a photo taken in the winter of 1951 in Princeton, N.J. - Hartman shows off some of her amateur historian's repertoire.

"I understand Einstein's family wasn't happy with that photo," she says. "They felt it didn't represent him well."

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