

Stephen F. Austin State University

East Texas Research Center a treasure trove for history buffs

Emily Taravella - May 30, 2007



Linda Reynolds, director of the East Texas Research Center, holds a senior memory book from a graduate of the Nacogdoches High School class of 1920.



Linda Reynolds, director of the East Texas Research Center, flips through an old book in the “back stacks” of the facility. Records dating back to the 1800s can be found in the back stacks, along with journals, diaries, family Bibles, photographs and all sorts of other East Texas memorabilia.

Those who love to prowl around old attics, rummage through time-worn trunks or peruse pictures and documents from years gone by will discover a treasure trove in the East Texas Research Center.

Entering the ETRC, on the second floor of Ralph W. Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University, one finds a reading room lined with bookshelves, a card catalog and cabinets where vertical files are stored.

But behind a door in the back corner of the ETRC, there is so much more. In the “back stacks” of the ETRC, one can discover all manner of historical relics.

There are county records dating back to the 1800s ... welfare records from San Augustine County dating back to the Depression ... grade sheets for Stephen F. Austin students dating back to 1923. (Only three people on campus are allowed to view students' grades, which include handwritten scores entered by the first SFA president, Dr. A.W. Birdwell.)

Scrapbooks, journals and records from U.S. Congressman Charlie Wilson's time in office are part of the collection. A life-size poster of a waving, grinning “Good Time Charlie” sits atop a file-cabinet in the back stacks.

“We just love Charlie!” Linda Reynolds, ETRC director said with a smile.

Papers from state Sen. Roy Blake's time in office are preserved for posterity in the ETRC.

In 1999, the family of long-time Nacogdoches photographer Charles Robinson donated 70,000 prints and/or negatives to the collection. Robinson's career in East Texas spanned more than 40 years from the 1950s to the 1980s. Students and staff have painstakingly gone through the photographs cleaning them, placing them in archival mylar sleeves, labeling them and filing them. There are boxes yet to go.

“Everyone who works or volunteers here gets to help with that project,” Reynolds said.

Issues of The Daily Sentinel going back to the early 1900 are saved on film, providing a useful tool for researchers. An extensive collection of maps offers a look at how East Texas has changed and evolved over time, and an index of local obituaries provides insight for genealogists and others who are researching previous generations.

Reynolds is in the process of creating an online database of obituaries that includes the name of the deceased, the date he or she died, publication dates for the death notice in the newspaper, and the names of the deceased person's mother and father.

Reynolds strives to make the information at the ETRC available online as often as possible. Case in point: Her extensive research into quilting groups in rural East Texas can be accessed at www.tides.sfasu.edu/qset/index.htm.

Reynolds has interviewed quilters from Nacogdoches, San Augustine, Blair, Livingston, Sacul and Nat to uncover their stories.

A professor at Texas Women's University wrote a thesis about quilters in urban areas, Reynolds said.

“It is interesting to see how the stories of the urban women differ from those of the rural women,” she said. “For elderly women living in the country, quilting clubs are a social outlet. It's their way of

checking up on each other — of making sure that they're all OK.”

Reynolds has photographed the quilts and made them available for viewing online. Each entry includes the name of the quilt, the name of the quilter and a short story. Some of the entries have accompanying audio files.

Through availability on the Internet, other collections at the ETRC also can be enjoyed by a world-wide audience. The collections have been imaged and made available through the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences-funded Texas Tides program (<http://tides.sfasu.edu>). Texas Tides staff is currently working on digitizing 20th- and 21st-century material to add to the imaged collections, Reynolds said.

The collection keeps growing.

Reynolds recently received a senior memory book from a graduate of the Nacogdoches High School class of 1920. Autographs and “senior sayings” are written in a script that looks much different than that of today’s young writers. Black-and-white photographs feature bright-eyed youngsters on the cusp of adulthood. The friendships they forged and the memories they made might have been forgotten — if not for the ETRC.

This senior memory book is just one of hundreds of similar items that have been donated to the ETRC. Family Bibles, personal diaries, journals and letters meet the sole criteria for donations: They are of historical value in East Texas.

In going through some of the keepsakes and diaries, one could feasibly stumble across secrets that were hitherto taken to the grave.

“We’ve received old, rare books as donations,” Reynolds said, gesturing to texts with cracked spines and curled, crumbling pages. “We also have scrapbooks that are given to us every year by groups such as the Daughters of the Confederacy. It’s interesting to see how scrapbooking has evolved over the years.”

Film footage from SFA football games dates back to the 1970s. Student artwork, created in the wake of the Columbia shuttle disaster, is included in a newer collection of interviews and artifacts. As the collections continue to grow, unfortunately, so does the mold.

Reynolds said students and staff don gloves, goggles and special suits once a year to wipe down every book and shelf on the floor — a formidable task.

When a consultant from the Northeast Document Conservation Center visited the ETRC last week, she made three immediate observations.

“We need more space, more staff and better climate control,” Reynolds said.

None of this came as a surprise. But with the written, expert opinion from this consultant, Reynolds said it should be easier to apply for grants and to articulate the reasons the center needs more space and its own heating, ventilating and air conditioning.

The consultant’s full report will be available in July, and Reynolds said she is looking forward to reviewing it.

The ETRC is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays when the university is in session.