This month, the Arkansas History Commission bids a fond farewell to two of our longest serving employees, Ronnie Watts and Emma Johnson. Both have performed their duties in the microfilm department for many years and we are saddened to see them leave.

Ronnie began his career here at the AHC on November 16, 1970. It was happenstance that he should already be friends with Russell Baker, who was on staff at the AHC. Russell contacted Ronnie and told him that a job would be opening soon at the AHC. From there, Ronnie has had a long and accomplished career. Ronnie has served the state under three directors, Dr. John Ferguson, Dr. Wendy Richter, and now Dr. Lisa Speer.

In his 43-year career, Ronnie has seen many changes at the AHC. Ironically, though, he says that technology really has not changed much. The microfilming process is the same now as it was when Ronnie began. “One thing that is pretty much the same is that I’m afraid of spiders,” says Ronnie. Ronnie has had to face his fear several times in his career. Often he'd pick up newspapers for microfilming that were not in the best condition. “One time there were brown recluses inside,” he shudders. “Maybe they weren’t brown recluses,” he retracts, “but a spider is a spider. I was probably more concerned that they’d get out in the truck we were using to haul the papers.”

When asked what he plans to do in his first week of retirement, Ronnie smiles wryly and replies, “Sleep late.” In addition to catching up on some well-deserved sleep, Ronnie and his wife, Nancy, plan on traveling. “I’d like to go west,” he says, “but here in this state, I’d like to visit all of the state parks.” What will the AHC be like without Ronnie?

“Ronnie Watts is the reason the Arkansas History Commission has such an exemplary microphotography program. The fact that we have the largest collection of microfilmed state newspapers is largely thanks to the efforts of Ronnie and the staff he supervises. Replacing him will be impossible. We can only hope to find someone who will provide the same kind of solid and reliable leadership as Ronnie, and who can guide the Imaging and Preservation section as it moves further into the digital age. From a purely personal perspective, he’s just an all-around good guy, and I’m going to miss him,” said Dr. Speer.

Emma Johnson has been at the AHC for a mere thirty years. She began her career in microfilm at the Arkansas Health Department and then moved over to the AHC in 1984. By then, Ronnie was a fourteen-year veteran of the AHC. In fact, he was pretty used to working alone and doing most of the work. This changed once Ronnie assembled a staff that he could trust to work with the equipment.

Unlike Ronnie, Emma predicts that she will still wake up really early. She still awakes at five o’clock every morning, even on the weekends, so she does not think that is going to change once she retires. She will spend more time visiting her mother in Holly Grove. Of course, she will also be the doting grandmother. Her granddaughter has already said that she expects Emma to visit her often.

Emma attributes her longevity at the AHC to having a great work environment. “Ronnie just made it a good place to work. He was always encouraging,” she reflects. The feeling is mutual. When asked about Emma, Ronnie says that she has always been solid and dependable. “She has always been extremely smart and modest. She is the type of person who doesn’t go around telling people how smart she is. Instead, she shows it in the way she works and carries herself.”

We are really going to miss both of them. They are irreplaceable and we wish them well (and are a bit jealous) in their retirement.
Your book club has decided to read *Marjorie Morningstar* and you remember that it’s in a box of books, together with your high school yearbook, that you left on a shelf in the garage five years ago. But when you open the box, everything smells so musty that you suspect it’s a lost cause.

Be of good faith. You may have to check out a copy of *Marjorie Morningstar* if you’re going to have it read by next month but there is something you can do in order to effect a “save” – it’ll just take a little bit of time.

Stack the books in a clean box (if doesn’t need to be acid free or “archival”), then set a dish of old-fashioned kitty litter of the non-clumping type, baking soda, or crushed charcoal in with the books. Don’t sprinkle the books with your chosen substance, simply place an open dish full on top or next to the books. Next, tape the box shut very tightly and bring it into the house.

Check it in a month and change the kitty litter or charcoal. Repeat this process for up to 6 months to give your chosen substance a chance to absorb the musty smell. You’ve saved your high school yearbook and you can set *Marjorie Morningstar* aside for your granddaughter.

James Lawson, one of the Black History Commission board members, also sits on the Sherman Park CDC Board. The board, including Mr. Lawson, are involved in the Mentor Empowerment Friday program, which mentors 5th grade boys at the 7th Street Elementary School. The goal is to provide the young boys with avenues and opportunities for them to succeed. This past February, James challenged the boys with an essay question: Dr. Carter G. Woodson, called the “Father of Black History,” often said that he hoped the time would come when Negro History Week would be unnecessary; when all Americans would willingly recognize the contributions of Black Americans as a legitimate and integral part of this country. Has that time come? Is it still necessary to observe Black History Month? Why or why not? There were 17 essays submitted and several will be on display at the Black History Commission of Arkansas workshop on June 7, 2014, at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, entitled: “Teaching African American History in Arkansas Schools: The Current Reality.”

Black History Commission News

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Conservation Corner

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From the Director

I write this column as the one-year anniversary of my first day on the job as Director of the Arkansas History Commission draws to a close. The months have mostly raced by, I think largely because of the near constant level of activity that characterizes our daily work. I’m very fortunate to work with a talented and dedicated group of people at the Commission and our regional archives at NEARA and SARA. In the last year, they have provided, at various times, inspiration, humor, comfort, creative energy, encouragement, and support. They have been excellent collaborators in this last year’s major initiatives, growing and changing them in most wonderful ways. I can’t think of a better use of this “anniversary column” than to reflect on their collective accomplishments at the History Commission in the time that I have known them.

Some of the highlights of their work over the course of the last 365 days include:

- Surveying over 4,000 cubic feet of collections during the physical inventory of collections
- Revamping our digital collections website, which will officially launch on July 1 – be watching for the roll out!
- Partnering with the Arkansas Humanities Council to create lesson plans for K-12 teachers and students
- Revamping the look of our newsletter, renamed The Arkansas Archivist in March 2014
- Expanding our social media presence to include Twitter and Pinterest, and expanding our Facebook following
- Establishing an official “intake” area for receiving collections, and codifying processing procedures in a best practices guide
- Planning several very successful AHC and Black History Commission of Arkansas workshops, at least two of which were supported in part by grants from the Arkansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment from the Humanities
- Securing an Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council grant to redesign our website
- Mentoring numerous student interns from Arkansas Tech, the University of Central Arkansas, Ouachita Baptist University, and Henderson State University

While these are some of the “highlights,” not to be overlooked are the many constant good works that the History Commission staff and regional archives staff regularly provide. These include research and reference support, public speaking at organizations and events around the state, creating interesting internal and traveling exhibits, preservation advice to individuals and agencies, as well as actively collecting and microfilming Arkansas’s historical records in all formats. How fortunate am I to work with such a creative and talented group of people! I look forward to seeing what the year ahead brings! — Dr. Lisa Speer

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News from NEARA

John Brown of Haddington (1722 - 1787) was an impoverished youth orphaned by adolescence. With little formal education, he came to master many languages and, eventually, enter the ranks of the clergy.

Brown firmly believed that the Authorized Version of the Bible, known to us today as the King James Version, needed to be adapted to be accessible to average people. The Authorized Version, commissioned by James I in 1604 and first released in 1611 (though revised several times thereafter), had served the Protestant faiths well for generations. The last major revision, the Oxford Revision by Benjamin Blayney in 1769, still fell short of what Brown believed was necessary. To address the shortcomings, he developed what he called “The Self-Interpreting Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments According to the Authorized Version with an Introduction; Marginal References and Illustrations; a Summary of the Several Books; an Analysis of Each Chapter; a Paraphrase and Evangelical Reflections upon the Most Important Passages; and Numerous Explanatory Notes.” The first edition of this Bible was published in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1778, and was republished many times into the twentieth century in both the UK and the United States.

NEARA holds a copy of this unusual Bible printed in 1844 in Glasgow, Scotland. Although it is not specifically significant to the history of northeast Arkansas, it is an interesting bit of religious history. Clergy from around the region have shown an interest in examining this somewhat rare work as an extension of their own religious studies.

News from SARA

The Arkansas History Commission was deeply saddened by the recent loss of Gail Martin, long-time staff member at the Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives (SARA). Gail Martin had 26 years of service at SARA, first starting as a volunteer under the late Mary Medearis in 1988, and eventually moving into a part-time position in which she served ten years. In 2002, Gail transitioned into a full-time position at SARA, where she held the position of Administrative Assistant III.

A native of southwest Arkansas, Gail was born in Magnolia, Arkansas, lived in Waldo (Columbia County) for most of her childhood, and spent much of her adult life in Hope. After graduating from high school, Gail joined the United States Air Force and worked in reconnaissance during the Vietnam era.

To patrons of the Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives, Gail was the heart and soul of SARA. Gail’s extensive knowledge of the holdings at SARA made her uniquely qualified to assist researchers and visitors at the facility. Faith Lynch, former SARA staff member, said of Gail, “I had the privilege of working beside her for four years . . . . She was in her element. She loved getting calls from people all over the United States and even overseas . . . . When visitors came in [Gail] . . . could usually go right to the source of what they were looking for. . . . [The] Arkansas History Commission has lost a great employee.” Her friends and colleagues at SARA, the Arkansas History Commission, and Historic Washington State Park will miss her greatly.

Gail is survived by her husband of 39 years, Larry Martin of Hope; two daughters, Christina Mukhtar (Yasir) of Sugar Land, Texas, and Tracy Graham of Texarkana; and one son Daniel Martin (Sylvia) of Willisville, Arkansas; and a host of other relatives and friends.

Gail’s funeral services were held on Thursday, May 22 at the Bodcaw Baptist Church No. 2, with interment following at the Memory Gardens in Hope. Gail’s family requested that memorial donations be made to the Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives (SARA), P. O. Box 134, Washington, AR 71862.
This month we feature Archival Assistant Brian Irby’s pick, the 1820 Acts of Arkansas. What is it and why did you pick this?

The first time I came across it, I found it interesting. It is the handwritten Acts of Arkansas from 1820, one of the earliest official government documents we have in our collection.

What makes it so interesting? I like to call this Arkansas’s ‘baby book’. If you look through it, you can see the first steps towards making the territory what it later became. For instance, you can see the creation of many of the early counties and the creation of county courts. One of the most interesting things is that this also had the official act moving the territorial capital from Arkansas Post to Little Rock. These were all hand signed by the first territorial governor, James Miller.

Is it mostly concerned with creating the territorial administration? For the most part, yes, but it also has some interesting things in it as well. For instance, there is a law in the book prohibiting dueling, which was likely a large problem for the early 19th century. There is also an odd law prohibiting the buying of horses from Indians. The law even made it a crime to borrow a horse from an Indian. Unfortunately, the law does not give an explanation for the law. I’d love to know why they were so serious about this.

Can researchers see this book? Absolutely, but since the book is rather fragile considering its age, patrons will only be able to see it on microfilm. It is just too delicate to be handled very often.

Meet Our Staff

Just as we say goodbye to two retiring colleagues this month, we welcome the newest member of our team, Adrienne McGill. She joins our Imaging and Preservation section as an Archival Technician. She is a 2001 graduate of Abundant Life School in Sherwood and then studied history at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, completing her BA and MA in public history in 2014. She focused her research on Black Nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam.

Her favorite thing about history is how it shows that people really do not change. “People have the same motives and needs throughout time,” she reflects. “It shows that, even though circumstances change, we have the same basic drives as our ancestors.” It is this continuity that is most interesting to her.

She will be focusing most of her energies here at the AHC on cataloging the AHC’s audiovisual collections, initially focusing on folk recordings that we acquired from the Ozark Folk Center at Mountain View. She is excited to be a part of this project, and to be bringing very interesting material to the public.

We are glad to welcome her to our team and look forward to many years of working alongside her!

Arkansas Foodways Seminar

Meet the Author with food blogger and travel writer, Kat Robinson

AHC staff awarding culinary-themed door prizes

Participants visit with Culinary Institute Chef Suzanne Campbell

New at the AHC

May Donations and Accessions

AHC
Arkansas Land Survey Division
6 cubic feet

SABA
Hope Chamber of Commerce
1.75 cubic feet

Katie T. Breese, Jackson, Mississippi, Trimble Family Tree
2 items

Hare Photo Collection from Stephens, Ouachita County, Arkansas
10 photographs

A.S. Neal Family Collection, FL.
0.25 cubic feet

We always receive more material than we are able to list in our newsletter. For a full listing, see our webpage (www.ark-ives.com) and our Facebook page.

Staff Picks

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