

2020 AND THE FUTURE OF ALABAMA HISTORY

ABOUT

2020 and the Future of Alabama History: Local Archives is a panel discussion held on Wednesday, September 9, 2020, featuring Robin Brown, [Chambers County Library Cobb Memorial Archives](#); Dr. Howard Robinson, [Alabama State University Archives](#); and Dr. Martin T. Olliff, [The Wiregrass Archives at Troy University Dothan Campus](#).

Sponsored by the [Alabama Historical Association](#) and the [Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University](#).

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TRANSCRIPT

Mark Wilson:

Good afternoon and welcome. I am Mark Wilson, secretary of the Alabama Historical Association and director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. And now, a welcome from Alabama Historical Association president, Frazine Taylor.

Frazine Taylor:

Good afternoon and welcome to our fourth Alabama Historical Association 2020 and the Future of Alabama History. Today, we are featuring local archives activists from Cobb Memorial Archives, Alabama State University Archives, and the Wiregrass Archives. Let's get started.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you, President Taylor. We are joined today by leaders of the archival community from across the state. Dr. Marty Ollif is professor of history and director of the Wiregrass Archives at Troy University Dothan. Robin Brown is archivist of the Cobb Memorial Archives, a part of Chambers County Library in Valley. Dr. Howard Robinson is archivist at Alabama State University in Montgomery. Thank you all for joining us today. 2020, to be a historian and an archivist in the year 2020 must be quite interesting to say the least. Here we are at the end of the summer, beginning of fall in the midst of a worldwide pandemic and also what we might describe as a moment of racial reckoning in the United States. In a real sense, we are witnessing history, but we are also experiencing a change in how we understand the past and what questions we bring to our study of the past.

Mark Wilson:

As you all know, the Alabama Department of Archives and History released a statement of recommitment to building a future characterized by justice, human dignity and a commitment to the wellbeing of all people. It's also true that local and institutional archives, like yours, are a critical part of our understanding of state and local history, including the history of slavery, segregation and the long-term effects of racism. And so I'd like to start out by asking each of you to tell us what kinds of stories of local history can we discover in your archive that might be of particular interest at this time. I think we'd love to start with the Wiregrass, with

Marty Ollif and then move to Valley with Robin and then move back to Institutional Archives Alabama State with Howard. So, Marty.

Marty Olliff:

Thanks for having us all today. And thanks for having me here in this. What kind of stories of local history can we find in the Wiregrass Archives for these interesting times? And let me start by saying that apocryphal saying may you live in interesting times is a curse rather than a blessing for a reason. And mostly because interesting times are hard times. When I was thinking about how to answer this question, I thought that maybe I should probably start with a small description of the Wiregrass Archives. We're a little different than many of the archives in the center of the state. Though I suspect that we're not that different from the Cobb Memorial Archives in that we have a collecting policy that extends into Georgia and in our case into Florida as well. We're willing to collect from approximately 30 counties in all three states to cover the Wiregrass, rather than just Wiregrass Alabama.

Marty Olliff:

We were also established in 2002. So quite frankly, we've not been around very long. So collecting has been resource challenging, as it is with every archives. That said, we've collected a thousand cubic feet of material from the local area. And as you can imagine, it's somewhat concentric. We have a lot of collections from the Dothan and Henry County area and some from Houston County, which we're the county seat on. Then we have fewer collections the further out we go. We also have a fair number of digital, some born digital, some digitized collections. A few of the collections that we have, have come about by us reaching out to document our community rather than waiting for collections to come to us. And this is in particular, we have gotten the collections that focus on African-Americans principally from documentation activities. For example, in 2003, we partnered with some other institutions in the area to help put together a centennial history of Houston County.

Marty Olliff:

And in that collecting project, we went out and solicited photographs from people that we could then scan and get information about and publish in Arcadia press book. And one of those collections was the Dorothy Brown collection. It's only three photographs, but it's two photographs of the first graduates of the Houston County High School for African Americans in 1940. So we have two young women of Mrs. Brown's extended family, the Weems family when they graduated. And they're two of the first graduates of the African American High School in Houston County. We have a photograph also of the program of that graduation. And we have a photograph of a branch of the Weems family in a mule cart, but in the 1950s. And the early 1950s, the Weems family owned about 200 acres since the era of Reconstruction in the Columbia area which is in the Northeast corner of Houston County.

Marty Olliff:

So that's a set of stories that you can begin to tease out from our collections. We had another project in 2016 funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, thank you very much. As well as a few other partners like some institutions, Troy University and the Alabama Humanities Foundation, called the Community Common Heritage Project. We again solicited photographs from people in our community, write large and scan them and got a lot of information about them. And we ended up with some pretty interesting collections from that. The Willow Dean Martin Hall collection is mostly work photographs. Photographs of her relatives at work. Her grandfather was an itinerant laborer. And so we have a few photographs of him in orange groves when he would go down to Florida to pick oranges during season. We have a few photographs of her mother as a daycare operator, a woman who owned a pretty prosperous daycare business.

Marty Olliff:

We have photographs of her from the 1970s and photographs of the daycare business. Some of which later on went to be published in a... I want to say Life magazine article. Ms. Hall has since written a few stories about particularly her mother. And so that's an enhanced collection that can still be worked on by anybody that's interested in doing that kind of research. We also have from that same collection and I really liked this, the Queen Amos collection, which should not only photographs of Ms. Amos, who was a member of the last group of WAC, Women's Army Corps, members in the early 1970s, before they were incorporated into the army per se. She also provided 135 multi-page African American funeral programs from her extended family and body of friends. And this collection was begun by her mother.

Marty Olliff:

So it's a multiyear collection. It begins in the 1930s, but it's really mostly in the late 1960s through the 2000s. We have those scanned as PDFs, but we've not put them up online yet for use. But they're available. And there's a lot of information that can be teased out of African-American funeral programs particularly for social and cultural historians. Finally, we have the Bill Church photo collection. In March 1958, a member of the planning board in Dothan drove around an overwhelmingly African-American neighborhood and town called South Side and photographed every piece of property in that neighborhood. Because that neighborhood was going to be turned over to an urban renewal slum clearance project. Which as we know, has never been particularly friendly for the people who have lived there. And indeed, instead of erecting new housing for the people that live there, this project drove all those people out and put in housing that no one that had lived there before could possibly afford. It drove out 175 African-American families and five working class white families.

Marty Olliff:

I have 180 photographs of this. And there's one in particular that I really like. It shows a number of houses up a street. And if you look carefully, there is a sign tacked to a telephone pole. If you know what you're looking at, and you expand this photograph fairly largely, you can tell that that sign is a 1958 George Wallace for Governor sign. Remember in '58, Wallace didn't run as the most segregationist governor. He didn't pick that up until the '62 campaign. These and a number of other documentation projects like our Veterans History Oral Project and the Wiregrass Rural Church Documentation Projects are how we have here in the Wiregrass, deliberately gone out and sought African-American collections rather than being in a position to accept African-American collections.

Marty Olliff:

And I say that because there is a divergence between my facility as part of Troy University and the fairly reticent African American community. This is not to cast dispersions on the local African American community, but as much as Dothan would like to say, like Atlanta, that it's a city too busy to hate, where it doesn't hate, it's not fully culturally integrated either. There's a great amount of mutual avoidance between the white community in Dothan and in the African American community in Dothan. And later on, Mark, I know you're going to ask us about what we want to bring in and I'll talk about another two other communities that we have in Dothan and the Wiregrass area that I'd like to begin addressing and have not gotten very far yet on it. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thanks Marty. That's a good overview of collections, but also how archives stand in the gap sometimes between communities in collecting. Talk to us about the Valley and Chambers County, Robin.

Robin Brown:

Okay, great. Well first, let me just say thank you so much for having me here and that it's great to be on this panel with Dr. Ollif and Dr. Robinson. Let me just give a little bit of background about our facility. I'm speaking to you from Cobb Memorial Archives in Valley, Alabama. And we were founded along with the H.

Grady Bradshaw Library in 1976. And I have been here in some capacity since 2014. And today I had in mind two collections that I'd like just to briefly discuss. These are two collections that I think have special importance in the year 2020. And the first one is called the Margaret Freeman Collection.

Robin Brown:

Mrs. Freeman was a retired school teacher in Chambers County. She had taught for 45 years and then when she retired, she became a local historian. She was able to gather and collect and preserve histories of African American schools and churches. And she donated two scrapbooks to the archives. So we're very fortunate to have those. And they do share a lot of history about the African American community that if she hadn't preserved it at that time, I'm not sure that it would have been preserved. So again, we're very fortunate to have that in our collection. And these scrapbooks do provide researchers with tools to access and fully incorporate into their histories, a more inclusive history of Chambers County.

Robin Brown:

And then there's one other collection that I wanted to mention briefly. And it is called the Chattahoochee Valley Human Relations Forum. It's a long collection title for a relatively small collection. But the forum was established in 1968 by three local women. And it soon grew to nearly 100 members. And the goal of this group was to gather together a racially diverse group of adults who sought to be examples of respect, understanding, communication and social equality in the community. And this happened right as local schools were beginning to integrate. The group disbanded in 1972, as I said, it's a relatively small collection. But we do have some papers that document their functions. And I think it's just a good example of a local community coming together and trying to address a larger problem. I don't know that they made everything completely smooth, but I do think that they tried to actively foster a better community environment and start to smooth the path for social change.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks for that. And that's a reminder that even small collections can be windows onto those larger movements that are happening and asking those probing questions and the management of scrapbooks as well. Things that some people might think, "Well, this may not be valuable." But obviously, it has great value. But now let's go to Montgomery, to Alabama State University. Dr. Robinson, talk to us about your vast collections there.

Howard Robinson:

Thank you for the invitation and the introduction. I'm pleased and honored to be on this panel discussion. Alabama State, I guess is unique in this conversation in that it is an institution that through the course of its evolution, found itself in the cross hairs of not only race relations in the American South, but in the modern rights movement specifically. And so, Montgomery is just an ideal place to be if one is interested in issues surrounding civil rights and social justice. And then Alabama State students, alum and faculty have also been involved in what we call the... what I used to call the Modern Civil Rights Movement. And I think I'm going to have to start thinking about different terminology because some of what's happened just recently in the last several months, has evenly eclipsed in the magnitude and the breath, some of the activism of the 1960s.

Howard Robinson:

However, if one is interested in looking at civil rights and really not just civil rights from a broader level but intricacies and the dynamics of organizations built around civil rights and human rights issues. Then we have been fortunate enough to have a number of collections. Probably one of the more important collections is the Montgomery Improvement Association Collection. This organization was created in 1955 in response to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. And so we saw that the black leaders in town in Montgomery came together, talked about a boycott. Let me back up a little bit. When Rosa Parks was arrested and many people know that

story, Rosa Parks was arrested, it was a professor on campus, Joanne Robinson, who was affiliated with an organization called the Women's Political Council.

Howard Robinson:

A group of about 300 black women centered at Alabama State, but they had branches in different parts of the city. And they were interested in political awareness and political education, but also they were at an advocacy organization but they had some issues. Women who were part of this organization had some issues with the buses. And so when Rosa Parks was arrested, they swung into action. They had already proposed boycotting the buses, but they had some hostility or some opposition from the black men in Montgomery. They were able to push through that hostility on the night of Rosa Park's arrest. And they ran off thousands actually mimeographed copies of a leaflet announcing a bus boycott on Alabama State's campus.

Howard Robinson:

Then the next day, they distributed these leaflets. And then that night, E.D. Nixon calls a number of people, including Martin Luther King. Says that we were looking at a boycott. We want to meet about this. There was a subsequent meeting and the creation of the Montgomery Improvement Association to execute the bus boycott. So this organization really sets the stage for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. So the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is supposed to do around the South, what the Montgomery Improvement Association did in Montgomery.

Howard Robinson:

And so many of the members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were also members of the Montgomery Improvement Association. So we have those papers. They are intricate and detailed papers and students who are interested in protests, in civil disobedience, come and look at those papers. There's a number of student activists who have utilized the collection because they want to understand the protests schemes of the past and how they could be applicable to the present. We also have, again, the E.D. Nixon papers. That's a very interesting collection. E.D. Nixon was a labor organizer. He was a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters which was a black labor union. And again, he was very integrally involved in the origins of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Howard Robinson:

And we also had a Robin and Jean Gretz collection. Reverend Robert Gretz is a Lutheran minister. Came to Alabama as a white minister, took over a church, Trinity Lutheran church in the center of the black part of West Montgomery. And so, he passed it to an all-black population congregation. And so he became intricately involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and we have his papers. He had a little phone book where every year he would utilize a different phone book and really he would capture all of his activities in his phone book. So, we must have 60 years' worth of his phone book appointments. But also his activities which transcended the Modern Civil Rights Movement and move into a human rights agenda. And so there are certainly materials in his collection respective to gay and lesbian, LGBT, agitation of rights respected to the rights of the handicap. They lived in Appalachian forest for some time and there's some advocacy documents in his collection.

Howard Robinson:

And then of course we have the Reverend Richard Boom collection. Boom worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but he created a spin off organization in Montgomery. And so his collection is a rich collection. He was of controversial figure, a more reactionary figure. And so you get to see some of the elements of the Modern Civil Rights Movement as you move into the late 1960, '68, '69, 1970. You get to see the reflection of that in his papers.

Howard Robinson:

That's just a few of the collections that we have at Alabama State University. And then what we're doing today, I'm understanding, because like Marty, I'm also a historian and so interested in social activism, we are reaching out to our students to get them to deposit with us images and conversations about their own participation in the various protests that they participated in when they return home during the COVID shutdown. I think that promises to be an interesting collection as we amass more information and materials relative to this most recent protest wave.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you. And I'm glad you mentioned that because I think it underscores the fact that none of these collections that any of you have talked about, would be there if it were not for your institution or an institution like yours, collecting those and archivists like yourselves who are processing those collections, caring for those collections and making them available for researchers. But it also sounds like that it's true, that you, at the same time are helping researchers find those collections and make those known to the wider world. You are also trying to preserve history that's taking place now. Or diversifying your collections with things that are out there because these collections don't just appear from nowhere. I guess sometimes they might on your back door, but mostly people are in contact with you because they have something of value that they want to provide to the historical community.

Mark Wilson:

And so my question now is related to, what do you hope the future of your archive will look like? What kind of collections do you hope to acquire in the future? And everyone watching you should know this might be a clarion call ultimately for you to get into your attic or into your church basement or somewhere else to respond to this call. And then after each of these folks respond to that question, we'll take questions on Facebook from anyone who's out there for any or all of the speakers. We'll go in the same order. Marty, what do you hope the future looks like?

Marty Olliff:

The Wiregrass Archives is like so many other archives, very resource constrained. We don't have a lot of shelf space. Even if I double my shelf space, I'm going to fill it up relatively quickly with collections that come in because we've started to get known in this area. But there is a difference between collecting materials, which is relatively passive and what archivists have known and have tried to do since the early 1970s and that shift the profession over to active collecting, usually referred to as documentation. And in my last little spiel, you heard me talk about documenting things and some documentation projects that we have done. This is the act of reaching out into the community to gather those things, writ large, that the community may not know that it has.

Marty Olliff:

Some of this is not written material. Many of the communities that traditionally don't have much to do with formal archives, don't have much to do with formal archives because they are not first and foremost, part of a culture that writes a lot of stuff down, that keeps a lot of records. These are not people that write diaries and necessarily write and keep letters that go back and forth between people. Our archives are full of that material. And what we found is, it tends to come out of already privileged groups. So one of the things that I know I need to do, is to reach out into the community of African Americans, of poorer whites, of our growing Latino population down here.

Marty Olliff:

Also, we have a fairly large Asian American, particularly a Southeast Asian American community here. And we have an emerging Middle Eastern community here, if we want to break it up by ethnicity. But like I said,

to a working class whites, middle class whites, upper-class whites, well-educated people tend to create a lot of their own records. They tend to save records. They tend to value written things and other groups tend to tell each other their stories. So we have to reach out into our communities and gather in those stories. This may mean photographic projects. This may mean, and it certainly does mean, oral history projects. And to gather in COVID-19 material for example, I started a project on March 20th. I started it with a letter to the editor of our local newspaper, The Dothan Eagle, soliciting mostly student writings based on the idea that a lot of teachers seem to be asking their students to write about their COVID-19 experiences.

Marty Olliff:

But I suspected that they didn't have any real place to put those writings of students. So I created this project for down here. It's grown a little bit. I didn't get a lot of response from the education community, but many other people wrote me and they wrote memoirs, you might say. I've also been contacted by people who wanted to give me a lot modern stuff, text strings from... I have one that wanted to give me a text string of 13 people. And so I ended up having 13 donor agreements come in with this text string so that we could use that and make it available for research.

Marty Olliff:

It's the old, "What did you do on your summer vacation?" But your summer vacation started in March because you locked down for COVID. We're going to continue to push that and find out what people in the Wiregrass did during their COVID activities. And we're bouncing back up again. So we may be locked down again, who knows? As well as reach out into our ethnic communities to gather their information, even if it's not recorded in a written fashion.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you for that. It's a good point. Robin, what does the future look like?

Robin Brown:

I hope in Chambers County and in Cobb Archives in the future, we will have a more diverse and inclusive historical record. I think we already do have inclusive records, but I would like to see it even increased and become a more fully representative of what life is like in Chambers County. And I'll just add, might even mention wonderful ways that outreach and that's something that we're working to do, although COVID-19 has made that a little difficult. One thing I've always found helpful in the past in terms of outreach and building new relationships and sometimes even gaining new collections, would be exhibits. So that's usually a good way for us to reach our community and to get people interested in things that we are collecting. One collection in particular I would love to see more of, I'm trying to compile a history of the Suffrage Movement in Chambers County.

Robin Brown:

I know that there was at least one Suffrage Association and haven't been able to find too many primary sources but several helpful club records like civic or study club records and newspaper articles. And so if anybody out there has anything with the Lafayette Suffrage Association, that would just be a remarkable find. And I did just want to mention one other point, because the COVID-19 crisis has been with this since March and it has become such a big facet of our lives in 2020. We put a call on Facebook to have people consider keeping records of their lives and consider donating them to the archives. And then in one fun outreach, we did a history club with summer along with our summer reading program. And one of the possible activities was to create something called a Quaranzine.

Robin Brown:

That's a homemade magazine about what your life has been like since the COVID-19 crisis. And so we've had a few wonderful artists take us up on that offer and it was mostly students aged maybe 10 to 13 that had turned in a Quaranzine. But I think one thing that's really neat about something like that is that, you get so young, it's like participating in history and not just participating, but actually making history and having a record that will be kept in the archives.

Mark Wilson:

Great. What a creative example of something happening in the community that needs to be preserved for future generations. Absolutely. Howard, what's the future look like Montgomery at Alabama State?

Howard Robinson:

Well, one thing is... Robin this Quaranzine, I really liked that idea.

Robin Brown:

Thank you.

Howard Robinson:

I'll find that someplace else. One of the things that I think we are doing at Alabama State or have been doing is partnerships. We partnered with the National Park Service and built an interpretive center that the National Park Service is running on the campus of Alabama State University. But the interpretive center deals with the Selma to Montgomery march and the voting rights campaign around that march. And so we certainly have made a focus of collected materials related to voting rights and the Selma to a Montgomery voting rights campaign. And what's interesting with just recently, we were looking for a picture of a young person, a high school student, who had participated in some of the activism and protest in 1965 and her father had shot some super eight color film of the Selma to Montgomery march, the last day of the march.

Howard Robinson:

And it was just wonderful. About 15 minutes of film. And so certainly photographs and film, they are really in high demand. We get a lot of requests for that. So we are looking towards growing that part of our collection. We have partnership with the National Park Service. So we're helping to provide some interpretation that they are utilizing in exhibits in that facility. And so we have certainly focused our collection things around voting rights and the Selma to Montgomery march. There's another built in mechanism that the dean of the library prompted me to initiate 17 years ago. And that is a patrons and donors program. One of the criticisms that we got was that, people donate to Alabama State's Archives and you all just put them in a box and put them in a room. They're never to be seen again.

Howard Robinson:

Yeah, we do put them in a box and put them in a room. A climate-controlled room and we have all these other states of the art accommodations to preserve our collection. However, we started doing a patrons and donors program, which allowed us to pull out our collection, to showcase highlights from the collection that we had approved over the past year, to find the people who have donated those connections and make monetary donations to out with John. So we partnered with the National Center for the Study of Civil Tights and African American culture. And so the archives and that organization on campus have a symbiotic relationship. And so that organization allows us to do public program programming. And so some of our exhibits drive those public programs.

Howard Robinson:

On the flip side, then we could make appeals to the public for specific types of materials through these thematic programs. And so that has worked out well. And then lastly, we have two rather large collections of the Alabama Democratic Conference political organization, and then the Alabama State Teachers Association, which was the black labor union for teachers before the merger of the two organizations to the white and black organizations to create the American Education Association. These two collections look at both politics and education, really in the county by county level throughout the state.

Howard Robinson:

So this is a rich collection that allows us to then want to augment that collection with other materials related to education throughout the state of Alabama, particularly African American education. So those are some of the areas that we'll be focusing on education, voting rights, of course we have a strong civil rights component to our archives and want to still and really try to come up with ways to make sure that we collect materials that reflect what's happening today in the protest climate that we are presently experiencing.

Mark Wilson:

Talk to us about the response of some students for that call for materials related to protests today. Are you getting students bringing stuff to put into the box to put into the room?

Howard Robinson:

We're actually starting to work with the SGA and some of the immediate young social influencers on campus. We have a message on our webpage, but we haven't gotten a lot of response from that. And so I think I'm going to prime the pump. I spoke at one of these protests in Montgomery and my wife and I went to the most recent march on Washington. I'm going to upload some of the materials that reflect my own involvement and then we're going to try to prime the pump with that approach. We're trying to figure out ways to reach students and get them to participate in. So that's been challenging.

Mark Wilson:

Leading by example, for sure. We have a question that's come through related to oral histories in your collections. And so I'm going to ask an unfair question, a terribly unfair question. If we can only listen to one oral history, one hour of oral history from your collection, assuming everyone has oral history collections, then what do you think we should listen to? Tell us a little bit about your oral history collections and then if we only had one hour to come listen, what should we listen to? Marty.

Marty Olliff:

I wish I'd seen this one coming. The second half of that question is going to be the tough one. The first half is relatively easy. Yes, we have lots of oral histories. We have of course, about 40 hours of tape which has now been digitized for our Veteran's Oral History project which began in 2003 and really only went until about 2005. Before I ran out of time to continue to do oral histories with local veterans. But we also have hours and hours and hours of histories that were taken from people in the area in the 1980s and 1990s. Generally, older people from an organization called Landmark Park. Dothan Landmark Foundation Inc. which runs Landmark Park. Also had an oral history program. And they went to retirement communities and talk to retirees about what life was like 60 years earlier in the 19 teens and 1920s, 1930s.

Marty Olliff:

And most of that has been digitized. There's also a class from one of our local teachers in the 11th grade American History class, did 15 to 20 minute oral histories of just to go out and do oral histories and to get used to doing that as a history lesson generally speaking of veterans. But they also captured a lot of information about one of the local World War II POW camp extensions that was here in Dothan. And we probably have close to a hundred of those, not a hundred hours, but a hundred individual discussions.

Marty Olliff:

Some of which are good and some of which are not so hot, then I have been teaching oral history classes on and off for 15, 18 years. And my classes donate their oral history product to the Wiregrass Archives. Some of the veterans stuff that I have is pretty interesting. A lot of this material is very interesting. Although I'd say that maybe the most interesting non-veteran thing that I have is an oral history of a wide spot in a local creek out in the country, in Geneva County, that was used both for a swimming hole and as a baptismal pool.

Marty Olliff:

And one of the most important things, one of the most interesting things that occurs with that particular oral history, is discovering that even on a Saturday or Sunday, when the kids were swinging on the rope, swing and splashing around in this pond, whenever they heard the congregation singing, coming down toward this pond called Frog Dip, then they would respectfully get out of the pond and wait until the baptism was over. We also have some photographs of one of the baptisms in this pond from the mid 1980s. So that might be the most interesting... At least it's the most interesting one to me. Although it is hard to make a choice about which is the most interesting that we have. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

That was a great example of why non-text based resources are so important for understanding the human experience for sure. Robin, what about oral histories in your collection?

Robin Brown:

Well, thank you. I think Marty's choice was a good one. It sounds like they have a lot of different, interesting or histories to choose from. But the one about Frog Dip sounded pretty fascinating. We do have collections of oral histories here. We have some that were collected probably in the eighties and nineties. And these are mostly done by historically minded community members interviewing each other. And I know one of the people whom we have interviews was a local columnist who wrote about historical features.

Robin Brown:

And so I think as part of his work in researching for the column, he would interview local people. So, we're very fortunate to have those. And we also have a pretty large collection of veteran interviews, part of the Veteran's History Project. And so if I had to choose one, it would be from the veteran's history project, I think. But I don't want to give any names. I think they're all wonderful. If I had to choose one, I would choose one from the Veteran's History Project.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you. And it's a good, important aspect of the community history that often brings in diversity even when we might not expected. Howard, oral history?

Howard Robinson:

Yeah. We have a pretty robust oral history collection. Maybe close to well, 300 and some more oral histories in different formats. Of course, we have a strong civil rights focus. We have a number of oral histories that are relative to the university over time itself. And went through civil rights, really cherished probably. We did have a Belafonte and we've been able to capture some of the really important voices in the civil rights movement. But there's an oral history with Mary Ethel Doelger Jones. And she was one of these civil rights singers. And so, during the bus boycott, she really got to start really in the midst of Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. But she was very young at the time, like nine or 10.

Howard Robinson:

Her oral history is engaging. One, I asked her to sing a number of songs during the oral history and that's just really enthralling to hear her sing these songs. And also people know the song, or should know, I would hope they know the song, "We Shall Overcome. Well, there's a verse of this song, "We Shall Overcome" that she is responsible for. That pretty popular verse of that song, "We are not afraid." And she tells a story of as a young person on going up to the Highlander Folk School in Multiple Tennessee to participate in civil disobedience nonviolence training with folks from Montgomery and the singers, these very young Montgomery girls who sang at different civil rights events.

Howard Robinson:

This particular day, the police raided the Highlander Folk School. It's in the mountains and they raided this, the Highlander Folk School, they cut off all the lights. And so the children initially were terrified, but in the darkness, they started to sing. And so they sang together so often that they knew how their co-parts sounded, they could recognize their voice. And so as they start to sing. Doelger knew that her sister was okay because she could hear her sister. And then she added the verse in that instance of, "we are not afraid," as a way to still their resolve and to motivate those young people to get through that, what was for them, a very traumatic experience. And to hear her tell that story and then sing that song and to understand that phrase then reverberated throughout the Civil Rights Movement I think was particularly rewarding for me to experience. And you could hear that on our webpage. She talks about that experience.

Mark Wilson:

What a beautiful story and the opportunity to hear that straight from your webpage is is wonderful. We've got a question. I'll put it on the screen for Howard, but it could be for anyone, from Debbie Pendleton. Always wanted to see an oral history project with Alabama teachers who were the first to teach in integrated public schools. That seems to fit nicely with your collections. Do you have any oral histories related to that topic?

Howard Robinson:

Actually, we do. We didn't do it purposefully, but we did talk to a number of teachers. And talking to Alabama State graduates, you're going to talk to teachers. Alabama State have its origins and for a long time was a school with a focus on teacher education. And so most of its graduates in the early years were teachers. And so, a number of those teachers in our oral histories talked about being a part of the integration process, either in Montgomery or in other places around the state or the South. And so, we do have some of those. I think that we could be more purposeful about that and start collecting. We'd have to do that pretty soon, but to start to collect those stories so that we could capture them for prosperity.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you. And this can be for anyone, from Frazine Taylor. Does it surprise you a question from Frazine on genealogy. What about genealogists who might want to visit your collection should they come see? Robin, let's start with you.

Robin Brown:

Yes. We certainly do have genealogy collections. From the extensive one, especially for East Alabama and West Georgia, you know, Chambers County and the surrounding area. So we'd be delighted to help, but I should probably note at the moment due to COVID-19, our genealogy room is not open. But I'm here and I'm happy to assist with questions in any way that I can.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you. Marty, genealogy collections?

Marty Olliff:

We have specifically not collected genealogical material. We began as an academic archives aimed primarily at a broader history, more standard history for students, but as you collect in communities, you run across collections that can be described as nothing but genealogical collections. And by that, I mean, they're focused specifically on genealogical materials. So we have collected some of that, but we don't have the library nor do we have the budget to buy library books to support genealogical collections. So we are very reluctant to take specifically genealogical collections. We'll take family history writ large readily, but specifically genealogical, that tends to go over to the Dothan Houston County Public Library.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Howard, genealogy?

Howard Robinson:

I chuckled at that question because yes, we do have both collections that I think could lend themselves to geological research and then collections that are really mobilized with an eye towards genealogy. And I say that because, some of that, Frazine Taylor, made sure that that happened at Alabama State. She works with us, I call her Queen Bee because she has a critical number of places around the state. But we have a funeral program collection. And then we have a collection of funeral homes, of black funeral homes throughout the state. And so those from a genealogical perspective are very useful. Then we have lists of all the graduates of Alabama State from the late 19th century to today.

Howard Robinson:

Then we made it for a geological purposes, I think. What is particularly useful is that we have all the student newspapers and there was several renditions of students' papers over the years, but all the student newspapers, accessible and keyword searchable online. We have all the yearbooks, accessible and keyword searchable online. The university had a long -time magazine they issue today. We have a full run of the ASU today magazines searchable online. So these resources are also useful for people who are interested in genealogy. And we've fielded for inquiries, both from professional historians, but also from people who are doing genealogical research about people they think were from Alabama State or taught at Alabama State at some point in the past. And so these resources help us to address their inquiries.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you. And on behalf of the Alabama Historical Association, I want to say thanks for participating in this program today. I think it gives us all a better sense of what archives are meant to do, what their mission is, what their purpose is and what you do. And we know that the future of Alabama history is dependent on what you are doing today. And so all of us in the history community and beyond say thank you for the work that you're doing. And we look forward to working with you in the future to meet all of the goals and all of the objectives that we've talked about here today. So thanks.

Marty Olliff:

Thank you Mark.

Howard Robinson:

Thank you.

Robin Brown:

Thanks so much.

Marty Olliff:
Thanks.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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