

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

November 2001

Discover Downtown Anew

Please join us to salute **25 Years of Downtown Discoveries** on Sunday afternoon, November 4 from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. at the Birmingham Public Library Gallery. Explore the city center's architecture and history in the Society's multi-media exhibit and our new book *The Downtown Discovery Tour + Heritage Hikes*. BHS designer Scott Fuller and Mrs. Van Os' Third Graders at McElwain School are planning special places for the library tour. Come and bring a friend, or two.

Our new tour book is dedicated to **Pat Camp** and to **Marjorie Lee White** for their passionate service, over more than two decades, to the tours and the Society. We will honor Pat and Marjorie Lee and the many volunteer guides, teachers and others who have made the Discovery Tours and this new book possible, fulfilling the Society's mission of contributing to the quality of life in our community, promoting the preservation of historic places and building civic pride.

We will also celebrate 25 years of the Birmingham Public Library Archives, the City's attic where significant records, documents and photographs are preserved and made available to the general public. Original copies of the historic photographs used in the *Downtown Discovery Tour* are available from Archives, telephone 226-3660. Don Veasey is curator of photographs, Jim Baggett the Director.

BHS Members for 2001 may pick up their copy of the annual publication at the reception. Other Member copies will be mailed on November 8.

Society Reissues *The Discovery Tour*

The 2001 *Downtown Discovery Tour + Heritage Hunts* features new self-guided materials for the exploration of the architecture and history of the Birmingham city center. Its 112-pages and 275 photographs, illustrations and maps help you take *The Downtown Discovery Tour* of the central business district as well as the new *Linn Park History Hunt* to the 20th Street park & governmental center; the *Going Downtown History Hunt* in the historic retail & theater district; the *Fourth Avenue History Hunt* in the historic black business district; and *A Walk to Freedom*, retracing the children's marches of 1963. An illustrated glossary of architectural terms and a timeline are also included. Teacher materials will be available at the Society's web site: www.bhistorical.org.

The *Discovery Tour + Heritage Hikes* is intended for use by school groups, families, the general public, and visitors to city center cultural institutions. The Discovery Tour begins at Birmingham Realty Company, the company that founded Birmingham in 1871. Hunts begin at the museum, library, Civil Right Institute and McWane Center.

First printed in 1977 and reprinted in 1984, the *Discovery Tour's* innovative approach to heritage education served as a national model for other programs in resource-based heritage education. Copies have been used on volunteer-led tours and in classrooms throughout the city and across the globe. In 1981, the American Association of State and Local History presented the national Award of Merit for our core educational program.

SOCIETY CALENDAR

25 Years of Downtown Discoveries
Exhibit
Nov. 1-Dec. 31, 2001
Birmingham Public Library Gallery

The Downtown Discovery Tour + Heritage Hunts
Publication Celebration
& Exhibition Opening
Nov. 4, 2001, 3:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.
Library Gallery

BHS Annual Meeting
Barber Vintage
Motorsports Museum
February 18, 2002, 7:00 p.m.

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Birmingham, Alabama 35222

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The Birmingham Public Library Archives Celebrates Twenty-five Years

The Birmingham Historical Society and the Birmingham Public Library's Archives Department enjoy a long and mutually beneficial relationship. Many of the books and exhibits produced by the Society are researched in the Archives. Likewise, the Society has deposited with the Archives much of its original research on Birmingham's industrial development, Five Points South, and Birmingham architecture. Members of the Society have enriched the Archives' collections with donations of personal and family papers. The Society and the Archives, both committed to the preservation and understanding of this community's history, celebrate 25 years of mutual service.

The Great Wall

A former Birmingham Public Library board member likes to tell about the day in 1976 when George Stewart, then library director, proposed establishing an archives department. Over the years the library had acquired a small collection of manuscripts, photographs, scrapbooks, and other archival material, including the papers of former Birmingham mayor George Ward and the papers of industrialist Erskine Ramsey. Having an archive, Stewart argued, would provide a place and a person—Marvin Whiting—to care for this material, and perhaps the opportunity to collect more. When asked by the board how much space this would require, Stewart pointed to one wall in the meeting room and said, "No more shelving than would fill that wall."

George Stewart may have known better all along. Shortly after the Archives was established the library acquired one of its largest and most significant collections, the papers of real estate developer Robert Jemison, Jr. In the coming years the department would add hundreds more collections, including the records of the Elyton Land Company (the company that founded Birmingham), the records of Sloss Furnaces, the papers of Birmingham's last seven mayors, the records of Church of the Advent, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Independent Presbyterian Church, First Presbyterian Church, Temple Emanu-El, the YMCA and YWCA, the Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce and Operation New Birmingham, the papers of numerous Birmingham families and individuals, records of clubs and civic groups, maps, architectural drawings, and more than 400,000 photographs.

A quarter century after George Stewart's meeting with the library board the library's archival collections have



Architectural rendering of the Birmingham Public Library, now the Linn-Henley Research Library and home of the Archives Department.

outgrown that one wall and now fill more than two miles of shelving in the Linn-Henley Research Library. If every piece of paper in the Archives were put in one big stack, it would reach higher than Red Mountain. In fact, twelve times higher.

Build It and They Will Come

Every day someone new discovers the Archives Department. Many are area residents who are referred there by the county courthouse as they track down information on their homes and businesses. It is not unusual for those who visit for utilitarian reasons to linger and research some other aspect of Birmingham's past that interests them—baseball at Rickwood, old Birmingham streetcars, or the history of the neighborhood where the person grew up. People who have seen copies of the department's historic photographs at a neighbor's home or on the walls of restaurants like Silvertron and O'Charley's will come to search the collections for images that interest them.

In recent years researchers have been able to discover the Archives by searching the World Wide Web. A key word or phrase relating to Birmingham history typed into many search engines will lead researchers to the Archives web site. All of the department's processed collections are listed there and with the recent addition of two new staff members, the Archives Department has been able to add more information about its collections to the web site. The department now receives requests for information and research assistance from throughout the United States and as far away as Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Many researchers plan trips to Birmingham based on the material they find described on the web site.

Often researchers know the Archives by reputation long before they visit. The department's collections have been used by many of the world's leading historians and filmmakers to produce hundreds of books, articles, dissertations, theses, and films. Books researched in the Archives have won the Pulitzer Prize, the Bancroft Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Lillian Smith Award, and the Robert Kennedy Book Award. Documentaries and other motion picture productions researched in the Archives have appeared on the History Channel, CNN, PBS, Turner Network Television, MTV, VH1, and the Lifetime Network. Some of these productions have won the Emmy Award, the Peabody, and have been nominated for the Academy Award (the Oscar).

Still Growing

In its first twenty-five years the Birmingham Public Library's archival collection has grown from a few boxes of material kept in a cubicle to the second largest archival collection in the state. A staff of one has grown into a staff of seven. Old index cards typed on manual typewriters, once used to access the department's collections, are being replaced by the World Wide Web. The work done so far, and the work still to be done, will enrich the life of this community and help it understand where it has been, where it is now, and the possibilities for where it might go.

The Archives Department is open to the public Monday-Friday, 9:00-6:00.

For information on the Archives and its collections visit the BPL web site at www.bplonline.org and click on "Archival Resources."

Jim Baggett
Regina Ammon

Digging Deep — The Collections of the Birmingham Public Library Archives

Archival repositories focus on collecting material relating to a specific subject or geographic area. The Birmingham Public Library's archival collections concentrate on recording the history and development of the Birmingham area and the lives and experiences of Birmingham's people. Archival collections record history's great moments, life's trivialities, and most every human experience in between. And unlike published history, in archival collections these great moments and trivialities are recounted by those who lived them. Diaries in the Birmingham Public Library Archives record the experience of an 1890s horseback ride up Highland Avenue, the joy and freedom brought by the arrival of the streetcar, and the fear and uncertainty of seeing one's country go to war. Letters tell of new babies, declined marriage proposals, and how difficult it could be to buy sugar in Birmingham during World War II. Scrapbooks help preserve the images of Birmingham's old Mardi Gras and show the fascination one Jefferson County coroner had for train wrecks and gun fights. Business ledgers record the transactions of grocery stores and the plans of men building a new city they had decided to call "Birmingham." Police reports can describe the exploits of a shoe thief and the horror felt by church worshippers when the building explodes around them.

In addition to material documenting industrialization and the Civil Rights Movement—those things for which Birmingham is best known—the Archives Department collects material on a variety of subjects including local architecture, women's history, sports, religious history, music, travel, entertainment, and the arts. Within the arts an area of special focus has been preserving the papers of Birmingham writers and journalists. The collection includes the papers of well known writers such as Charles Gaines, author of *Stay Hungry*, and Vicki Covington, author of *Last Hotel for Women*, the papers of unknown writers who never published, and the papers of journalists like Ryland Randolph, James Saxon Childers, and John Stewart Van der Veer.

Investigating Journalists

Colonel Ryland Randolph (1835-1903) was a prolific and colorful journalist and editor. In 1984 V. M. Randolph, a descendent, donated a scrapbook to the Archives containing both signed and pseudonymous newspaper articles by the old newspaperman. A University of Alabama alumnus, former plantation owner, and civil war veteran, Randolph became a newspaper editor when he established the Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor* in 1867. In this and other papers, Randolph, an ardent Southern apologist, inveighed against corruption wherever he saw it. Reconstruction era leaders, carpetbaggers, the leadership of the University of Alabama, and the Alabama Democratic Party were his frequent targets.



Material in the Archives is preserved in a secure, climate controlled facility.

Randolph's columns reveal a combustible personality, and indeed his newspaper and brief legislative career were studded by frequent altercations. In letters to his friend John DuBose, Randolph describes numerous brawls, several involving disputes with the University of Alabama faculty. In one, a "big wad of paper currency" stopped his assailant's bullet short of Randolph's heart, but a bullet wound in the knee cost him his leg. He walked with a cane for the rest of his life and found canes rather handy. Upon sighting J.C. Loomis, the chair of the English Department, downtown one Saturday, having promised the man "a d—n good thrashing on sight" for banning one of Randolph's newspapers from the UA campus, Randolph writes that he "procured a suitable cane—one that would hurt but not kill—crossed over and belabored him in a style amply satisfactory to my wounded feelings as an Editor, and left him sprawling on the floor, bellowing for help."

When he moved to Birmingham in the final days of Reconstruction, Randolph may have been somewhat mellowed by the years and by the death of his beloved wife, but his newspaper work shows him to be zealous as ever about all things Southern. Well, the compiler of the scrapbook also carefully recorded the descriptions of Randolph's two repeaters suggesting that the old editor kept them polished and within reach until the end.

The collection of native son James Saxon Childers was donated to the library by Maurine Childers in 1990. Childers was born in Norwood in 1899. He graduated from Oberlin College in 1920 then attended Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar (B.A., 1923; M.A., 1927). From 1925 to 1942 he was a professor of literature and creative writing at Birmingham Southern College as well as a columnist and book reviewer for the *Birmingham News*. During these years Childers became immensely popular in Birmingham. His office on the second floor of the BSC library was filled with travel trophies, including a pair of crossed oars from his rowing days at Oxford. In the afternoons Childers' remarkable office would fill with students (his classes were always well attended), and he would don a blue smoking jacket for the lecture. On other afternoons Childers would load his English bulldog Falstaff into his convertible, and the two would drive through elegant neighborhoods in search of cocktail parties. In 1942 Childers married and left Birmingham to serve as an Air Force intelligence officer in World War II. Upon his return he lived in Chapel Hill and Atlanta, but remained a favorite in his hometown. Childers' papers include the author's correspondence, writings, photographs, and other materials.

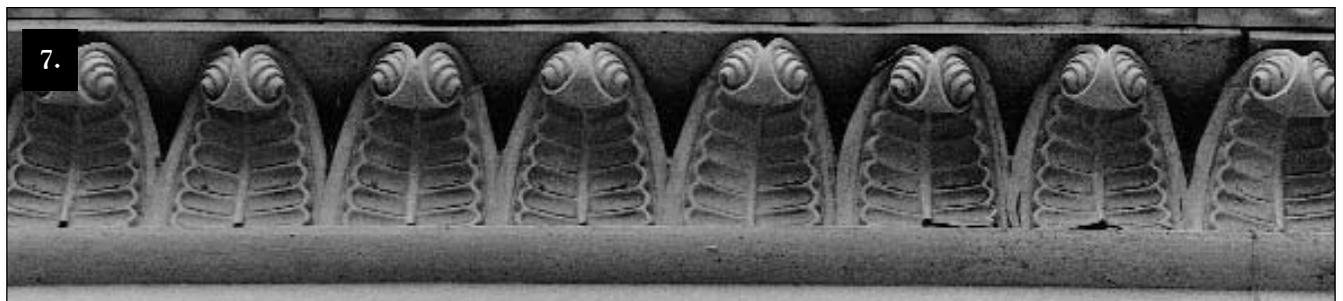
John Stewart Van der Veer (1893-1966) is probably best known locally for his direct mail business, the Van der Veer Company, but he was also a frustrated opera singer, a published novelist, a newspaperman, and a veteran of World War I. During the war, he served as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross on the Italian Front. He later recounted his war stories in an unpublished autobiography called "Walk in My Moccasins". The autobiography includes an account of his transporting a wounded Ernest Hemingway to a hospital in Milan. Van der Veer did publish three novels before he was forced to give up writing fiction "for economic reasons," as he put it, and concentrate on his ad agency. The library's collection, donated by the Van der Veer family, contains correspondence (including letters Van der Veer wrote while stationed in Italy), writings, newspaper articles both by and about him, and photographs.

Stay Tuned

Upcoming issues of the Birmingham Historical Society *Newsletter* will feature other collections and research opportunities in the Birmingham Public Library Archives

TITLE THAT TREASURE

Identify the buildings on which these detail are found. All images appear in the Birmingham Historical Society's *25 YEARS OF DOWNTOWN DISCOVERIES* exhibit at the Birmingham Public Library Gallery, November 1-December 31, 2001.



1. _____ 4. _____ 6. _____
2. _____ 5. _____ 7. _____
3. _____