



Etchings in history

Marion library preserves links to past

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A mad dash to the flooding Marion Carnegie Library basement several years ago saved irreplaceable historical documents. Although secure now, these documents, known as the M Collection, face another threat — time.

The ink on the documents fades, and the paper begins to dry and crumble as years pass. Marion Librarian Ronald Reed, too, faces time constraints — processing the collection completely could take up to three years, and that can happen only if he can find large blocks of time to work on the collection.

Saving the documents from the flooding basement also added to the workload because some of the dozens of boxes became disordered in the rush to get them from the basement.

Even with the trials and tribulations facing the collection, Reed holds a determined spirit to get the collection processed. It contains gems of history: letters, stories and records pertaining to Williamson County and Southern Illinois, many of which date from the turn of the century and before.

"This is the treasure of the library," Reed said. "This is something that can't be replaced."

Some of the more-important documents within the collection are the original manuscripts of interviews with four Cherokee Indians who traveled the Trail of Tears through Southern Illinois. The Indians passed through after being forced to relocate to reservations in the West.

Ironically, these interviews refute a 1933 government document, also in the collection, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which denies that any large number of Indians passed through Southern Illinois.

The M collection also has several documents signed by Gen. John A. Logan and records on coal and the early coal industry in Southern Illinois.

Some of the boxes contain school directories from the area dating from the 1860s to the 1890s. Papers document the early days of the Chittyville School, too.

Once processed, the collection can provide new historical data for anyone doing historical or genealogical research on Williamson County and Southern Illinois, Reed said.

"It's most unfortunate it's not usable condition," he said. "I had to see this sitting. The people of Marion and Williamson County deserve this."

Reed won't rummage through collection haphazardly. Some of documents are fragile, and should be handled only during meticulous cataloging, not endangered by a casual looking-over, he says.

Reed has archival training and has done historical research, so he's ready for the challenge if he can find the time.

He figures it will take three full days a week, working for three years, to complete the cataloging and filing. A staff shortage, complying with state mandates the library and regular library business, however, fill his days.

Reed's goal is to have the M collection assembled before he retires, he said.

"It's a damn shame it has waited and waited until it can be used," he said.

Although a large chore still awaits on the M collection, part the documents are cataloged for use. Reed said 70 percent of the books and more than 170 family files are done.