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Plainfield library combs through massive photo collection

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Abstract (Summary)

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Full Text (835 words)

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STAFF WRITER

Some might call the work tedious, even painstaking.

Sarah Hull calls it heaven.

Hull, an archivist with the Plainfield Public Library, is about six months into what is anticipated to be a slow three-year process of meticulously organizing nearly 85,000 images illustrating more than a century of daily life in Central Jersey. The Courier News photo collection was donated to the library last year, and when Hull's task is finally complete, many of the images will be available for the public to review.

"It is, by far, one of the most amazing collections we've ever seen," Hull, a 38-year-old resident of the Somerset section of Franklin. "We refer to it as a treasure trove of information, and it really is."

PRESERVING HISTORY

Courier News Managing Editor Paul C. Grzella said the decision to donate the photo collection coincided with the newspaper's 2009 move from an expansive Bridgewater facility on Route 22 to a smaller office on Main Street in Somerville.

"The move afforded us the opportunity to do some housecleaning and not take everything with us -- just like any family does in a move," Grzella said. "We simply didn't need the same amount of space as we did before. But in doing this, it was important to us that we simply didn't throw valuable historical documents away. We took care to give some of our archival material to area libraries and groups so it can still be utilized by the public."

One look at the collection, Hull said, and the library instantly had logistical questions of its own to consider. The approximately 50,000 negatives and 35,000 prints that comprise the collection currently are split between a pair of storage rooms at the library.

As of last week, Hull said she had personally reviewed about 26,000 prints, nearly 10,000 of which the library has decided to keep as part of its historical archives. The remaining pieces will be given to other area libraries, Hull said.

The archiving process entails organizing, numbering and labeling images and filing them away in folders, according to Hull. Efforts to preserve the images include placing each individual image in protective sleeves and keeping the folders in metal-reinforced, pressure-resistant boxes.

The process is slow, Hull admitted, but every once in a while a gem jumps out of the pile. Some notable images spotted thus far include images of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis riding a horse in New Brunswick, Willie Mays speaking to Piscataway High School students, and even late former Plainfield Mayor Richard "Rick" Taylor chatting with Mother Teresa during a visit she made to the city.

"I get excited whenever I see anyone I've heard of who was actually here," Hull said.

Along with the occasional celebrity, Hull said images also being archived portray local mayors, boards of education members,

freeholders, police officers, firefighters and others.

"As an archivist, it's nice to think that 100 years from now people will still know who was in the town," Hull said.

COMING HOME

Pairing the new collection with the library's existing archive of photographs taken by longtime Courier News photographer Paul Collier from about 1900-1950 paints a sharp picture of local life throughout the 20th century, according to library director Joe Da Rold.

"This really fills in the second half of the 20th century for us," Da Rold said.

Hull and Da Rold said organizing the new collection was made possible in large part thanks to a Union County historical grant and another awarded by the Plainfield Cultural and Historical Commission. The grants total about \$9,000 with parts matched by the library, they said.

Grzella said Plainfield's library wasn't the only one to receive archived items when the Courier News moved last year. Microfiche copies dating back more than 125 years were given to the Somerset County/Bridgewater Library, and many area librarians with other facilities went through newspaper clips dating to the 1920s looking for pieces to add to their particular libraries' archives. The remainder of the clips were given to the Somerset County Historical Society, which is archiving them for eventual public use.

But Grzella, Hull and Da Rold all agreed that it made sense that the bulk of the newspaper's photos returned to Plainfield, the city called home by the Courier News for nearly 90 years before it moved to Bridgewater in 1972.

"Growing up in North Plainfield, we always called it The Plainfield Courier," Da Rold said. "It's exciting to say that (the pictures) are coming home."

"From stories that we have written about the Plainfield library, we knew that our photo archive would prove an asset to what the library already had to offer, and are pleased that we could do this for our community," Grzella agreed. "It is particularly appropriate that Plainfield houses these photos since the Queen City is where the story of the Courier News began nearly 126 years ago. We appreciate the symmetry, and know that these photos will be treated with the care and respect they deserve."

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