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STATE ARCHIVES OFFERS KEYS TO PAST FOR FAMILY RESEARCHERS

By Kelly Hagen

It's been said that before you can know where you're headed, you must first know where you've been. As this relates to a family's history, there are a multitude of resources to dig deeper through the State Archives division of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. Responsible for acquiring, preserving and referencing documentary holdings, it is here that the public can find historical records, photographs, maps, books, motion pictures, blueprints and records of enduring value collected from state agencies, local governments and individuals.



State Archivist Ann Jenks

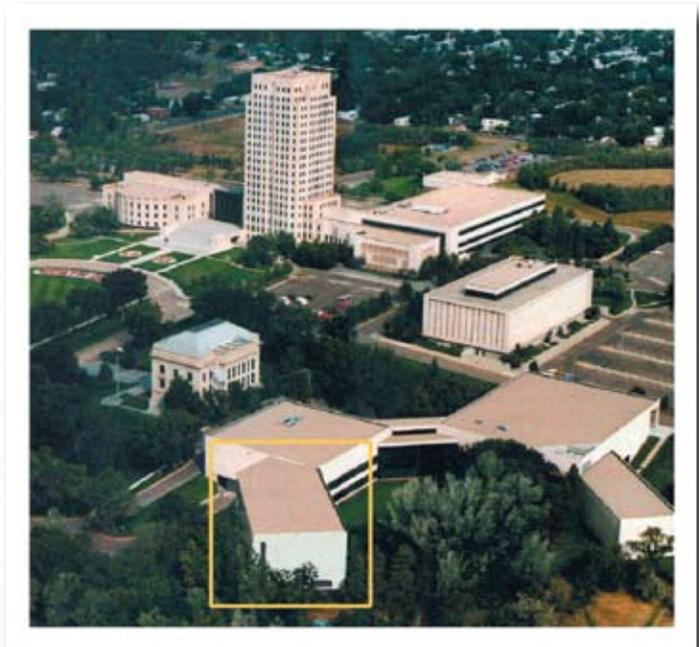
North Dakotans have long held close to their heritage, collecting important records as early as 1895, when the State Historical Society was founded. "At first, the records were kept in the old Capitol building that burned down in 1930," says State Archivist Ann Jenks. "We have a photograph of some men standing by drawers of crispy, slightly burned records that they dragged out through a window."

The archives collection has had different homes throughout its history, moving from the original Capitol to the Liberty Memorial Building. Space there became limited, eventually leading to the point that there was no room for any more records. So plans for constructing a new building for the State Historical Society took place during the 1970s, culminating in the completion and opening of the North Dakota Heritage Center in 1981. The Archives had a new home and again had space to fill with records.

"As more room became available in the Heritage Center,"

says Jenks, "the staff started collecting – deliberately collecting – both local government records and records of organizations and private people. They even went around to every major town and collected the records of the chambers of commerce and other civic groups."

The Archives eventually used up all the space at the Heritage Center, and staff again eased up on what it took in. In the late 1990s, the Archives purchased a building at the former Shiloh Christian School east of Bismarck, and put up shelves



Lighthowler Johnson Associates, Fargo

This view of the state capitol grounds in Bismarck includes the North Dakota Heritage Center in the lower portion of the photograph. The \$5.7 million State Archives addition is highlighted.

The photos on these two pages are from the extensive photo archives of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, available for use by researchers and the general public. Shown at left is the North Dakota State Capitol fire in Bismarck on December 28, 1930.

to house what they could.

A \$5.7 million expansion of the State Archives was funded mostly through a bond approved by the 2005 Legislative Assembly. That expansion added more than 30,000 square feet of space in 2007-08, consisting of climate-controlled rooms to keep the paper records from deteriorating. This additional space allowed Archives staff to take in more records. However, 75 percent of the space in the new addition is still available for collections for many years to come.

“When we moved into the addition, more state agencies and other entities started asking, ‘Will you please come and get this stuff?’” says Jenks. “So we’ve taken in quite a bit since we moved in.”

Today, the Archives collections include some 115,000 books and periodicals, 10,000 maps, 250,000 photographic images, 2,171 historical manuscript collections, 3,754 archival records series, 1,447 newspaper titles, 3,000 recorded oral histories, and 3.5 million feet of film.

The Archives is also expanding into the unlimited space of the Internet, with the creation of Digital Horizons. It is an online resource created in 2007 by a consortium of the State Historical Society, Concordia College Archives in Moorhead, Minnesota, North Dakota State University Institute for Regional Studies and University Archives in Fargo, and Prairie Public Broadcasting in Fargo.

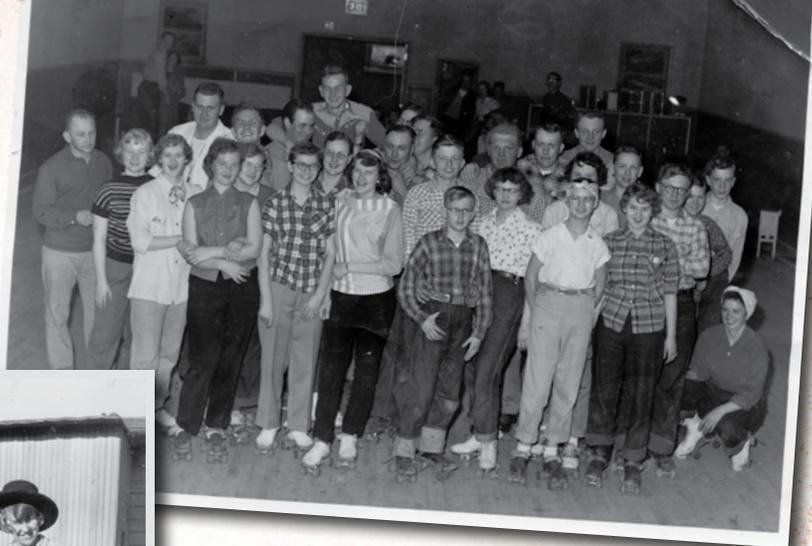
Located at digitalhorizonsonline.org, its official purpose statement is to “provide, maintain and preserve a wide range of historical and significant content related to North Dakota and Minnesota.” There, online fact seekers can find thousands of collected images, documents, videos and oral histories from the late 1800s to present day, all at the click of their mouse.

Digital Horizons has grown in exposure, year after year, according to web usage statistics. And it’s been a superb resource for the Archives staff to point its patrons to when they are searching for information. “We get a lot of people requesting images who didn’t know anything about Digital Horizons and couldn’t have found us any other way than through Google,” Jenks says. “So that’s a good thing.”

With a collection as large the Archives, and growing larger every day, digitizing all these records is a goliath task. It’s one that has been going on for the last decade, according to Jenks. “And, still we have just a fraction of our collections digitized. Everybody does a little bit, particularly as new materials come



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Above, a group of teenage rollerskaters in a roller rink, location unknown, taken during the late 1940s or early 1950s. Left, Olivia Hamre in a western outfit with her dog, 1928. The 1930 census recorded her as a public school bookkeeper, living in Fargo. Born in North Dakota, her parents were from Norway.

in. As we are processing them and find something real interesting, we scan it and get it online so people can see it. It is, however, going to take a long time.”

In the meantime, this mighty collection of records exists in hard copy inside the Heritage Center for anyone to research history, particularly of their own family. The Archives is a popular spot for genealogical researchers from all across the state, the nation and the entire world.

“Every summer we get a lot of people from every state, and a lot of Canadians, too. We have visitors from all over Europe, but particularly Norway.”

Naturalization records from every county are housed in the Archives. The tax records can include valuable information on property records of a family’s home, like when it was first built. Newspaper microfilm from throughout the state contains a wealth of knowledge, including birth announcements, obituaries and stories about historic events.

Before people begin a genealogical search at the Archives, Jenks suggests they do their homework, so that they know where to go before they pull open the glass doors at the entrance to the Heritage Center. “If they’re doing family history, before they come they should interview family members and find out as much as they can before they get here. Then they’ll have a better idea of the questions they need to ask,” she says.

“It’s better to have a little bit of knowledge before you come, so you know what it is you’re looking for.”

The State Historical Society of North Dakota preserves and interprets treasures past and present, and works to share them with residents and visitors through a variety of services. For more information about the state’s history agency and its programs, call 701-328-2666 or visit www.history.nd.gov.

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