

Archive Preserves County's Unique Rural Roots

by D. J. Mathews

J. C. Jessee is a man who likes to collect things. The Russell County resident has old photographs of Honaker where he grew up in the thirties, music of artists like Jimmy Rodgers and the Stanley Brothers, and original recordings of the Carter family. Although he has old 78s numbering in the thousands, what has proven most valuable to his community in far southwest Virginia is his picture collection of old homes and other structures—images that have become a part of a unique photo archive at the Russell County Public Library in Lebanon.

Historical photographs have traditionally been of more interest to filmmakers and those studying architecture or environmental history. But as more and more families pursue genealogical research into family history and see what local and county institutions have to offer, keeping a photo archive is becoming more important. Dr. Lisa Roberts Jett, who teaches cultural geography at Emory and Henry College in Emory, believes storing these old images of wheat mills, churches, and schools with digital technology is both avant-garde and significant. "They tell us a lot about what places were like in the past ... these will be very valuable in the future."

Russell County Library Director Kelly McBride explains that the genesis for the idea of a historic photo archive came when a local resident brought an old picture to her attention a few years ago. "It

was really old and really interesting," McBride says. The photo depicted members of the Virginia Bar Association. McBride felt it could be put to better use at Grundy's Appalachian School of Law in nearby Buchanan County and donated it to the college. Since she'd been exposed to the concept of historic

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archives at her previous positions at Mars Hill College and UVa-Wise, she then decided to apply for a grant and advertise for old county photos, which would be copied and made part of a permanent collection for future residents to enjoy.

Jessee, a member of the board of directors of the Russell County Genealogy Group, which had been meeting at the library for several years, began donating photos to help preserve the "look" of a Russell County of bygone days. He contributed a number of photos of his hometown of Honaker, including a Civil War reunion circa 1900 and county train depots. He has over 200 historic photos, which he says he has obtained "from any-

where I could find a picture in the last twenty years."

Another member of the Genealogy Group, Barry Hess, of the Cook's Mill section of the county, says McBride "had talked about it in a genealogy meeting" and was happy to contribute a few photos. His pictures were of particular importance, because they showed a few old homes that were part of the "poor farm addition" of the county in the last century. Given to Hess by a cousin a few years ago, the photos show a barn and silo where food was stored and small but separate buildings in which penniless men and women of Russell County could live when necessary. The Lebanon property was sold at auction in 1957 to Hess's uncle. He proudly stands in front of one house with his wife and three grandchildren.

The library received a lot of old class pictures and pictures of schoolhouses from individuals and the school board office. "I figured there'd be a lot of churches," McBride comments. Until bigger, more centralized elementary schools were built in the early 1950s, this rural community had over eighty one- and two-room classrooms scattered all over the county. These were simple wood frame structures with no indoor plumbing; they were named according to

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Carrie Warner taught at Ferguson's Chapel in the 1930s.



Reunion of the Civil War veterans of Honaker, 1912.



Oak Grove School, circa 1911.

the location, such as Mill Creek, Castle Run, Temple Hill, or Corner Schoolhouse.

The teachers who taught at some of these old schoolhouses were feted at a Teacher's Appreciation Day in May 2005. They were treated to a display of many of the one-room school photos, black-and-whites from as early as 1910. These showed serious-looking young boys in loose-fitting suits or overalls; the girls, equally severe, wore skirts just over the knee, with their hair pulled back in a bun or braids. Carrie Warner, a ninety-four-year-old retired teacher from the county, appreciated the tea and the display of old photographs.

Warner has vivid memories of teaching first through third grade in a two-room school called Ferguson's Chapel as early as the 1930s. Back then, a teacher had to be very self-reliant, buying her own supplies and oiling the floors to preserve the wood herself. Kids walked from the nearby mountains to the school in all kinds of

weather. When she got a vehicle in 1934, Warner says, "I would pick up every child who was going where I was going" till the car was jam-packed. She had fewer problems with discipline than at Lebanon Elementary, which opened about 1952. But she did sometimes have unique predicaments, like needing a man to put up an outhouse that had been turned over by a male student from the upper grades.

The digital age has allowed the Russell County Library to both copy and preserve over 200 photos for its year-old collection, which residents can access from a file on the ten computers in the library. A patron can then print off an image on either a black-and-white or color printer in a condition suitable for framing. For those interested in starting a photo archive, McBride advises, "Creating it is not hard, but keeping it organized and accessible is." The archive, funded in part by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, needs to be maintained by the computer-savvy. Photos preserved in TIF format are of the best photo quality for a printout, and the library has printed Excel sheets of photo information, which can be accessed according to town location or type (building, road, house, business, or people).

"I've been pleased by the response to the photo archive," McBride says. In the future, the library will be especially interested in hundred-year-old family farms. "Like many rural counties, communities that were once thriving may have disappeared, and we have no visual record of them. I hope we can find photos of those communities and preserve our past," she says. ▣

Some Hints for Activating a Photo Archive

- 1) Advertise in the local media.
- 2) Have donors sign a release form that says the library has permission to keep a copy of images of their family, business, or community photos for display or educational purposes.
- 3) Save the photo as a TIF file in your scanning for the best photo printing quality. A JPEG file is more suitable if the photo is to be displayed on the library website.
- 4) Have the digital archive available to patrons on one of more computers in a special file, where users can observe and print out images.
- 5) Have copies of the photos and background information burned to CDs for backup.