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## **PLEASE DON'T BURY THE RECORDS**

**By Jean Allin**

Public records are being burned, buried, and shredded in many County courthouses. Citizens interested in preserving these records for genealogical and historical research have become vitally concerned at the needless waste of such records.

Jean Allin of Bradenton, Florida, teaches genealogy research at Manatee Junior College. In March, 1977, Mrs. Allin and her students, shocked at the proposed destruction of the old records of Manatee County, decided to do something about it. The following excerpts taken from the daily journal of Mrs. Allin describe in detail the inside story of how one group saved county records.

March 29, 1977 - Tuesday: The genealogy class of thirty-two students from Manatee Junior College chartered a bus for a trip to the Mormon Stake Library in Tampa. Barbara Dalby, the librarian, presented a film on using the library facilities. We had a marvelous time reading microfilms and books and then jotting the helpful information in our notebooks. Chartering a bus was an excellent idea, providing time for companionship and the exchange of ideas. It has been a long but rewarding day. For tomorrow's trip, thirty-seven students will be leaving Bradenton at 6:30 A.M.

March 30, 1977 - Wednesday: Back to the Mormon Library again today. More microfilms and books to read. Another long day, but we had lots of fun. The trip ended on a slightly hysterical note. At a dinner party last night, a remark was made regarding some old records that are stored in two rooms above an abstract company in a building across the street from the Manatee County courthouse. It seems as if the newly elected county clerk is cleaning house, and these records are to be buried in the Lena landfill Saturday morning. As we returned home from the library on the bus, I expressed my concern over the destruction of records of historical and genealogical value. Cries of outrage filled the bus. Dr. William S. Hatt, Sarasota physician, suggested we do something - like lying down in front of the trucks when the county employees come to move the records. Someone else wanted to organize a protest and picket the courthouse. The air was heavy with plot and counterplot. I suggested calling the county clerk to ask if this rumor were true; if so, then we could take effective action to stop the destruction of the records.

March 31, 1977 - Thursday: Busy today with shopping, decorating the church for the fashion show tomorrow night, and trying to clean house; therefore, I almost forgot to call the county clerk to ask about the proposed destruction of the old records.

I called Mr. Richard "Chips" Shore, County Clerk of Manatee County, about 3:00 P.M. He was angry! Not only did my students call him, but they had their friends call also. Mr. Shore said that his phone had been ringing all day. Furthermore, he said that we should have checked our facts before we began complaining. He added, "There are no records of historical or genealogical value scheduled to be destroyed. Only county bids, inter-office memos, and vouchers are destined for the Lena landfill. And did you know that Dr. Hatt had called the newspapers?"

"He didn't!" I replied. "Now what about those records in that building across the street from the courthouse?"

"Who told you about those?" he asked.

"Who told me is not important. Is it true? Are there probate and other records in that building?"

Mr. Shore said that yes there are such records. But all have been microfilmed, and he has received permission from the State Archives to destroy them. The owners of the building need the space, and the records must be moved.

"Would you consider giving them to the Genealogy Society?" I asked. "Microfilm can deteriorate over a period of time. I should hate to see the originals unavailable when the films become unreadable."

Mr. Shore said that he would be glad to give the records to the Society, but that it would be necessary to obtain permission from the State Archives as it is against the law to give public records to private individuals or groups. Furthermore, we would have to move the records by Saturday.

I told Mr. Shore I would call Dr. Hatt who is President of the Manatee Genealogy Society, and advise him of our discussion. We would prepare to receive the records as soon as he gave us an OK.

I called Dr. Hatt. I repeated my conversation with Mr. Shore, and then suggested that we formulate a plan to obtain a building, moving trucks, and manpower so that we would be ready if Mr. Shore receives permission to release the records to the Society.

Dr. Hatt was elated but still a little distrustful. He had placed a call to the Governor and thought that I should call someone at the State Archives.

Well, why not! I placed the call, but everyone was in a meeting. I explained our problem to a very nice secretary. She promised to have someone call as soon as possible.

I called Dr. Hatt again and reported my lack of progress. In the meantime he had arranged to rent trucks for moving the records, a barn to temporarily store them in, and manpower. No problem, I can call all my students!

Back to Mr. Shore again to confirm our agreement. He had also been unable to talk with anyone at the State Archives. But he promised he would keep trying, and he would give us the records if he could receive permission.

"And did you know that Dr. Hatt had called the Governor?" he asked.

"He didn't!" I replied.

April 1, 1977 - Friday: I changed my beauty shop appointment from 10:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. I cancelled my dentist appointment and just barely made my committee meeting at church, all because of those old records. However, I do not regret a minute of this hectic day.

Mr. Shore called at nine o'clock this morning. He wanted me to come to the courthouse, to see the records that were to be destroyed. I could evaluate them to be sure the Genealogy Society really wanted to proceed with the task of moving, reassembling and finding a place for them.

I called the State Archives again - still in a meeting. I advised the secretary that I would be at the courthouse for a few hours, but I would call again as soon as I returned home.

Mr. Shore graciously received me in his office; he introduced me to Mr. Ed Garrison, who probably knows more about the records in the Manatee County courthouse than anyone else. Mr. Shore instructed Mr. Garrison "to take her around and show her all the records.

We were preparing to leave Mr. Shore's office when the phone rang; it was the State Archives calling. Mr. Shore spoke for a second; then with a surprised expression on his face, he handed the phone to me saying, "It's for you."

I certainly did not expect a call. However, after I explained our plans for the records, Mr. John Gaches agreed to help us. He put a "stop order" on the destruction of the records until decisions could be made by his department as to the proper procedure for handling our request. Mr. Shore also agreed to assist us in our efforts to save the records of Manatee County.

Mr. Garrison showed me the records that were to be destroyed. Boxes and barrels stuffed with all sorts of records lined the hallways of the basement. Most of them did not contain papers of genealogical or historical value, but the two rooms in the building across the street - "a whole new ballgame!"

Loose pages are scattered knee-deep; several large ledger books are piled in one corner. Cobwebs dangle from the ceiling, and a blanket of dust covers everything. In the whispery stillness of time, I hear the faint murmur of long-gone voices. What stories could be told! I kneel and pick a page at random. It is the indenture of a young female, indentured as a servant until she reached the age of eighteen. She is to be trained as a house servant and a ladies' maid. She is to be taught to read and write as befitted her station. She can not leave nor marry until her indenture is completed. At that time she will receive a new set of clothes and a blanket.

April 2, 1977 - Saturday: A genealogy seminar was held at Manatee Junior College. Everyone expressed interest in our efforts to save the old records of Manatee County. I took the names of volunteers willing to help reassemble the records as soon as we get them from the county.

Our efforts to save the records have received good publicity in both the Bradenton and Sarasota newspapers. We also were mentioned on the 6:00 P.M. and the 11:00 P.M. news broadcasts on T.V.

April 6, 1977 - Wednesday: Dr. Hatt has appointed me Director for the Preservation of the Records of Manatee County. It is a special challenge, exciting and worthwhile.

The project is to be spearheaded by the Manatee Genealogy Society, and we have invited other interested organizations to join us. We have received commitments from the following groups: Sons of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, Colonial Dames of the 17th Century, Manatee County Historical Society, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Mayflower Descendants, and the Historical Commission.

I have chosen Frances Carter as Co-Director; Virginia Davis, Marta McMaster, Lucile Trimble, and Catherine Ramsey as Supervisors. Beatrice Overbeck will be Chairman of the Telephone Committee, and Virginia Cancro has offered to head the Finance Committee.

A supervisor will be in charge each day. Volunteers can come and go at times convenient to them. By requiring each one to log in and log out, we will be able to keep a record of the hours and number of people involved in this project. Bea Overbeck can, from my list of volunteers, call and recruit daily help.

April 7, 1977 - Thursday: I drew a floor plan of the two rooms where the records are stored, and then I divided the plan into squares, giving each square a number. I will give a corresponding number to each box used in packing the records. I believe that someone has carelessly gone through the records, and flung each page over his shoulder as he finished. At least from the state of the records it looks as if this is what has happened. Perhaps the records that belong together could have fallen together or at least close to one another. If this is so, by numbering the floor plan and the boxes with corresponding numbers, we can more easily reassemble the records.

We received word from Mr. Shore that we will get the records. They will be put on indefinite loan through the County Historical Commission. Still a few details to be worked out, but we will be able to begin work soon. Must find a suitable building to house the records while we reassemble them.

April 8, 1977 - Friday: Warren Johnson, Raymond Carter, Marta McMaster, and I looked at several buildings, trying to find a suitable one. We finally decided on one owned by Wyman-Green and Balock. It is the old Zale's building, and it is perfect for our needs. It has shelves on two walls and counters running the length of the building. We'll need both for sorting and filing records. The price is right - rent free for a month. Frances Carter and I cleaned it this afternoon. We expect to begin moving records Monday.

April 11, 1977 - Monday: I kept my dentist appointment this morning, and then walked down the street to the courthouse. I picked up a letter from Mr. Shore that he had written to Dr. Hatt, authorizing the Genealogy Society to reassemble the old records and pledging his support to get the "records transferred to the Division of Archives, to then be put on permanent loan to the Manatee County Historical Commission"

He also stated that "the records were transferred from Judge Rickey in 1956 to the abstract building after they were microfilmed. They were stored there by mutual consent of the abstract company and the County Judge, and the rent for the storage space was paid by the three local abstract companies. The records were then left in a state of disarray as they were pulled from the books in the course of use."

As the saying goes, "It gets curiouser and curiouser."

Marta McMaster and Mattie Lou Wooten helped me pack the records into the numbered boxes. Donald Countryman, William Wager, Ed Garrison, Henry Tipp, and I loaded boxes in my pickup and Henry's van. I appreciated Henry's help. He is young and strong; he could carry two or three boxes at one trip down two flight of stairs! I lost count of the number of trips I made, but I bet I feel each one tomorrow. Tonight, I need a hot bath and a bottle of liniment. To make my day really memorable, while I was loading county records, I got a parking ticket for parking in a loading zone!

April 12, 1977 - Tuesday: We moved more records today and began sorting and filing. We have found the perfect answer to the lack of filing cabinets - chicken boxes. They are free for the asking, and the right size for legal file folders.

The numbered floor plan and boxes do make the sorting easier. In some cases we have been able to compile a complete file from one or two boxes. Mr. Shore sent several boxes of used file folders from the courthouse and promised more if we needed them.

April 14, 1977 - Thursday: A man at the abstract building told us that if we did not get the records moved quickly, he would put a truck in the alley and shovel the records out the back window. Because of the pictures in the newspapers showing the loose papers, he said that the fire marshal would be giving them trouble. I told him those papers had been in that building twelve years, probably in the same condition, so where was the fire marshal all that time? However, Henry Tipp and Mike Murray finished moving the records. They also swept out the two rooms.

Twenty people worked a total of eighty-nine hours today. Bea is doing a terrific job on the telephone. Not everyone can work a full day, but a few hours from several people add up and the work moves forward.

April 17, 1977 - Friday: An unusual incident happened this morning. Several of us were sorting records, and I noticed a man searching through the boxes sitting on a table.

"Sir, can I help you?" I asked.

"No, no!" he answered. But he kept rifling through the boxes.

"If you would please tell us what you are looking for, perhaps we could help you. What surname are you interested in?" I insisted.

"No name in particular. I just collect old documents."

"Not from these records! If you want a copy of a family record, we'll be glad to help you. But neither you nor anyone else will be allowed to take a single page from these records," I declared. Later I was told that he is one of the more prominent lawyers of this county.

I posted our policy regarding the copying of documents: A volunteer and a witness, preferably one of the supervisors, could take the document across the street to a quick-copy machine. Otherwise, not one page of these records could leave this building. Most of these records are originals, and I don't intend to lose any of them.

April 17, 1977 - Sunday: We desperately need several tables and chairs. It is too tiring standing all day trying to sort and file records. Warren has been trying to borrow both the tables and chairs from the Park Department, but with no success. However, we seem to get what we need one way or another. Today at church (Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) our Bishop announced that due to new rulings the kitchen would need to be remodeled; therefore, we would not be having any church dinners until the remodeling was completed. So I borrowed the tables and chairs we needed.

April 21, 1977 - Thursday: Probate files are interesting. One can find almost any type of record included. One family file contains three oaths of allegiance signed by a Confederate soldier from North Carolina (required by the Federal Government every time one moved from one county to another), a steamboat pilot's license, a land grant, and a map showing the exact location of the property, plus two pages of Bible records, showing birth, marriage, and death dates.

Another file, contains several pages of a German genealogy, including pictures of each person listed on the pedigree chart. Still another file contains death and adoption records. We also have found a suicide letter, but at this time have been unable to find the rest of the file. Mattie Lou found her great-grandmother's will and other records of interest. She quickly obtained a copy of that file.

May 5, 1977 - Friday: Mr. Garrison has brought us the early marriage records from the old Justice of Peace Courts. These records began in 1860 with that year showing only five marriages recorded: 1861, fourteen marriages recorded; 1862, none. Is that because of the Civil War and all the boys who marched off to battle, or do we not have all the records?

May 10, 1977 - Monday: We are into our second month of work on the records. We are making progress. Considering the fact that none of us has had any experience in putting together such records, it is amazing that we have succeeded in doing so. There is a sweet spirit of cooperation among us. What one can't do, someone else can.

The county clerk is sending over other records from the courthouse; he does not dispose of anything before checking with us. Wyman-Green & Balock have extended our occupancy of the Zale's building another month.

I had to teach a class this afternoon, but Frances said that Mr. Shore called to inform her that the county would pay the electric and water bills, and furnish file folders. This is good news, especially for Frances, as she is the newly elected President of the Manatee Genealogy Society. I told her not to worry because I knew something would turn up; the work we are doing is very important.

May 18, 1977 - Wednesday: A group of young people and their counselors, from the Mormon church, came to help us file records. Tonight was their regular meeting, and they elected to help us. We had several large boxes of records sitting on the floor that needed to be filed in the "chicken boxes." They saved us old folks a lot of "stooping and bending." They worked so quickly that they almost finished the lot before they had to leave. We are grateful for their help.

May 23, 1977 – Monday: Mr. Garrison asked if we have decided what we are going to do with the records after we finish sorting, reassembling, and filing them. "There is no room in the courthouse, and you can't keep them in this building indefinitely," he said.

Without thinking I replied, "Organize a record center, of course. We can index the records, and then print the indexes. We can sell the printed indexes to libraries and genealogists. We can staff the record center with volunteers; they can answer inquiries or assist people that want to do their own research. Only a few of us have Floridian ancestry, but we are willing to do the work here in the hope that someone else is doing the same in our own areas of genealogical interest."

"What about the old Carnegie Library? It will soon be vacant as the new library is almost ready. I think the city is only asking about a hundred thousand for it."

I knew Mr. Garrison was really teasing. No way does he think that we will be able to organize a record center. But I know we will, therefore I thanked him for the suggestion. The Carnegie Library would be perfect. It is close to the courthouse, close to the new public library, and it has parking facilities. There must be some way of getting it for a record center!

June 1, 1977 - Wednesday: The Retention Schedule that Mr. Shore submitted to the State Archives lists the following records to be destroyed: Probate and Guardianship Files, 1855 to 1967; Probate and Guardianship Record Books, 1855 to 1967; Probate and Guardianship, Progress Docket Books, 1937 to discontinued; Delayed Birth Certificates, 1943 through 1974; Marriage License Applications 1894 through 1974; Incompetency and Restoration Record Books, 1898 through 1975.

We have inventoried the records that we reassembled, and the records just listed are included. In addition, we also found four Criminal Docket Books: B, C, D, and E, and three Civil Docket Books: A, B, C, and one book simply called Docket Book. It covers a time period from 1915 to 1917. Plus two Tax Assessment Roll Books: 1962 and 1964. Interesting! I wonder why these books were in that building. I can't imagine what they would have to do with abstracts.

The first recorded crime in Criminal Docket Book B is: Occupying same room together in nighttime. A month later the warrants are returned, defendants marry. Year: 1904.

Another entry: Fine \$5.00 and court costs for gambling. Year: 1905.

Still another entry: Fined \$5.00 and 30 days in jail for "Publicly Using Profane Language."

June 2, 1977 - Thursday: The banner on the wall reads: "We Did It! With a Lot of Help From Our Friends!"

We really did; we finished sorting, reassembling, and filing the old records of Manatee County. Seventy-six people worked 1,192 hours. The loose pages have been filed in the proper folder, the folders filed in proper order in the "chicken boxes," the ledgers reassembled and placed in the proper binder. We are holding open house tomorrow. I ordered a cake; cookies and punch will be provided by several of the volunteers. Invitations have been sent to county and city officials. We issued an invitation to the public via newspapers and radio. We want everyone to see, what we have done. It has been a tremendous job-tedious, hot and dusty, but also exciting and stimulating. In my opinion, a wonderful way to learn history.

June 3, 1977 - Friday: The open house party was a great success. The cake was beautiful; it was decorated with the same slogan that was on the banner. There were plenty of cookies and punch, and an enthusiastic response from the public as many people came to view the records and express their appreciation. We asked everyone to autograph the banner. Mr. Shore presented a letter of commendation from the county to Frances Carter, President of the Manatee Genealogy Society, in recognition of the heroic efforts of the Society in the restoration of the old records of Manatee County. We had an excellent coverage by the news media. Don Stober, reporter for the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, wrote a feature article. T.V. Channel 40 reported today's party on the news program.

June 4, 1977 - Saturday: Bearl (my husband) helped me put the lids on the "chicken boxes" this morning. Then we stacked the boxes in the center of the room and the ledger books next to the boxes. We loaded the tables and chairs in our truck and returned them to the church (the kitchen remodeling had just been completed and the first dinner scheduled for next Friday). Afterwards we swept the floors and emptied the wastebaskets.

Mr. Shore advised us the records will be stored for the present, but I haven't given up the idea of a record center for this county.

October 3, 1977 - Monday: To express our appreciation for his efforts in helping us save the records I have decided to research Mr. Shore's ancestors for five generations. I also believe that if he is presented with documentation - birth, death, and marriage certificates - of his own ancestors, then he might become motivated to help us establish a record center. Catherine Ramsey has offered to help me. She can get the basic information from his mother. We have almost a month before the genealogy seminar in November. Mr. Doug Denison from Manatee Junior College has invited Mr. Shore to speak on county records. We will keep the research a surprise, and if we are successful, then we can present it to him at the seminar.

November 5, 1977 - Saturday: There was a large crowd at the seminar today. Mr. Shore brought a mini-computer and his staff to discuss county records. Before he presented his



**Carnegie Library in Bradenton.**

program, we presented him with a Book of Remembrance containing pedigree charts, family group sheets, pictures, and documentations of birth, marriage, and death dates of several of his ancestors. Mr. Shore was overwhelmed and very surprised. Quoting from the presentation speech, "Mr. Shore's lineage is a very interesting one, with both a French and a Polish Count. We enjoyed researching his line, and we hope that this documented information will please him. We also hope, as Clerk of Manatee County, that it will motivate him to help us to continue to preserve and make accessible this same type of documentation to others interested in genealogical and historical research in Manatee County."

February 20, 1978 - Monday: I received a letter from Mr. Shore. He has leased the old Carnegie Library and intends to make it into a historical records' library. Mr. Frank Perkins will head this department. A record center at last!

May 4, 1978 - Thursday: Several of us attended a County Commissioners' meeting and petitioned for funds to operate the Historical Records' Preservation and Library (record center).

The Commissioners agreed to allocate \$25,000 to the Library. This will be used to remodel, restore, and buy supplies.

The Carnegie Library has been in continuous use as a Library since its opening in October 1918. After the restoration is completed, we will try to place it on the National Historical Register.

May 11, 1978 - Thursday: Today is the first day of actual work in our own record center. We checked duplicates against the originals, something we didn't have time to do before. The next step is indexing within each category. Then we can print the indexes and sell them, thereby providing funds for the Historical Library and a needed service for researchers in many states.

March 2, 1979 - Friday: Mr. Shore has announced that the Historical Library will be open to the public June 1. It has been almost two years since we finished assembling and filing the old records, but our work has just begun. The importance of preserving our heritage through county records cannot be emphasized too strongly. The future generations must have the opportunity to study the lives of their forefathers. It has been said, "If a man knoweth not where he has been, how will he knoweth where he is going?"