

Case Study

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It Only Happens Once Every Hundred Years: Making the Most of the Centennial Opportunity

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Abstract: Clemson University celebrated its centennial in 1988-89, an event that served as the catalyst for transforming the university's archives. The author discusses how the Special Collections department capitalized on centennial-related reference requests, publications and oral history projects, exhibits, and time capsule activities to reach new audiences and win support for program expansion. Important elements in the successful strengthening of this program were the support of key university administrators, start-up funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the identification of viable, high-visibility projects for its various constituencies.

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CLEMSON UNIVERSITY WAS FOUNDED through Thomas Green Clemson's bequest to the State of South Carolina upon his death on 6 April 1888. The state legislature accepted Clemson's bequest in 1889 and established Clemson Agricultural College upon land that had once belonged to John C. Calhoun, Clemson's father-in-law.¹ After several years of preparation and the construction of facilities, the first class was enrolled in July 1893. The first graduation followed in December 1896.² The name of the institution was changed to Clemson University in 1964 to reflect its research and graduate activities more accurately.³ Enrollment for the Fall 1990 semester was 16,303.⁴ Clemson is the land-grant university for South Carolina and has extensive public programs related to agricultural extension.

General Planning for the University Centennial

Planning for the Clemson centennial began in the spring of 1984 after the university's president appointed a planning committee that included faculty, staff, students, and administrators as well as representatives from the Clemson community, alumni, and South Carolina media. This committee, made up of a number of subcommittees, created a framework for the centennial celebration, including the period when the centennial would be celebrated, its major themes, participation by the entire "Clemson family" (i.e., alumni, area residents and the citizens of South Carolina),

and financing for the event. The official centennial celebration extended over eighteen months, from the hundredth anniversary of Thomas Clemson's death to the official acceptance of the Clemson bequest by the South Carolina legislature. Major themes tied the celebration to Clemson's history, its current accomplishments, and its future role in the development of South Carolina and the nation. A wide variety of centennial events sponsored by different parts of the university drew people into the celebration process. Centennial committees in every college and the University Libraries provided the structure for academic departments to participate in this event. Additional committees planned exhibits, publications, town and gown, and a variety of events such as the laying of a centennial cornerstone. The creation of centennial memorabilia and the connection of some centennial events with other university activities were used as mechanisms for financing this celebration.⁵

Beginning the planning several years ahead of time was important for the centennial's success. Three university presidents and three vice-presidents for development served between 1983 and 1988; fortunately, the key administrator entrusted with the overall management of the centennial, Vice-Provost Jerome Reel, provided the critical continuity necessary for the centennial's success.

Although the centennial celebration was by no means planned for the purpose of promoting Clemson's archives, Special Collections, which includes the University Archives, identified opportunities within the broad context of this event to create public programs that built upon an incremental approach to archival outreach and interpreted the archives' function to the public.⁶ The

¹Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., "The Founder Thomas Green Clemson, 1807-1888" in *Tradition: A History of the Presidency of Clemson University*, ed. Donald M. McKale (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 17-18.

²"Report of the President," *Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Trustees, Presidents, and Officers of Clemson Agricultural College . . . 1896* (Columbia, SC: Charles A. Calvo, Jr., State Printer, 1897), 21.

³McKale, *Tradition*, 203-04.

⁴*Facts: 1991* (Clemson: Clemson University, 1991), 21.

⁵Clemson University Centennial Committee, *Report of the Study Phase* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University, 1985), 1-14.

⁶For discussion of archival public programming, see

centennial provided the occasion to draw upon internal and external resources for archival program development that would last long beyond the centennial celebration.

The Centennial Opportunity: Creating a University Archives and Records Management Program Using Internal and External Resources

During the fall of 1983, the head of the Special Collections unit at the University Libraries alerted his administrators to the potential impact of a centennial celebration on the Special Collections unit's ability to respond to the anticipated increase in service requests. Although the unit had expanded its manuscript program, it lacked a university archivist. This neglect resulted in an inactive collecting program, a backlog of unprocessed material, and an inadequate descriptive system. The university's records management program was at a similar embryonic stage of development. The university's internal auditor had records management responsibilities, but no staff to implement a program.

To deal with these problems, the Libraries requested funds from the university administration to hire a university archivist and records manager and increase the student assistant and supplies budgets. Unfortunately, budget problems precluded a favorable response. The Libraries then began to explore the possibility of outside funding to develop the university archives and records management programs. Preliminary discussions between the head of Special Collections and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) indicated that for a proposal

to be competitive the university would agree to support the university archivist and records manager positions after the expiration of the grant.

Despite the budget problems, the university provost approved the creation of the new positions as a necessary part of attracting the outside funds. He reasoned that the value of attracting external funding outweighed the relatively low priority he assigned to these positions. In exchange, the libraries withdrew their request for immediate funding. Given the assurance of continuing program support, the NHPRC awarded a \$50,000 grant to Clemson in November 1984 that provided a year's salary for the records manager and university archivist as well as funds for archival supplies and student assistants.⁷ The grant eventually covered a period from January 1985 to December 1988.

Tying the long-term needs of the university's archives and records management program with the specific needs generated by the university's centennial event proved to be a successful combination for transforming the Special Collections activities. For the first time, the university had a full-time professional records manager to inventory records, update general schedules, prepare special schedules, transfer records to the archives, and create a records center. With the hiring of the university archivist, for the first time someone was responsible for the acquisition, arrangement, and description of Clemson's own records.

The development of a viable records management program was greatly enhanced by the establishment of a records center. Beginning in 1983, the head of special collections began examining potential locations; eventually the unfinished basement of the agricultural extension programs

Kathleen D. Roe, "Public Programs," in *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, ed. James Gregory Bradsher (London: Mansell Publishing for University of Chicago Press, 1988), 218; and Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline, *Archives and Manuscripts: Public Programs* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1982), 7-13.

⁷Michael Kohl, "Clemson University Archives and Records Management Proposal." The proposal was accepted and supported by NHPRC Grants 85-47 and 85-134.

Figure 1

| Use of Clemson University Archives | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Fiscal Year | Percent of Total Special Collections Use | Increase in Use from Previous Year |
| 1983-84 | 16% | 5% |
| 1984-85 | 17% | 1% |
| 1985-86 | 28% | 11% |
| 1986-87 | 37% | 9% |
| 1987-88 | 24% | - 13% |
| 1988-89 | 28% | 4% |

building was identified as a suitable site. In 1986, the director of libraries convinced appropriate administrators to remove the bales of cotton stored there, and a 3,000 square foot records center with a 6,000 cubic foot capacity was established. Once again, the library looked outside its own budget. The vice president for business affairs recognized the value of a functioning records management program and faced a storage crisis for routine financial records then crammed into the administration building's offices and closets. Business Affairs provided the funding for the renovation and equipment as well as a paraprofessional position to help the records manager. In 1989, Business Affairs supported the addition of a micrographics supervisor.

The NHPRC grant had a multiplier effect on program development such that by the end of 1989 there were five full-time permanent staff members working on university archives and records management activities, compared with none in 1985. The centennial celebration gained the attention of Clemson's administrators concerning archival matters. The grant provided a means for participation in projects solving both short-term problems and long-term deficiencies.

The Centennial Challenge: Reference and Outreach in Overdrive

Reference. The Clemson centennial provided the impetus for archival program de-

velopment. On the other hand, Special Collections experienced a great deal of pressure from centennial-related projects. The particular circumstances at Clemson would differ at another institution, of course, but the examination of its centennial projects illustrates the successes and problems an archives may encounter during such an event.

Reference use related to the university archives actually peaked before the centennial officially began at Clemson. This unexpected outcome is illustrated in Figure 1. Special Collections experienced the greatest percentage increase in the use of the university archives during the fall of 1986 and the spring of 1987. The early start to university centennial planning and the emphasis upon research projects produced a large increase in the use of the collections—up more than 100 percent from the previous fiscal year. The number of photocopies made for researchers also doubled to more than 10,000 copies.

Scholarly researchers, undergraduate students, and the general public all dramatically increased their use of Special Collections. In addition to biographies of Clemson's presidents, a number of the university's colleges produced their own histories and a popular history of the university from the viewpoint of one of its former presidents was published.⁸

⁸Joseph C. Ellers, *Getting to Know Clemson Uni-*

Although Clemson undergraduates have always been the largest single user group for Special Collections, the approach of the centennial caused even larger numbers of undergraduates to use the archives, often for the first time. Professors in courses ranging from English to horticulture gave centennial-related assignments. Usually, the Special Collections staff were consulted about these projects, although one memorable noon hour, thirty freshman descended upon the one reference archivist on duty and demanded to use the same material. The addition of a full-time university archivist and a records manager truly helped to stabilize a very fluid and stressful situation.

Publications. In the spring of 1985, the University Centennial Committee initiated a project to prepare biographies of Clemson's presidents. The resulting volume of biographical sketches, titled *Tradition: A History of the Presidency of Clemson University*, was ready at the centennial's start in April 1988;⁹ its preparation significantly increased research demands upon Special Collections. During 1985, the twelve faculty members assigned to write biographies and a number of their graduate students camped in Special Collections for extended periods of time. The head of Special Collections guided the authors through the collections and, as one of the volume's authors, was closely involved in its planning. His personal involvement in the project helped familiarize scholars with the Libraries' holdings, knowledge of which one should never take for granted.

The University Centennial Committee

identified a pictorial history of Clemson as its most popular proposal.¹⁰ This project involved both research in the photograph collections of Special Collections and an active acquisition program. A history professor, Dr. Alan Schaffer, served as editor of this volume. His skill in public relations and diligence in seeking out material held by the public insured that this volume included photos never before seen by the general public. The project had several virtues: it satisfied a need identified by the Centennial Committee; it involved an enthusiastic member of the faculty; it cost little money other than project staff time and the resources of the university's communication center and library; and it had a high-visibility product.

The pictorial history project presented a number of challenges for the University Archives. Special Collections provided space during the summer of 1987 for Dr. Schaffer to review its holdings systematically and have copies of desired prints created by the University's photo laboratory. The production of the photo album took longer than expected. During the spring of 1990, *Visions: Clemson's Yesteryears* was published.¹¹ More than a standard illustrated photo history, it evoked the spirit and values that created and shaped Clemson University.

Exhibits. The mounting of exhibits with centennial themes involved high-visibility projects in which Special Collections participated with a variety of other university departments. During the course of the eighteen-month centennial celebration, Special Collections mounted exhibits in the main lobby of the University Library, outside the Special Collections reading room, and temporary exhibits in conjunction with specific centennial events. Although most of the

versity is Quite an Education: Determination Makes Dreams Come True (Clemson, SC: Blue Ridge Publications, 1987); Laura L. Benjamin, *Clemson University College of Engineering: One Hundred Years of Progress* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University, 1989); Roger Leemhuis, *The Liberal Arts at Clemson Agricultural College* (Clemson University) (Clemson, SC: Clemson University College of Liberal Arts, 1989).

⁹McKale, *Tradition*.

¹⁰"Report on the Study Phase," 4.

¹¹Alan Schaffer, ed., *Visions: Clemson's Yesteryears 1880s-1960s* (Lexington, KY: Harmony House, 1990).

centennial exhibits did not focus on archival outreach, several contained archival material; the historical photographs and the cornerstone exhibits emphasized archival preservation. These exhibits were successful in raising the public's archival awareness at Clemson.

Special Collections staff nevertheless found these exhibits to be a major burden during a time when a variety of other centennial activities, as well as the relocation of the Special Collections unit in a new facility, also demanded attention. The library technical assistants in the unit assumed much of the responsibility for the coordination, creation, and mounting of these exhibits. By early 1989, library administrators recognized that the success of the exhibit program had resulted from the good fortune of having extremely capable paraprofessional staff members ready to assume these additional duties. A full-time professional Special Collections staff position was created to insure that the exhibits program would maintain the momentum gained during the Centennial celebration.

Oral History Projects. Clemson's centennial celebration produced some oral history activities, but oral history never developed the momentum that characterized other centennial activities. During the planning stage, the University Centennial Committee determined that resources would not be available to transcribe any tapes created through interviews. Unlike the photograph project, there was no ready market for such tapes and no means of recovering costs or creating a profit. Equally important, the committee concluded that the end products of such a project would lack appeal to the general public.¹² Several small, subject-specific projects were undertaken. The authors Ellers and Benjamin interviewed individuals as part of their research projects. Once their books were published,

they donated their tapes and research files to Special Collections.¹³ The libraries' Centennial Committee hired a graduate student to conduct a series of oral history interviews with approximately a dozen individuals on the subject of the history of the University Libraries.

Although one may debate the validity of this analysis, the end result was that there was no major oral history project undertaken during the centennial celebration.¹⁴ The lack of a serious oral history project during Clemson's centennial celebration reflects the limits within which any commemorative celebration labors: it must link available financial resources with the scholarly interests of its researchers, the priorities of the organization's administrators, and the interests of its public.

Time Capsule Activities. The opening of the cornerstone located in Clemson's first college building and its replacement with a new time capsule generated more public attention for Special Collections than any other centennial event. In 1891, when the members of the Board of Trustees dedicated the cornerstone for the Main Building (now called Tillman Hall), they placed in it a variety of contents including some items of definite historical interest.¹⁵ The possibility of retrieving material documenting the lives of John C. Calhoun and Thomas Green

¹³Ellers, *Getting to Know Clemson University*; Benjamin, *Clemson University College of Engineering*.

¹⁴Such an oral history project might have preserved history about Clemson not found in institutional papers or published sources. See James E. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983): 150-56.

¹⁵According to a contemporary newspaper account, a variety of items were placed in the cornerstone: "Mr. Clemson's diploma as a graduate of the Royal School of Mines at Paris; his sketch of the life of John C. Calhoun; a phrenological chart of Mr. Clemson; a sketch of the life of Mr. Clemson, by Col. R. W. Simpson; a record of the proceedings in the case of Isabella Lee vs. R. W. Simpson and a variety of other material about the College or its founders were placed in the cornerstone that then was fixed into the wall of Tillman Hall." (Charleston, SC *World*, 28 July 1891).

¹²Conversation with Dr. Alan Schaffer. 9 April 1990.

Clemson appealed to the Centennial Committee administrators, who recognized its potential historical significance and value as a newsworthy event. During the autumn of 1987, a committee planned the removal and opening of the cornerstone.

The removal occurred during the spring break of 1988. University maintenance staff loosened the cornerstone from its place in the wall and placed it on the ground. As Dr. Max Lennon, the university's president, and senior members of its administration stood by and TV cameras rolled, the outer shell was chipped open to reveal a copper box with only a piece of lead solder and a pencil in it. Fortunately, a perceptive maintenance supervisor advised prying the box out of the cornerstone. It was then discovered that the copper box had a false bottom.

The box was transferred to the University Library and opened while camera shutters clicked and video cameras rolled their tape. It was a moment of high archival drama; first a series of newspapers were removed, then a printed copy of the court case that settled the question of the Clemson will.¹⁶ Hopes of an archival coup were dashed when it became obvious that the remaining contents of the box were badly damaged by water. Tillman Hall had burned in 1894 and it was apparent that the solder in the box had melted in places and water had solidified the remainder of the box's contents into a glob of material with the consistency of papier-mâché. The conservation lab at the South Carolina State Archives was eventually able to deacidify the newspapers and recover a number of lost items, primarily coins, but many of the most interesting items were irrecoverable.

During the fall of 1988, the university

planned the installation of a new time capsule in the cornerstone. Designed to survive anything short of a direct hit from a wrecking ball, it consisted of a stainless steel container with a screwtop lid, sealed with epoxy glue and placed in a copper box lined with sheetrock. The entire "Clemson family" became involved in suggesting what would go into the new time capsule. The committee selected a variety of items that documented the full extent of the university's activities and programs. The committee loaded the time capsule with some fanfare at a press conference in late March of 1989.¹⁷

The following weekend, a major centennial event with about two thousand spectators occurred when the time capsule was placed inside the Tillman Hall cornerstone and mounted again on the side of this historic building. Special Collections staff prepared special exhibits and helped with some of the event's logistics. As the crowd watched, the university's president, members of the board of trustees, and other administrators participated in the ceremonies which drew state-wide media attention.

For Special Collections, these events raised awareness of its activities to a large audience beyond the research community already familiar with its holdings. Staff interviewed on TV and for newspaper articles explained the importance of archival records and how to preserve and restore them.¹⁸ The time capsule activities demonstrated the excitement of discovering important historical documents, which usually occurs in the prosaic surroundings of the archival processing area and search room. The em-

¹⁷"Marking Time," *Clemson World* 11 (April 1989): 2-3 includes a complete list of the twenty-two items placed in the time capsule.

¹⁸The head of Special Collections was interviewed on Greenville, Spartanburg, and Asheville television news programs. There were news articles in a variety of South Carolina newspapers such as the *State*, 15 March 1988 and the *Greenville News and Greenville Piedmont*, 27 November 1989.

¹⁶District of South Carolina, Fourth Circuit Court, Isabella Lee by her next friend Gideon Lee vs. Richard Simpson: Report—Testimony—Exhibits and Statement of Facts (Charleston, SC: Walker, Evan & Cogswell, 1889).

phasis on preserving the contents of the new time capsule made people aware of the preservation problems related to modern paper. The public's interest in the fate of the contents of the Tillman Hall cornerstone suggests that preservation may be a key method of outreach to the general public.¹⁹

Conclusion

A centennial is a great opportunity for an archives to reach its various constituen-

cies: researchers, resource allocators, and the general public. Developing programs that appeal to these constituencies during this event can lay the basis for permanent improvements. The centennial provided the opportunity for program expansion to meet increased public service demands. Today the six full-time permanent staff members, whose positions were created during the centennial period, continue to provide service to the university through a functioning records management program, a revitalized University Archives, and an expanding exhibits program. Their contributions to the university will continue after the last centennial event is all but forgotten.

¹⁹Joel Wurl, "Methodology as Outreach: A Public Mini-Course on Archival Principles and Strategies," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 184; Sandra Myres, "Public Programs for Archives: Reaching Patrons, Officials and the Public," *Georgia Archive* 7 (Spring 1979): 11.