New respect for scrapbooks

Grant helps Emory digitize documents of African-Americans.

Lined photos, worn pages show earlier era.

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Nearly every place she looks around her Lawrenceville home, Terrace “Terri” Fagan Mitchell can put her hands on a piece of history.

Mitchell, a retired teacher, is an avid scrapbooker and the family genealogist. “I call them my old folks books,” Mitchell said.

Photos of author Alice Walker are in a scrapbook she started at age 15. The document is part of the Emory collection.

There’s a scrapbook for her husband’s side, one for family reunions, one for Christmas, one for “regular” family and a heritage one.

“Scrapbooking bridges the gaps,” said Mitchell, who started making scrapbooks in 1998. “I was not a history person in school, but since I started doing this, it has helped me become more familiar with African-American history.”

Her latest project is to compile information about her grandmother Cymera Fagan, who was born in 1880, had 10 children and got an education after her first husband died. “It shows that back then you had independent, determined..."
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women.” Indeed, scrapbooks are “rich in documentation,” said Randall K. Burkett, the curator of African-American collections at Emory University’s Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library. “They tell the stories of people who, otherwise, would never be preserved.”

Scrapbooks haven’t always received the level of attention as other historical documents, but that attitude is changing.

Emory’s Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, for instance, recently received a $70,000 three-year matching grant to preserve and digitize African American scrapbooks in its collection. It plans to set a best practices standard that others can follow.

About 30 scrapbooks are covered in the Save America’s Treasures grant, which is awarded through the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. The grant is made in collaboration with several other agencies. The scrapbooks were selected because the staff felt they were very important or because their condition created preservation challenges.

They include scrapbooks containing the teenage musings of future Pulitzer Prize-winning author and poet Alice Walker. Her scrapbook also contains her early poetry and photographs of several young men. One is called an old flame “but not for me.”

Another scrapbook, with its yellowing pages, is filled with the memories and career highlights of black vaudeville performer Johnny Hudgings.

There’s an advertisement from a theater in New Jersey, where he shared billing with actress Nina Mae McKinney, and contains several photographs of him performing in blackface. He documents trips to South America.

Even scrapbooks from the not so famous, however, are valuable.

Consider Walter Hutcherson, whose scrapbook gives a glimpse into black college life in the 1930s. Hutcherson was a student at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, in the mid to late 1930s. The scrapbook contains a bright red feather with a gold “T” and a ticket from the 1938 Thanksgiving Day game.

They’re the building blocks, really, upon which any historian has go to reconstruct the lives of people who are not famous,” said Stan Deaton, a senior historian with the Georgia Historical Society. Particularly today, “when people don’t take time to write letters ... everything is deleted or digital.”

Scrapbooks, he said, can shed light on how people lived, the decisions they made and why they made them, their values.

Carroll offers some tips for scrapbookers. Use acid-free paper at all times; don’t use tape — use apolyvinyl acetate adhesive; if you want to include newspaper clippings, photocopy them on to acid-free paper, then affix them to your scrapbook.

The Emory project is a huge undertaking because of the volume of material contained in the scrapbooks and the condition.

“They’re like the neglected children,” Carroll said. “They’re hard to deal with and are stubborn but interesting. ... The problem is how do we preserve them best?”

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