

Preserving History in Lavaca County, Texas: An IPS Chronicle

An Amigos Library Services preservation site survey helps keep vibrant Texas history alive for future generations

BACKGROUND

Every spring Amigos members and non-members approach the Amigos Imaging and Preservation Service (IPS) group for assistance in obtaining a Preservation Assistance Grant (PAG) for Smaller Institutions from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Using these funds, smaller libraries or archives, and those in underserved areas, can obtain site surveys and training in preservation.

With assistance from Amigos IPS, Lavaca County Clerk Elizabeth Kouba has obtained two rounds of PAG funding to conduct a survey of the County Courthouse and the County Clerk's Offices, and for delivery of an on-site workshop, *Preserving Your Historical Records: An Archival Holdings Maintenance Workshop*, and a second, more advanced training session.

THE SITUATION

Located about 100 miles southwest of Houston, the city of Hallettsville is the Lavaca County seat. The County had preserved an abundance of records dating back to its founding in 1846, covering everything from court records to documents signed by Sam Houston. Unfortunately most of the records were scattered throughout the courthouse or in poorly housed conditions, and the community was unaware of the problem.



Document signed by Sam Houston

Proper storage was an immediate concern. In conducting the site survey – an assessment of current preservation practices – Amigos IPS Adjunct Preservation Field Services Officer Rebecca Elder found most of the documents being housed in less than ideal situations.



AT A GLANCE:

LAVACA COUNTY HISTORICAL RECORDS PRESERVATION

Demographics:

Lavaca County founded in 1846

Population 19,000

Hallettsville, the County Seat

The Problem:

Historic county records in danger due to poor storage conditions and disorganization.

The Solution:

Amigos IPS conducts site survey and document preservation training sessions to help the County save historic documents.

The Results:

- Community awareness and education campaign launched to save historical documents in danger of being lost forever.
- Recommendations from Amigos for short-, medium- and long-term projects as well as a site preservation report.
- Documents located in old box car were saved and are in the process of being cleaned and restored.
- Group of committed volunteers has been trained on cleaning and preservation.
- Ongoing preservation of poorly housed documents continues.
- Courthouse renovation planned and additional space secured for future courthouse annex and records retention facility.
- Community to have future access to historical documents dating back to 19th century.



“At one point, County representatives drove me to a field and pulled up to an abandoned railroad box car,” said Elder. “To my dismay, there were vast amounts of voting records, coroners’ records, prison records as well as genealogy records dating back to the 19th century. Storing these records in a boxcar put a large part of the County’s history at risk.”

In addition, the County Courthouse was in desperate need of renovation, and with storage space in short supply, documents were being stored randomly throughout the building.

THE SOLUTION

In May 2005, Amigos’ Imaging and Preservation Service (IPS) spent several days touring a number of facilities in Lavaca County to conduct a site survey. The survey included findings on building conditions, how items were stored and exhibited, the general state of the collection, and environmental factors such as temperature, humidity and light levels. Lavaca County received a detailed written report with photos and specific recommendations, including the following:

- Addressing remote storage. All documents should be removed from the “less than ideal” boxcar storage and the process of cleaning and housing them properly should be started.
- Obtaining storage space for the future. A location for a future Records Retention Center and better storage facilities should be considered as part of the remodel of the County Courthouse.
- Get the environment under control. Utilize part of the restoration grant to install central heat and air, which the courthouse currently lacks. Some of the records are stored near window air conditioning units that drip condensation and/or gas powered space heaters that run during the winter – both hazardous to fragile historical documents.

THE TRAINING

County staff and local residents took the issue to heart. After making the community aware of the importance of records preservation and keeping the state of the County’s history intact, Elder had the support she needed to conduct two team trainings in Hallettsville. There were approximately 30 attendees – 20 from Lavaca County and 10 from surrounding areas – to maximize the grant. The initial training in 2005 was a general overview and understanding of preserving and storing historical records while the second, more advanced training, held in 2007, went in-depth into handling and storage, mold removal, environmental concerns and correct use of a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) vacuum.

In 2007, Elder was on hand to observe the transfer of records from the boxcar to climate-controlled storage. She also gave a presentation in May 2008 on the importance of preservation at a local genealogy symposium sponsored by the library, and is planning to return in 2009 to deliver a second conference presentation.

Brenda Lincke-Fisseler, chairman of the Lavaca County Records Retention Volunteers and an employee of the French Simpson Memorial Library in Hallettsville, is responsible for pulling together a team of committed volunteers to sit in on the preservation training

and put the techniques into practice. A group of up to 12 volunteers currently meets on the third Monday of each month and works from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. cleaning and restoring documents from the boxcar and moving them into a “clean room” – one with proper temperature, humidity, and storage.

Fisseler jokingly refers to her committee as the “Press Gang,” referencing the days when pirates would press people into service. In reality, all 12 volunteers have a strong desire and interest in preserving the County’s history. And when new recruits want to come aboard, Fisseler now has two “first lieutenants” ready to conduct training and supervise the techniques taught in Elder’s two sessions.

“With the Press Gang on board,” says Fisseler, “We have been successful in attacking a large project on a practically nonexistent budget, although we realize it’s not a quick fix.” According to Fisseler, Elder has been a real asset, and more accessible and helpful throughout the restoration project than anyone could have anticipated.

And the feeling is mutual. Elder says she talks to someone from Lavaca about once a month and admits she’d be devastated if she didn’t hear from them. “We go to great lengths for our members to ensure they’re getting the support they need – whether they need to know if that’s the proper type of vacuum to buy or just to provide a listening ear,” says Elder. “We’re here to make them successful.”

NEXT STEPS

As part of the complete renovation of the County Courthouse, plans have been included to address housing, storage and accessibility of documents. Beyond cleaning, repair, and storage, the County also has long-term plans to digitize most of the documents for public access.

In addition, there is a three-phase project in place to open and utilize a courthouse annex and Records Retention Center, with the County recently approving the purchase of a nearby facility.

- Phase I: Relocate everyone from the courthouse to the annex for courthouse renovation.
- Phase II: Move some officials and employees back to the courthouse and establish permanent facilities for those staying in the annex.
- Phase III: Establish a Records Retention Center where residents and visitors can come in and view/use originals, copies, and scans of historical documents.

Amigos is proud of the service it has provided to Lavaca County and hopes to share the key learnings from this historic preservation study with other small, rural and agricultural communities letting them know that preserving the history of any such location is worth the time and effort for future generations.

ABOUT AMIGOS LIBRARY SERVICES

Amigos is the largest and most trusted provider of support services to a network of more than 750 libraries in the Southwestern U.S. For more than three decades, our member libraries have enjoyed our purchasing discounts on the products and services they value most. Amigos members utilize a comprehensive array of services including cataloging and resource sharing, electronic information resources, preservation and digital imaging, consulting, and training. For more information on Amigos, visit www.amigos.org.

ABOUT PRESERVATION ASSISTANCE GRANTS

Amigos IPS stands ready to help other institutions needing assistance with preservation projects, site surveys and preservation or emergency preparedness training. In 2008, National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) increased funding for Preservation Assistance Grants (PAG) to \$6,000 from \$5,000. For more information or to request assistance with your preservation project or PAG application, contact Gina Minks, IPS Manager, at minks@amigos.org or Elizabeth Klein, Program Coordinator, at klein@amigos.org.

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