

PAPER TRAILS



LINDA S. HAYMES

Post office in mystery category

Historic-home owners often find themselves researching their homes' history, and discover not just a tale of timber and bricks but a richer one of the people who resided within.

Jeff Baskin, executive director of the William F. Laman Public Library System in North Little Rock, now knows that public buildings can hold the same allure.

The library bought the old U.S. post office at 520 Main St. last year for \$775,000 and plans to move its Argenta branch, now nearby in an old city fire station, there by 2014. Renovation of the 16,000-square-foot space will cost \$3.5 million and will be paid for through a bond issue.

The new branch will have a larger children's department; 20 computers for public use; up to 20,000 books, CDs and DVDs; and services including a notary public, a coffee shop with indoor and outdoor seating, an auditorium and space for exhibits.

As focused as Baskin is on the future and making the best use of the new space, he is also respectful of the building's past as the city's main post office, from its construction in 1931 until becoming a branch office in 1965 before closing in 2012.

"I believe that the more you get to know the building and its history, the better the renovation will be and allow you the option of restoring the historic parts," he says.

But the more he learned, the more questions he had. What happened to the lobby's original light fixtures? Why was there a hole in the ground leading to a small brick basement room? And then there's this small, weird-looking key — what did it open?

Otto Seay of North Little Rock was able to answer some of the questions in a recent visit with Baskin and his staff. Seay, now 80, worked for the North Little Rock post office from 1958 until retiring in 1990.

When Seay joined the post office staff, he was 25 and a stamp cost 3 cents. He began as a mail carrier, but he rose to become the post office's manager.

During their visit, old photos and blueprints were used to explain how different areas of the building were used. Topics ranged from mail chutes and conveyor belts, to segregated employee break rooms and restrooms, to where a bullet struck a door when an employee committed suicide there in 1958. Where did the employee get the gun?

"There were guns on the [teller] windows," Seay explained, "There was a holster attached to the wall beneath the window."

"But that wasn't the only bullet to ever hit the building," he said, adding that another (a stray one from the nearby Checkmate Club on an especially rowdy Saturday night) once flew through a window and embedded in a wall.

Seay couldn't shed light on what became of the lobby's original fixtures but knew what that hole in the ground leading to the basement room was for — delivering coal for the boiler. And that odd-shaped key? Employees inserted it into the back side of a post office box to block customers who hadn't paid their bills.

Those who have memories, memorabilia or photographs of the old post office can contact Baskin at (501) 758-1720 or at jeff.baskin@lamanlibrary.org.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL

Biologists Kevin Church (left) and Jessica Johns towel off a female mallard Friday at a Sherwood facility where they're cleaning wildlife affected by the Mayflower oil spill.

Oily wildlife getting human touch

Crews work to calm, clean crude-covered wild critters

CATHY FRYE
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

A duck coated with thick crude oil squirmed frantically as two field biologists from Florida examined their newest patient.

Captured by Arkansas Game and Fish Commission agents, the female mallard continued to struggle while her temperature was taken. She also didn't like the Pepto-Bismol forced down her throat, but the pink medication may save her life by protecting her digestive system from inadvertently swallowed oil.

Nearby, in a large covered

cage, a female beaver nursed her kit, which was born just hours after six people — using several plastic kiddie pools — had washed the tarry oil from the 35-pound to 40-pound mama.

The duck and beaver currently reside at a warehouse in Sherwood, where a wildlife rescue operation is under way. On Friday, biologists were also treating 21 turtles, a raccoon and 10 other ducks, all victims of the oil spill in Mayflower.

At the warehouse, white sheets cover cages and kennels. The atmosphere is one of hushed voices and dim lighting, the primary goal be-

ing to keep these wild creatures calm while in captivity.

A ruptured pipeline belonging to Exxon Mobil is to blame for the oil that gushed along neighborhood streets in Mayflower on Good Friday and into the area near wildlife-rich Lake Conway. Officials said Friday that the lake itself remained oil-free.

Crude oil, which contains the most dangerous chemicals found in gasoline, is toxic. Many of the chemicals are neurotoxins, which means they affect the brain. And benzene has been linked to adult leukemia and other cancers. Some of the toxins can be absorbed

through the skin.

Animals, especially those with oil-coated heads, are at great risk when exposed because they often ingest the toxins.

Even those rescued and cleaned may not live long. And there's not much research into long-term health effects, said Louisiana field biologist Lexi Anderson.

Thus far, at least 27 oily birds and mammals have been captured by Arkansas Game and Fish authorities. Those include mallards, wood ducks, turtles, blue-winged teal ducks, the beaver and a raccoon.

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Bus-insurance bill advances; CATA says it's target

SARAH D. WIRE
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The 2011 death of a Bryant man spurred a Senate committee to approve a bill Saturday to dramatically increase the amount of liability insurance public transit authorities must hold.

After hearing from the family of James David Wright, the Senate Insurance and

Commerce Committee approved Senate Bill 851 by Sen. David Johnson, D-Little Rock.

Wright, a 57-year-old Entergy employee was struck and killed by a Central Arkansas Transit Authority bus in downtown Little Rock.

The family's attorney, Carter Stein, told committee members that the family was startled to learn that current

law only requires the transit authority to hold liability insurance of \$25,000 per person and \$50,000 per occurrence.

That is the same amount Arkansasans are required to carry on their personal vehicles, he said.

"Transit buses operating in a densely populated city where there are pedestrians [and] bicyclists, actually pose

a greater risk" than other vehicles, Stein said.

SB851 requires public transit authorities to have liability insurance of at least \$500,000 in case of injury or death, and at least \$1 million for bodily injury or death to multiple people in the same accident. The bill also requires the same amount of uninsured-motorist liability insurance. Under Ar-

kansas law, a driver can choose to reject uninsured-motorist liability insurance.

The bill also requires \$500,000 coverage for property damage.

Stein stressed that the bill would not affect the Wright family if it becomes law, because it doesn't apply retroactively. CATA has offered the

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High-schooler aims for perfection, hits it

Hot Springs student gets 36 on ACT

CYNTHIA HOWELL
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Yeongwoo Hwang of Jonesboro took the ACT college entrance exam for the first time last summer after purchasing and going through a practice book. He also took a practice course offered through his home-school program.

He scored a 35 — one point shy of a perfect score.

Hwang moved on. He enrolled at the Arkansas School for Mathematics, Sciences and the Arts in Hot Springs. And in January, midway through the school year, he decided to take the ACT exam a second time.

He wanted to attain a score on the optional writing part of the test that he did not take the first go-around. He said he didn't have as much time to practice for the second test because of class work.

"When I went into the test the second time I wasn't as focused as I was the first time on the actual subject areas because I knew I had a 35," he recalled.

"I wasn't as worried. I was

mainly focusing on just the essays. When I exited the test, I felt I had done pretty well on all the parts. I felt the ACT was easier the second time, probably because I was more confident and I had already taken it. I felt pretty good about it."

Hwang, a 16-year-old junior, earned the top composite score of 36, his school announced.

Less than one-tenth of 1 percent of students who take the ACT earn the top score, according to the ACT. For the recently graduated Class of 2012, a total of 781 of the more than 1.66 million test-takers in the nation earned a 36 while 4,457 earned a 35.

In Arkansas, only six students in the Class of 2012 earned a 36 composite score out of the 26,058 test-takers in that class.

Each of the four sections of the exam — English, math, reading and science — is graded on a 1 to 36 scale. The four sections are averaged together for the composite score.

Hwang said he missed only one question in the subject area exams and that was on the English part of the test, which still gave him a 36 on that section.

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Hwang



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL

Daniel Danielson cleans signs Saturday morning at the Reed's Bridge Battlefield Homestead as part of a national Park Day cleanup project.

20 focus on park, not 1863 fight

Reed's Bridge green space what's important, they say

CHELSEA BOOZER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

JACKSONVILLE — The wooden bridge across Bayou Meto where Confederate troops claimed a small, short-lived victory in a skirmish with Union troops in 1863 is nowhere in sight — the dirt road has long since been paved and the area developed.

During that August clash, the area was thought to have been devoid of houses, but

now replicas of Civil War-era homes stand with neatly mowed lawns across an open field where about 20 volunteers met to work Saturday.

To coincide with national Park Day, sponsored by the Civil War Trust — a Washington-based group dedicated to preserving Civil War battlefields — the volunteers cleaned around and in the bayou, the road and the field at Reed's Bridge Battlefield Homestead on Arkansas 161.

While using a hose to water freshly dug plots ready for planting new daffodils, Daniel Danielson said it wasn't the Reed's Bridge skirmish that prompted him to help keep up the site.

"At a certain level, I don't know that it's necessarily important" to keep the battlefield preserved, he said. "My understanding is that this was a battle, a skirmish, but you know it wasn't a

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Oil spill seen as 'blessing' for some

Businesses happy for local spending

CHELSEA BOOZER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

MAYFLOWER — Exxon Mobil Pipeline Co. has already spent millions of dollars on supplies and services from local businesses and contractors after a major oil spill more than a week ago in this town 10 miles south of Conway, a spokesman said Saturday.

"We are buying as much supplies and hiring as many contractors as possible from Arkansas," Exxon Mobil spokesman Patrick McGinn said. "We have purchased from 70 Arkansas contractors, and about half of those are local — local meaning here in Mayflower or Faulkner County."

He didn't divulge an exact dollar amount, however. And McGinn and other Exxon Mobil officials declined to say how much the company has spent so far in efforts to clean up the spill, estimated to have spewed about 5,000 barrels — or 210,000 gallons — of heavy crude oil into the Northwoods neighborhood, surrounding ditches and a cove across Arkansas 89 from Lake Conway.

While the spill has displaced residents from 22 homes, some local businessmen are calling the disaster a "blessing in disguise."

That's the viewpoint of Andy Morris, an employee at Lumber 1 Home Center in Mayflower. Workers hired by Exxon Mobil frequent the business daily, he said, purchasing cleanup supplies.

"It's definitely helping us

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