A PASSION FOR PRESERVING THE PAST

Ethel Bacon ’44, ’55 in the depths of the University Archives.

BY JUDIE JACOBSON
Suddenly, the quiet is flooded with her memories, which bring a profusion of sights and sounds:

• A unanimous chorus of “ayes” rises from the Connecticut General Assembly, approving the incorporation of the University of Hartford. The date is Feb. 21, 1957.

• The idiosyncratic music of renowned composer Arnold Franchetti, a Guggenheim Foundation Award winner, ricochets off the halls of The Hartt School. The period is 1949 to 1979.

• The majestic words of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. exalt the students who come to hear him speak on campus. The year is 1959.

“The archives have always fascinated me, maybe because I’ve lived through all these years,” says Ethel Bacon ’44, M’55, the university’s first and, until recently, only archivist, who will soon retire from the post she has held for 45 years.

Indeed, Bacon has enjoyed a front-row seat to five decades of University of Hartford history, and she recalls every day of it in vibrant detail, spicing up the retelling with a sardonic wit. The straightforward and spirited octogenarian has no need to refer to actual files as she fires off, with uncanny precision, names and dates and other tidbits of information. Bacon also can pinpoint within seconds the precise location of any given piece of documentation—and there are thousands of documents, manuscripts, photos, and journals available for pinpointing.

Take, for example, the history surrounding the imposing ship’s anchor that rests on the lawn near the university’s main entrance. To most, the anchor is simply the traditional spot for rival Greek houses to display their colors. But Bacon knows better.

The anchor belonged to the U.S.S. Hartford, the flagship of Admiral David G. Farragut. The ship was pressed into service during the Civil War battle of Mobile Bay. According to Bacon, the U.S. Navy bequeathed the anchor to the university because alumni had served in the Armed Forces. As she talks, Bacon lays hands on a treasure trove of original documents that verify her story—photos of the ship, correspondence from Farragut, the July 1864 general order sending the Hartford to Mobile Bay—as if her story needed verifying.

“Once I told the head of Operations and Maintenance that during Christmas break my staff and I were going to paint that anchor black, as it should be. So we brought brushes and a stepstool and painted the anchor black.” She laughs.

“Security came. I told them to call O&M.”

Of course, Bacon isn’t only the keeper of the university’s history; she is an integral part of it. A native of Rocky Hill, Conn., who now lives in Madison, Bacon is still partial to The Hartt School, where she taught for several years after earning her bachelor’s degree there in 1944 and her master’s in 1955. It was while working long days as Hartt’s music librarian that she was cajoled, in January 1960, into assuming responsibility for organizing and preserving the university’s past.

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“I asked to have a name plate made up for my desk that said ‘Send Help!’” she recalls. Neither help nor a name plate arrived. But Bacon threw herself into the job with a passion that grew more profound with each passing year. “I suppose that deep in my bones I’ve always been an archivist,” she said.

In November 1989 the university’s once nomadic archival collection moved to its permanent home on the lower level of the Mortensen Library. There, Bacon continues to work a few hours every week helping in the preservation of countless materials relating to the history of the university. These days she has the help of Margaret Mair, who recently joined the university as its new archivist. A published author of children’s books, Bacon hopes to find more time to write during her retirement.

People often ask her if she minds working in a room without windows. “I don’t need windows,” Bacon explains, “because the archives themselves are a window to the past.”