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Historical museum marks American Archives Month

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October is American Archives Month at the Artesia Historical Museum and Art Center.

For some, archiving is a term that may be unclear. An archive is a safe place where materials are stored and preserved, and a place where people go to find information. Instead of having information compiled in a book, the materials in an archive are raw materials in their original form.

Most people have their own personal archives. It may be a file cabinet, a cardboard box filled with important documents like birth certificates, car titles and house mortgage information, or that catch-all drawer.

Archival materials and records are stored in an archive. Archival material is information that is generated or created about activities and events. The materials can be letters, diaries, recordings, financial and legal documents and visual materials, such as photographs and films. They are unique, one of a kind sources of information.



Dawn Bowen photo

The Artesia Historical Museum and Art Center at 505 W. Richardson Ave. holds some of Artesia's finest treasures and serves as an archive, preserving the community's history.

The local museum has its own internal records (administrative and past exhibits), a collection database that documents what's in the collection such as the donor and the object's history and historical records.

Some people wonder why records matter, asking "Why do the government and we as American citizens need to take action to protect records from damage or destruction?"

The Council of State Archivists (CoSA) explains important reasons.

Records are essential to protecting life, CoSA states. Medical records allow doctors

to treat patients safely and effectively. Maps and floor plans allow rescue workers to locate victims of disasters. Infrastructure records showing utility lines keep rescue workers safe. Construction records help engineers assess damage to bridges, tunnels and levees.

Records are essential to protecting property. Plats, deeds and mortgage records establish ownership of real property. Insurance records help owners recover losses. Probate records and wills prove inheritance. Bank records verify financial assets. Divorce records confirm property distribution.

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Records are essential to protecting rights. School records document educational attainment. Adoption records establish parental rights. Military service and employment records provide access to pensions and other benefits. Guardianship records protect those who cannot speak for themselves.

Records are essential to restoring order and resuming operations following a disaster. Businesses need proof of assets, liabilities, contracts and other legal obligations. Governments need documentation of decisions, regulations, precedents and lines of succession and authority. Individuals need proof of identity, medical histories and documentation of assets. Communities need historical records to retain a sense of continuity with the past on which to build a future.

In an effort to preserve local government records, The "Closet to Home Project" sponsored by the CoSA focuses on records that are truly "closet to home." As CoSA explains, in many localities these invaluable documents are being lost. Some records suffer from simple neglect, stored in leaky basements or attics when office space becomes crowded. Those created or stored electronically are vulnerable when hardware and software upgrades make files unreadable in only a few years. Local government officials, whose time and resources are often limited, may be pressed to implement effective records management procedures that could identify records of long-term significance and ensure that they receive the archival protection they deserve.

The Closet to Home Project is determined to find practical and effective strategies for preserving archival records that can be adopted by localities nationwide.

States a press release from CoSA, "We know that these

strategies must be adaptable to local conditions, because every state's law and traditions in regard to its local records are different. We also recognize that there is much variation even within states as to how local governments approach caring for their archival records."

Records from the past teach people who they are, where they came from, what mistakes they've made that they can learn from, and how their community has developed and evolved over the years.

Records may prove invaluable to some. People born at home with no attending physician or birth certificate may need access to early newspapers or some other material to prove existence. Others may need access to early newspapers for family history information and leads such as adopted people looking for leads on birth parents.

Nancy Dunn, the Artesia Museum manager, said that from the museum's point of view, their internal records are important to help them manage their collection, and because they are accountable to the public.

"The public relies on us to save and preserve their treasures for future generations, and need to know that they can count on us to do so with honesty, integrity and reliability" says Dunn.

Dunn is an archivist. The archivist is the middle man. Dunn and others sift through the archival materials, determining what is worth saving, preserving it from deterioration and making it available to the public.

Some records that Dunn has to keep are for administrative purposes. Those documents can include timesheets. Fiscal records are documents needed to be kept for a set amount of time and contain records of financial transactions. Legal documents kept deal with title/ownership matters. The archival/historical documents tell the story of Artesia.

Lisa Johnston, assistant city clerk of Artesia, brings records from City Hall to the museum and they become artifacts.

Johnston and Dunn realize the importance of keeping track of archival material and preserving it for future generations.

They urge all Artesians to take care of their possessions. In an example given by Johnston, she explains that if someone's house were to catch fire, the first thing most people would grab would be their pictures and irreplaceable items. She said if those are so important, then why not take time to protect them instead of leaving them in a spot where the items can be easily damaged.

Another example, Johnston said, is people who store papers and other important items in a cardboard box in the basement. She asks what would happen if a person's basement were to flood. Their papers would be ruined and they would be faced with the difficulty of recovering those lost documents.

Dunn and Johnston recommend the book "Saving Stuff" By Don Williams and Louisa Jagger. The book explains how to preserve pictures, heirlooms

and other prized possessions.

Dunn and Johnston also ask people to consider as they weed out old keepsakes, such as pictures and programs from their child's play 10 years ago, if the items might have value for archival purposes. If there is a picture of a person that's not very good, but the background shows a house or a street clearly, Dunn and Johnston recommend calling the museum. It might be something to help develop a timeline of Artesia through the years and may help build a pictorial history.

One project aimed at building Artesia's history through pictures is The Centennial Photo Project. Dunn asks the public to bring in their historic photos from Artesia's past to be scanned into the archive.

Dunn and Johnston say anyone with questions can feel free to call them. Anyone with a question about preservation techniques or who has items that might help build Artesia's history is asked to contact Dunn at 748-2390.

Anyone with question about items that the City of Artesia might be interested in may contact Johnston at 746 2122.