

MSU COLLECTION PRESERVES MISSISSIPPI'S RURAL PAST

By Bob Ratliff

Mississippi's history is closely tied to the land — from the era when flatboats moved the cotton harvest to the Gulf of Mexico to the current technology revolution in agriculture.

Preserving the stories of the people and events that have shaped the state's rural life is the goal of a new program at Mississippi State University.

The Consortium for the History of Agricultural and Rural Mississippi, formed in 2002, is ensuring preservation and access to important documents related to the individuals and organizations that built the state's rural heritage.

CHARM partners include the MSU Libraries, the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, the MSU Extension Service, the College of Veterinary Medicine, the College of Forest Resources, and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. The CHARM collection is housed in MSU's Mitchell Memorial Library.

"Agriculture and forestry have played significant roles in the development and history of this state," said Vance H. Watson, vice president for agriculture, forestry and veterinary medicine. "Exploring the past through documents like early plantation journals and vintage photographs can help students and others understand and appreciate the rural, agricultural roots of Mississippi and the role they played in defining our state and its people."

In just a few months, the project has already brought together an impressive array of documents and artifacts.

"Our manuscript materials document everything from small farms and family-run sawmill operations to corporate agricultural and forestry enterprises," said Mattie L. Sink, manuscripts librarian for Special Collections. "The collection also includes more than 300 handwritten scripts from the television feature, 'Farm Family of the Week,' which was broadcast by WLBT-TV in Jackson from 1954 to 1961."

Photographs, diaries, account ledgers and a host of other materials provide glimpses into day-to-day rural life, including concerns about the weather, the economy and the changing face of agriculture.

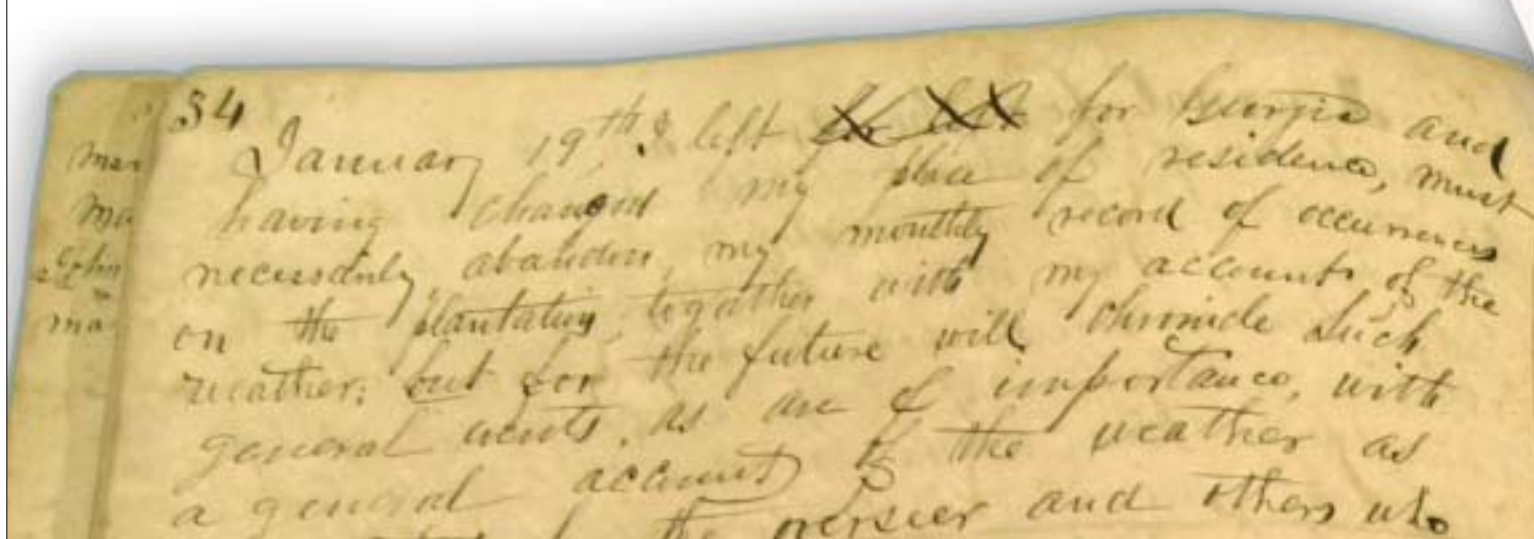
Another important part of the collection is materials from the university archives, including photographs, reports and other MSU Extension materials. Oral histories from individuals who have played leadership roles in Mississippi agriculture also are being collected.

"The project establishes a single location to preserve the materials," said Frances N. Coleman, dean of libraries. "It makes them accessible in a setting where large collections of other, more general information about Mississippi and its past are already available for reference."

Technology is rapidly changing both the business of agriculture and rural life, Watson said, making the CHARM proj-

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ect especially important in preserving an accurate record of the past for future generations.

“We’re not far removed from a time when animals provided the primary power for agriculture,” he said. “Today, we’re making use of advanced technologies such as satellite-based remote sensing to pinpoint the nutrient and other needs of a crop.”

To expand its accessibility, the consortium is digitizing materials in the collection and making them available on the World Wide Web at <http://library.msstate.edu/charm>.

The CHARM project also can help families and individuals preserve materials that have historical significance.

If the materials are suitable, the MSU Libraries will gladly add them to the CHARM collection, preserving and cataloging them for access by scholars and the general public,” Coleman said.

For additional information on CHARM, contact Coleman at (662) 325-7761.



MANUSCRIPTS LIBRARIANS
MATTIE SINK, LEFT, AND
SARA MORRIS CLEAN,
CATALOG AND FILE
CHARM MATERIALS.

Jim Lytle

