Raising Archives to New Heights in Central Florida: The Archives and Library at Bok Tower Gardens

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On September 27, members of the Suncoast Information Specialists (SIS) enjoyed a rare opportunity to tour the archives and library at Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales. Established in 1983, SIS has served as a networking, mutual support, and professional organization for archivists, librarians, and information scientists from all types of libraries and cultural heritage institutions in the greater Tampa Bay area. SIS arranged for a tour of the archives and library housed within the upper floors of the majestic Tower, and SIS members and guests also had an opportunity to learn about the collections from Joy Banks, a librarian who built the collections and developed the archives during her four-year tenure as a "lone arranger."

In the 1920s, Edward W. Bok saw the beauty of central Florida rapidly eroding to settlements of people. He purchased what is now the Gardens in order to preserve a patch of that beauty on Iron Mountain, one of the highest points in peninsular Florida, along the Lake Wales Ridge. Bok intended the land to be a sanctuary for "birds and people" and envisioned the Gardens and its accompanying Tower (which houses a 60-bell carillon) as part of his life's mission to live up to his grandmother's motto: “Make the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it.”

For the Sanctuary's landscape design, Bok hired Frederick Law Olmstead Jr., a landscape architect who designed the National Mall in Washington, D.C. as well as developing state and national park areas throughout the United States. As the grounds took shape, work crews constructed the impressive 205-foot neo-Gothic Singing Tower atop the 295-foot summit. The Tower's opening in 1929, along with the Good Roads Movement that had finally brought improved automobile transportation networks to areas well beyond the railroad lines, ushered in an era of Florida roadside
attractions that covered the peninsula long before the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971.

Before leading a tour of the tower, Joy Banks offered a presentation entitled *Always be Prepared: A Librarian’s Guide to New Beginnings*. She described the unique duties of serving as quite possibly the only dedicated carillon librarian in the world. She encouraged those in attendance to maintain contacts with allied disciplines, such as museum organizations. When she secured the position of Bok Tower librarian, Banks found herself “suddenly solo” as the first professional librarian the Gardens had ever employed. She encouraged all of us to avoid being an “island.” Although perched within a Singing Tower surrounded by a mote on the other side of a locked gate, Banks has built strong networks with archival and library organizations, as well as the Guild of Carillonneurs in North America. She emphasized the value of proactively informing others at Bok Tower about notable events and anniversaries that tie into the Garden’s 85-year history, even if few of them regularly walk on the other side of the brass-plated Tower door to visit the archives and library.

As we entered the Tower, we saw the impressive ceramic tile and vaulted ceiling of the Founder’s Room. After climbing to the second level, Banks showed us the Chao Research Center, a windowless archival area constructed in 2008 above the concave ceiling of the Founder’s Room. Much of this area includes manuscript collections from Bok Tower and other carillons. Some of the materials are being organized as part of a 2013 Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant offered through the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) to organize the vertical files of the Anton Brees Carillon Library. This CLIR grant continues through 2016.

After examining the archival collections and some ephemera that illustrates the history of Bok Tower, we ascended the stairs (or took the vintage 1929 elevator) to the Anton Brees Carillon Library at the fifth level of the tower. The library houses approximately 6,500 cataloged items and grew from the original collection of the Tower’s first carillonneur, Anton Brees. The scope of the library includes the international carillon community—information for and about both carillons and carillonneurs. It is composed of the primary collection, carillon scores, and the secondary collection, general carillon reference. Those interested in seeing the Carillonneur’s Office also enjoyed an unparalleled view of the rolling ridges along Polk County. Above them (and perched above the archives and library) hung bells weighing from less than twelve pounds to more than eleven tons.

Bok Tower Gardens preserves nature’s beauty on one of the highest points in Florida. During her four years as an archivist and librarian, Joy Banks elevated the status of the collections within the Singing Tower to new heights. Cataloging, arrangement and description, conservation, and digitization efforts assure that this cultural treasure’s history and collections—along with the joyful noise emanating from the Tower—will continue to be appreciated for future generations.