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OUR WRITTEN HERITAGE

The Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, in its mission to identify, preserve, and interpret the written heritage of North Dakota for future generations, has recently made available several manuscript collections for scholarly research. The collections span more than the last hundred years and uniquely document the political, economic, and social history of the state, the Red River Valley, and the city of Grand Forks.

The political papers of the late Senator Quentin Burdick document his two years in the U.S. House of Representatives as North Dakota's first Democrat elected to Congress in 1958 and his thirty-two years from 1960 to 1992 in the U.S. Senate. Burdick staunchly defended North Dakota's agricultural community and family farmer, and was a lifelong champion of the state's Native American communities. He wielded considerable political clout in his latter years as Chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies. Burdick's papers total 966 linear feet and contain correspondence, subject files, legislative materials, and photographs.

The American Legion Auxiliary sponsored the first Flickertail Girls State in 1947 at Jamestown College. Held on the University of North Dakota campus since 1950, the program allows participants to experience real-life politics in North Dakota at the city, county, and state level. Records trace the evolution of the program from 1956 to 1989.

Business records of several companies reveal the economic climate of the Red River Valley from 1881 to 1990. The A.L. Hanson Papers outline Hanson's banking career which began in Iowa in 1878 and continued in Hillsboro, North Dakota Territory. From 1881 to 1893, Hanson organized and became an officer of the Hillsboro Bank, Buxton Bank and the Bank of Wapeton. The majority of his papers reflect loan and mortgage activities of these three banks, as well as his real estate and tax title business.

The nation's tenth largest wholesaler, the Nash Finch Company, began as a small family-owned confectionery and tobacco store in Devils Lake in 1885. Business thrived with the addition of two stores and expanded into retail fruit. After fire destroyed the original store in 1887, the Nash brothers relocated to Grand Forks where they developed a wholesale line. By 1891, Nash Brothers Company was entirely wholesale and included fruits and other grocery lines. Nash Finch Company remained in Grand Forks until 1919 when it moved to Minneapolis, a rapidly growing regional wholesale distribution center.

Nash Finch Company records contain 48 linear feet of financial records dating from 1911 to 1979, although the majority date from 1919 to 1960. The records detail the financial activities of the Nash Brothers Company, Nash Coffee Company, Nash Finch Company, the Nash Shareholders Company, and the Nash Foundation. Three indexes offer detailed access and organize the records by date, creating agency, and document type.

The Implement Dealers Mutual Fire Insurance Company was organized in 1903 by the Retail Implement Dealers Association of North Dakota and Northwestern Minnesota. The company experienced several affiliations and name changes, and is presently American West Insurance Company. Although it has operated in thirty-four states at one time or another, the highest number of policies have been written in North Dakota. Certificates of Authority, annual reports, and yearbooks outline the history of the company from 1903 to 1990, while correspondence, minutes of meetings of both policy holders and Board of Directors, and financial reports document the company's early years through 1948.

The depression years began in North Dakota in the 1920's and continued into the Great Depression. The McCanna Farming Company was established in 1881 near present-day McCanna, ND, and operated continuously through the 1960's. Nine linear feet of farm records contain a wealth of correspondence and financial records, which tell the story of the farm's survival during the Depression and recovery during and after WWII. The collection's bank records for 1922 to 1930, however, reveal the opposite scenario for small bank operations in northeastern North Dakota. The majority of these banks closed their doors.

A similar scenario was played out for two Grand Forks businesses. The Northern Packing Company opened for operation in Grand Forks on December 9, 1919, and processed a variety of meats and meat products. Annual reports, correspondence, and financial records document the company's high business expectations, but disclose that area farmers found it more convenient to take their business to local butchers. In 1935, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation foreclosed on its unpaid mortgage and the plant closed. A small Grand Forks business, the Dacotah Custom Shirt Shop, experienced a similar fate. In operation from 1919 to 1934 at
the hands of several proprietors, shop records disclose a tenacious effort to succeed, but not enough business to meet expenses.

Records from the Grand Forks County Register of Deed’s Office offer ninety-nine-state journals that record and document several different types of property transactions, streets, and county businesses. The Registry Indexes of Chattell Mortgages date from 1875 to 1966, Redemption Books from 1895 to 1967, Register of Deeds Cash Book, 1885 to 1955, and the Index of Chattells Mortgages. "The Henry Herbert House" contains biographical material and a nearly complete collection of his compositions, orchestral, musical, songs, poetry, and orchestral concerts, light opera and numerous selections for voice, organ, piano and violin.

Several interesting collections offer glimpses into the social and cultural life of the state. Marian Gjelsnes immigrated from Norway to the Red River Valley and lived in 1881 to 1959. Her great-great-grandson, Burt Finney, a pioneer from Norway, wrote letters from 1925 to 1958 written by Burt Finney, a pioneer from North Dakota.

The Pioneer Daughters Club of Pembina County is active in preserving Norwegian-American history. Several fascinating collections offer glimpses into the social and cultural life of the state. Manus Gjelsnes and Caroline Gjelsnes exchanged letters during their courtship and marriage, allowing a researcher to follow the entire case from jurist to subsequent appeal.

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Paulo Conte was born in Palermo, Italy. He taught piano and composition at Wesley College from 1914 to 1923 when he became Dean of Fine Arts at Oklahoma Baptist University until 1936. He continued his career at the University of Wisconsin and as the minister of music for the First Baptist Church in Wichita, until 1952. His papers contain biographical material and a nearly complete collection of his compositions, orchestral, musical, songs, poetry, and orchestral concerts, light opera and numerous selections for voice, organ, piano and violin.

Paulo Conte in his studio in Wesley College, UND, circa 1920.

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