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METRO

African-American Archive Thrives over the Decades

Hundreds of thousands of adults and schoolchildren have touched their history, and that of others, at the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection. The largest archive of African-American history and literature in the Midwest turns 75 this year. It's named after the first black librarian in the Chicago Public Library system. A treasure trove of material is open to scholars and the public. Chicago Public Radio's Natalie Moore has the story.

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A letter from Zora Neale Hurston. A slave insurance policy. Original fliers from civil rights marches. Priceless relics are on display here. But that's just the start.

Senior archivist Michael Flug gives me a tour of the stacks, as we wind around the collection's prizes. The lights are dim, and we pass by hundreds of heavy boxes containing memorabilia and manuscripts.

FLUG: I'm opening box two of the Langston Hughes papers. This is the second draft of Langston Hughes' memoir *The Big Sea* published in 1940.

It's sheathed in plastic. Penciled edits mark the typed sheets.

FLUG: And when he got done with this draft, he typed another draft and then hand corrected that one.

Hughes isn't just catalogued here; he was an early supporter of Vivian Harsh's efforts. Once known as the "Special Negro Collection," the archive now has more than eighty-thousand books.

It began with a woman never too shy to ask for material. In 1932, the Chicago Public Library named Vivian Harsh manager of the George Cleveland Hall branch in Bronzeville. It was the city's first full service library that catered to blacks.

Eleven-thousand people attended the grand opening. Harsh never married or had children. Instead, dedicated her days to promote black history and thinkers.

FLUG: She really didn't have an outside life. And she wasn't a fuzzy-wuzzy warm and friendly person either. She was stern. She was a no-nonsense person. That she respected hard work and scholarship. But she had no tolerance for foolery.

The library became a nucleus of black culture and fostered the city's black renaissance of artists, intellectuals and musicians.

Vivian Harsh hosted clubs, readings and lectures with writers such as Richard Wright, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. This was in segregated Chicago, and the Great Migration brought African-Americans who contributed to gospel, jazz and fine arts.

Danielle Allen is board chair of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium. She says the Harsh archive is accessible in ways that many special collections aren't.

ALLEN: If you went to, say, a special collections department in a university library, you'd have a lot more resources directed toward sort of basic preservation and making it accessible than is the case in this collection. And yet this collection is one of the most important collections in the county of African-American materials.

The Harsh archives are located at 95th and Halsted in the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, where they've been since 1975.

Today, filmmakers, professors and history fair students patronize the collection. Michael Flug boasts that only one-third of the researchers are scholars. People come for book research or to trace family roots.

In the past year, a flood of donors has bequeathed collections. Flug says it's becoming clear the Harsh archive will again eventually need more space.

On a recent fall morning, nearly 50 high school students from Bronzeville Scholastic Institute took a field trip to the Harsh collection. They're studying the Italian Renaissance and are comparing it to Chicago's Black Renaissance of the 1930s and 40s. This is Garrett Brown's first visit.

BROWN: I never realized how more important a library could be to basically the history of African-Americans in Chicago or across the nation for that matter. So I'm learning that more and more as I go along.

Vivian Harsh died in 1960; by then she'd retired from the library. The late journalist Vernon Jarrett wrote a column about her and his youthful trips to the Hall branch. A large print copy is on display in the collection.

This is his memory of what Harsh once told him: "If we Negroes knew the full truth about what we as a race have endured and overcome," Jarrett wrote... "our respect and hunger for education would triple overnight."

I'm Natalie Moore, Chicago Public Radio.

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