

Special Preserves

Stories of women who have made a difference in Iowa and around the world live inside special holdings in University's Main Library

When May Bennett Harshbarger's husband, Harry, died in 1926, she was left with a decision: Should she move into town with her children, Helen Louise, 12, and Laurence, 5, and rent their 80-acre farm near Carroll, Iowa? That was the customary practice, and no doubt it seemed the practical thing to do.

Harshbarger decided instead to stay and learn how to farm. Unfortunately, she made her choice just before the Great Depression struck. In 1932, Harshbarger, who always had handled the family accounts, gave new headings to her tabulations of income and expenses in her account books: Sold, Bought, Lost.

"Cream, eggs, garden kept us busy but independent," she scribbled under one ledger, and she penciled this lament on another page: "Harry loved his country and his family—why did he die when only 43."

Harshbarger's account books, personal papers, and other artifacts from her struggling days on the farm now are part of the Louise Noun-Mary Louise Smith Iowa Women's Archives. They share shelf space in a collection at The University of Iowa's Main Library that includes the life stories of hundreds of Iowa women.

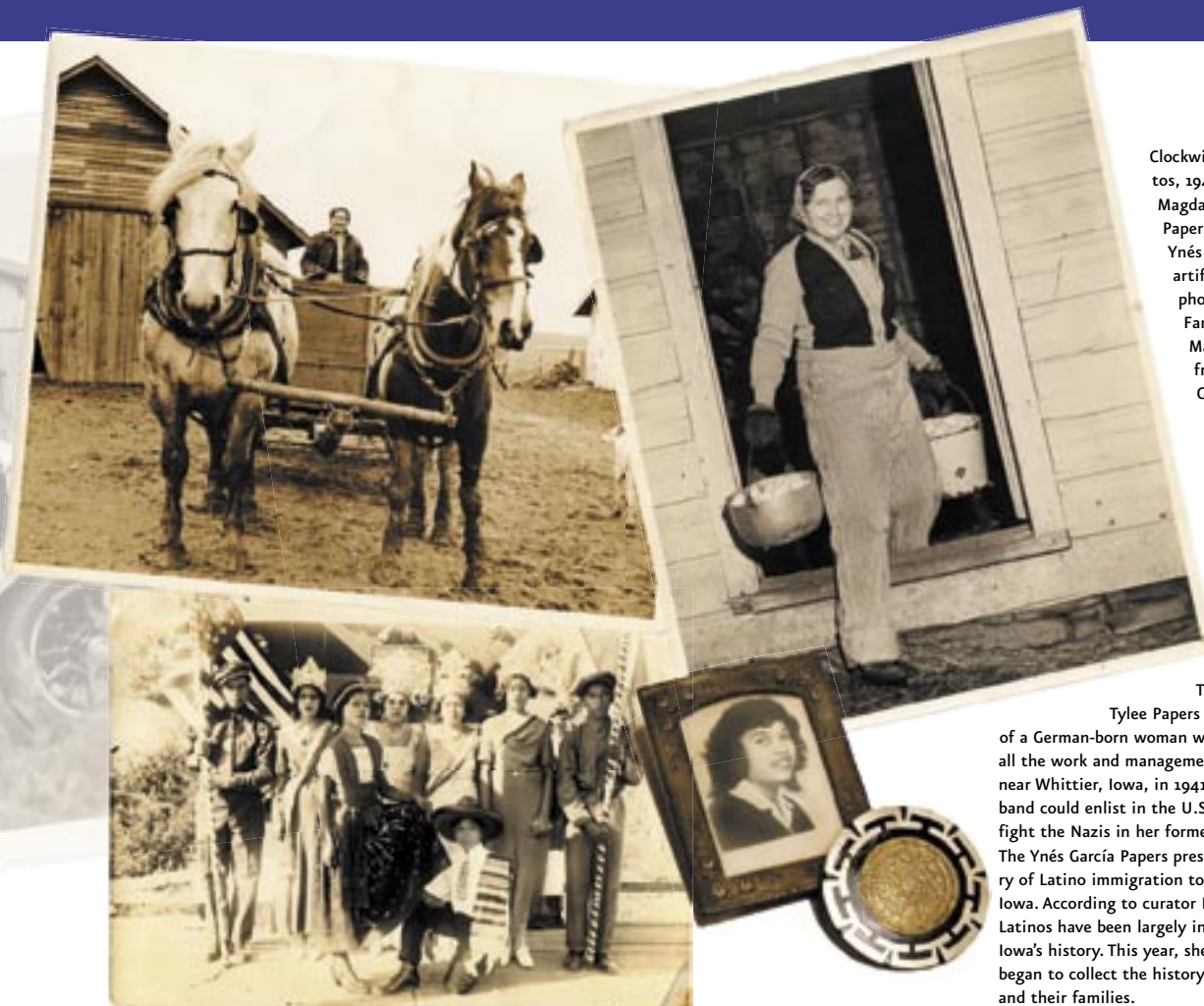
Anyone who visits the UI Main Library can request that a collection of personal papers be brought out from behind the archives doors. The holdings draw more than 500 researchers annually, according to Kären Mason, curator of the Iowa Women's Archives. Many are undergraduate students working on class assignments or graduate students writing dissertations or seminar papers on topics ranging from Iowa's history of six-on-six girl's basketball, the development of the Iowa Porkettes women's group, or the emergence of African American women's clubs. Scholars come from other institutions, too, and people also come for a glimpse into the lives of ancestors and relatives or friends. The archives staff also receive reference requests by e-mail from all over the country.

Inside hundreds of plain gray boxes and acid-free folders live more than 850 accounts of Iowa women of diverse backgrounds and occupations: brave farmwives, prizewinning writers, political activists, scholars, soldiers, Red Cross volunteers, and athletes. People donate a broad range of materials, including letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, scrapbooks, photographs, audiotapes, and home movies. Mason endorses the purpose and value of these artifacts.

"They contain the histories from everyday life that need to be told," Mason says. "I encourage women to donate their own things, their aunt's scrapbooks, their grandmother's diaries. You're not losing



Lifelong Iowa City resident Alice Kelley (left, middle photo) passed along many personal treasures to UI curator Kären Mason (center, middle photo) and UI library volunteer Margaret Richardson (right, middle photo) for safekeeping in the Iowa Women's Archives. Alice donated her diaries (top photo) and photographs, including a shot of Alice shaking hands with Eleanor Roosevelt (bottom photo).



Clockwise: Two photos, 1941, from the Magdalena Tylee Papers; photo of Ynés García and artifact, and photo of Díaz Family, Fort Madison, 1932, from the Ynés García Papers

The Magdalena Tylee Papers tell the story of a German-born woman who took over all the work and management of a farm near Whittier, Iowa, in 1941 so her husband could enlist in the U.S. Army and fight the Nazis in her former homeland. The Ynés García Papers preserve the history of Latino immigration to Fort Madison, Iowa. According to curator Kären Mason, Latinos have been largely invisible in Iowa's history. This year, she and her staff began to collect the history of Latinas and their families.

these things when you donate them to the archives. You're simply finding a safer and more useful place for them."

FROM TWO STRONG-HEADED WOMEN

The archives is named for its founders, two women from Des Moines. Louise Noun was an art collector, historian, philanthropist, and writer, as well as president of the Iowa Civil Liberties Union (she was involved in the famous late-1960s U.S. Supreme Court "black arm-band" case over a Des Moines high school student's free speech rights). Mary Louise Smith was a Republican Party activist for abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, and the first woman to head the Republican National Committee (from 1974 to 1977). Noun first recognized the need for a women's repository while writing her 1969 book about the history of women's suffrage in Iowa, *Strong-Minded Women*. In her research for the book, she discovered how few of the papers and artifacts from women's lives were preserved. She later shared with Smith her frustration about the scarcity of primary sources by and about women, and the two determined to establish a repository to document the experiences and achievements of Iowa women.



Photograph albums from the 1900s through the early 1920s, from the Edna Hidlebaugh Papers

"At that time, you couldn't look in a library catalog under women's names and find materials," Mason says. "They would be under their father, brother, or husband's name."

In 1991, Noun auctioned her prized Frida Kahlo painting, *Self-Portrait with Loose Hair*, using the proceeds to endow the archives. Established in 1992, the Iowa Women's Archives, part of the Department of Special Collections, is supported by Noun's initial gift and by the generosity of donors.

Today, the archives operates on a tight budget that supports two full-time staff members (Mason and Janet Weaver) and a few part-time student assistants. Mason has seen the workload grow as word spreads about the archives.

"I speak all over the state of Iowa, taking along our little three-panel display board to show people some of our collections," Mason says. "Doris Malkmus, who developed the Rural Women collection on a grant, spoke in almost all of Iowa's 99 counties when she was working on the collection. After they hear a presentation, people will contact us to see if we'd be interested in a family member's story. To those families, as well as to those interested in the history of Iowa and of women in this country, the life stories of these women are priceless."

Located on the south end of the third floor in the Main Library, the Iowa Women's Archives is open to the public, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. For information about donating materials or using the collections, contact Kären Mason, curator, at 319/335-5068. To learn more about services and collections available at the archives, visit the web site: www.lib.uiowa.edu/iwa.

by Anne Tanner