

**Big Mary Walker's-great-great-granddaughter  
ventured into OU's Western History Collections  
and found a treasure-trove of information.**



OU Western History Collections

# **Tracking the Choctaw Lighthorsemen**

*by Eve K. Sandstrom*

**A** courageous woman goaded me into my first visit to OU's Western History Collections.

This woman was my great-great-grandmother. Although I know her only through family legend, I deeply admire her.

Yet on the day I first entered the marble halls of Monnet Hall, ready to research her times, I was wondering just where that admiration had led me. In Okie terms, I felt like a reprobate in church. I was definitely in the wrong pew.

The University of Oklahoma's Western History Collections is the largest, the most complete, the widest in scope of any assemblage of materials on the American West.

The collections contain some 50,000 books and thousands upon thousands of additional items—manuscripts, periodicals, microfilm, photographs, maps, oral histories and artifacts.

The Western History Collections are a mother lode of historic facts and viewpoints for undergraduate and graduate students, historians, television and film researchers, textbook authors, writers, genealogists or just plain folks—for anyone interested in any aspect of the history of Oklahoma and the trans-Mississippi West.

Donald L. DeWitt has been curator of the Western History Collections since 1986. He says the WHC's "depth" is unequalled.

"By 'depth' I mean the support that one body of documentation gives to the others," he explains. "The printed materials are here, but many times you can find the printed materials in other libraries. To go deep down into a topic or to go broader into a topic, you need to come and look at the unpublished things (in the collections). Those in turn are supported graphically by the very large photograph collection. And we have a kind of icing on the cake with the oral histories.

"It's unusual to find a repository that has this breadth in the different kinds of materials."

The Western History Collections are linked to other scholarly libraries through RLIN, "Research Libraries

Information Network." This electronic system allows researchers to check resources through a national network of prestigious research facilities.

In 25 years as a writer for newspapers and magazines, I've researched a lot of topics, but I'm no historian. As a reporter, I research by finding "sources," people who'll tell me what I need to know and give me some lively quotes in the process. Digging through history books, microfilm and documents is not my style.

The Western History Collections are housed in Monnet Hall on the Parrington Oval, the "North Oval" to us older OU alumni. Monnet is that



stately white stone building once known informally as "the Law Barn," the one with the green owls under the eaves.

On that first visit, I felt as if those owls might be hooting with laughter at the thought of me as a researcher. I wondered what in the name of Big Mary Walker I was doing there.

I'd come because of my schizophrenic career. Although I've spent most of my working life writing strictly factual news stories and magazine articles, I also write fiction—murder mysteries.

In addition, I'm a descendant of a remarkable woman named Big Mary Walker Watt Blackburn. Big Mary was a mixed-blood Choctaw, although her degree of Choctaw blood is impossible to detect today, some 170 years after her birth. According to family tales, she was a child of 11 or so at the time of the Choctaw Removal between 1831 and 1833, when a treaty "induced"

a majority of the tribe's members to move from Mississippi to what is today southeastern Oklahoma. By the late 1850s, Big Mary was married to her second husband, who was originally from Pennsylvania. According to the family stories, they farmed and ran a stage station in Blue County of the Choctaw Nation. Just at the beginning of the Civil War, Big Mary's husband died, leaving her with children who were still young.

Times were tough in the Choctaw Nation during the Civil War. Big Mary's few field hands left. (Many Choctaws owned slaves—even ones who had married men from "up North.") Gangs of armed men, known as "bushwhackers," roamed Indian Territory, killing and looting.

Big Mary's youngest daughter, Susan Blackburn, never forgot the hardships of her childhood, and she told her daughter, who was to become my grandmother, about how courageously Big Mary met them.

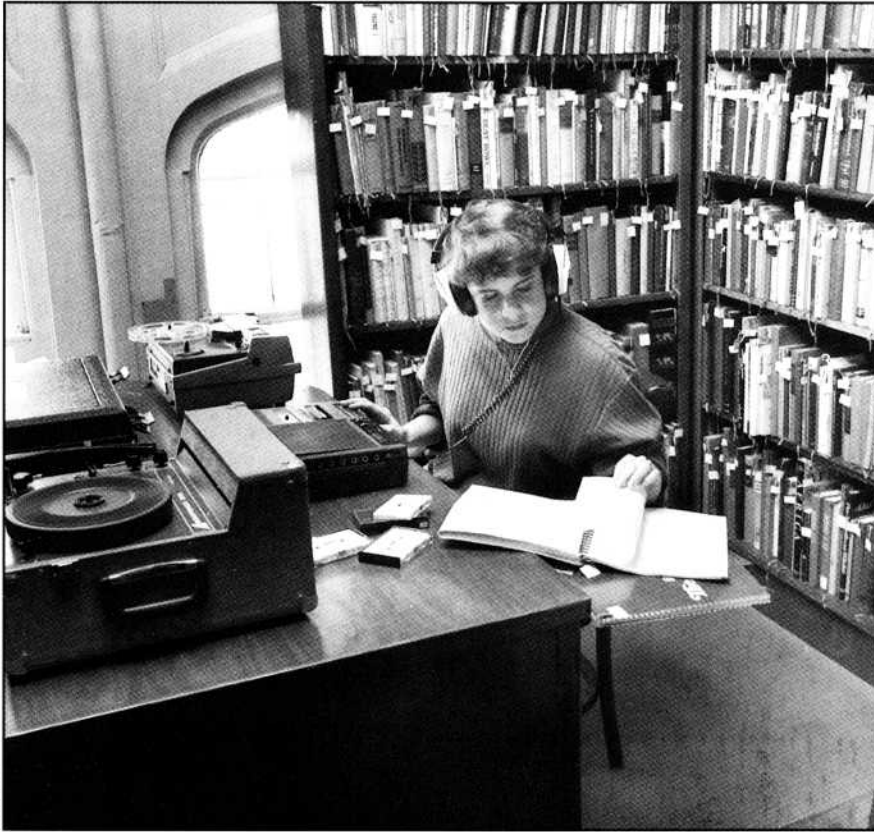
"My mother said the bushwhackers would steal any kind of stock," my grandmother told me. "Sometimes Big Mary would get on a horse, take a gun and chase them, trying to get her cattle back. But by the end of the war, the family didn't own as much as a chicken.

"One time the bushwhackers came right into the house. The family didn't have any kind of a timepiece, so Big Mary had taken her husband's watch and hung it on the wall. One of the bushwhackers saw it, and he reached out to take it down, to steal it. But Big Mary was quicker. She grabbed the watch first.

"Then she smashed it into the floor. She broke it to bits rather than let him have it."

Many other family tales are told about Big Mary, but no one ever described her physical appearance and apparently no photograph of her exists. I'll never know if she was called "Big" Mary because of her size or her character. I'm betting on character.

Big Mary was a thrilling ancestor for a little girl to hear about. When I grew old enough to realize I wanted to become a writer, I knew I wanted to turn Big Mary's story into a novel. But I also knew quite early that my favor-



Gili Jain

*The supplementary material in OU's Western History Collections give researchers a "depth" not found in other libraries. Here Kim Brewer listens to recorded Kiowa Indian music from the old WNAD radio program, "Indians for Indians Hour."*

ite form of fiction was the mystery story, not the "straight" novel. So I hesitated to tackle Big Mary and her adventures.

One factor that made me cautious was my lack of knowledge about the Choctaws. My grandmother's was the last generation to be listed on tribal rolls, and all I knew about the Civil War in the Indian Territory came from the family stories. They might be more colorful than reliable. But a few years ago I finally did something about learning more; I read *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, by Angie Debo.

Debo's book on the Choctaws is well-researched, thoroughly footnoted, scholarly—interesting reading but not sensational. I enjoyed her accounts of the Choctaws' social customs, their educational system, their early conversion to Christianity, their struggle to accommodate their lives to the white world and their bicameral legislature.

Then I reached the chapter on crime in the Choctaw Nation.

"In addition to the sheriffs, the Choctaws had a special group of enforcement officers known as lighthorsemen," Debo wrote. "The Principal Chief had six—later nine—whom he appointed and who served as his special agents in carrying messages, making arrests, keeping liquor at a distance during the Council sessions and assisting the United States Indian agent in the enforcement of the laws."

Wow! Nine special agents, working under the direct orders of the Principal Chief of a sovereign nation—dealing with the marshals from the famed hanging judge, Isaac Parker, of Fort Smith. The lighthorsemen were involved in the complicated transactions of coal mining, solved cases of murder and highway robbery, perhaps even sought out bigamous white men who married Choctaw women so they could

obtain a share of tribal lands.

"Golly!" I told myself. "Those lighthorsemen would make a heck of a mystery series!"

They would, I realized, make a mystery series in which a strong frontier woman of mixed Choctaw and white blood—a woman who had faced adversity and overcome it, a woman who worked from dawn to dusk running a farm and a stage station, a woman who observed and understood human nature—could play a major role.

Had I found a way to write Big Mary's story in my favorite literary form?

It depended on those lighthorsemen. They would have to be historically accurate to interest the typical mystery reader, who is notoriously picky. And I didn't really know anything about the lighthorsemen except that they existed. Most books on the Old West spend chapters on Judge Parker's marshals but say little about Indian law enforcement. The Debo book merely mentioned the lighthorsemen a few times. Where could I find out more?

The logical place was the Western History Collections.

Now I stood in Monnet Hall, sure that my inexperienced attempts at research were about to make me ridiculous.



Shirley Clark, administrative assistant for the Western History Collections, staffs the front-office desk and is often the person who greets visitors. The first thing she hands out is a smile.

"It's very simple," Clark told me. "You just go right up there into the reading room and fill out a form explaining who you are and what you're interested in. The assistant will show you how to look for things and explain how things work.

"Then she'll bring the material to you."

Western History Collections materials are non-circulating; they may not be taken from the premises. They are in closed stacks—researchers may not browse through at will.

However, the materials may be used by anyone who has a reason for research. The collections are open from



8 a.m. until 5 p.m. each weekday year-round and from 8 a.m. until noon each Saturday during the academic year. Some 250 researchers use them monthly.

The most common category of researcher, DeWitt says, is the undergraduate student.

"That's what we're here for—to support the academic programs that the University offers," he says. "We're delighted that the students use the collections, that they are capable of using them and that the resources we have support their work."

**T**he Western History Collections were begun by Edward Everett Dale, an OU graduate who joined the University's history faculty in 1914 after receiving a master's from Harvard. Dale had been reared on a ranch, and he was intensely interested in the history of the American West. From the beginning of his career, he was devoted to locating and collecting important materials on the history of Oklahoma and the American West.

Dale became head of the history department in 1923, a year after earning his doctorate from Harvard. He believed that a strong graduate program in history would best be achieved by concentration in one area of research. With Dale's background, the logical choice was the trans-Mississippi West, with emphasis on the history of Oklahoma.

Dale saw the need for money to acquire materials to back this research, and he asked a Tulsa attorney, Patrick Hurley, for help. Hurley arranged for Dale to meet legendary oilman Frank Phillips at his Bartlesville ranch, Woolaroc.

There Phillips told Dale that he himself had begun a collection of books and materials on the West. Was there a need for two such resources in Oklahoma?

No, Dale told Phillips. One collection would be better—and it should be located at the University of Oklahoma, where it would be more accessible to students and researchers.

## Dale spent money carefully; his "informal rule" was to spend no more than four dollars for a book.

Phillips agreed, and in 1927 he pledged \$10,000 as the first donation toward "The Phillips Collection." Over the years gifts from Phillips and the Phillips Foundation to the body of books and records that was the nucleus of the Western History Collections totaled \$67,000.

Dale spent the money carefully. In his book, *The Seeds of Excellence*, President Emeritus George Lynn Cross quotes Savoie Lottinville, then director of the OU Press, as saying Dale had an "informal rule" of spending no more than four dollars for a book.

John Lovett, the present librarian of the Western History Collections, says one of Dale's prize acquisitions was a copy of "The Wheeler Survey," officially titled *West of the 100th Meridian*.

This book—a volume 20 inches tall, 17 inches wide and two inches thick—is a record of surveys undertaken in

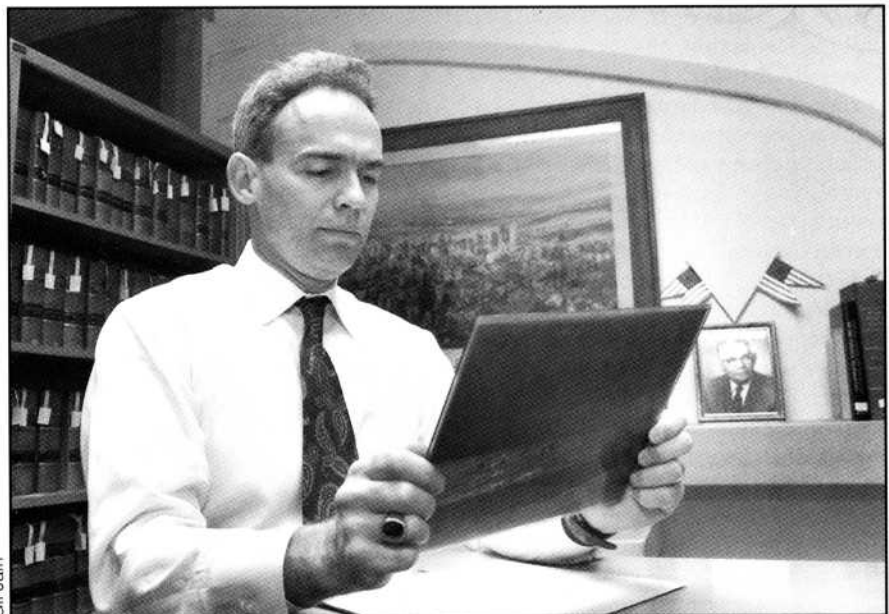
the American Southwest between 1871 and 1874 by 1st Lt. George M. Wheeler of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Published around 1875, the book is illustrated with full-page photographs taken by famed frontier photographer Timothy O'Sullivan.

Lovett points to the spine. "Here's where Dale marked the date of a purchase and the amount he paid for an item."

The penciled figures are clear. Dale paid \$4.50 for the book in 1939.

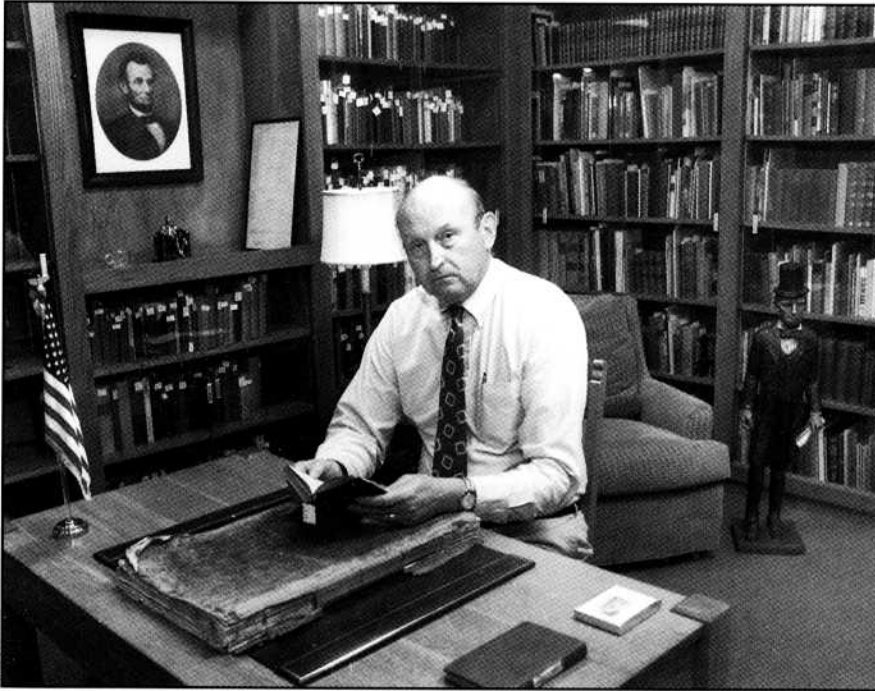
"Today this is probably the most valuable single item in the collections," Lovett says. "It's probably worth \$40,000, or even more if it were taken apart and sold page by page."

Originally the Phillips Collection occupied a single bookshelf in Dale's office. The Western History Collections later were housed in Bizzell Memorial Library itself, then moved



Gil Jain

*The photo archives in the Western History Collections contain nearly 250,000 prints and negatives. WHC librarian and photo archivist John Lovett examines an early-day glass plate negative, taken by J. A. Shuck, in the Norman Brillhart Collection.*



Gil Jain

Shown here in the room devoted to the Henry Bass Collection on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, WHC curator Donald DeWitt holds one of the collection's treasures, Lincoln's personal copy of *The Poetical Works of Fitz-Greeve Halleck*.

to Monnet Hall in 1976.

The collections have grown through donations of materials, as well as through purchases. A dozen named collections today recognize such donors to the library. In addition to the Phillips Collection, these include the Glenn P. Bradley, E. E. Dale, Alan Farley, Patricia Grass, John Morris and Fred Schonwald collections, all of which include materials on Oklahoma, Native Americans and frontier history; the Norman Brillhart Collection on General George A. Custer; the Henry Bass Collection on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War; the Mr. and Mrs. Robert Fay Collection on the Louisiana Purchase and the St. Louis World's Fair; the Earl Bell Collection on Arctic explorations; and the Bill Burkhardt Collection of western fiction paperbacks.

The Bass Collection, donated by the family of the late Enid businessman, is of particular note. Included are the two most interesting items, a two-volume collection of poetry once owned by Lincoln and a copy of Lincoln's favorite poem in his own handwriting. Also

donated were Henry Bass' materials on the Cherokee Strip.

Books are only the beginning of the printed materials in the Western History Collections. The collections include shelves upon shelves of "serials," the library term for magazines, almanacs, yearbooks and other publications printed—well, serially. These include, for example, bound copies of *Harlow's Weekly*, an Oklahoma political journal for the years from 1912 to 1940, and sets of the Buffalo Bill dime novels. Modern journals, such as the *American Indian Quarterly* or the *Western States Jewish History*, are also on hand.

Some items, copies of the U.S. Army Register from 1835 to 1890, for example, are of special interest to genealogists, as well as historians.

The reading room of the Western History Collections, on Monnet's fourth floor, once served as the reading room of the OU law school. Running the width of the building, this classic li-

brary reading room is in atmosphere a miniature of Bizzell's Great Reading Room. Stained glass accents the design of floor-to-ceiling windows at each end of the room, and balconies run along each side. Smaller rooms open onto either side of the main reading room and the balconies—many of them equipped with locks to safeguard the special collections and some of the WHC's most valuable items.

The physical setup, DeWitt says, is adequate.

"We have 25,000 square feet, all in Monnet Hall," he says. "The materials are safe—as safe as they'd be in any building on campus at this time. Of course, there are deficiencies. We have inconveniences in moving things. Our shelving is not as efficient as it could be. We can control temperatures but not always humidity. Our handicapped access is passable but not good."

He smiles ruefully. "We're growing short on space. The end is very close."

Research assistants are always on duty when the reading room is open. I was greeted by an OU senior, Melissa Tuttle, who explained the routine.

"First," she said politely, "no pens are allowed in this library." I slid my erasable ball-point into my purse, and Melissa gestured to a container full of freshly-sharpened yellow pencils. "We have plenty of pencils. Just fill out this form, and we'll get started."

The form is simple—name, address, research topic and a pledge to abide by the WHC rules. Researchers are asked to categorize their reasons for being there—student, historian, writer or "other."

As a topic, I wrote "Choctaw Lighthorsemen." Melissa did not ask why I was interested. This was a relief—people look at you strangely when you tell them you're planning a murder.

"I know we have pictures of the lighthorsemen," Melissa said. "Just have a seat at one of the tables, and I'll get the Choctaw photos. You can look at them while I find out what books we have."

Copies of photographs are displayed in approximately 50 loose-leaf notebooks. Each contains pictures on a particular topic.

Lovett is the photographic archivist in addition to being librarian for the collections.

While undergraduates are the most common researchers among the books, Lovett says that 90 percent of the users of the photographic archives are from outside the University community.

"Publishers of textbooks, people doing documentaries—that type of thing," he explains. Ken and Ric Burns, producers of television documentaries such as "The Civil War" and "The Wild West," have used WHC photographs, for example.

The photographic collection was begun by Dale in 1927 and now includes nearly 250,000 prints and negatives. The collection emphasizes the Southwest and West between 1870 and 1940 and is strong on Native Americans, Oklahoma's land runs and lotteries, settlement and development of Oklahoma towns, the cattle business, agriculture and the petroleum industry, and lawmen and outlaws.

"A lot of institutions down in Texas grind their teeth every time they have to buy a photograph from us," Lovett says. "During the Texas Sesquicentennial, they used our collection extensively. We have one of the best Texas



Included in the manuscript collection are 1,500 groups of documents, such as the papers of the Cherokee and Choctaw nations and records of the Pawnee Bill Wild West Show and the 101 Ranch, featured in the poster above.

Ranger collections. They're still upset that they let that collection get out of Texas."

The collection includes the work of many professional photographers, Lovett says, but much of it is simply snapshots or family photographs from settlers' albums.

One of the most heavily used groups of photographs is the A. A. Forbes Collection. Forbes operated a studio in Oklahoma City during the 1890s. He

also operated as a traveling photographer in western Oklahoma Territory and the Texas Panhandle.

"He'd join one of these cattle outfits and photograph all the cowboys. He'd shoot the glass plate negative, then develop it in his wagon," Lovett explains. "Then he'd sell the cowboys prints. When they'd run out of money, he'd go to another group. He was making a living, but he was also documenting the range cattle industry."

The Western History Collections also are the repository for a number of oral histories and some historic motion pictures.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Doris Duke Foundation funded a project that recorded 695 tapes of interviews on tribal traditions. These tapes have been transcribed and are available on microfiche. A number of reminiscences of Oklahoma pioneers and Oklahoma Indians, made during the 1930s as a WPA project, are also available.

Hundreds of recordings of the "Indians for Indians Hour," made during broadcasts on OU's radio station WNAD between 1943 and 1964, are in the archives. These programs featured traditional Indian music, punctuated by announcements of dances, hand games and other social events.

Candace Greene is a specialist in North American ethnology for the de-



partment of anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History—a part of the Smithsonian Institution. She has used the Western History Collections to research a number of topics.

“Most recently I used it to do research on the material culture of the Kiowas. I began with the 19th century and linked it to the current culture. I used the photos, the manuscripts, the published materials and some oral histories that are part of the Doris Duke project.

“The (WHC) manuscript material, of course, is unique. The Doris Duke project is available on microfilm, but the Oklahoma portion of the study was run out of OU, so that’s really the best place to go.”

The Western History Collections are extremely valuable to an anthropologist, Greene says. “People think that here at the Smithsonian we have everything, but there are still a lot of valuable materials out there.

“The Western History Collections are a real treasure.”

Melissa brought me several books. She already had marked the pages containing references to the Choctaw Lighthorsemen. Twenty minutes later as I read happily, she reappeared.

“All I find in our manuscript collection on the lighthorsemen is a reference in the papers of Peter Pitchlynn,” she said.

I realized that she had spent the last 20 minutes on my project.

The WHC manuscript collection includes some 1,500 groups of documents and occupies between 11,000 and 12,000 linear feet of shelf space, DeWitt says. It contains many official archives, such as the official papers of

both the Cherokee and Choctaw nations and records from the 101 Ranch and the Pawnee Bill Wild West Show, as well as hundreds of diaries, letters, business records, scrapbooks and posters saved by ordinary people who just happened to be pioneers.

Dale made one of his most astonishing document finds in 1919, long before the Phillips Collection was established, when a student told him of a family friend who had many papers of prominent Cherokees in her barn. Included were trunks full of the papers of Stand Watie, the Cherokee who was a Confederate general, and several other well-known Cherokee families. Dale was able to obtain the papers on loan and later to purchase them.

In libraries, documents are stored in acid-free document boxes, upright boxes made of a heavy, pure paper stock. The Western History Collections include rows and rows of these boxes, closely packed on metal shelves that reach to the ceiling and line narrow aisles. These stacks fill three floors in a wing at the back of Monnet Hall. It is no place for the claustrophobic.

Many of the collections of papers are fascinating to the social historian. Lovett recently joined Melissa H. Nored in writing an article based on funeral records of the Redwine Store, a business operated for many years near Spiro.

“Redwine’s was a sort of general store,” Lovett says, “and like many such places in those days, they sold coffins and served as undertakers. Their comments on the causes of death were very interesting. The records of a store like that give a real picture of the community.”

While the Western History Collections have a strong regional focus, many of the documents have significance reaching far beyond regional bound-



Gill Jain

Preserving documents in danger of deterioration is the job of the collections’ assistant curator Bradford Koplowitz, shown here deacidifying a rare map using the Wei T’o Soft Spray system. The WHC preservation laboratory is one of only three such facilities in the state.

aries. The collected papers of Patrick Hurley are a good example. The Tulsa attorney who originally put Dale in touch with Frank Phillips, Hurley later practiced law in Washington, D.C. He also served as Secretary of War under President Herbert Hoover and as Ambassador to China under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"His papers take our holdings well beyond the scope of traditional western American history to the international level," DeWitt says.

More than 20,000 microfilms and microfiche also are included in the Western History Collections. Many of these materials originated in the National Archives, Lovett says. For example, the census cards of the members of the Five Civilized Tribes when they were enrolled before Oklahoma statehood are available.

The archives of the University of Oklahoma also are preserved in the Western History Collections.

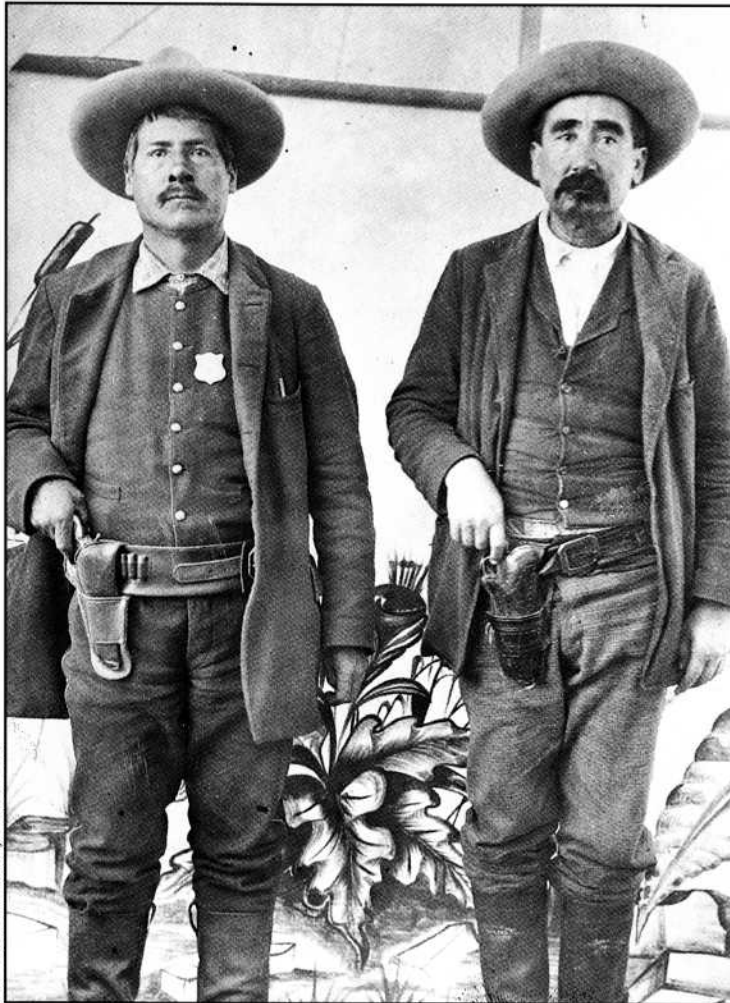
Bradford Koplowitz, WHC assistant curator, is in charge of the document preservation laboratory. In the lab, documents that are deteriorating or are in danger of deteriorating are mended and preserved. Koplowitz also coordinates preservation work for the Bizzell Library.

The Western History Collections lab is one of only three such facilities in Oklahoma; others are at the Oklahoma Department of Libraries and at the University of Tulsa.

One of the major lab activities is "deacidifying" documents. Late in the 19th century, manufacturers began to

use acids in the paper-making process. These papers break down much faster than papers that do not contain acid. In the WHC lab, Koplowitz is able to stall this process, perhaps for 200 years or so. He often encapsulates the deacidified documents in polyester film to further protect them.

Documents and books may be



OU Western History Collections

*From 1890 to 1907, the Choctaw Lighthorsemen served the Choctaw Republic as special law enforcement agents of the Principal Chief by carrying messages, making arrests, controlling liquor and assisting U.S. Indian agents and marshals. Within the territory, they were empowered to act as investigator, judge, jury and, perhaps, executioner.*

mended, cleaned, treated for mold or humidified in the lab, and tape is removed. The lab also builds "phase" boxes from an extremely pure, acid-free paper stock to protect the fragile books.

Dabbling in research at the Western History Collections taught me a lot. I learned the site of the "Blackburn Station" on the Butterfield Stage Line. I learned that one of Big Mary's cousins was accused of killing a member of a prominent Choctaw family and that another cousin nearly was executed by the lighthorsemen during a tribal dispute over royalties on coal mined near McAlester.

More importantly, I learned that the polite and efficient staff of a well-run library makes research easy—even for the beginner.

What did I learn about the Choctaw Lighthorsemen themselves?

I learned that they were created around 1820 and were active until the Choctaw Republic ceased to exist at the time of Oklahoma statehood. In the earlier period, each lighthorseman served as investigator, judge, jury—perhaps even as executioner. Later the Choctaws established courts on the American pattern, and the lighthorsemen apparently functioned much as today's policemen do. Sheriffs also had county lighthorsemen.

Would a lighthorseman be a good detective for a period murder mystery?

It all depends. A lot more research would be required—at the Western History Collections and among historical records in eastern Oklahoma.

Would the current vogue for historical mysteries last long enough for me to get the topic researched and written? Could my agent sell such a book? Would the public read it?

That's a mystery I haven't solved. ☞