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Click into the past

By Lisa O'donnell

A new online archive of yearbooks from North Carolina's colleges and universities offers a trove of information for researchers and people who are simply curious about what their parents or grandparents looked like in their younger years.

So if you had a mullet in 1983 or a bouffant in 1955, there's no more hiding.

With a few clicks of the mouse, it's possible to find photos from as far back as the early 1890s from 51 universities and colleges across the state, including public and private universities, historically black colleges and universities, community colleges and medical schools.

The images include lots of college students who went on to become famous. There are portraits of a pensive Andy Griffith from UNC Chapel Hill's "Yackety Yack"; Eugene Wolcott, who was to become Louis Farrakhan, posing with his violin on the pages of Winston-Salem Teachers College's "Ram"; and a bearded and bespectacled David Sedaris from Western Carolina's "Catamount."

The N.C. Digital Heritage Center at UNC Chapel Hill started the project more than two years ago.

"When we started the Digital Heritage Center, we wanted a couple of different projects that could reach the entire state, something that a lot of institutions could contribute to that would create some general interest," said Nick Graham, who oversaw the yearbook digitization project. "We thought digitizing yearbooks was a terrific choice."

The staff at the center reached out to institutions from across the state and received a good response.

Archivists from those institutions brought or shipped their yearbooks to the center to be scanned. The result is more than 800,000 scanned pages from 3,500 yearbooks.

"We've heard from alumni all over the state who have found this to be meaningful," Graham said.

The center is currently trying to beef up its community college digitized collection.

Wake Forest and Winston-Salem State were among universities that participated in the project.

The project was funded by a grant, so the universities got a chance to have their yearbooks digitized — something archivists at the universities had wanted to do for years — for free.

"We get a lot of people contacting us, looking for a family member or an old yearbook photo, so this was a way for them to see it from their own home instead of traveling here," said Tom Flynn, a documents archivist at WSSU. "It's a way of getting our collection to the broader public."

Vicki Johnson, an archivist at Wake Forest, agreed. Her office routinely fields calls from people interested in finding a family member or researching famous alumni such as Arnold Palmer or Brian Piccolo.

Before the digitized collection went online, Wake Forest had its "Howler" yearbooks on microfilm, which is not an attractive option for many people, Johnson said.

Besides spotting famous alumni or tracking down family members, people get a broader sense of Wake Forest from the digitization project, Johnson said.

"It really does tell the story of Wake Forest," Johnson said. "The photos that go with the information really are so unique to the school and the people who are part of it."

She likes to call yearbooks "the original Facebook."

"You have a headshot of a student, and beside them you read what they were involved in. It really gives insight into the kind of students at Wake Forest and the culture of the times."

Graham said the digitized collections have been popular among genealogists and alumni organizations.

"Beyond that, anyone who is interested in any aspect of student life in the 20th century is going to get a lot out of this, whether they are studying political participation or changes in gender roles or changes in hairstyles," he said.