

# Revealing Hidden Collections

## THE BIRMINGHAM HISTORY CENTER

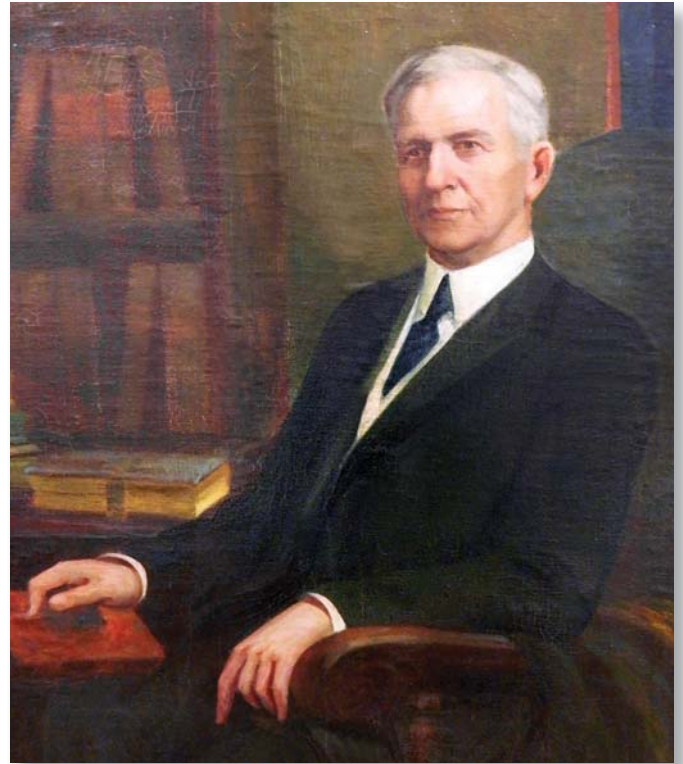
BY JERRY DESMOND

**J**ohn Herbert Phillips, Birmingham's first Superintendent of Schools, wrote in his annual report submitted in the 1887 City Directory:

*Our people are too busy in the intensely practical channels of industry and trade to think of our city's history—they are too busy carving out her future to think of the past. Why should it be otherwise? The city has no relics, no legends, and but little history. But the time will come when the traditions of Birmingham, her garnered relics, silent reminders of her former struggles and victories and her wonderful history, will be eagerly sought and cherished.*

Phillips proved to be a prophet. His own official portrait was found several years ago in a city dumpster and rescued by an anonymous citizen. Prior to 2004, it would have been lost forever, as no public entity was saving such items in Alabama's greatest city. However, in that year, seven prominent members of the Jefferson County Historical Association decided it was time to start finding and "garnering" the area's relics. They formed a nonprofit organization, the Birmingham-Jefferson History Museum (the name was changed to the Birmingham History Center in 2010) and set about their task with the hope that someday a building could be founded or built to house their collected treasures. Simply stated, the museum's mission is "to educate and entertain the general public by collecting, preserving and presenting the comprehensive history of the Birmingham region." Superintendent Phillips's portrait, with only a few scratches and dents, found its way into a collection that has grown to over thirteen thousand artifacts in just eleven years.

To oversee the collection and provide professional guidance, the newly formed organization hired Marvin Whiting, the former director of the archives department of the Birmingham Public Library, as curator. His reputation as a



**The official portrait of John Herbert Phillips, the first superintendent of Birmingham schools (1883–1921), donated to the Birmingham History Center anonymously after being found in a city dumpster. (All photos Birmingham History Center)**

meticulous record keeper and historian of the region soon resulted in a flow of hidden treasures from collectors who wished to donate items. He was aided in this quest for relevant artifacts by Tommy West, chairman of the Birmingham History Center's (BHC) collection committee and one of its founding members. Soon a major task became separating the wheat from the chaff. Many potential donations did not meet Whiting's or West's strict criteria. Their discerning eyes resulted in an amazing and high-quality collection, representing over 150 years of central Alabama's history.

Many of the items conserved or salvaged take up considerable space. They include a completely restored 1894

Brewster carriage (with the original bill of sale); a fourteen-foot-long model of the USS *Birmingham* (CL62, on loan from the U.S Navy); a linotype machine; a 484 lb. bell donated to St. John's Episcopal Church in Elyton in 1872 by Williamson Hawkins Sr., one of Jefferson County's early settlers; the two-ton name plate from the former *Birmingham News* headquarters building (1917–2006); and a soap box derby car which raced in Birmingham in 1970, donated by its builder and driver. Several items in the collection are

**Right: This badge was worn by those serving as reception committee members when Charles Lindbergh landed the Spirit of St. Louis in Birmingham. His two day visit provided the inspiration to build the municipal airport. Below: A corner piece lion's head decoration salvaged from the exterior of the Morris Hotel in Birmingham prior to its demolition in 1958.**



relics or sections from historic buildings in Birmingham that did not escape the bulldozer, including stained glass from Birmingham's Terminal Station, torn down in 1969; a lion's head decoration saved from the Morris Hotel, demolished in 1958; and items salvaged prior to the 1974 implosion of the original Tutwiler Hotel.

Whiting and West invested much effort into finding and adding to collection groups, including sheet music from songs about Birmingham, a large assortment of menus from historic restaurants, a wonderful set of "Dolls of the World" handcrafted by women in Birmingham as part of a Works Progress Administration project during the Great Depression, and items from the early coal mining and iron industry in Jefferson County. While some of these artifacts came from the local community, many were found on websites like eBay and purchased by funds provided by the Jefferson County Historical Association.

Many artifacts in the collection are one-of-a-kind items that cannot be found anywhere else, including a reception committee badge from the visit of Charles Lindbergh to the city in 1927, only a month after his famous trans-Atlantic flight to Paris; the artwork for the radiator cap of the Premocar, the only automobile ever produced in Birmingham (1921–1924); a Thanksgiving menu from the original USS *Birmingham* (CL2), the first ship modified for aircraft takeoff and landing; and a banner from a Confederate veterans' reunion held in Birmingham in 1908.

As a former archivist, Whiting also

insured that the written and photographic record of the region's history would be preserved as a large part of the BHC's collection. This included hundreds of glass plate negatives of the coal mining industry from the early twentieth century, letterheads and ledgers from early businesses in Birmingham, old newspapers and journals, political campaign posters and fliers, postcards, photographs, school yearbooks, personal diaries and letters from prominent Birmingham citizens, and even slave sale documents from the period before the city's founding in 1871. One great coup was the acquisition of the private scrapbook of Louise Wooster, the most famous madam in the early days of Birmingham's history. Wooster and her "girls" helped tend to the sick during Birmingham's 1873 cholera epidemic.



Over 70 songs have been written about Birmingham. The History Center has a large collection of Birmingham-related sheet music dating back as far as the 1920s.

In 2008 the BHC received a substantial ten-year, \$750,000 grant from the Jernigan Foundation. This, along with other

donations, allowed the board of trustees to hire the Center's first executive director and build a modest 3,000-square-foot museum in the historic Young and Vann Building on First Avenue. The museum opened in April of 2010. The Center also had offices and limited collections space in the building. Thousands of natives and out-of-town visitors visited the museum over the next three years as the BHC developed a word-of-mouth reputation for excellence. Unfortunately the momentum gained during that period was temporarily halted when the lease on that space expired in 2013. The entire collection and exhibits were moved to climate controlled storage, where they remain in the dark, unseen. However, the History Center continues to accept donations of artifacts. It operates out of offices on the fourth floor of the Pythian building on 18th Street North as the Board of Trustees searches for a suitable site in downtown Birmingham's historic district. Until then, Birmingham remains one of the few major cities in Alabama and the Southeast without a general full-service history museum. However, to update the words of Superintendent Phillips, the city now has relics, legends, and almost 150 years of history—and the time has come to showcase them.

## SELMA QUARTER PAGE AD

*Jerry Desmond was hired in 2009 as the first Executive Director of the Birmingham History Center. A graduate of the University of Maine, he has lived in the South since 1991, working in the museum field as a curator, educator, director, and museum consultant. Louis A. Pitschmann, standing editor of the "Revealing Hidden Collections" department of Alabama Heritage, is dean of the University Libraries at the University of Alabama and director of the Alabama Center for the Book, which co-sponsor this department.*