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## **Libraries of New York: The Bronx Institute Archives of Lehman College Library**

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**LIBRARIES OF NEW  
YORK: The Bronx  
Institute Archives of Leh-  
man College Library**

**Janet Butler Munch**

*Abstract*

*The Bronx Institute Archives is a unique collection of primary and secondary sources assembled to document the history and development of the Bronx. This article describes its various collections, outreach and publicity methods, library support and collection use.*

A unique body of materials exists at Lehman College Library which document the history and development of the Bronx. Housed in the Library's Special Collections division, these materials take the form of oral histories, personal and organizational papers, books and photographs and are known collectively as the Bronx Institute Archives.

The Bronx emphasis in the Special Collections division is no mere accident and can be attributed to the College's Bronx Regional and Community History Institute. Established in 1982 with National Endowment for the Humanities funding, the Bronx Institute seeks to document urban development and change in the Bronx. Taped oral history interviews capture the personal observations on daily life of residents in individual neighborhoods, stores, streets, parks, schools, etc. As Bronx Borough Historian, the Rev. Dr. William A. Tieck has noted, "Local history deals with people as they live, the markets they shop in, the drug stores they go to, the movies they attend, the churches of which they are members, the stuff of their daily lives and concerns at work and at play."<sup>1</sup>

To date, over 325 oral history interviews have been conducted by staff and students trained at the Bronx Institute. All Bronx neighborhoods (except City Island which has its own oral history project) have been documented. Using the BRISK urban thesaurus<sup>2</sup> prepared by the Bal-

timore Region Institutional Studies Center, the interviews have been computer indexed.

Sample oral history interviews include expressions of anti-German sentiment during World War I; the reminiscences of tenants in Amalgamated Housing, the first union supported and publicly funded housing cooperative in New York City; crisis in health care provision as in the closing of Fordham Hospital; reminiscences of a student who attended the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind; the story of the hiring of local children as extras for the films shot by the Edison Studios in Bronx parks; the fire period of the 1970s and the struggle to rebuild; redlining—the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition's monitoring of insurance policies and bank mortgages issued and their successful efforts at stabilizing the central Bronx; the saga of neighborhood development—the selling off of the large estates in the West Bronx and the development of the exclusive Fieldston, a still privately owned community.

Often oral history interviews are supplemented with family photographs, personal papers, clippings and other documentation. Interviewees either donate materials outright or otherwise agree to duplication of their original copies by the project photographer. The legal forms which interviewees sign stipulate that their words or images become the property of the Bronx Institute and may be used for educational, exhibit or publication purposes as the Institute deems fit.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing its responsibility to donors, the Bronx Institute requires that researchers wishing to use quotations captured in oral interviews request permission in writing, stating their intended purpose. Written permission for duplication of and use of the Institute's visual images is also required of users.

The Bronx Institute Archives, which were surveyed in Cornell University's Historical Documents Inventory,<sup>4</sup> today measure some 225 linear feet and are still growing. Just as the oral interviews cover virtually every aspect of Bronx life, the individual collections themselves are also diverse.

## Archival Collections

The Riverdale Neighborhood House Historical Collection (1883-1978) is among the largest held in the Bronx Institute Archives. The records of the now 115 year old Riverdale Neighborhood House reveal a non-political, non-sectarian organization which has been at the center of every major concern (culture and recreation, health care, the environment, child care, land use and zoning) facing the community since its inception. Additionally, the Riverdale Neighborhood House spawned many local organizations and even issued The Riverdale News, a community newspaper which ran for over two decades.

The Fordham Manor Reformed Church, the oldest church in the Bronx (established in 1696) with a permanent ministry, provides another significant collection held in the Bronx Institute Archives. Church marriage and baptismal records offer genealogical insights into the earliest families to settle the Bronx, many of whom are today commemorated in Bronx street names. Minute books, correspondence, photographs and church publications spanning from 1796 to 1966 shed light on a tightly knit congregation and their involvement in spiritual and temporal concerns.

The Harry T. Johnson Collection consists of photographs of the Grand Concourse, the "Champs-Elysees" of the Bronx, documenting the architecture of this well known boulevard and the Jill Jonnes Papers which represent the working files used by the journalist in writing her South Bronx monograph We're Still Here: The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of the South Bronx (1986). Through reports, newspaper accounts, transcripts and interview notes, the political, social and economic forces shaping the modern South Bronx are documented.

The B.T. McKane Pharmacy Collection, is another small but significant source which documents a South Bronx pharmacy operating from 1878-1966 under three generations of the same family. Life in the Mott Haven community is recorded through photographs, customer lists, physician prescriptions and commemorative publications. Oral history additionally

gives an account of the status of pharmaceutical education in New York during the 1890s, the effect of the flu epidemic in New York during 1917 and the impact of sugar rationing on the pharmacy during World War II.

## **Archive Publicity**

Bronx Archives collections are advertised in a variety of ways. A popular 20-minute slide-tape production entitled "The Bronx: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" for example, was prepared by the Bronx Institute staff with Consolidated Edison funding and is delivered and presented by Consolidated Edison to interested organizations. Travelling exhibits prepared by the Bronx Institute such as "Bronx Faces and Voices" and "Memories of Bronx Childhood—1895 to 1949" have additionally been widely circulated to area schools, hospitals, nursing homes, galleries and community centers. These outreach efforts help make thousands of community members, each year, aware of resources at the College.

Ongoing Library exhibits call the attention of students, faculty and the community to the Bronx collections held at the College. Recent exhibits which have been mounted in either the Special Collections division or the Library Gallery have included: "They Were Here: Famous Figures of the Bronx," "Bronx Estates, 1860: Country in the City," "Going, Gone...The Auctioning of Bronx Real Estate 1910-1925," and "Life Along the Grand Concourse."

The College Relations department at Lehman College has been extraordinarily successful in obtaining area-wide publicity for all exhibits prepared through the use of the Bronx Institute Archives. Occasional feature articles, too, on the work of the Institute have helped alert the public at large to ongoing work and exhibits.

The larger scholarly community is brought in through publications and ongoing professional conference presentations. Internally, the newly organized Bronx Topics Forum has been an effective vehicle for bringing together faculty, administrators and advanced students engaged in Bronx

research. Across the country, research librarians using RLIN (via Cornell's New York Historical Resources Center), OCLC and standard reference guides such as the Directory of Community Services, the Directory of Oral History Collections and the Research Centers Directory<sup>5</sup> will find references to the Bronx's archival holdings.

## **Collection Use**

Use of the holdings in the Bronx Archives rises as they are processed and publicized. Students at the College studying such diverse areas as: history, writing, speech and theatre, education, sociology and urban studies are the primary clientele. Frequently other students from City University affiliates or outlying colleges and universities also come to use the Bronx Archives. An often heard comment of students doing community assessment is that they are able to find the "memory of the community" through the Bronx Archives. Scholars, community residents and local teachers coping with the new state mandated local history curriculum component also come to use the Bronx Archives. Sample topics which researchers investigate include a specific Bronx community, person, ethnic group, park, landmark, street, theatre, racetrack, business, school or even an archeological site.

## **Library Support**

Lehman College Library recognizes the significance of its collections for the pedagogical and research needs of the College and community. Probably the most tangible commitment by the Library to the Bronx Archives was in the creation of the position of Special Collections Librarian in 1985. The incumbent brings archival management expertise and subject specific research and reference skills—a combination instrumental in collection appraisal and processing.

The purchase of new books, maps, atlases, post cards, newspapers, prints, etc., is considered vital in enabling in-depth study of the Bronx. Such materials supplement and enhance the use of the oral history collection as well as the other personal and organization papers comprising the Bronx Archives. All together this material has been recognized as an "area collection strength" by the New York Metropolitan Reference and Research Library Agency (METRO) which awards the Lehman Library a yearly allotment under "METRO: Coordinated Collection Development Aid" to strengthen its local history holdings.

Additional funding has come to the Bronx Archives through grants such as the New York State Education Department's "1985 Conservation/Preservation Discretionary Grant," for microfilming the records of the Fordham Manor Reformed Church; and the New York State Library "Shared-Cost Retrospective Newspaper Microfilming Grant," in 1986, which was used to microfilm a run of the Riverdale News.

#### Conclusion

The Bronx Archives are becoming an increasingly recognized resource for primary and secondary research on the Bronx community. Through collection development, archival appraisals and continuing oral history recording, the scope and depth of the collection is expanding. Each new item opens up new areas of investigation. Every outreach effort generates local good will and brings new contacts, new donations and new interest in the Archives. The Bronx Institute Archives is interested in seeing even more people who wish to avail themselves of its interesting and unique materials.

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#### References

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- <sup>2</sup> Paul M. Roscberg, The Urban Information Thesaurus. A Vocabulary for Social Documentation (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977).
- <sup>3</sup> The Bronx Regional and Community History Institute, "Certificate of Gift" (form).
- <sup>4</sup> Julie Miller, "Surveying in the Bronx," Documentation Newsletter vol. X, number 2 (Fall, 1984): 5-7. Cornell University Libraries, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives.
- <sup>5</sup> New York Public Library, Directory of Community Services (New York: New York Public Library, Community Information Service, 1987); Allen Smith, Directory of Oral History Collections (Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press, 1988); Mary Michelle Watkins, Research Centers Directory 10th edition (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Co., 1986).

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