ARCHIVES prepares to go public

These days, books and films have the attention of staff at the Mercy Heritage Center (MHC) in Belmont, North Carolina. That’s 1,800 books and 275 films gathered from local and regional Mercy sources across the Institute as MHC continues to pursue goals identified by its development team and strategic plan. “These are resources concerning the Sisters of Mercy that we want to make available to community members, staff and researchers,” says Kathryn (Kat) Oosterhuis, Institute archivist and MHC director.

To achieve that goal, archives staff have now catalogued 1,800 of MHC’s collection of some 6,000 books (30 percent) by or about the Sisters of Mercy, as well as a selection of Mercy-valued books on spirituality. Books fall into one of several categories: preservation copies that are not generally available, ready-reference copies that are available on site and “give away” copies that are offered only when there are multiple copies in the collection.

“We’re not going to become a lending library,” Kat cautions. “These are resources that we want to make available to researchers in and beyond the Mercy community.” The catalog will be available online in late summer 2020, along with tutorials about its use. Meanwhile, cataloguing the rest of the collection continues.

When it comes to films, the Mercy Heritage Center’s holdings stretch back as far as the 1930s and exist in formats that came and went across the decades. Emily Reed-Jordan, digital and audiovisual records archivist, has catalogued the 275 films the MHC holds and is now in the process of “migrating” them into a digital format. Migrating, Kat explains, means reformatting the films so that they can be accessed by current technology. It’s a process that MHC outsources in order to save on cost and staff time. (Want a peek at what’s involved in preserving film? See Emily’s 2015 blog here.)

What to digitize? That’s where staff expertise is crucial. Priority is given to those films whose condition has deteriorated so much that they might be lost completely if not reformatted soon.
Films whose topics make them likely to be of interest sooner rather than later are also prioritized. As with the books, once digitized, each film will be held as a preservation copy with an additional copy available to researchers on site or online.

“This work with our book and film holdings is an important part of archival work,” Kat points out. “Archives generally—and certainly the Mercy Heritage Center—serve not only to preserve the past but also to make it available to others. The heritage is ours, but it’s not only ours.”