

TABLE TALK WITH ACADEMY ARCHIVIST ED DESROCHERS

By Famebridge Witherspoon

The aging red scrapbook, its faded pages disintegrating with age, overflows with mementoes of a shy young man's schooldays. The student, Everett E. Harris '17, filled an entire album with tokens from his time at Exeter—snapshots, telegrams, old athletic programs, newspaper articles and hastily scribbled poems—and with keepsakes from girls he admired, including handkerchiefs, dance cards, photographs taken at school football games, and handwritten notes from years long gone by. The story that Harris' album tells is not only his own, but Exeter's as well.

Harris' scrapbook is shelved near an Academy catalog from 1814, the earliest extant record of Exeter's curriculum. Also nearby are copies of the original student literary magazine, first published in 1886; hand-tinted tintype student graduation photographs from the 1800s; various student diaries and letters; and even a pair of silver knee buckles that once held up the silk stockings of Exeter's founder, John Phillips.

These are just a few of the thousands of historical records and artifacts that make up the collection of the Academy Archives, located in two climate-controlled, locked rooms on the basement level of the Class of 1945 Library. While the Academy acknowledged the importance of keeping its historical records as early as 1904, it wasn't until the mid-1960s that a more formal archival program was established.

Since 1977, the keeper of all that Academy history has been Edouard L. "Ed" Desrochers '45 (Hon.); P'94, P'97, PEA's fourth archivist. "The function of an archivist is to collect and preserve official documents, records and other historical matter and then make them available for research," explains Desrochers, seated at a desk piled high with stacks of papers and books. What makes the work satisfying, he adds, is "learning that the past is alive and that it repeats itself." Whether it's the 18th century or the 21st, "Exeter students tend to write about the same things, and teachers tend to have similar concerns and desires." Case in point: a student letter written in 1795, which closes with the words "and please send money because I have to buy a pair of pants for class." Says Desrochers with a chuckle, "That shows that in at least some aspects, things at Exeter are still the same."

During his three decades at Exeter, Desrochers has steeped himself in Academy history, which he enjoys sharing with students, faculty, alumni/ae and parents, both in conversation and through regular historical exhibits he creates for the library. He is also the author of the "Chronology of the Academy," a succinct but invaluable outline of PEA history that can be found in the Archives section of the library's website (<http://library.exeter.edu/dept/Archives/chron.html>). To read the chronology is to watch a modest 18th-century school of just 56 students grow in size and stature and become the institution it is today. Desrochers admits a certain fondness for what some refer to as Exeter's "dark ages," a decidedly col-

orful period in the late 1800s when students' natural high spirits sometimes verged on lawlessness. "But there were also students who pushed for a lot of positive and valuable changes at the Academy," he notes, including the construction of Exeter's first gymnasium.

The faces of that era, and of subsequent generations of Exeter students, live on in the Archives thanks to a collection of several thousand visual images, from glass-plate negatives to digital photos. Not only are they evocative images, Desrochers points out, "many are also literally one-of-a-kind. That's why preserving them is so important."

Photographs have yielded up important pieces of the Academy's history, including the identity of one of the Academy's

earliest known African-American graduates, Emanuel Sullavou, a member of the class of 1867 who went on to Harvard and a successful career as a lawyer in New Bedford, MA. Desrochers found a small portrait of Sullavou (which also bore his name) while rifling through period photos for another project, and the discovery enabled him and another researcher to learn the details of Sullavou's subsequent education and career. Another recent discovery was a photo of the 1881 baseball team, one of whose members is among Exeter's first Asian students: Kin Kwei Chin, class of 1883, who came to Exeter from Shanghai, as a participant in the Chinese Education Mission.

While the Academy Archives are open to the public as well as the school community, there are policies governing access to particular materials, including trustee and

faculty records. About half of Desrocher's time as archivist is spent handling research requests, whether from professional historians doing research for a book or from private individuals. And then there was the time the White House called. The year was 1978, and a member of President Carter's staff was on the line, asking Desrochers to "confirm that *The Exonian* [which was observing its centennial that year] was the oldest continuously published student newspaper in the country. I told her it was. That was pretty exciting." *The Exonian* later received a signed letter from President Carter.

But if Desrochers spends much of his time immersed in Exeter's past, he also thinks a lot about its future. With the advent of computer technology, "archivists everywhere are now trying to figure out the best way to retrieve, manage and store important electronic documents," he says. He is also trying to educate those who produce the documents about the importance of archiving. "People have to be aware of the critical need to preserve documents from the time of their creation," explains Desrochers, a past president of New England Archivists, an organization of nearly 600 members. "An institution evolves because dedicated people continue to ask the question, 'How did we become who we are today?' The future of the Academy rests completely on how we record and preserve our history. And we're making a part of that history every day."



FRED CARLSON