This past January, a crowd filled with alumni, faculty, trustees, and community members gathered in Cecilian Hall on Seton Hill University’s campus for the opening ceremony of a yearlong celebration. The preparations for the event had themselves taken the better part of a year. Lights, decorations, trays overflowing with food, parlors filled with guests, and theatre students dressed as key figures from the university’s history; it was the work of many hours and many hands.

The ceremony itself opened with brief speeches given by Bishop Edward Malesic of the Diocese of Greensburg, Sister Catherine Meinert of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, and university President Mary Finger. Glasses were raised, a toast made – thus, Seton Hill University celebrated its one-hundredth year of existence.

A reminder of that evening remains stretched across the wall of the outer hallway. It is a photographic timeline, detailing the history of the university. Passersby and visitors can read summaries of key events from the recent completion of major building projects back to the university’s founding in 1918. It is perhaps the most visible sign of how important the Seton Hill University Archives is when it comes to preserving the university’s shared history.

Resident Archivist Bill Black has contributed his expertise and the depths of the archives’ resources to a number of centennial projects throughout the year, serving as a member of various committees. He and Sister Louise Grundish, S.C. – former archivist and current assistant archivist for the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill – spent time proofreading the historical descriptions used in a booklet published alongside the timeline.

Collaboration of this sort is not new; in fact, the archival collections of both the university and the religious community began life as one entity, established in 1870 when the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill first came into being. The Sisters began their educational initiatives in 1883 with the creation of Saint Joseph Academy; Saint Mary's School for Boys and the Seton Junior College followed. In 1918, the sisters received a college charter and founded Seton Hill College. However, the creation of a separate archives solely for these educational initiatives didn’t occur until 1969 when the records were officially split. By the 1980s, Seton Hill College had a fully-functioning archives of its own.

The college’s archivist at that time was Sister Mary Alma Vandervest, S.C. Trained as a librarian, she took courses at the University of Pittsburgh. Bill Black joined her in 2000, later becoming the official archivist in 2010. The archives’ location was initially in an 8x12-foot room behind the Harlan Gallery in Reeves Library building, on the basement floor near the Reeves Theatre. Due to cramped conditions, this space was nicknamed the “Vault.”

Black’s priority upon taking up the mantle of Seton Hill archivist was to establish the archives department more fully, with a focus on preservation and proper storage of materials (which was not always possible at that time, given the limited space).

An example of this work was the opening of a locked door on the university campus. It had been shut by an unknown sister many years earlier, and the key long lost. Upon opening the door, Black found a closet containing Alumni Office information that dated back to the early years of the college.

Black also rescued the Bramer Collection, which was part of an endeavor started by the Religious Art Institute of America – an organization created by Monsignor William Ryan, sixth president of Seton Hill College. The Institute eventually dissolved and donations in the form of religious artwork were turned over to the college. When Black learned about the existence of this collection, he searched for its current location and found the pieces stored above Saint Joseph’s Chapel.
Here, the pieces had been exposed to sun and rain through open windows and through leaks in the roof of the chapel. Black has since worked to clean and restore many of these pieces with the help of student workers and interns.

As a result of these initiatives and others, a need for more space became apparent. The 8x12-foot “Vault” was simply not enough. Soon the archives moved to a classroom in Maura Hall, a slightly roomier but still narrow fit for the ever-growing collection. Later, the archives was moved to its present location on the lower level of Brownlee Hall, a student dorm building. Additional rooms allotted to the archives in recent years have been utilized to store large documents and blueprints.

The archival resources are now in constant demand, a change from the early days of Black’s tenure. Departments across the university call in requests for information and transfer materials to be archived.

“[The late President] JoAnne Boyle always called us the ‘memory’ of the college, which I always liked,” Black has said. That memory is kept alive today through the daily efforts of the archives department as well as through the resources it provides for celebrations and events throughout the university’s continuing history, not the least of which is this year’s centennial celebration.

One such celebration occurred in 1968 when the college celebrated the 50th anniversary of its founding. Part of that celebration included the painting of colorful designs on the ceiling and pillars of Lowe Dining Hall. The designs painted then have since been recreated during the recent renovation of Lowe Dining Hall, a project Black played a role in by helping to determine what parts of the building should be preserved as is. Photographs from the archives served as a reference for workers who painted the newest iterations of the designs on the ceiling.

In addition, the archives contain bowls and plates made of French glass. This glass came from the original windows of the Administration building, constructed in 1889. The windows were replaced in 1995; the newly created bowls and plates were then sold as commemorative gifts in celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill.

As events unfold – both centennial-related and otherwise – the Seton Hill University Archives remains busy as ever, preserving and promoting the memories of an endeavor one hundred years in the making.