

Photo Archives opens new space

By GEORGE H. NEWMAN

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Aaron Campbell might have been the oldest person to visit the Plant City Photo Archives during its grand opening celebration Oct. 22.

Campbell said he can appreciate what the Photo Archives is all about - preserving history, whether it is through photos of people and places around town, or photos of Plant City residents in faraway lands.

Archives officials estimate 200 to 300 visitors passed through the doors of the newly renovated photographic museum during the celebration. The building at 106 S. Evers St. housed the Orange Blossom Tea Room for many years.

Campbell, 92, a retired funeral director, was born at his parents' home about one mile from Hopewell Baptist Church, south of Plant City off County Road 39. He said his great-great-grandfather, William Campbell, and his wife moved to the Fort Brooke area, now known as Tampa, from Scotland in the early 1840s.

At the time the area was made up largely of native Indians, Spanish settlers and soldiers manning the fort.

With much of his family history undocumented by photographs, Campbell said he can appreciate the role played by the Plant City Photo Archives.

"This new facility is great," Campbell said. "It has the feel and look of a studio and museum. It's very impressive. The entire concept means a whole lot to the people who live in and around Plant City. Those who visit from out of town or out of the state can get a better image of Plant City as it was and is now by visiting this showroom. It offers a pictorial history for everyone to see."

Gil Gott, the executive director of the Photo Archives, has been busy with the rest of the staff moving photos, furniture and equipment from the former location on North Collins Street. Gott estimates the archives has scanned 55,000 historic photos and has an equal amount of pictures on file yet to scan.

"The entire town has taken interest in preserving its photographic history," Gott said. "Almost every day we are open, another resident or visitor comes in with family photos to be scanned. Because of that interest we have doubled the size of the exhibition gallery and museum. Now we are better able to display historic photos and specific subject albums more easily than before."

Gladys Jeffcoat, a Plant City Courier photojournalist from 1940s to 1960s, provided the Photo Archives with some 20,000 (some say it might be twice that many) photographs she took during that time. She also owned and operated a photographic studio, taking pictures for school yearbooks and family portraits.

"I sold most of my photos to the Photo Archives for a very small amount of money," Jeffcoat said. "I would rather have them on display here than in a stack of boxes in an attic somewhere."

Jeffcoat, still active in the community, also sold the Photo Archives her collection of cameras. Directors at the Photo Archives plan to devote an entire room to displaying the cameras.

Jeffcoat sat with friends, talking about old times and looking at the many photo albums on display during the event. One of those sitting with her was a friend, Dorothy Spear.

"Everyone is amazed at how wonderful the new studio looks," Spear said. "And it's fun to see people react to the large photos of people and places from years gone by. Being here brings back good memories for me and shows young people things we did and saw so many years ago."