

fire, theft, rain, mold, mildew and pests. The collection belongs to the public and the public needs to be involved in its' rescue. "I spent my life and resources assembling it to keep it from being lost forever. The public needs to do its part. One of the ways they can help is by supporting WSBREC events and they can make tax-deductible contributions to our non-profit."

How do you think what you have done has impacted this city and who has it impacted the most?

"Right now the majority of African American research-based collections are on the East Coast or in the South; our collection the largest and most substantial on the West Coast. The collection is not just for black people. Many people of all backgrounds are interested in the accomplishments and history of African Americans and have a difficult time finding resource materials in traditional public libraries and schools. I believe we provide an important service to the world community who recognize that black Americans have contributed richly to the world."

WSBREC's goal is to create a world-class, research-based cultural center in Los Angeles that welcomes the world. We believe that a grand, spectacular institution dedicated to black intelligence and creativity will be a source of pride and commerce for the City of Los Angeles, the State of California and the Nation.

One of our goals is to continue collaborating with other cultural institutions such as California African American Museum whose mission is centered on the fine arts, to provide a more comprehensive expression of the richness of African American experience in Los Angeles. Collaborations with the Skirball Cultural Center, the Getty Museum, the Huntington Library and colleges and universities will also facilitate that objective.

Have you had the opportunity to mentor others in your area of research and if so, who, how and when?

"Since I founded WSBREC back in 1972 I have been blessed to meet many wonderful people in all walks of life. I've been acknowledged for my work by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton (who's from my home state of Arkansas). I've had scores of university and college students use the collection. Researchers from the motion picture and television industry and plain everyday folk who appreciate the work I've done.

One of the mentoring efforts I'm most proud of is the fact that my sons are carrying on the work I've begun. My son Avery, the artist is WSBREC's executive director now and is leading the effort to establish the Mayme A. Clayton Library & Cultural Center. My son Lloyd curates the music collection and Renai, Sr. curates the sports collection. I am grateful that my family thinks enough of what I've done to want to continue my work. I am blessed. God has been very good to me."

Mayme Clayton was never rich. When asked how did she financially manage to assemble the largest and most substantial collection of its kind in the Western United States, she replied, “Whenever something important needed to be included in the collection, the money just appeared.” There were bargains, too. Like finding Volume 1, Number 1 (November 1945) of Ebony Magazine at a garage sale and purchasing it for 10cents.

Mayme A. Clayton founded Western States Black Research and Educational Center (WSBREC) in 1976. The Center’s mission is to collect, preserve and perpetuate the unique history and cultural heritage of Americans of African descent; and to share that history and culture enthusiastically with people of all ethnic backgrounds.

When asked what she felt the Center’s greatest accomplishment has been, Dr. Clayton replied, “We’ve had a good beginning at saving our history, but much more needs to be done. At least it isn’t lost and one day in the right home, the public will have access to it.”

What have been some of the major challenges to starting and growing the Center and how were they overcome?

Major challenges still face the Center. Dr. Clayton spent 40 years of her life and her own resources to save the collection. The collection is huge: over 20,000 rare and out-of-print books; a vast uncounted collection of documents; the largest black retrospective film and collection in the United States; over 10,000 sound recordings and rare sheet music; 75,000 photographs and memorabilia. Recently WSBREC acquired the Ligon Collection, owners of the former Aquarian Bookstore and the collection of the former Inner City Cultural Center to prevent them from dying in obscurity. It costs money to maintain storage facilities for these collections. The films, photographs and music collections required specialized temperature controlled conditions to prevent deterioration. Finances are a major concern.

Another challenge that faces the collection is having the public understand the breadth and scope of the collection and how valuable it can be to conveying the truth about black history. The collection will counter the media perception that black culture is about slavery civil rights, urban life and comedy. The collection is a testament to the little known richness and diversity of the black experience.

Many people believe that the collection is primarily a film collection because of past BLACK TALKIES ON PARADE Film Festivals we’ve had, but the flagship collection is the Literary Collection, which includes the books and documents. The Literary Collection is the foundation for scholarly research on black life and culture and why so many universities and colleges have been interested in the collection over the years.

A facility in which the collection can be consolidated; organized, which means inventoried, cataloged, conserved and eventually digitized. A lack of sufficient trained personnel and operating expenses are all challenges confronting the collection. Right now the majority of the collection is inadequately housed and is endangered by threat of

Mayme A. Clayton Library

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Background on how and why the center got started, and what Dr. Clayton feels its greatest accomplishment has been.

Mayme Agnew Clayton began her career as a professional librarian in 1952 at Doheny Library at the University of Southern California (USC). In 1959, Dr. Clayton became a law librarian at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In the turbulent late 1960s, university administration came to Dr. Clayton and asked her to help establish the Afro-American Studies Center Library, which still exists in Campbell Hall at UCLA today. A lack of substantive materials related to black history and culture prompted the administration to take steps, based on student demands to develop curriculum more relevant to the needs of UCLA's black student population.

One of the reasons Dr. Clayton was approached was because it was known among her fellow librarians that she had been a private collector of African American literature for some time, and that she had a well-developed knowledge of culturally and academically important works by black authors. As she set out to develop the Afro-American Studies Center Library collection, part of her plan was to purchase some out-of-print works by authors like Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, Zora Neal Hurston and others. The out-of-print books were more expensive than those available in from then popular publishing houses. The university opted not to include the costs for those works in their allowable budget expenditures.

This was of grave concern to Dr. Clayton. She wondered, what would become of black history if other institutions held the same ideas? At that point, she began collecting with a sense of purpose. She felt compelled to purchase anything and everything of academic or cultural significance by black authors. Like many collectors, their collections evolve. Soon she began purchasing rare black films, music and photographs. She was driven to save black history because the books, documents, films, music, photographs and memorabilia were the embodiment of black intelligence and creativity; and they had to be preserved and honored, so as she put it, "Children would know that black people have done great things."

She has traveled as far as Africa to find the right pieces for the collection. She roamed used bookstores throughout the United States in search of "forgotten pearls" before collecting African Americana was fashionable. She was one of few black members of the Antiquarian Society (antique book dealers). She soon became know to collectors throughout the United States. Collectors most often have specializations. For some it's 18th Century English Literature; for others it's Italian Renaissance Literature. For Mayme Clayton it is African Americana. When other dealers would come across something they thought she'd be interested in, they'd give her a call.