



Merle Roninger and Corky Ransford spent one day a week for more than three years indexing all the obituaries that have appeared in The Eccentric since May, 1878. (Staff photo)

Tales of a century

2 women chronicle 100 years of local obituaries

By CORINNE ABATT

With the increasing popularity of genealogical research and interest in local history, a new file at Baldwin Public Library is certain to be well-used.

Now carefully preserved on about a dozen clear plastic cards, are 20,000 obituaries. In less than five minutes, any person whose obituary was printed in the Birmingham-Bloomfield Eccentric since the newspaper was first printed in May 1878 can be found.

The basic facts of some 20,000 obituaries are printed on about a dozen small clear plastic cards. Arranged alphabetically, the cards can be slipped into a viewer and turned to the desired name. If more information on the person is needed, the location of the original obituary is given so the complete story can be read. Like the obituary file, the papers are preserved on microfilm.

THIS HANDY index is the work of two women volunteers, Merle R. Roninger and Corky Ransford. Each worked on the file one day a week for more than three years.

As she described the long task, Ms. Roninger said, "It might sound dull, but really, those old papers were just

fascinating. I use it to get sidetracked a lot—the ads were especially fascinating."

In her three years of reading the community newspaper, Ms. Roninger said she learned a lot about Birmingham where she has lived for close to a quarter of a century.

"In the early newspapers, the writers told very personal things about people—it was typically small town—who was his visiting friends or relatives, what people wore, what they ate. For a while, the Eccentric ran stories in German every week. They nearly drove me crazy because I couldn't read them," she said with a smile.

Not only did she enjoy reading so much of every paper, it was necessary in the earlier issues to be sure she found all the obituary notices.

They were scattered all through the paper, even in the classified section," she noted.

Half in jest, she said she could see the need for a woman's liberation movement in the early papers. When a man died it would be explained that he was survived by his wife and the number of children. The name of the widow was never given, but all of the children would be listed by name. Ms. Ransford, who said she has

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—Merle Roninger

done all kinds of volunteer work in the area over the years, also enjoyed her task once she got into it.

"I knew quite a few of the names. When I moved here, Birmingham was just a village. I went to Hill School. There were country roads and cows in the field across from where Seaholm High School is now.

Ms. Roninger will probably remember for a long time the story she found describing how a woman identified her lost dog. The person who found it wouldn't give it back so the original owner sued in court. The judge asked her to prove ownership. She told him the dog's tail had been cut. Then she produced the cut portion of the tail. The judge observed that the two parts fit together, declared the dog was hers and closed the case.

When their work was finally up to date, the women had filled about 15

boxes with individual file cards. All of these were put on the 12 microfiche cards and their three years of work looked rather insignificant.

But, they know the hours and hours of searching it would take one person trying to find information on an ancestor. It will all be worthwhile if the file is used.

Lee Tuttle of the library staff knows it will be from the number of calls she has from people looking for ancestors.

Ms. Tuttle said that if it wasn't for the many dedicated library volunteers like Ms. Roninger and Mrs. Ransford, services would be sharply curtailed.

Ms. Roninger, retired legal secretary, said she plans to come in each week to keep the obituary file timely. And, in the process, read the paper and look for amusing anecdotes to pass on to friends.

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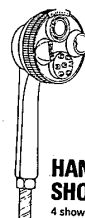
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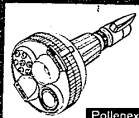
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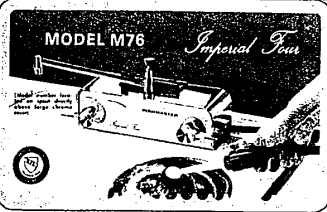
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