"I Found it in the Archives!"

Jay H. Buckley
Department of History
Brigham Young University

In a recent movie, Forrest Gump offered this bit of wisdom he remembered hearing from his mama: “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” A similar phrase could be used to describe the L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. You never know what you might find in the archives until you start looking and you can be confident you will find something worthwhile.

When researching articles I also look to see what the archives contains. For an article on the fur trade, I was elated to find an original 1836 map drawn by Warren A. Ferris, which offered one of the earliest depictions of the geography of the Intermountain West. While writing an essay on Latter-day Saint missionary activities in Africa, I once again found what I was looking for in the archives. Not only did they have original journals of the missionaries who proselyted in the South Africa Mission, but they also had images of them and collections of some of the converts who had emigrated to Utah Territory.

While conducting research for books I have found what I was looking for in the archives. In researching William Clark’s interactions with Indians, I came across several handwritten notes from Clark that detailed his interactions with Chickasaws during the War of the Old Northwest. When researching historical images for my local history of Orem, Utah, I uncovered a collection of photos from the Salt Lake and Utah Interurban Railroad known as the Orem Line. The archives contained wonderful scenes from Utah Valley, Utah Lake, Provo Canyon, as well as images of other significant people and historical places I was able to incorporate into my book.

I have taught western history at BYU for more than a decade and my teaching interests have invariably led me to the archives. I continue to be surprised at the gems I have found in their collection. I also send my students there to conduct research because I know they will find something useful. No matter their topic—migration, gender, settlement, Indian wars, religion, the
environment, agriculture, tourism—I am confident they will find something relevant in the archives. Whether researching and writing articles and books, preparing lectures, or sending my students there to conduct research, I know that the archives contain something for everyone.