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USFSP Florida Studies graduate wins national award

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Cynthia Mott

ST. PETERSBURG, FL (May 14, 2012) — A recent graduate of the Florida Studies Program at USF St. Petersburg has won a national award for the most outstanding research paper on Florida history by a graduate student in the U.S.

Cynthia Mott, who earned her Master's in Florida Studies in December, will be presented with the Gov. LeRoy Collins Award May 24 during the Florida Historical Society Annual Meeting & Symposium Awards Luncheon at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Tampa. It is the third consecutive year the award has gone to a USF St. Petersburg Florida Studies student.

Mott was honored for her thesis on the Hanson Family Archives of Fort Myers, a privately owned family collection of historical artifacts held by the Woody Hanson family.

The archives include thousands of high-quality, black and white photographs taken from 1895 to 1945, covering every facet of regional growth, from waterways to architecture to national parks to birds to people. At least half the photos are of Native Americans in their natural environment, and only a small fraction has ever been publicly seen.

“The photos and the archival materials are a cultural treasure of immense importance,” Mott said. “They offer a stunning array of scholarly research opportunities.”

Mott said she hopes her research will encourage other scholars to mine the archives for hidden treasures still lying within.

“Cynthia’s study of the Stanley Hanson archives just might be one of modern Florida’s great treasure hunts,” said Gary Mormino, the Frank E. Duckwall Professor of History in the Florida Studies Program, who nominated her research paper. “The Hanson sons and daughters led exemplary lives, generously helping Seminoles in a time of need, all the while and recording native folkways for future generations.”

The Florida Historical Society inaugurated the Collins prize in 1991 to honor Collins, who endowed the award. Previous winners include former Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio, a USF graduate (2000); and James A. Schnur, a USF graduate and special collections librarian at the Nelson Pointer Memorial Library, who won in 1991 and 1992. Jason Memmer won in 2010 and 2011.

Here’s a Q&A with Cynthia Mott:

Why did you pick the Hanson Family Archive as your thesis?

A mutual friend introduced me to the collection’s owner, Woody Hanson. I was a graduate student in the Florida Studies Program at the time, with a focus on the history of Southwest Florida. Mr. Hanson, his amazing collection and my research desires clicked. He generously made the materials available for me to study, which I did by going in to his office nearly every weekday for six months.

What did you find?

The Hanson Archives offered new surprises daily. They continually shed new light on the people preserved in facts and photos. But truly, no two days spent in this mass of accumulated history were the same. It was and is a historian’s dream, particularly if you love Southwest Florida the way I do.

What drew you to Florida studies?

My first Florida ancestors arrived in Central and Southwest Florida in the 1830s and my people have been here ever since. I have a deep and abiding love of this region, with generations of ancestors who staked claims and shed blood to survive. So my draw to Florida Studies springs from a deep well of cherished and honored personal history.

What was that experience like?

Working through this program, studying under the likes of Drs. Gary Mormino and Ray Arsenault, was one of the best growth experiences of my life. Not only did they guide me in learning more about Florida than I ever dreamed, they worked hand-in-hand with me in my Hanson Archives research. They truly enabled me to accomplish goals I never would have without their guidance and help. I went around the South I adore on a bus learning painful civil

rights history lessons from Ray Arsenault, studied and debated Florida politics with former Tampa Bay Times columnist Howard Troxler, waded through the Green Swamp with Program Director Chris Meindl, and was continuously mentored by Gary Mormino. USF St. Petersburg Florida Studies students and faculty truly became family and made my time in the program inspiring and literally life-changing.

Tell us a little bit about yourself

I returned to college after many years absent from the classroom after career, family, marriages, the whole deal. It was scary tackling a graduate program at age 47, but I really had nothing to fear. The Florida Studies Program was the perfect place. I was born in Fort Myers, raised in LaBelle, and have always lived in Southwest Florida. My previous career was as a tomato broker, a family agribusiness job. My family is in Florida agriculture, tomatoes mostly, but we also have a ranch in Arcadia. I am currently a freelance writer and regular contributor to Florida Weekly – local stories about local characters and history. And when I grow up I want to write full-time about Florida history and Florida culture — particularly indigenous, old-Florida history, Florida Crackers, and Southwest Florida Native Americans.

What's next?

I have recently completed the manuscript for a biography of W. Stanley Hanson, the main character around whom the Hanson Archives revolve. He was a great friend to and advocate for South Florida Native Americans during the early 1900s — a time of turbulent change for Florida. Hanson was known simply as the “White Medicine Man,” a fascinating Floridian. University Press of Florida is working with me to get the book into publication, which hopefully will happen in 2013.

To read Mott's award-winning research, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/86oou64>