

PAST PURSUITS

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A Newsletter of the
Special Collections Division

Akron-Summit County
Public Library

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Akron-Summit County
Public Library

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Women with Wings: Akron's Aviatrices

BY JANE GRAMLICH, LIBRARIAN



Frankie Renner in the Akron Beacon Journal, March 21, 1932.

Nothing could keep Frankie Renner on the ground. In 1977, at age 80, Akron's first licensed woman pilot reminisced in an Akron Beacon Journal article about her determined and adventurous flying career nearly fifty years earlier, including an attempt to set a world altitude record. "Those were the days when (Charles) Lindbergh was the big hero," she said. "I thought, 'if he could do it, why couldn't I?'"

Renner wasn't the only woman thinking along those lines. As flight boomed across the U.S. during the late 1920s and early 1930s, small commercial air services began to train many aspiring aviators. Following the lead of trailblazer Amelia Earhart, women made up a sizeable portion of them, and it didn't go unnoticed. As the Washington, D.C. Sunday Star of October 14, 1928 put it, "American Women Take to Flying with Remarkable Success." Part of that success belonged to the women of Akron and Summit County.

There were at least four locations in the county offering flight instruction, and women trained at all of them. Stow Aviation Field, now Kent State University Airport, was in existence by 1920. Planning for Akron Municipal Airport, now Akron Fulton Airport,

began by 1926. 1929 saw the opening of Mid-City Airport, also known as Issoudun, located between Stow and Hudson on State Route 91. Sky Haven Airport opened just outside Northfield in 1933. Earhart's own words underscore that Akron was a good place to be for women interested in aviation. She visited in 1929, attending a dinner in her honor at the Akron City Club, where she encouraged local women to "go out and try flying." Her 1932 autobiography *The Fun of It* includes a pleasing tribute: "To me, it is sometimes worth going a hundred miles out of the way to land at ports like Akron, Ohio, where the Women's Aeronautic Association has furnished a pilot's lounge complete with everything from powder puffs to showers. Usually when pilots and passengers are so well treated, motors and airplanes can find adequate care, also."

In this environment, Akron's early women pilots flew and flourished. Risk takers by nature, the setbacks and tragedies they encountered were a sign they were pushing forward. Much of what we can learn about them comes from veteran journalist Helen Waterhouse, who painstakingly chronicled local aviation history for three decades in a Beacon column

called *Wings over Akron*, later renamed *Wings and Wheels*. The competing trio of Frankie Renner, Isabelle Chappell, and Millie Stinaff led the way. Goodyear employee and Portage Lakes resident Chappell was considered the first female to take lessons at Municipal, with North High School graduate Stinaff a close second. Renner was the first to earn a private pilot's license, with Chappell closely following suit. Though licensing was the immediate and practical goal, it wasn't long before these intrepid young "birdwomen" were performing stunts and seeking to smash world flight records.

1931 was a year of daring and disaster, with the stories of Renner and Stinaff standing out. Over a period of hours on March 13, Renner climbed several miles above the Stow field in an attempt to break the women's altitude record. She was in fast and tight competition with New Yorkers Elinor Smith and Ruth Nichols. On the day Renner made her attempt, Smith held the record of 27,418 feet, and Nichols was waiting on a ruling from the National Aeronautic Association for a March 6 flight. Renner's experience was grueling. At one point, encountering dense clouds, "for more than 10 minutes I was completely lost," she said. Her

goggles froze in the bitter cold, making it impossible for her to see, and after her landing, she found her feet frostbitten. Her altimeter

Goodyear Employee Nearing Her Goal



Isabelle Chappell

Isabelle Chappell was the first local woman to earn a limited commercial pilot's license. Akron Beacon Journal, June 25, 1930.

stopped registering at 28,000 feet. She said she continued to ascend for ninety minutes afterward and felt certain she had gained another 2,000.

However, because the altimeter had failed, the Association had to rely on the plane's barograph for an altitude reading. And as the results were pending, the goalpost moved. On March 17, the Association announced that Nichols surpassed Smith's record and Renner's altimeter, reaching a height of 28,743 feet. A week later, they officially set Renner's attempt at 24,990 feet. Renner held her ground and vowed to try again, but she never did. The rest of her life, she maintained that she had broken the record that day.

Three months later, on June 23, 19-year-old Millie Stinaff died at City Hospital after her plane went into a spin and crashed at Municipal Airport in the presence of several horrified spectators, including her parents. Stinaff did secretarial work for local air services and served as a hostess at Municipal's administration building while she took flight training. In January 1930, she briefly held the record of 42 consecutive loops completed 2500 feet above Mid-City Airport. A month later, Mildred Kauffman of Kansas City managed four more. Undeterred, Stinaff would soon make another attempt. Her fatal flight was a training run for both the loop record and her transport pilot's license. Her funeral

service at Standing Rock Cemetery in Kent included a flyover by her friends releasing flowers over her grave. Her talent, high energy, and cheerful personality made her a popular figure among local residents, and her flying loops seemed effortless. In her words, it was “almost natural to keep on going over and over.”

After the loops and heights of Stinaff and Renner, the next local aerial favorite was Babe Smith Walker. Teamed up with pilot Rubye Berau, she delivered thrilling parachute jumps for rapt audiences, including several over Municipal Airport. (Berau’s [personal collection](#) containing Akron and Summit County references is stored at the National Air and Space Museum Archives.) Walker often performed delayed jumps, where she went into free fall for several thousand feet before deploying the parachute. Describing one such jump resulting in a terrifying accelerating body spin, she was quoted in the Cincinnati Enquirer of February 24, 1935: “The sensation was

eerie. I did not know where I was going. I feared loss of consciousness. There was only one thing to do – pull the rip cord. I did.”

Over time, the number of

women pilots who lived, trained, or regularly flew in the Akron area grew. In 1932, Renner, Chappell and ten other local feminine flight enthusiasts formed the Squadron of Death, a group that met regularly for several years. Some were also members of the Ninety-Nines, an organization of women in aviation founded in part by Amelia Earhart. Ever restless, they changed the group’s name a couple of times, never quite knowing what fit. They switched to S.O.D. Fliers for a few years, and in 1938, after rejecting suggestions of Ladybirds and Flying Femmes, they became Women with Wings. They darted in and out of the news over the next decade as they honed their craft, supported and competed with each other, and pushed for inclusion in air races limited to men’s competition. In addition to their flying careers, the women were often involved in the business side of aviation, sometimes as owners, operators or managers of local ports.

The women fliers of the 1930s passed the torch to younger and no less tenacious pilots, many of whom had aviation experience in World War II. Longtime Akron residents Ruby Mensching and Jean Hixson served as Women’s Air Service Pilots (WASPs), federal civil service employees who tested



Jean Hixson as she appeared in the Akron Beacon Journal on July 4, 1962, just months after her successful testing as part of the Mercury 13.

aircraft, transported cargo, and trained other pilots during the war. Hixson went on to accomplish far more, becoming one of the first women to break the sound barrier in 1957. Four years later, she became one of the [Mercury 13](#), a group of women who took part in a secret, privately directed program to test women for space flight. Subjected to the same strenuous physical and psychological examination NASA required for male astronauts, Hixson excelled. When the program and its positive results became public, two of the thirteen participants testified in congressional hearings in hopes of persuading NASA to allow

women in space. But NASA had no intention of any such thing, with Hixson’s fellow Ohioan John Glenn commenting that a women’s astronaut training program was, at that point, simply unnecessary.

After this extraordinary experience, Hixson returned home to her career as a teacher in several local elementary schools, where she was known as “Akron’s flying schoolteacher” and “the supersonic schoolmarm.” The nicknames may have been meant with fondness, but they fell far short of acknowledging her substantial achievements.

The courageous history of our local women pilots is breathtaking and complex, with tales that could fill volumes. One thing is clear – along with many others across the U.S., they paved the way for women to become a thriving force in aeronautics and space exploration, and because of them, Sally Ride and Akron’s own Judith Resnik could aim for the stars. Their legacy lives on and their stories continue to be an inspiration to us today.

THEY PAVED THE WAY FOR WOMEN TO BECOME A THRIVING FORCE IN AERONAUTICS AND SPACE EXPLORATION

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Featured Archival Collections: Aviation

BY REBECCA LARSON-TROYER, LIBRARIAN



Generator room and instrument panel of the USS Akron airship. Photo from the Frederick J. Ilse Collection.

Special Collections Division holds several collections which document the history of aviation in Akron. These collections are accessible in person by request at Main Library.

Bain E. "Shorty" Fulton Collection

Donated in 2002, the Fulton Collection comprises the films, photographs, letters, books, personal papers and memorabilia of Bain E. "Shorty" Fulton. As an aviator and long-time manager of Akron Municipal Airport (later Akron-Fulton International Airport), Fulton had a front-row seat to Akron's aviation scene. The collection includes records pertaining to the development of Akron Municipal Airport, in the creation of which Fulton was instrumental, as well as his time as a pilot during World War II. View the [finding aid](#) for this collection online, or browse [items](#) from the collection on Summit Memory.

U.S. Naval Air Station, Akron Collection

The U.S. Naval Air Station, Akron Collection consists of materials documenting the history of the air station located at Akron Fulton Airport from 1948 to 1958. Donated to Special Collections in 2002, the records and photographs in the collection were gathered by Joseph Cenney and Harry Gilcrest with the intention to publish a history of the air station. A manuscript of this history is included in the collection. View the [finding aid](#) for this collection online, or browse [images](#) from the collection on Summit Memory.

Lighter-Than-Air Society Book Collection

Founded in 1952 by a group of Goodyear Aircraft employees, the Lighter-Than-Air Society was established with the goal of furthering the knowledge of various aspects of buoyant flight, including the establishment of a library of books pertaining to the subject. The resulting collection of approximately 1,200 texts has been housed at the Library since the 1960s. The collection also includes the society's newsletter, Buoyant Flight. View a list of [books](#) in the Lighter-Than-Air book collection, or browse [images](#) from the society's photograph collection on Summit Memory.

Frederick J. Ilse Collection

Donated in 2005, the Frederick J. Ilse Collection includes materials collected by Frederick J. Ilse during his time working at Goodyear Tire and Goodyear Aerospace from 1937 to 1980. The small collection consists primarily of photographs of events at Goodyear during Ilse's career, as well as photographs of various Goodyear airships. Several of these are unique or unusual interior views of control panels. View the [finding aid](#) for this collection online.

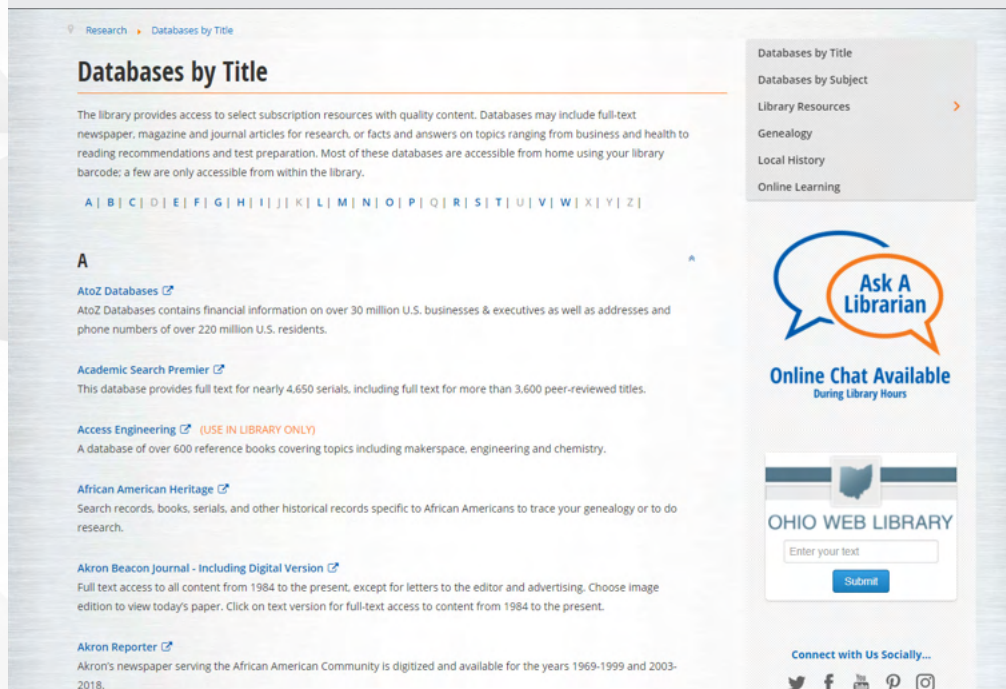
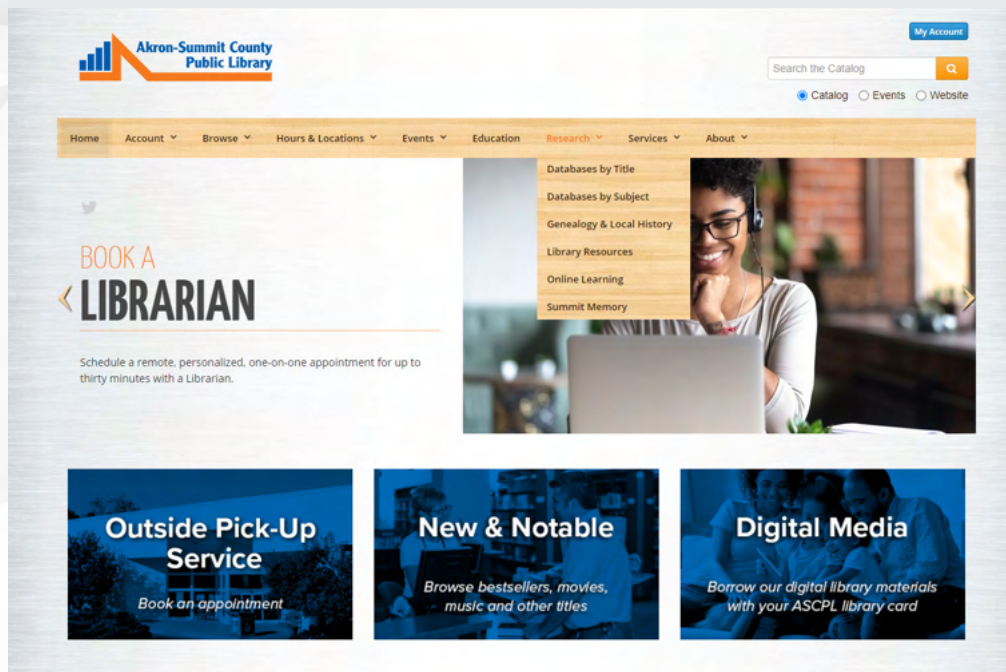
Thomas Knowles Collection

Thomas A. Knowles served in various executive capacities with Goodyear Aircraft, later Goodyear Aerospace. He amassed a collection including 66 books and framed prints of early aeronautics and lighter-than-air, which were donated to Special Collections in 2000. View the [finding aid](#) for this collection online.

Spotlight on Databases: Akron Beacon Journal Collection

BY BARBARA LEDEN, LIBRARIAN

Extra, extra, read all about it! Now you can, with the Library database Akron Beacon Journal Collection. If you want to keep up with current local news or do research from 1984 to the present, you can access this database online for free anytime with a valid Library card. The Akron Beacon Journal Collection is offered through NewsBank, a subscription service providing archives of media publications to libraries. Simply visit the ASCPL home page, navigate to the database section, and click on Akron Beacon Journal. If you're accessing the database outside the Library, you'll need to enter your Library card number.

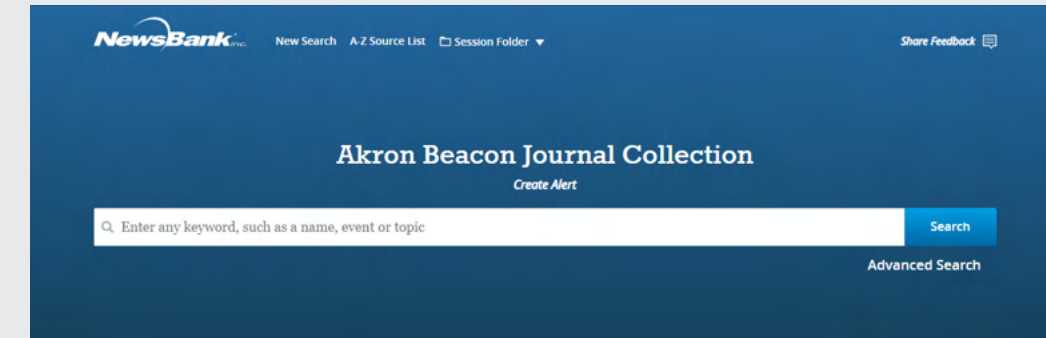


The Akron Beacon Journal Collection is comprised of four formats of the newspaper covering the years 1984 to present day:

- The text version presents full text-only articles (including texts of obituaries), with the exception of letters to the editor and advertisements. No photos or graphics are available in this format.
- The image version provides full digital images of the newspaper from November 2018 to current day. This includes photos, graphics, editorials, classifieds, advertisements, weather, box scores, puzzles, and cartoons.
- Blogs (text-only) include online blog entries written by Akron Beacon Journal staff that may offer different or additional content compared to the standard edition of the newspaper.
- Web edition articles (text-only) appeared on the Akron Beacon Journal website and may offer different or additional content compared to the standard edition of the newspaper.

All four formats have an option to search by keyword or browse by date. The search box at the top

allows searching all versions at once. In addition, an advanced search is available to help refine search results.



1-4 of 4 Sources

Source Name	Dates	Location	Type	Format	Language
Akron Beacon Journal (OH)	1984 - Current	USA - OH - Akron	Newspaper	Text	English
Akron Beacon Journal (OH)	2018 - Current	USA - OH - Akron	Newspaper	Image	English
Akron Beacon Journal: Blogs (OH)	2005 - 2017	USA - OH - Akron	Blog	Text	English
Akron Beacon Journal: Web Edition Articles (OH)	2017 - Current	USA - OH - Akron	Web-Only Source	Text	English

Once you find the article you are looking for, the database offers options to help make the best use of the information. In the image format, functions include searching within the article, clipping a portion of the image, zooming in to enlarge the image, creating a citation for the article, and creating a quick link to the information. In the text format, a reader can enlarge the text size or choose "Read News Document," an audio version of the article. Articles in any format can be emailed, downloaded, printed, and shared to Google Classroom.

This database also features a "Save to My Folder" option. You'll need to create a free account with

NewsBank to use this feature. When you create a personal folder, you can save articles for future use within the database as

well as save searches and create alerts for searches. At the top of a search results list, click "create alert" to receive email notifications whenever new results of your search terms become available. You can choose a frequency of notifications within the alert options.

The Akron Beacon Journal Collection provides a wealth of information focused on local content, but occasionally offering state, national, and international coverage. Having this information online can be very useful for researching news, local history, genealogy, or just reminiscing about days gone by.

CONNECT WITH SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



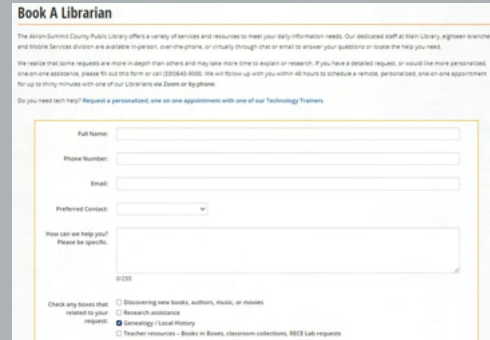
On Display: Summit Metro Parks 100

Summit Metro Parks is celebrating being “Your Backyard for 100 Years.” It’s a great time to highlight our county’s nature retreat with some history of the park system. In commemoration of this centennial, an exhibit is in the Special Collections display case on the third floor of the Main Library from May-October. Featured in the display are seventeen panels, one for each park in the system, along with a large panel map of Summit County with each park location identified. The park display panels show historic pictures of the parks as well as a present-day image along with a brief history of how each park came to be. The pictures are just a few of the thousands of historic photographs, maps, and documents from the Summit Metro Parks Collection available to researchers in Special Collections. Stop by to take in the nostalgia!



Save the Date: Late Night at the Library Friday, October 1, 6:30-10:30 pm

We’re back and we’re planning for an in-person event this year! The Special Collections Division and the Summit County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society are once again teaming up for Late Night at the Library. Late Night is an after-hours genealogy event when Main Library reopens for genealogists. Mingle with fellow researchers while learning about Special Collections’ resources and discovering your family history. Parking is free for those entering the parking deck after 6 pm. No registration is required for this event.



New Book A Librarian Service

Unlike some libraries, our Special Collections Division is open whenever Main Library is open, so you can always reach a genealogy and local history specialist when you visit, call, email or use our online chat service.

If you have a more in-depth question or would like more personalized, uninterrupted research assistance, you may use our new Book A Librarian service to schedule an appointment with a librarian for up to 30 minutes. Just complete the [Book A Librarian](#) form on our website or call 330.643.9000, and a staff member will follow up within 48 hours to schedule a remote, personalized, one-on-one appointment with one of our Librarians via Zoom or by phone.

If you need tech help, you may request a personalized, one-on-one appointment with a technology trainer by completing the 1on1 [Tech Help](#) form.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to send a special thanks to the following for their generous contributions:

Akron Chapter DAR for books in memory of Nancye McMullan Thomas, Helen Ray Weyrick, Patricia Long Schaffner, and Thelma Ralph Ola

Cuyahoga Portage Chapter DAR for books in memory of Marian Esther Kiefer, Martha Jane Dixon Nelson, Dianne Jo Hall Allison, and Mary Jo Guthery Stasell

Howland S. Davis II for Veteran Honor Roll Notebooks (part of the Summit County Chapter Ohio Genealogical Society Documents Collection) and research pertaining to local Vietnam War veterans for the Summit County Veterans Memorial Plaza

Ohio Society Dames of the Court of Honor for books in memory of Ohio President Dianne Allison and other deceased members

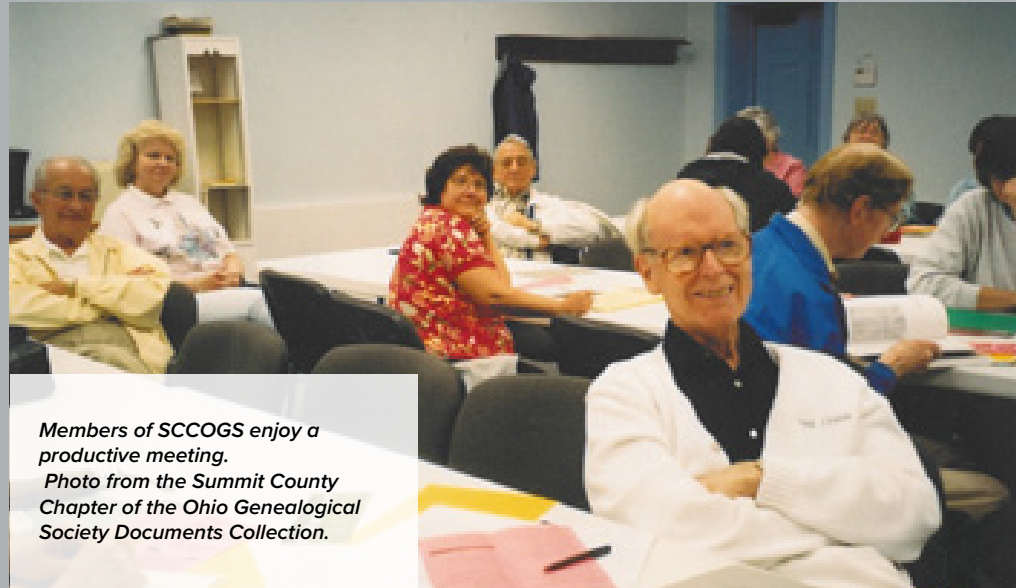
Sharon Myers for the signed copy of her self-published book, Prohibition in Summit County, 2021

James Herster for several Firestone Tire and Rubber Company promotional films

Dan and Goldie Ross for the photograph of the 1928-1929 Firestone Bank baseball team

SUMMIT COUNTY CHAPTER OGS CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

by Jane Gramlich, Librarian



Members of SCCOGS enjoy a productive meeting. Photo from the Summit County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society Documents Collection.

On April 17, 1971, after several months of organization and planning, the [Summit County Chapter](#) of the Ohio Genealogical Society was chartered. This year the group celebrates their 50th anniversary. From the beginning, Summit County OGS and ASCPL have been mutually supportive partners. Warren Skidmore, former manager of the Library's Language, Literature and History Division, had an important role in moving the chapter forward in its earliest days. Minutes of SCCOGS meetings show that by 1990, they had some influence in the eventual

creation of Special Collections. Two SCCOGS members attended a Library board meeting that January nudging them toward a future genealogy department. Ten years later, Special Collections was established. Our collaborative relationship with SCCOGS continues, including our archival storage of the chapter's records. Over the years, SCCOGS' meetings have educated and inspired many a local genealogist, and the group has contributed a great deal toward identifying, preserving and distributing the

county's genealogical records. Projects have included indexes to local histories, member ancestor charts, microfilming Summit County Probate Court records, and transcriptions of local funeral home records. SCCOGS has also been particularly active in compiling information on area cemeteries. Here in Special Collections, we rely on their work regularly.

Congratulations to SCCOGS for reaching this milestone, and best wishes for the future!



Derby Downs, Akron, 1985.

Photo from the Akron Beacon Journal Collection, Summit Memory.



PAST PURSUITS

The Akron-Summit County Library Special Collections Division is located on the third floor of the Main Library.

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