PRESERVING OUR PAST
What’s past is prologue,” wrote William Shakespeare in The Tempest. Indeed, everything letter carriers have done before us sets the stage for what we do. That’s why keeping track of our union’s history, especially at the branch level, is important.

“We speak often of the importance of teaching our union’s history to the new generation of letter carriers, so they understand what things were like and how we got to where we are now, and to inspire them,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “But we can’t teach our history if we don’t hold onto it. The more we can bring our past into the present, the better.”

Though our jobs are essentially the same nationwide, we’re often more connected to local history at the branch or state level. The carriers who walked the same sidewalks and streets we travel on our routes today faced the same challenges we do, and they built our branches and their traditions. Differences in factors such as weather, geography, culture and economics make NALC as diverse as America itself.

NALC Headquarters in Washington, DC, keeps certain records and items of historical significance, but branches are responsible for collecting and keeping their own histories. In the wake of the 125th anniversary NALC marked last year, some branches also are approaching or have recently reached the same milestone. No matter how old your branch is, it’s always good to look at your history and how you preserve it.

Branches are required by both federal labor law and the NALC Constitution to keep certain documents, such as meeting minutes. The oath branch officers take includes a pledge to “guard all property placed in my charge and, at the expiration of my term of office, turn the material over to my successor.” But what else should a branch keep to preserve memories and pass them to future generations?

Items to consider saving include branch newsletters, photos, documents, letters and postcards, programs and flyers from branch events, and newspaper articles about the branch or its members. Articles about a heroic carrier who saved a life on his or her route are good examples. With modern technology at our fingertips, computer disks containing videos or photos might also go in the box.

But saving objects isn’t enough. To preserve history, saving the context is important, too. With photos, that means saving the date, identity of subjects and event or activity in each photo, preferably by writing on a label and attaching it to the back (writing directly on the back of a photo with a pen can ruin the front). Some objects, such as pins, medals or plaques, also may benefit from dating or labeling. The same goes for electronic records like photos kept on a disk—dates and tags, explaining the photos and who is in them, are invaluable.

Many branches expect branch presidents or other officers to keep their histories as part of the job. For other branches, a member with a personal interest in history or many memories to share may take on the role. Some branches and state associations even have official historians, such as Madison, SD Branch 1308 member Ron Warns, historian for South Dakota’s state association.

South Dakota created the office of historian in 1935, Warns said. The association’s first historian, Max A. Whited, wrote: “Every organization, whether large or small, makes history.”

Whited began what has become an unbroken tradition of preserving the past for South Dakota letter carriers.

Warns has played his role for 25 years. Given that he started carrying mail in 1959, Warns is not only keeper of history, he’s part of it. Carrying mail was much different in his day, he said. “It was a hard job, but I enjoyed it. But I don’t know if I’d ever want to go back,” he said. “It’s just too much pressure.” He retired in 1998.

In his early days, before the Great Postal Strike of 1970, gaining pay raises was the primary goal of carriers. Warns recalled the thrill of receiving his W-2 form early in his career and seeing that he had made more than $5,000 a year for the first time. “I came home and showed my wife,” he said, “and I was on Cloud Nine.”

Warns inherited a wealth of documents and photos, including some writ-
ten by previous historians specifically for posterity’s sake, and he has added his own over the years. To preserve and organize the material, he had most of it copied and bound in book form.

Flipping through the South Dakota book demonstrates how details bring history to life. Copies of convention programs reveal that South Dakota postal employees across crafts held joint conventions in the 1920s and 1930s. Notes taken by a letter carrier at one convention recorded some of the concerns of the day: legislation in Congress to give postal workers the day off on legal holidays and efforts to convince Congress to pay city and “village” carriers the same wages. Labor Day picnics were as popular then as today; picnic announcements illustrated with hand-drawn cartoons lured carriers and their families to a park with “two ball diamonds, horseshoe courts, bowling greens, big ovens for cooking and lots of shade and tables for the picnic meals.”

Whited was keenly aware of the rapid changes happening in his state. Describing a convention in the town of Winner in 1939, he wrote, “This marks the first time a convention of the letter carriers has been held in this part of S. Dak. Just a few years ago, so to speak, the buffalo and deer roamed these prairies and the American Indian hunted them.”

You don’t have to be an officially elected historian to collect, research or present the history of your branch or state association. In fact, many historians do it just for the love of it, and their fellow letter carriers appreciate their efforts.

Keeping history is about more than collecting it. Documents, photos and items stuffed in a box and forgotten aren’t very useful. Finding ways to bring history back to life for the carriers of today is important, too. Writing a basic history of the branch for publication on the branch website, with photos, is a good way to do that. Some branch newsletters feature occasional articles focusing on a part of their past.

Duluth, MN Branch 114 has carried on a tradition of keeping historical items stored in its office, including its original charter, meeting minutes and many photos. The photos don’t stay hidden in the boxes, Branch President Scott Dulas said.

“We have a big display at our annual retiree banquet,” Dulas said. “We cycle the photos because there are so many.” Retirees love seeing the old photos. “They get to see people they remember,” Dulas said. Even older photos remind attendees, retired or active, of what delivering the mail in Duluth was like long before they began their careers.

The branch even shows off its collection of previous banquet programs going back 70 years, which include notable speakers and guests from the past.

The photos depict carriers doing their jobs, but they also show community events involving letter carriers, such as the city’s annual “Christmas City of the North” parade, which has heralded the arrival of the holiday season for half a century. The branch even has photos of an annual event in Duluth that celebrates letter carrier history—a living link to the postal past.

Every winter since 1980, world-class dogsledders and their canine runners have raced nearly 400 miles in the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon. The event commemorates letter carrier John Beargrease, a native American who carried mail by dogsled, as well as by canoe and on horseback, through the rugged, wild Minnesota of the late 19th century. By connecting remote villages to each other and to the outside world, Beargrease played an essential role in the establishment of Duluth and other towns in the region. He stopped carrying the mail in 1899 when the trail he used became a road accessible to horse and carriage; he died of pneumonia in 1910 after rescuing another letter carrier caught in bad weather.

Several Branch 114 carriers commemorate Beargrease’s role in their local history by volunteering to help with the race each year.

History isn’t just about things that fit in a box. Among the most useful historical resources are the memories of retired or longtime carriers.

For instance, as a project for the NALC Leadership Academy, Nashua, NH Branch 230 member Fred Ordway explored the history of his branch. Instead of digging around in books or newspapers, though, Ordway sim-
ply gathered several retired branch members together, pointed a camera at them and let them talk. The retirees recalled details about daily life on the job that likely wouldn’t be found in a book. Retirees are a living historical resource, and documenting their memories and thoughts is a great way to add to the body of historical knowledge.

You can see the results on YouTube at youtube.com/OaWkm1ARJe4.

Writing about history and publishing a series of stories in branch newsletters or as special publications to mark special events is another popular way to bring history to life.

NALC celebrated its 125th anniversary last year. Some of the first NALC branches also are celebrating that milestone. Minneapolis Branch 9 was chartered on March 24, 1890, and its newsletter, *Branch Nine News*, is marking the branch’s 125th birthday with a series of stories and photos throughout the year.

“You learn your history so you can see where you’re going,” *Branch Nine News* editor Jeremy Rothstein said. “That’s how you know why things are the way they are today. And you appreciate those who came before, and what they did.”

*Branch Nine News* uses a special 125th anniversary logo to “brand” the historical items as they appear in each issue. Readers are learning about the life and accomplishments of Jerome Keating, the former Branch 9 president and national NALC president for whom Branch 9 is named, and about the daily lives of some of the first letter carriers to serve postal patrons in Minneapolis.

Rothstein has borrowed material from the branch’s 100th anniversary publication, a booklet that compiled a great deal of historical information in one place.

But you don’t need a special occasion to write about or research branch history. Pick a certain focus or historical era and you will find history all around you that will interest your fellow carriers any time of the year.

Think about historical events that can affect letter carriers. There’s the Great Postal Strike of 1970, of course, but there are so many more. Daily life carrying the mail has changed a great deal over the years. Rank-and-file carriers from your branch may have risen to leadership positions in the union or the community.

Mergers of branches are an important part of their history, too. Natural disasters or unusually bad weather are key events for letter carriers, as are heroic carriers who save lives on their routes. Sometimes a local grievance or dispute has ended up setting a national precedent for carriers everywhere.

Letter carrier history also intersects with broader historical events that affect everyone. A natural disaster involves stories of struggle and heroism among letter carriers as they face threats to their lives, rescue others, and bring supplies, money and news to isolated community members, along with a sense of normalcy just by being there every day. Wars sent many carriers overseas, or brought a wave of returned veterans into our ranks, and before women were accepted as permanent carriers, they found temporary jobs delivering the mail during wars.

Carriers faced not only their own labor struggles; they also were active in the campaigns of our brothers and sisters from other unions and in the overall struggle for labor rights. The civil rights movement, immigration, and economic booms and busts are other historical trends that affected cities across the country, and the letter carriers who served them, in varying ways.

“Chances are, there is a wealth of local letter carrier history waiting to be told in your branch or state—you might even uncover unsung heroes in the past worthy of celebration today,” Rolando said. “And some of the history letter carriers will learn about in the future is being made right now. Preserving it is our responsibility.” PR