Man Of The Times

By Stephanie Jeter Cannon ’06

The door to the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives second-floor collection room whispers the faintest squeak and closes. Inside are shelves of books, so many that the floor-to-ceiling pieces are pushed together like books themselves. A motor-powered mechanism slides the bookshelves horizontally to allow for aisle space. The hum of the engine sounds like the rise and fall of time.

Chapman fills this space like a storyteller, weaving his narrative around the stacks of A&M history.

It is common knowledge that Chapman knows everything there is to know about Texas A&M. Obscure fact or meaningful event, Chapman holds it in his head. He asserts it’s not that he knows everything, but rather knows “where to look it up.”

There was a time when that’s all he did—go through boxes to identify and help classify Texas A&M’s collections. Chapman started at the University Archives in 1972 as a student worker. After 38 years, he’s now retiring. The man who started working at Texas A&M the same year campus housing was opened to women has said “it’s time to do something else.” His last day is Jan. 31.

When asked to recall the favorite memory of four decades in Aggieland, his mind wanders the dorm rooms in Hart Hall. “When I go inside, it still smells the same,” he said, like dirty laundry. Accommodations as a student were bare, “no phones, and if two people plugged in an iron, it knocked out the power,” he said, but it was designed to do something special.

“There are four rooms on a floor, two on each side, and connected with a bathroom,” he said. The family-style floors fostered lasting friendships. His dorm room was the one with the coffee pot and the open-door policy. With several friends in the Corps, sometimes freshmen would take naps in his room just to get away. “A lot of kids hung out in my room,” he said.

“I really enjoyed living on campus. I loved the spontaneous Midnight Yell Practices. I loved being close to the MSC, and I was always impressed at how quiet and dark campus got for Silver Taps,” he said. Hart became home.

After graduating with his degree in history, Chapman spent three years on a ship as a Navyman. When his time was over, it was back to A&M for his master’s in history. He later earned his doctorate in the same subject. Chapman aspired to teach on a college campus—which he did, teaching a couple different courses in addition to his work at Cushing.

“But, I didn’t mean to stay,” he said. It wasn’t with intention that he continued his career and education in Aggieland, yet “it turned out to be the greatest thing that has ever happened in my life,” he said.

For through staying, he’s been able to learn from A&M greats like Ernest Langford, M.T. Harrington and Olin Teague. “I would sit down with them, they would tell me things, and I would listen,” he said. He’s made true friendships; he’s made a difference.

Chapman has been as stable as the walls and enduring as the Spirit. And, as he steps out of his position, he said it feels good to be able to leave Cushing Memorial Library and Archives in a better spot than he found it. Each archivist and director of Cushing has had a different role to fill in the history of A&M’s historic collections, he said, “and my predecessors were visionary.” His salute to the past leaders of the archives is one of a continued legacy in excellence.

Chapman taught his history class that “facts have to mean something,” he said. Once, he took a late night flight out of Atlanta to Houston, and the flight attendant on board happened to be a past student. Chapman remembers how she brought him his favorite drink before he could request it. As she handed him the glass, she thanked him. “Thank you for teaching me history,” she said.

Texas Aggie echoes the thanks.