Conserving the Past to Contribute to the Future

As a six-year-old child, John N. Payne escorted his cousin, a National Guardsman, into Griffin, Indiana, following a devastating tornado on March 18, 1925. The Great Tri-State Tornado—the worst in U.S. history—killed 689 people in Missouri, Southern Illinois, and Southwestern Indiana. The experience launched Payne's lifelong passion for weather and history.

Payne, a McCutchanville resident and friend of the University of Southern Indiana, compiled weather statistics and Evansville history until his death in 2012, at the age of 93. He was well-known in the Tri-state area as the downtown weather observer for 60 years, receiving the coveted Ben Franklin Award, given to a cooperative observer of the National Weather Service, after completing 55 years of service. After retiring as corporation secretary from the A.L. Frederick Company, an Evansville machine shop, he served as the weekend weatherman for several years on local television station WFIE 14.

Known as “the professor,” Payne wore glasses and used a pointer during his forecasts. “He played the part quite well,” said Dr. Darrel E. Bigham, professor emeritus of history at USI. Described as quirky and eccentric, very few people knew Payne personally. “He played the part during his time on-air,” said Charlie Alms, one of Payne’s few close friends. “The persona everyone saw on television was not the real John. He kept to himself.”

Alms befriended Payne, whom he consulted while working on a weather-related science project as a student at Delaware School in 1953. First a mentor, then a friend, Alms’ and Payne’s friendship lasted over six decades. Payne’s weekly rounds to catch up with friends always ended with coffee with Alms at the Tennessean, a local 50s diner. “Our conversations invariably started with the weather, then we’d move on to topics of Evansville and its history,” Alms said. “I knew it was time to part ways when John would say ‘I guess we’ve finally covered the waterfront.’ That was my cue the visit was over.”

Payne was an avid collector of books, manuscripts, photographs, artifacts, and medallions about both weather-related topics and the history of Evansville—invaluable information to area historians such as Dr. Bigham. An author on local and regional history, Payne’s knowledge and memorabilia helped complete Bigham’s research for several books. “He was always willing to help with information,” Bigham said. It was during one of those research visits that Bigham inquired about Payne’s plan for the collection after his death, inviting him to contribute the collection to USI.

Thanks to Bigham’s invitation, Payne entrusted his collection to USI for its care and preservation, knowing the University would provide continued
“Because of his vision, the Payne Collection will benefit students, researchers, curators, and educators in perpetuity.”

“The most important thing we have for historical research is primary evidence—first-hand material,” Bigham said. “We have that in Mr. Payne’s collection. To be able to touch that material is to get a sense of what really happened in history.”

Jennifer Green, reference and archives librarian at USI remarked, “It’s a great way to find out about the changes that have happened in our community—things that are important, things that were important in one period to another period—just to understand where we came from and how we’ve gotten to where we are now.”

Payne left a legacy across Evansville, dividing his estate among nine local charities in addition to the USI Foundation.

A recognition display in Rice Library acknowledges Payne’s generosity and his devotion to his parents. It states “The USI Foundation was pleased to receive this bequest on August 8, 2012, which Mr. Payne described in his own words as ‘given in memory of my beneficent parents.’ The University and USI Foundation are deeply grateful to Mr. Payne for his generosity and for his thoughtful and careful planning over many years. Because of his vision, the Payne Collection will benefit students, researchers, curators, and educators in perpetuity.”

In the words of John N. Payne, “I guess we’ve finally covered the waterfront.”

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For more information or other gift-planning ideas, return the enclosed reply card or contact the USI Foundation.

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USI depends on loyal friends and alumni who make annual gifts which help underwrite scholarships and enhance its educational programs. When a benefactor dies, then that support ends.

Continue your commitment to support higher education by including the USI Foundation in your will. You can create a permanent legacy. Here is how to accomplish that:

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* Assumes an average annual rate of return of 4.5% on bequests received by the USI Foundation.