Shirley Theriot worked with the Clerk of Court's office for 28 years while crumbling old stacks of naturalization documents, elegantly handprinted and sprinkled with near-century-old dust, were stored away in anonymous locked cabinets.

Indexing and preserving the naturalization documents is something Lafayette Parish Clerk of Court O. C. "Dan" Guilliot has always wanted to find the time and resources to do.

So Guiliiot, at the urging of City Court Judge Kaliste Saloom, called Theriot out of retirement and for weeks now, Theriot has been meticulously recording and copying and cross-referencing what are essentially pages of Acadiana history.

Guilliot and Theriot sit opposite one another, staring at the expanse of priceless documents spread across the large conference table in the Pelican Room.

"The toughest part is trying to make out what the names are," Theriot sighs, as she hands over a document with curlicued swirling loops for a signature.

"People signed their names that way back then, too," she laughs.

Before 1906, when federal law established the Bureau of Immigration, immigrants were naturalized through locally established Clerk of Court offices.

Guilliot's office has naturalization documents ranging from 1834 into the early 1900s.

Of course, Guiliiot and Theriot weren't around back then, but probably feel as though they have finally had a chance to step back in time and meet those early immigrants.

Theriot thumbs through a stack. She pulls out naturalization documents filed by the ancestors of some of Lafayette's most well-known families. "So many of them are here," she says.

She thumbs a little further.

"You know, I didn't find any women," Theriot notes, "except one." She looks for that document. "It was a nun. Sister...something." Women, Theriot determined later, were considered naturalized once their husbands were naturalized. Papers were filed on behalf of the nun only because she was unmarried.

At first Theriot thought it might be because the women just weren't accompanying the men as they initially immigrated to the Louisiana wilderness. Or it might have been because naturalization was necessary only for those people in political office or in business. And at that time, men were generally found in those occupations.

Guilliot and Theriot both said there have been few requests to see the documents over the years, and then mostly from people doing genealogy research.

But that may change.

A close-up look at the old documents.

"It's the information on those documents that's priceless," Theriot said, "and that is what we are concerned with preserving."

Shirley Theriot and Dan Guilliot inspecting some of the naturalization documents.

Story by Donna Broussard
Photos by Brad Kemp