Stash from the past

1939 time capsule speaks volumes to La. School for the Deaf alumni

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Moments before a maintenance worker cut open a time capsule buried at the former Louisiana School for the Deaf building, Houston Moss’ heart was pounding.

“I was so excited,” Moss, a 1968 graduate and retired carpentry instructor at the school, said through an interpreter, pounding his chest to sign his anticipation.

The time capsule, buried by students and teachers at the school in February 1939, was cracked open Monday afternoon.

Crews working on the renovations of the former School for the Deaf building, which went on to house the Baton Rouge Police Department headquarters and is now being renovated by the state Department of Corrections, discovered the 77-year-old time capsule just before Easter.

Graduates of the Louisiana School for the Deaf, including Wanda Miller and Moss, said they’d been hunting for the time capsule for years but hadn’t been able to pinpoint exactly where it was hidden until a drill bit struck the copper box about 11 a.m. on Good Friday.

A previous effort to uncover the capsule in time for the School for the Deaf’s 150th anniversary in 2002 failed. When Miller, Moss and school officials heard the Department of Corrections was renovating the building, they embarked on a two-year quest to uncover the box.

The hunt ended when building maintenance manager Nathan Harvey, who enthusiastically dove into the search, shimmied through a hole in the plasterboard wall and laid his hands on the box.

On Monday, Jason Macon, an inmate working with Harvey, climbed back through the hole and pulled out the box.

As Louisiana School for the Deaf Director Donna Alleman unpacked the box to a crowd of former students, teachers and reporters Monday afternoon, she held up the eclectic and well-preserved trove of school artifacts sealed away all these decades.

Alleman spread class registration forms, copies of the school newspaper, state tourist pamphlets, sign language textbooks and three children’s dolls out on the table as she dug through the collection.

Among the books stashed in the capsule were a bound edition of student poetry, a guide to the birds of Louisiana and a copy of the 1937 biography of “Huey P. Long, the Martyr of the Age.” A 1939 school homecoming program touted a matchup between the Silent Warriors of the Alabama School for the Deaf and the Louisiana School for the Deaf Mustangs (LSU’s mascot has since been changed to the War Eagles).

In a hand-bound collection of student reports — each about a different species of tree — Miller saw the names of her mother and her cousin, both of whom were students at the school in 1939.

“I was really so excited to see her name,” said Miller, a third-generation graduate of the School for the Deaf who said her excitement over the find made it tough to sleep. “I just had butterflies in my stomach.”

Department of Corrections Secretary Jimmy LeBlanc, who was on hand for the special occasion, said workers kept an eye out for the box for about two years but recent conversations with a pair of 90-year-old School for the Deaf graduates — who were 12 when the capsule was buried — helped direct the search to the correct part of the building.

“We’re amazed that we found it,” LeBlanc said.

Harvey, the maintenance worker, said he used a drill to probe for the box through concrete and brick walls.

“It was obvious it was the box,” said Moss, who was with Harvey at the time. When a wall scanner also showed what appeared to be the box, Moss said, “we started getting really excited.”

Seeing the capsule unpacked Monday, Moss said, felt like watching some of those long-ago students be woken from a slumber: “Now they get to tell their story.”

Alleman, the school’s director, said plans are in the works to create a display of the items, offering a window into education for the deaf in Louisiana.

As for LeBlanc, he said the Department of Corrections intends to drop a new time capsule into the slot in the wall the old one was pulled from, to be opened during the next renovation.