

## Unfolding History

Library science student Alesha Shumar carefully removes a rubber band from a stack of yellowed, folded papers. Even though the band adheres to the 80-year-old pages, she manages to remove it without tearing anything. She unfolds the leaves of paper and gently flattens them on her lab table. Her eyes skim a coal-dust covered page with “Press Report” typed at the top. Then, she reads the report aloud to her fellow researchers.

“Floyd H. Simmons, 21. Nationality, American. Died Thursday, Dec. 2, 1926, from streptococci pneumonia following septicemia due to splinter in third finger of right hand,” she announces, noting that this is one of the most unusual cases she has come across. Her fellow researchers, busy examining other century-old death records, agree that this death-by-splinter case is an odd one. Nearby, other students study the cases of a miner who was crushed by fallen slate and a woman who died in an abortion attempt.

Shumar is one of 28 Pitt graduate and undergraduate students who helped to process and preserve documents for the Allegheny County Coroner Case Files Project during the past two years. Completed this summer, the archival project was managed by Pitt’s Archive Service Center, part of the University Library System, and supported through a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. The students—from the Schools of Information Sciences and Arts and Sciences—cataloged 208,000 files of questionable deaths that had been kept in the county coroner’s office until they were donated to Pitt in 1973. The documents, which date back to 1887, are useful in studying trends relating to disease, medical knowledge, and social problems.

The day that Shumar found the splinter case, she also read through an employee accident report, which stated that Simmons was pierced with a splinter at the Clark Lumber Company. Here was some information about the young man’s



life: He worked at a lumberyard. Then, Shumar read a statement written by Simmons’ wife, Helen, who described her husband’s pain, their trips to the doctor, the pneumonia diagnosis, and, finally, his death. He was less than three weeks away from his 22nd birthday. Shumar felt saddened and sympathetic but also awed by the history that she had unfolded.

Later, she would post comments on the archival project’s blog about the number of pneumonia cases that she had examined, including the Simmons case. Throughout the project, all of the student researchers were required to keep a journal, and the history students wrote academic papers on what the records revealed about domestic abuse, alcoholism, and abortion in the 19th and 20th centuries.

After Shumar finished examining the Simmons file, she placed the pages in acid-free, docket-numbered file folders, still careful not to tear them. Then she reached for the next rubber-banded file to unfold another story of a person from the past.

—Lauren Mylo