As we celebrate the centennial of the Seventh Day Baptist (SDB) Historical Society this year, we are surveying the past activities of the society at warp speed. This edition features innovation and intrigue!

In 1958, Rev. Al Rogers, the SDB Historical Society president, revealed that the beginning of the official preservation of our denominational history began not in 1916, but in 1863. The Historical Board designated Milton College and Alfred University as the two repositories of historical material, including Peter Heylen’s book published in 1636 on the history of the Sabbath. This book still resides in our library!

Almost 100 years after the Historical Board started collecting printed materials, the Historical Society adopted a new technology—microfilm. For you young people who store documents in the cloud and think in gigabytes, in the 1960s microfilm was the way to go—a spool of film could store up to 2100 pages of material. Think of it as carrying a palm-sized box instead of 10 heavy books.

In 1962, the Historical Society kicked off a new annual event; it designated the last Sabbath in November to be “Sabbath Heritage Day.” The purpose was to keep alive the work of our founding fathers in spreading the truth of God’s Sabbath. As Rev. Rogers stated so eloquently in the 1965 annual report,

Seventh Day Baptists should know John James—not merely the fact that he suffered a martyr’s death. They should have their emotions
stirred by the words he spoke—his simple statement of faith, the circumstances under which this confession of faith was made, and finally his prayer from his scaffold. Seventh Day Baptists should be able to re-live that exciting moment in the life of Francis Bampfield when, ordered by the constable to cease his preaching that Sabbath Day, he declared in a firm voice—“But I have a mandate from the Lord Jesus Christ to continue.”

Indeed we need not look back that far in our history for examples of SDBs defending their Sabbath beliefs. In 1962, the SDB librarian provided background material on SDBs in Arkansas for the Arkansas Baptist Historical Commission. Arkansas passed a law in 1887 prohibiting work on Sunday. The DeWitt SDB Church was warned that the SDBs must stop work on Sunday or be prosecuted. Rev. James Shaw, SDB missionary for southwestern states, and Thomas Monroe, church deacon, convinced their state senator (Davy Crockett’s grandson) that this was an unjust law. “On the floor of the Arkansas senate, [Senator Robert Crockett] made a grand speech on religious liberty, and an amendment to the bill protecting Sabbath-keepers was passed overwhelmingly.”

We SDBs have an exciting history of which we should be proud. Do not consider the SDB Historical Society a storage place for old things. Our mission is to keep alive the stories of heroism and faith from our past to inform the present and envision the future. As mentioned in the 1957 report, there is no value in preserving our historical resources unless denominational boards, societies, churches, and individuals utilize those resources. (What is the whole story of James’ martyrdom? What can we learn from Bampfield?)

Learn more about the goal and the details of the Centennial Fund in the Centennial Fund flyer available through your church or the SDB Historical Society (www.sdbhistory.org).