June 9, 2011 - As many of you likely know, we have recently made an attempt to segue from the "Homes of History" series into doing historical accounts of the downtown Leonard buildings. My mother, Ava Barlow, has put in hours each week at the courthouse in Bonham sifting through book after book of deed records to connect current owners to original owners, which has proved to be quite a daunting task since the time spans 131 years, the properties have changed hands several times, and the recording system for the early years is archaic, at best, and requires some guidance. Unfamiliar with the process, I decided last Thursday would be a good time to go with her and see what it's all about. So armed with her block and lot map of Leonard and notebook of information found previously, we drove to Bonham.

As we entered the office where the land records are stored, I was a little overwhelmed. Shelves that are probably seven feet tall line the walls and create an island in the middle, holding book after book of records. Each book is numbered, and those numbers go from 1 to over 1500. Of course the smell was common to me - old paper - so I felt a little at home there. The books holding the records to certain eras in history - such as The Great Depression - are sparse, while others - such as the ones from just a few years ago - are filled to capacity. A friendly lady, with whom Mom was already familiar from her previous quests, greeted us and offered her assistance if we should need it. And we did. More than once.

In a separate room connected to the records room are more shelves with books and two computers. These are the reference tools where you can search and find deed transactions from each year dating back to the 1800's. Those registries then provide the record book number and page number on where to find the detailed information related to the transaction, such as town addition, block number and lot number. The computers provide a quick and efficient way of searching records, so we were able to connect several dots on the two properties we were researching rather quickly. The electronic records, however, only date back to 1967, and the rest must be found in the reference and record books manually.

Our pace slowed tremendously - or hit a brick wall rather - once we got to the point of having to use the reference books. One lot we were researching was owned by B.B. Braly, who owned several lots in Leonard and whose name is spelled both Braly and Braley in the reference books. So it becomes rather complex when you come across an owner like him because his name appears consistently (in frequency), yet inconsistently (in spelling). It is really neat, however, to see in concrete the namesakes of our Leonard streets - such as Willard P. Hall and the Connett and Parmele families. Some of the families mentioned in our Homes of History series have also shown up.

At this time, we are tracking down information on the buildings occupied by KD Johnson Inc., which is actually two lots and requires two separate searches. I started from present day and worked backwards, and Mom started from the original owners and worked forward. But, we still have about a 30-year gap on who owned the buildings. We would also like to provide information on what businesses occupied the spaces during the various eras of ownership.

We would like for anybody with information on these two buildings to contact us and let us know what you know. We want the articles to be as thorough and accurate as possible so the history is on record, which will take some time. So please be patient with us as we attempt to spotlight each building on the square. In the future, and after one history article runs, we will run a small teaser letting the readers know what property we are researching next, so those with information pertaining to it may contact us at that time. We have several historians in town who have lots of information on lots of properties, and we always make sure to contact them and the current owners, but there may be just one person with information that will fill a missing link we have.

We also have not totally abandoned the Homes of History series (i.e. this week's issue). We have a couple of more homes that we will likely spotlight still. So please let us know if you know of a home that has history. We have heard lots of wonderful feedback on the history articles, and are excited to continue them for our readers. History is not interesting for everybody, but documenting it is important for those who are here in the years ahead who are interested in it.