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Because everybody  
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



*Material I examined during three days of research at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library.*

## Stay in touch

A public library is the best place in the world for total sensory experience.

Many have sought it elsewhere, many have failed.

A library? For sight, sound, smell, and touch? Isn't that as likely as \$3 gasoline in California? Gravity taking a day off? Your doctor saying you need more sodium and ultraprocessed food in your diet?

I offer you the [Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library](#).

It ticks off the sensory feedback boxes like most libraries: See words and images, hear recordings and murmured conversations, smell the ink and paper. We'll leave out taste to keep this from getting weird.

But a library can excel in a way you may not expect: Touch.

Ike's library, a part of the National Archives and Records Administration, is in Abilene, Kansas, an unassuming town of about seven thousand people that remembers its boisterous cattle-drive past with rodeos at the fairgrounds and a downtown mural of Wild Bill Hickok. The Eisenhower library (a museum and his boyhood home are on the same grounds) is invaluable for those looking for primary source material on mid-twentieth-century topics. World War II, for example. In three days recently, I reviewed at least five thousand documents and scanned a few hundred with my phone to research a book about men who served in a small combat unit, the 95th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop. ([For more on the book, you can read an earlier newsletter here.](#))

Those pages. Those pages that are at least eighty years old. Those pages that you can hold in your hands and feel the impressions left by a typewriter. Who wrote it and under what circumstances? Was it an Army clerk-typist? An officer? Where was it written? Why is it a little crinkly? When was the last time someone unfolded this oversized map? Some pages are flimsy and worrisome for a researcher who would prefer not to run afoul of the library's scrupulous efforts to prevent damage.

The material is a tactile wonder stored in row upon row of sturdy file boxes that are off-limits to the public. You can request specific material, and a library archivist will bring it to you in the research room. If you were able to look at these pages on a screen, you would see the same words, and you probably would benefit from a search function. However, few of these records have been digitized, maybe 1 percent of the thirty million pages. And looking at a screen just isn't the same thing as touching a page that its creator touched.

Dr. Jim Ginther, the supervisory archivist at the Eisenhower museum, knows that feeling.

"Honestly, one of the things that attracted me to the archival field is that physical connection to a historic event," he said. "You'd think in the modern era, the internet, everybody thinks, well, as long as I have the information, that's what's important. But I'm often amazed at the transformation that comes over people when they actually come against the physical reality of something that was

connected to a historical event.”

Dr. Ginther directs an expert staff that guides people who have applied to do research, filed a description of their project, and completed an online class that covers the research rules (no pens, just pencils; no outside notebooks nor any kind of books; no water bottles or food in the locked research room; examine only one page at a time at your assigned desk; no jackets or sweaters on the back of your chair; handle photos with gloves).

“The most important thing I would reinforce is the fact that you don’t have to be a scholar to be here,” Dr. Ginther said.

The six-member staff tries to limit the number of in-person researchers to five a day so they can provide any help that might be needed, but they have room for thirteen. Appointments are strongly recommended. The research room is open to everyone, and no university pedigree is required. You have to be an adult, although children accompanied by parents are invited. The library staff recently helped a seven-year-old from Denver who produced a two-minute video and a PowerPoint presentation on Eisenhower and Stalin.

“It was fantastic,” Dr. Ginther said.

He acknowledges the technological changes that have affected research during his career, which includes four years at the Eisenhower library after twenty years as a civilian archivist for the U.S. Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia. He earned a doctorate in military history at Texas Tech University.

“It used to be people had to come in with a backpack and big flatbed scanners and large laptop computers,” he said. “And now the iPad in particular has made that a whole lot easier for people to just come in. And so many are using their cellphones.”

Those changes have simplified the process, made the research room even quieter, and one other thing:

“Let’s face it, it saves people money, right? They don’t have to pay for those photocopies at eighty cents a page.”

I appreciated that, given my history as a frugal (some would use a different word) person.

By the time Eisenhower was president, the scope of the office had grown to affect nearly every aspect of American life, Dr. Ginther said, so the library attracts researchers who delve into a wide range of subjects.

“The price of food at the supermarket, agriculture policy, or how we’re going to defend the country, the presidency reaches that,” he said. That means there is no typical researcher, and Eisenhower’s role as commander of all Allied forces in Europe during World War II is just one strand.

Some gems are tucked away in Abilene, including [a famous note Eisenhower never had to release](#). He intended to offer it if the Normandy landings in June 1944 failed. It was to be his public mea culpa.

“The in-case-of-failure message is actually a piece of paper. It’s in pencil, and it’s (on paper that is) not much better than newsprint. If you left it, the conditions of just a normal room temperature would eventually cause that to self-destruct,” Dr. Ginther said.

In Abilene, Dr. Ginther came to an understanding of Eisenhower that surprised him a bit.

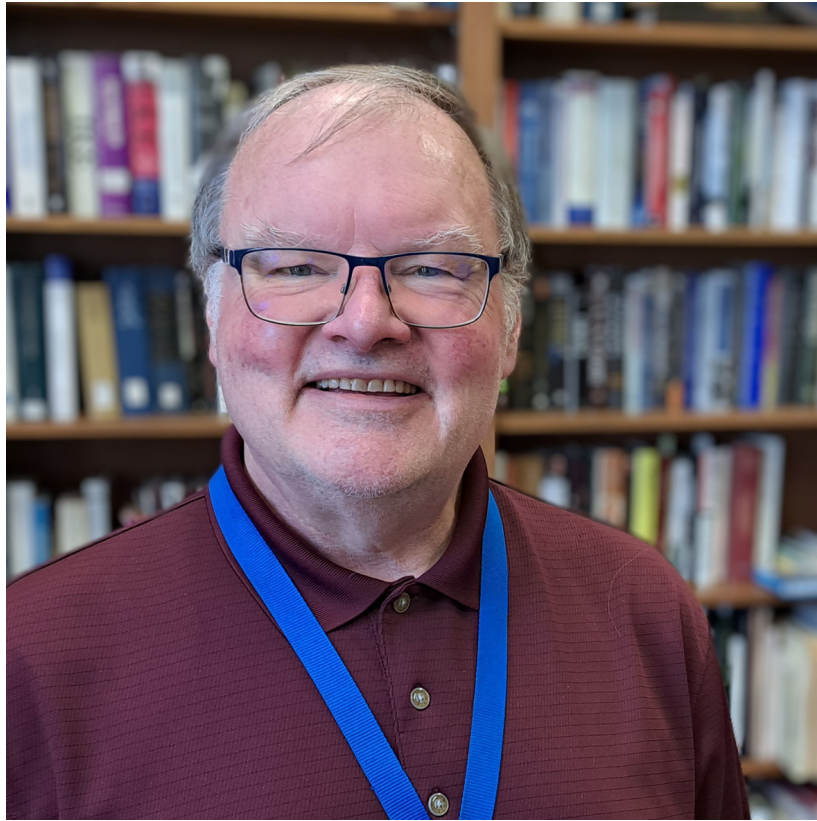
“Probably the one thing that impresses me more than anything about Ike was that he never lost sight of the impact of big things on individual people. When you look at him and he’s talking about World War II, he basically is always giving credit to the individual soldier. And he doesn’t lose sight of that when he’s making public policy as president.

“We tend to think of leaders as people like Patton. Patton had this big, bombastic personality. Certainly, Ike had a big personality, but his ability to take all that right back down to the level of how does this impact the individual is just brilliant.”

Abilene’s neighbors are wheat, corn, alfalfa, bean, and assorted sunflower fields. And the nearby villages of Hope and Enterprise. Country roads square off the impossibly flat landscape into sections, half sections, and other measures familiar to farmers. Getting there requires determination.

But the payoff at the Eisenhower library or any National Archives site is worth the effort. It’s not every day you get to touch history.





*Dr. Jim Ginther, supervisory archivist.*



*A quiet day in the research room at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, which has desk space for thirteen researchers.*





*Ike stands watch outside his library.*



Abilene says it has the world's largest belt buckle. It is in (where else?) Eisenhower Park, a few blocks from the library.





*Dave appears to have closed his downtown business, but Abilene remembers Wild Bill Hickok, a gunslinger, gambler, and town marshal in the 1870s.*

Kind regards

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