A Genealogist in Special Collections, or Schizophrenia in Wonderland

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As a researcher, I can tell you what a thrill it is to go to a library that actually seems to enjoy working with its patrons. I have been in libraries where the staff give the impression that "You do not know just how fortunate you are to be sitting in this place, much less be allowed to actually hold that document, which, if you happen to deface by your inexcusable carelessness, will likely result in the total collapse of Western civilization as we know it." Libraries do not have to be that way. Archives are as much about serving people as they are about saving things. I learned that lesson in Ann Arbor. The staff at William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan is known far and wide for their expertise as collectors of Americana. I was aware of their reputation before I went. What I did not know was that they had an elephant in the basement. Imagine my surprise.

James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., is the Associate Provost, Professor of Psychology, and Lecturer in History at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has written two books on the Civil War: *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War,* and *Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks,* both published by the LSU Press. His latest book, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866,* is due out this spring and will also be published by the LSU Press.

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A Genealogist in Special Collections
Or
Schizophrenia in Wonderland

Dr. Lynne Mueller
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I have a confession to make: I am a professional schizophrenic (not especially paranoid and only occasionally delusional). My schizophrenia is based on the fact that I am a Special Collections librarian, and I am also a genealogist (horrors!). I understand when my genealogical researchers tell me they want more, more, more (time, resources, services, etc.), and I also understand when I go elsewhere and the librarian or archivist asks, "Aren't you ever going to go home?" In my delusional moments, I think genealogists and archivists, librarians, and court clerks can actually get along and help each other. Only occasionally do I encounter another genealogist who makes me wonder.

As a genealogist, I want every resource I can put my hands on, and as a librarian trained as a historian, I prefer my resources to be original. I want name indexes to everything—I don't have time to waste here! Get me to those documents quickly! Don't throw anything away; it might have some piece of minutia that I need to crack my currently greatest mystery.

As a librarian/archivist, I can't afford every resource. The budget's too limited to provide materials for all of the clients that I serve: university students, faculty, scholars, representatives of other state agencies, local businesses, individuals needing help finding their way through the bureaucratic maze, lawyers, the media, and the occasional 4th grader doing a class project. Even if I could afford the sources, I don't have room to put them all. And name indexes take time I don't have to produce, even if it were practical or useful in every case. Not everything in the world is worth keeping. Besides, not everything fits
my collecting policy (which, of course, was well thought-out in a series of long committee meetings that
took up a lot of my time). It's my job to balance all of this stuff. Back off and let me do my job!

The genealogist in me wants lots of time to do my research. Give me long hours every day in the
repository. Oh yes, I need a microfilm reader/printer, too, just for myself, instant photocopying of
anything I find, a good parking space, and I do prefer a table turned just so in the room to take advantage
of the light. The chair needs to be comfortably padded as well. How about a plug for my laptop and room
to spread out all the materials I have called for? I promise I will use only pencils if I don't have to walk all
the way to the other end of the room to find a pencil sharpener. And by the way, let me tell you about my
family; I'm sure you have the time to listen.

The Special Collections staff in me is willing to put up with the genealogist during working hours,
but when closing time comes, I want to go home (I may be going to another library to do my research,
and you're cutting into my time). I can't afford another microfilm reader/printer. You have to get here
early to get your preferred parking space and table. The chairs are the best we have (try not to lean back
on two legs and break it, please). I can't move the wall plug any closer to your table, and I had better not
catch you using a pen. I will get your photocopying as soon as I can. (Please see "budget" and "clienteles"
in paragraph three). I am happy to know about your many illustrious relatives, but could you get to the
point of your question?

Actually, as a genealogist I have always gotten good service in libraries and archives, possibly
because I know what the other side is thinking. Mutual understanding is the key to both sides getting
along together. As a genealogist, I try to share resources; I try to be organized and state my questions
succinctly. As a librarian, I have tried to give service because I understand what the genealogist needs.
I teach workshops and give programs to local genealogical societies, trying to teach beginning
genealogists how to make the best use of their research time.

Genealogists, like all researchers, need training. Most researchers are trained by their teachers,
but it is usually the archivist or librarian who has to teach the genealogist. When I teach workshops, I try
to share the following four useful rules for genealogists using archives, libraries, or courthouses, especially
those at a distance. Maybe the rules should be posted for all researchers, not just genealogists.

Rule 1: Get organized. Everyone should organize research notes just to see how far they have
gotten. Find the questions that need to be answered in a repository and put those in priority order.
Sometimes you find out that you already have answers, and the questions have changed.

Rule 2: A phone call is cheap insurance. Call ahead and make sure that the repository is the one
you think it is (I have had genealogists looking for information about the University of Mississippi show up
at Mississippi State University because they did not realize those were two different institutions, and that
our resources on the University of Mississippi might be somewhat limited).

Rule 3: Don't waste time. If your questions from Rule 1 have a priority order, begin with the first
and make sure that the most important facts are found while there is plenty of time. Save the peripheral
questions for the end of the day if time is left.

Accept the rules of the institution and don't waste your time arguing about them with the staff.
That's time you can use for research, and you are not likely to change the rules anyway.
Of course, you're excited when you find your fourteenth great-grandparent, but don't spend all of your time sharing it with everyone in the room. You might meet very nice people that way, but you may also aggravate a less-than-enthusiastic non-genealogist. The time you spend sharing your findings is time that could be used to find your fifteenth great-grandparent.

Photocopies may be expensive, but decide if they are cheaper than a trip back to the repository. If the answer is yes, copy what you can and leave the note-taking for what can't be copied (and know the difference).

Rule 4: Find out how to follow up on new discoveries. It may take some time after your trip to sort out the findings and to develop new questions. The new questions may need answers from the same repository. Ask before you leave about getting copies of documents by mail or how much research the staff can provide if a question needs to be followed up on. Ask if there is a list of local researchers willing to do work for someone from a distance.

Librarians and archivists have just one rule for dealing with genealogists: Have patience! Patience in dealing with a single genealogist can make that person an independent researcher, one who can help train beginners around them or serve as volunteers to do research for others at a distance—a great timesaver. Genealogists can be among the best supporters a repository or library can have. They have contacts, and they are not afraid to use them. They can provide you with new collections or leads to collections. At the very least, they will increase your use statistics which can have a good influence on your budget (which you can then use to provide more resources, services, and time for them).

(Dr. Lynne Mueller is the Mississippiana/Rare Books Librarian in Special Collections at Mississippi State University Libraries where she has worked for 21 years. She is a native of Alabama and earned her PhD in history as well as her MLS at the University of Alabama.)

Thanks to the superb design by Jason Catlin, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Society of Mississippi Archivists now has a beautiful website at http://www.lib.usm.edu/~smainfo. The site is hosted by USM Libraries, University of Southern Mississippi and will be maintained by Peggy Price, Special Collections Librarian, McCain Library and Archives, with the assistance of Ron Peterson, Information Services Librarian at USM Libraries. SMA wishes to thank Dr. James Martin, Dean of University Libraries, for his generous support.