

2000

## A Genealogist in Special Collections, or Schizophrenia in Wonderland

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### Recommended Citation

Mueller, Lynne (2000) "A Genealogist in Special Collections, or Schizophrenia in Wonderland," *The Primary Source*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.18785/ps.2202.03

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/theprimarysource/vol22/iss2/3>

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A Genealogist in Special Collections  
Or  
Schizophrenia in Wonderland

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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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 "clientele" 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.

Identify the repository that is most likely to provide answers. A local library or repository may be able to help you do that. Ask.

**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).

Find out when the repository is open (every institution has someone complain because they showed up after hours or on a holiday and the repository was closed).

If you need special services or facilities (an elevator, a computer plug, or whatever), ask if it is available. Many institutions will go the extra mile, if they know what you need in advance and can work on supplying it in their own time. If something is not available, think what can you do to remedy the problem (like bring extra, charged battery packs for the computer).

Ask about the rules, and go prepared. If you can't take in a notebook, make sure that you have your research notes in a form that is allowed; you won't have enough time to do research if you wait until you get to the repository door to sort everything out. If you need identification to register, don't leave it in the car; you will only have to go back and get it.

**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.

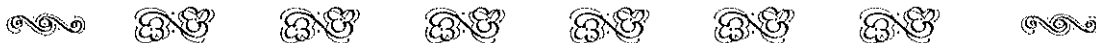
Of course, you're excited when you find your fourteenth great-grandparent, but don't spend all of your time sharing it with everyone in the room. You might meet very nice people that way, but you may also aggravate a less-than-enthusiastic non-genealogist. The time you spend sharing your findings is 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 time-saver. 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.

