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Lynne Mueller
Mississippi State University

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The Genealogists And The Keepers of The Records: a Fable
by Dr. Lynne Mueller, Mississippiana/Rare Books Librarian,
Special Collections, Mississippi State University Libraries

Part 1

Once upon a time (as all good fables should begin), there was a tribe of people called the Genealogists. They were good people and tried to emulate their ancestors. They pursued many occupations, but all were dedicated to finding out and publishing the Great Deeds of their ancestors. They were happy in their mission (except when they found out bad things about their ancestors). Some were beginners and didn't know what to do, but others, who had been seeking out the Great Deeds of the ancestors for a long time, helped them.

Eventually, the Genealogists discovered another tribe, the Keepers of the Records. There were several different kinds of Keepers of the Records. Some were called Librarians and only kept copies of the records. They, too, sometimes helped the beginner Genealogists learn about the Great Deeds of the ancestors. Some Keepers of the Records were called Archivists and kept original records. Some were called Court Clerks and kept very specialized records. Actually, the Genealogists probably discovered the Keepers of the Records a long time ago, because some Keepers of the Records were half-Genealogists. These half-Genealogist-Keepers of the Records were always friendly to the Genealogists, and they usually invited the Genealogists in to see the Records.

The Keepers of the Records had to deal with many other tribes as well, including the Historians, the Serious Researchers in many other fields, the Administrators, the Tax-Payers, and even the Lawyers! All of these tribes made many demands on the Keepers of the Records, and the Keepers often felt harassed. Some decided they really didn't need to deal with the Genealogists, who probably were not Serious Researchers in any field anyway. This caused some Genealogists to change their name to Family Historians, in hopes that they would be seen as more serious by the Keepers of the Records. What the Keepers of the Records forgot was that the Genealogists had other pursuits and other friends, including the Administrators and the Tax-Payers who paid the bills.

Moral of the first part of the story: Keepers of the Records should remember that all the tribes make demands on them, and all of the tribes can be their allies if treated properly. The Genealogists have learned what the records can do for them and have very good reason to demand that the Administrators and the Tax-Payers continue to support the Keepers of the Records. The Keepers of the Records need to see that the Genealogists never forget that.

Part 2

One day, a small dark cloud appeared on the horizon. At first it was very far away, but as it approached it grew larger very rapidly. The cloud was called the Computer. At first, everyone feared the cloud, because no one knew what it would bring. In fact, at first it usually just brought snarled-up bills. In time, some of the people in the many tribes began to see the light reflected off the cloud and decided that the Computer might be just what they needed. The Keepers of the Records saw the Computer as their savior: it could index the Records; it could keep copies of the Records. Why, it could even create the Records! Of course, that presented a different set of problems, but that's a different fable.

The Genealogists took to the Computer slowly. A few forward-thinking Genealogists realized that they might keep the Great Deeds of their ancestors on the Computer. Then they found out that the Keepers of the Records were indexing the Records, and they could find out what Records the Keepers had. When everyone began sending each other messages through the Computer, the Genealogists discovered that they could find long-lost cousins and share the Great Deeds of the ancestors.

When the Genealogists found out that the Keepers of the Records were actually keeping copies of the Records on the Computer, they were overjoyed. Now they could see the records without ever bothering the Keepers of the Records, and they knew that would please the most harassed of the Keepers. Some Genealogists became so enamored of the Computer that they never again visited the Keepers of the Records. The Genealogists and the Keepers of the Records both suffered. The Genealogists now praised the virtues of the Computer, forgetting that the Keepers still had the Records, never understanding that the Record and its copy are not always the same, never knowing that some Records might not be in the Computer. The Genealogists no longer saw the need to support the Keepers of the Records, who had not always wholeheartedly accepted the Genealogists, and the Keepers were the losers there.

Moral of the last part of the story: the Computer is a wonderful tool for both the Keepers of the Records and for the Genealogists, but it is only a tool. The Genealogists still need to see the real Records, and the Keepers of the Records still need to teach the Genealogists that the real Records exist. If they only work together, each can make the other's work easier.

Dr. Lynne Mueller is the Mississippiana/Rare Books Librarian in Special Collections at Mississippi State University Libraries where she has worked for over 20 years. She is a native of Alabama and earned her PhD in history as well as her MLS at the University of Alabama.