

Elsa Martin, former Genealogy and Local History Librarian - Pascagoula Public Library, has written an article that was published in the "Mississippi Libraries" Magazine, Volume 64, #2, Summer 2000, page 43 - "In the Public Eye." This information should be used as a basic guide to become familiar with using Genealogy materials for research.

The Ultimate Reference Question: Who am I? Genealogy Online

Who, what, where, when and why. "Who is my great grandmother? What can I find out about my name and where did my family come from? When did they come to Mississippi? Why did they leave England?" All day long in my job as genealogy librarian, the people come asking the question, "Who am I?" In person, by e-mail, letter and phone, asking questions - seeking answers.

Many really do need to know who their parents and/or grandparents are. A young father came into the library one night two hours before closing. "I was told that the librarian can help me find my parents. Where do I start? How can I find out? I am frustrated and desperate," he stated with great emotion.

He told me that his little two-year-old daughter was lying in a hospital in New Orleans and needed a bone marrow transplant immediately. He really did need to know who he was. He was frantically searching for a donor. Everyone in his wife's family had been tested, to no avail. He said, "I was adopted at the age of three. I only have a vague memory of a connection with a Mrs. Smith, perhaps a grandmother."

He was born in Pascagoula and we searched the newspapers for new births, finding two baby boys born on his birth date and one of the boys was his birth weight. That tiny article listed the street address. We then searched the city directories and found the family at that address in the birth year, 1958.

We searched the 1999 city directory and phone books and did not find the family. He called the next-door neighbors from 1958 who still were living "next door" and BINGO! They knew the family, remembered a little William Smith who was living with his grandmother, and gave him a number to call. Within two hours we had found his family.

He called me from New Orleans the next day to tell me that both birth parents met him that morning at the hospital. That is the kind of information and resources only a library can provide.

One of the popular requests is to help find a Revolutionary or Civil War ancestor. Again, many beginners do not have enough information to pick out the right person in the many military records. For instance, it is a surprise to most researchers to find out how many people had the same name in 1860 Mississippi records.

A frequent request for help is the elderly person who needs proof of birth when there is no birth certificate in existence. We help Medicaid staff find birth records for many senior citizens. We can and do help all of them by pointing them in the right direction. Those born before 1920 are in the census and school records. Finding out more about family is fulfilling and

satisfying and is more than a genealogy hobby. It is an important discovery of self. So how does the reference librarian help?

Start with Family Knowledge:

The librarian will have to encourage the researcher to begin with information gleaned from the immediate family. It is always best to begin the research with as much information as possible from family members and then enhance it using the library and Web searches. Think of the Internet as a launching pad for other kinds of genealogical searches, via e-mail or physical searches at an archival library. The most prominent problem with researching only on the Web is the lack of original records. Old records are almost all hand-written and thus both time-consuming and expensive to convert to an electronic format. Therefore, most original records are only in libraries and archives. We encourage the use of available original records.

Taking Advantage of the Internet:

In the last few years, most people requesting information and guidance in their search for family information have already been surfing the globe via the Internet. They come to the librarian loaded with a lot of good and sometimes unrelated data about people with their surname. Some have found the correct family and bring in printed histories of ancestry back many generations, BUT they need to know how they fit into the picture. The information available in books, microform, journals, family files, CD's and now the Web is overwhelming, and the researcher begins to realize that more facts need to be collected on known grandparents. This is the only way to put the family history into perspective to make the correct link to proven information. The library comes into the picture when the collected records from the Internet do not match the known family records. They come to find the proof or original source.

Many people do not have computers and have never searched the Internet themselves. They often come wanting to know how they can search for family information when they get their new computer. We can quickly show them the main sites to help them get started. The good sites are multiplying rapidly and there are so many great links to check out. The beginner and experienced researcher needs to know the following sites.

Social Security Death Index:

First, for accurate birth and death dates of parents, grandparents, or other family members who have died in the last 35 years - since the automation of social security records - go to a SSDI (Social Security Death Index) site. One SSDI site, which is free, can be reached at <http://www.ancestry.com/main.htm>. From this main page of Ancestry.com, one can connect to the Social Security Death Index as well as other important sites. Searching the SSDI site is tricky when the names being searched are common names. For uncommon surnames, you can enter just the surname, like Nygaard my surname, and find those deceased people who had social security numbers in the U. S. Just remember that the more information you enter in the search, the harder it will be for each bit of info to be accurately matched. The real plus is that this SSDI site provides instructions on getting a copy of the complete and original application for social security that was filled out by the deceased person when they received their first Social Security card and number. They also provide a letter, which you can print, addressed to the Social Security Administration requesting a copy of the original application. For instance, the

original application filled out by a grandfather in 1939 will provide proof of his parents, birth date and birthplace. The reference librarian should be able to assist a beginner in using some sites such as the SSDI.

Important Sites That Link - Ancestry.com:

Ancestry.com is a popular site but they, like other sites, are not complete and do not have all records that relate to every family. There is no need to purchase the SSDI CDs being sold by many companies. It is available free. The membership in Ancestry is paid for at our library just like a subscription. Therefore, the patron and the librarian have access to many more records constantly being made available.

Important Sites That Link - Cyndi's List:

One of the most valuable sites on the web is Cyndi's List which links you to over 64,000 sites vital to family research. But it is so large that many people overlook the important links. Use the basic alphabetical list provided at <http://www.cyndislist.com/alpha.htm>. This page has information, books for sale, etc., on the opening page before the simple alphabetical list begins. Move several pages down to the list. On Cyndi's main page, the states are all listed under "United States", not under Mississippi or Alabama for example. This is an important link for reference librarians as well as home researchers, because you can find many of the other genealogy or family research sites from it.

Vital Records:

For vital records anywhere in the United States, go to <http://vitalrec.com/usmap.html>. It's an important site for forms, addresses, fees and how to order birth, death, marriage and divorce records in every state. This site is always kept up-to-date. For International Vital Records go to the country site of interest or use the Vital Records Handbook available in most library reference departments.

Land Records:

The purchase of government land in the public domain states, which includes Mississippi, and the acquisition of land through homestead is an important and interesting part of family research. The search for the description and date of a homestead is available from the GLO-BLM (General Land Office Bureau of Land Management). This is a wonderful and very helpful site at <http://www.gloreords.blm.gov/>. This government site will give you the information you need or want to get a copy of the original land patent and educate you about land records. The homestead "land entry papers" are available from the National Archives and are loaded with information about the pioneer homesteader. When I ordered the 1867 "land entry papers" for my great grandfather in Wisconsin there was testimony by his friends about his log home, farm, fields, family and as a surprise bonus his naturalization papers were also included. The NARA (National Archives and Record Administration) may be accessed at <http://www.nara.gov/> and the required form may be ordered for obtaining these Land Entry Records for a fee.

Military Records:

Since MLC owns all Mississippi Confederate Records, and all state libraries can borrow them without cost for the patron, the Confederate researcher needs only to ask the reference librarian for assistance. There is no need to order them from the Mississippi Department of

Archives and History or from the National Archives. Use Cyndi's List or Ancestry to link to the Internet sites for Revolutionary War, Civil War and other military sites which are numerous and very good. Many are lists and indexes, and do not have the actual official record. The military records for veterans from World War I, and later are available at the National Personal Records Center, located in St. Louis, Missouri, at <http://www.nara.gov/regionalmpr.html>.

LDS Records:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has a massive international collection of family records. The main site for LDS researchers is <http://familysearch.org/>. Just remember when helping researchers that all families are not listed.

Accuracy in Internet Research:

Genealogical sites are not useless. They help point beginners in the right direction, offer several online databases and make connections to existing research by other online genealogists. Important records such as the Federal Census from 1790 to 1920 originally recorded in books, and microfilmed by the National Archives, are slowly becoming available on the Internet. Scanned digital copies are available on CD's and in print. These scanned copies are difficult to read from a printed form in many cases. The volunteers who are submitting census transcriptions, read from microfilm and shared on the Internet are having a hard time reading the old handwritten names, ages and other important data. Therefore, it is really very difficult for them to share accurate information.

Most census sites on the Internet are second hand information. Encourage the patron to go to the nearest library owning census microfilm or able to borrow the film for them so that the original record can be used. The sharing of family records, photos and stories via the Internet is really a miraculous and amazing form of communication. Just remember that sharing records is just like sharing stories. By the time the story has been repeated many times, the facts begin to change, and the story reflects each teller's personality or knowledge. So, forget any notion that the Internet will make your genealogical research a snap. The sites may actually contain gems of information about your ancestors; but to get a complete picture you will almost certainly have to go outside of the Net.

The library is still the "Main Street Information Station" for family research. Submitted by Else J. Martin.