

Finding Oneself At Snow Library

by Tavi M. Prugno

It was an ordinary day in Orleans for most people, but not for me. I began the morning working at the reference desk at Snow Library thinking back to how reference has changed since I first came to the library. When I started, the only computers we had were text-based without graphics. There was no wireless access, no laptop computers, and, although mobile phones had been invented, no one brought them into the library.

Not many things have remained the same in reference work except for one: Uncertainty. I was fearful that I would be asked a question for which I could find no answer.

I remember vividly my first reference question on my first day as a reference librarian. A patron strode up to the reference desk holding a piece of paper on which was written a verse from John Milton's epic poem "A Paradise Lost." I was hoping she was going to ask where she could obtain a copy of the whole poem or maybe a collection of Milton's works; that I could handle. Instead, she wanted to know how she would go about translating this verse from English into all the Indo-European languages. I walked her over to the language reference books while thinking to myself that I will have broken some kind of record for lasting less than two hours on the first day of a new job, but, as it turned out, she decided that ten of the major Indo-European languages were enough. I knew I could order her the needed language books through interlibrary loan. I was saved--at least for now. Her project was a long one and I never found out if she was successful; however, I recently had an experience that reminded me of that first reference question long ago.

Again, I was at the reference desk when a patron approached and asked me, would I help her find out who she is? My fear of not understanding what she meant was mingled, again, with dark thoughts of unemployment. As my eyes searched her face for any additional clues as to what she might mean, she blurted

out "genealogy." "I would like to know what resources you have on genealogy so I can find out who I am." Saved again. I knew I was going to make it through another day--at least for now.

When I first began guiding people to genealogical resources, there were only print books. Then came along something called a CD-ROM. It was a popular novelty, but the information on it was not editable. You couldn't revise the information on there either by adding to it or deleting it. If you wanted to change what was on there you had to buy a new, updated CD-ROM. The company producing this product

was pleased with that arrangement, but both patrons and librarians found it frustrating. Doing genealogy is much easier now with the Internet as well as some genealogy databases which we offer at Snow Library: Ancestry and Heritage Quest Online.

Ancestry can only be used in the library, unlike Heritage Quest, which can be used remotely. Ancestry allows searching of census and voter lists, birth, marriage, death, military and immigration records. City directories, school and church records, and newspapers are also included. Best of all, many of these records encompass not only the United States but the United Kingdom and Europe as well. Most people who use Ancestry find that they want to search for hours. Those hours quickly become days, weeks, and months. That sounds like a considerable undertaking, but most people who begin genealogy research find it so enjoyable that they want to continue. Heritage Quest has a couple of unique search features such as U.S. Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files from 1800-1900 and a Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses from 1790-1920 so you can find the state you are looking for and see how counties from where your ancestors came have changed over time. Genealogy databases very successfully give users all the benefits of technology in the quest for knowledge of times past.



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