

The User Talks Back

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Abstract: This paper is a review of policies, facilities, and services I have observed or experienced while working in various repositories in the United States and includes suggested areas for reevaluation by archivists. Mention is made of services and equipment archivists should consider for the researcher working in their specific holdings, and the attitudes of archival personnel is discussed. Good service in university archives as well as disastrous efforts of some county archives are considered. Specific needs of the researcher are presented; and the dependency of the researcher on the ability, expertise, and cooperation of archivists is emphasized.

About the author: Mary N. Speakman is a certified genealogist from Wichita Falls, Texas. She has been an active researcher in many different archival repositories in various parts of the United States for many years. Much of her research involves tracing genealogies to establish heirships to settle estates.

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Before actually addressing the question of a user talking back to archivists, perhaps I should first mention the type of research I do so that you will be better able to evaluate what I have to say about various archives and libraries. I work almost entirely for attorneys, trust officers of banking institutions, and administrators of estates. I am retained to establish heirships for estates where the heirs are unknown or lost.

In Texas, if there is neither a spouse nor children or their descendants to inherit an estate, the estate reverts to the decedent's father and mother in equal portions. If only the father or the mother survives the intestate, then the one-half portion destined for the deceased parent is divided between his or her siblings. If there are no parents but there are siblings, the entire estate goes to the siblings and/or their descendants. If there are neither parents nor siblings nor descendants thereof, the estate reverts back to the grandparents in equal portions. Each living grandparent receives one of the four equal parts. If there are no surviving grandparents, the whole of the estate goes to their descendants, and so on without end. This means I may be working on individuals who are potential heirs from an ancestor several generations removed. I must establish the line of descent back to the point where there will be heirs and then bring the line forward, establishing proof for each and every descendant, whether living or dead, for presentation to the court at the time of probate. In one case I had to work back to 1813 before I could start forward again.

To accomplish such a search, I must compile a complete family history. In many cases this must be done for both the maternal and paternal sides of the family. Full historical and genealogical searches must be made for every generation and in every geographical location

involved. Every search I make is unique: the techniques are different, the areas of search are different, and my needs are different. In every case I must establish an economic, social, and personal background for the people so that I will better understand the research problem. This information may come from personal correspondence belonging to the decedent or from personal interviews with individuals who knew the person being sought. It might also come from research into a person's occupation, religion, social affiliations, or known family relationships as well as court records, census records, and all other research materials genealogists use, in addition to all the research materials historians use. Because of the wide variety of materials required to establish, locate, and prove these heirships, I must do research in all types of repositories throughout this country and sometimes abroad.

Time is very important to all researchers, but it is especially so for someone doing the type of research I do. I am always on a very tight time restriction. There is always an attorney, a trust officer, or a judge waiting for me to complete my research and submit my evaluation. At times, I call in my report from the field to my client at the same time he is going to court. To accomplish my job, I must have the cooperation and expertise of every archivist and librarian I contact. Unfortunately, I cannot depend upon receiving this cooperation and expertise in many archives and libraries.

Because time is so important to me, and I surmise that the same is true with archivists, I try never to go into an archives or a library cold or completely unannounced or unprepared. Ideally, I like to have the published guides to the different research facilities in my own library so that I can determine where I need to go and how much time it will

probably take to do the work. Unfortunately, a great many repositories have never published guides, and many of the guides that have been published are woefully out of date. When I know in advance in what archives I will be working, I write or make a personal telephone call to that archives to alert the staff that I wish to work in certain records and to request that they be ready for me when I arrive. In addition, I always ask for suggestions of other materials that might be pertinent to my research subject.

When I have submitted such a request in the past, I have always received a very courteous, and sometimes very enthusiastic, reply that all would be ready for me and that thought would be given to my request for suggestions about additional materials. On only one occasion, however, has this in fact been done. On every other occasion, I appeared at the appointed time and was told by staff members that they were very sorry but there had been no time to bring materials from the stacks or to seriously consider my request for suggestions on other holdings. Hence, I have had to delay the start of my research until someone could bring out the materials I had requested. It is impossible to determine how much material I might have missed because archivists and librarians have not had time to think about my requests for suggestions for sources other than those I had previously identified. I do not question that these have been legitimate answers; however, my next question would be "Why did they offer to take any action at all if they were not going to be able to do so?" I would have preferred complete honesty. I would rather have been told "I am sorry; but because we have a limited staff or because we have already committed ourselves to other activities at that time, we cannot assist you until you arrive." This would have given me an opportunity to reevaluate the time re-

quired for the search in that particular repository and to give consideration to the additional expense for that time. For some researchers, this may be of small concern; but to me, when I may be visiting that particular archives on a roundrobin trip by air and I am able to allot only a limited amount of time for that part of the search, it can change a one-day task into an overnight stay with consequent added expenses to my client.

The extensive processing procedure for entry into some archives is another vexing, time-consuming activity. Although I am very conscious of the great need for security in archival repositories, I can nevertheless recognize inefficiency in the processing procedures of some of the archives in which I have done research. In one state archives it took between thirty and forty-five minutes to process each person, depending upon how long it took each one to fill out the extensive form, read the three pages of rules and regulations, furnish acceptable identification, sign all the forms on exactly the right line, and be sure that everything was dated. In contrast, it took less than ten minutes to complete the same activities at the library of the British Museum. I urge every archivist to examine the procedures at his or her institution to be sure that users are not enmeshed in an undue amount of red tape paperwork before being granted access to materials.

The wide variations in rules and regulations for use of materials and in photocopying procedures and costs in the archives I have visited can also be a problem. When I go to an archives for the first time, I like to receive a concisely written copy of the rules and regulations which I can keep nearby while I am working. I also like to have on this one sheet the cost of any services that are available. Many times the only copy of these rules and regulations I see is the one I signed and returned to the archivist

for his or her records. Having this copy on hand would reduce the number of questions I have to ask the research assistant and would enable me to make more efficient use of my work time. In addition, it would give me information for my own file that I might need in a future search.

In making a very unofficial survey of other researchers concerning their work in various research centers throughout the United States, I received as many different answers as I had researchers. There was, however, one concern—perhaps it should be called a problem—expressed by several researchers, who said something like this: “I like to work in an archives that has made a definite area separation between the book collection and the manuscript collection. It makes my work easier when I can get away from the noise and confusion of the constantly moving traffic and daily business around a staff member’s desk.” What researchers really desire is a place to work that is physically conducive to concentrated study. This can best be achieved by locating it away from the reference assistant’s desk, since it is frequently necessary for that staff member to carry on extended conversations with other researchers. This seems to me to be a legitimate request, and I would like to see more archivists make it possible.

Unfortunately, the reference assistant’s desk is not the only location in which distracting conversations are held. On one occasion I was working in the manuscripts section of an archives when the archivist came in and engaged one of the researchers in an extended social conversation. Thirty minutes of research time was lost by every other researcher in the room because of this intrusion. It was an unwarranted and inexcusable interruption of valuable time. All conversations, whether personal or subject-related, should be removed from the im-

mediate area of the search room to a separate area made available for this purpose. It is imperative that staff members converse with the researchers, but those conversations should not be held in the presence of other researchers for a number of reasons. Doing so interferes with work of others. In addition, the information being discussed is, in many cases, confidential and should not be made common knowledge.

More researchers than ever before are entering archives now to do work for others. This may be work for professional scholars, medical scientists, attorneys, or nonprofessional clients. The information gathered by these researchers is not the property of these researchers, but rather it belongs to the individual who has employed the researchers. The findings of the researchers cannot be shared. On one occasion I was working on an assignment in which I needed copies of certain selected items from several collections in two different archives to establish an heirship. I secured these items and returned home. Later, on a return trip to the same archives, I was told by another researcher exactly which items I had pulled and photocopied from each collection. A staff member in each archives had given this information to the other researcher. This incident could very well have had legal implications. Fortunately, in this incident, no harm was done. There is, however, a need for archival staff members to understand that the type of research I do must be treated differently from that being done by an academic researcher. The selection of competent staff members is the responsibility of the management of any facility, but to me it is important that this same management be aware of the shortcomings of certain staff members and take corrective action.

A quiet, unruffled atmosphere in the

archives search room is one thing I especially appreciate. I am sure that much of this attitude comes from my first research experience. When I first started doing research years ago, I was living in Washington, D.C. It was only natural, therefore, for me to use the National Archives. At that time the National Archives was a leisurely place in which to work. The search room was quiet, and the research assistant was unhurried and always available to help out when needed. A number of researchers had set up permanent research offices in an adjacent room in which the archives had provided desks. Reference books were shelved along the walls and were within easy reach. The tables in the search room were sparsely occupied so that each person working there could have at least one-half of a large table. The census books were stacked against one wall, with a cart available to move them to the tables more easily; and we worked from all the original documents, which were delivered minutes after we requested them. Unfortunately, these ideal conditions no longer exist at the National Archives.

At present the nearest comparable location available to researchers—as far as comfortable work space, fast retrieval of materials, and competent and helpful staff are concerned—is in some university archives. University archives are gold mines if you can find the particular repository holding the materials you need. Except on very special occasions most are never crowded; and there are usually adequate assistants to help with sticky problems. It is much easier to receive favorable responses to mail inquiries from the university archives than it is from some other types of repositories. I have had excellent success when requesting information or getting copies of specific items from their various collections. Many university archives have

good guides or card catalogs to enable researchers to locate materials within the different collections. Often there is a staff member present who has been working in the repository for many years, who perhaps even helped secure and process a particular collection, who can be extremely helpful. I have encountered one major drawback, however, in working in a university archives and library: finding a parking place is sometimes virtually impossible! I would like to see university archivists make serious efforts to provide some parking space for outside researchers.

In some aspects of their operations, city archives established in public libraries compare favorably with university archives, but in other aspects the city archives are not as good. Both types of repositories contain a variety of materials. Some city archives contain county records as well as collections of regional interest. I have seen excellent photographic collections in some. City archives are usually not heavily used and therefore are seldom crowded. A researcher can always get a microfilm or microfiche reader, and only on rare occasions is a time limit placed on the use of such equipment. These conditions do not exist in some larger archival repositories. City archives also give excellent responses to requests for photocopies of materials in their collections. It is not rare for a staff member to search out the material requested even when a full or proper citation is not given. I have also received excellent suggestions of further search areas. Needless to say, I have been much impressed with such service.

There are some problems with city archives, however. Such repositories usually have very few finding aids or listings of collections held. Another problem stems from the policy that some have of rotating library personnel from one department to another. This may

make for well-rounded librarians, but it makes for very little assistance to the researcher unless the archivist happens to be available.

From my experience, county archives are in a sad state. The majority of those I have worked in were mere storage houses for out-of-date and unused records. Nearly all lack any real security, and most have very poor retrieval systems. For example, in one location it took three days, three trips to the courthouse, two trips across the city to a warehouse, and a quarter tank of gasoline to get a certified copy of a single document. The majority of personnel in the county offices has limited knowledge of the placement of the different records in the storage systems and is, therefore, of little help to a researcher. It is often necessary to secure the aid of the oldest courthouse employee, or even a retired staff member, to help find the records that are needed.

Even when there are finding aids it is sometimes impossible to locate records in a county archives. Not long ago, I checked one of the inventories of records for a Texas county to see if any naturalization records were available. When I found them listed, I wrote to the county to request the record I needed. A reply arrived promptly: "We are sorry, but we have no idea where those records are!" Which, then, is the least offensive situation for records: being lost in the courthouse or being haphazardly stored in a warehouse and called the archives?

Some counties will not permit a researcher to go into the archives or the county record storage area. In one such county, I was advised that a runner made two trips in the morning and two in the afternoon and that if I found something I wanted to look at or needed listed in the index, the runner would bring the item to me. This method insures a long working day with meager

returns. From a researcher's point of view, depending on a runner is a totally indefensible procedure. No guide, index, or runner can substitute adequately for a personal examination of all materials.

I have worked in a number of private libraries or archives and also in the archives of several small historical societies. This is an area in which I have encountered many difficulties and have seen many problems and have witnessed numerous examples of improper care of materials. That there were no inventories or other finding aids and inadequate means of retrieval of any of the holdings was incidental. My greatest concern has been over the improper manner in which these repositories cared for their holdings. In one, a large number of original bills of sale of slaves were permanently stored on glass shelves in a glass case in front of a west window. In my opinion this was a heinous crime! One small historical society had an oral history project; and, after finishing their interviews, the staff members would toss the tapes into a shoe box on top of a bookcase in their small museum. When I was there the tapes were covered with dust, and the building was excessively hot. Both dust and heat can severely damage tapes as well as many other materials.

To judge all archives and libraries on one set of standards is as impossible as judging a duck against a chicken at a state fair. Although each library and archives has the same ultimate aim, each reflects the individuality and management concept of its archivists and librarians as well as the standards set forth by the administrative system under which it functions. The experienced researcher must be aware of these variants and be flexible enough to fit himself and his work into the day-to-day operation of all types of research centers. The one need that will never change is the need

for efficient and effective service; and to give such service, the archives must have adequate physical facilities.

Because of the tremendous increase of use of microcopying of records and manuscripts, readers are an important element in a successful search. I do not mind using microfilm if it is of good quality, nor do I greatly mind using the type of microfilm readers that break the researcher's neck and send all of us bifocal wearers reaching for our reading glasses. I do resent greatly, however, going into a repository to work and finding all the readers either in use or out of order. While I realize that numbers of users per day vary and machines do break down, to have none available for a researcher is, to me, an example of poor planning or serious mismanagement.

The library of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City has been increasing its microfilm holdings and equipment for years, and its staff admit to having problems of adequately serving patrons. As of February 1982 this library had 1.2 million reels of microfilm. It is adding about 40,000 reels of new film each year. In addition, it has 500 microfilm readers. There is an average patron count of 3,000 per day. A floor count is made three times each day, and at these times the count varies from 700 to 800 patrons using the facility. To give adequate assistance to this many patrons requires planning! The LDS library makes very efficient and effective use of volunteers at all levels of its operation. It seems to me that other libraries and archives could also use volunteers to assist in giving additional service to patrons. There are many areas in which such help could be used, and trained personnel could devote more of their efforts to other, more technical or complicated duties.

There is a great need for more finding aids in all archives. Much of the material

stored away in cavernous stacks of archival repositories will never see the light of day, much less be of value to researchers, unless professional archivists are somehow enabled to make better use of their expertise and time. Volunteer processors could make this possible. There are individuals in communities around most libraries and archives who could, and would, assist in planned volunteer programs if they were given an opportunity to do so.

Many genealogical researchers are now using computers in their own research and are becoming quite expert in setting up their own programs of historical and genealogical information. Archivists should consider asking these genealogists to use their experience and expertise in helping archives. This could help give researchers a broader scope of information on the collections in the archives.

One state archives has already permitted one researcher to bring her computer into the archives to start research on a new book. Making the necessary arrangements was not easy. The administrative personnel of the archives had many misgivings. The computer has been in use for several months and has created no problems that could not be easily corrected. I would like to see more archives move in this direction.

I would also like to see more historical data placed on computers. Information on the owners of the English trading companies of the early 1600s has been treated in this manner and will be most helpful. This should not be interpreted, however, as advocating the destruction of original records and substituting compact computer records purely for space conservation. Although I do advocate the storage of more holdings of archives and libraries in computers, I also recognize the dangers of the garbage-in-garbage-out syndrome.

One library that did away with its card

catalog and started using computer retrieval developed one great big mess. Entries had not been standardized, and users were unable to find an entry by subject unless they happened to stumble upon the particular abbreviation used by the individual placing that item in the computer. As a result, it could take thirty minutes to an hour to locate one item by subject, even with the help of a librarian. With so many staff members and researchers becoming better trained in the use of computers, providing rapid subject access should not be an unsurmountable problem.

Finally, I would like to see more effort and positive action in promoting training in research techniques. This is an area that should have structured instruction. Not long ago one of my researchers was working in a university library when two young women came in and sat down at the same table. They were working together on a paper for one of their classes. As they were reading and making notes, one of the young ladies said to the other, "Don't you think we'd better put down the title of the book and the author?" The other answered "No, the teacher will know we got it some place!" This is a poor commentary on our educational system, not because of this one incident, but because it is happening more and more frequently. Unfortunately, this is not a problem experi-

enced only by the uninformed and unknowing. When it was brought to the attention of one noted historian that the periodical he cited had discontinued publication at least two years prior to the issue he had cited, he replied "That doesn't matter. It is such an exotic citation no one will ever bother to check it!"

The general education of researchers is certainly not the responsibility of archivists, but it does merit their interest and encouragement. Better researchers will result in better quality research and writing and will improve the prestige of archives. It will also reduce the wear and tear on staff members. Education of researchers in the use of materials in his or her archival collection, however, is the responsibility of each archivist. Collections are of no value if no one knows about them or knows how to use them. Archivists might consider cooperating in workshops out in the field to instruct researchers on how best to perform their tasks in their repositories. This has been done by some archivists and has been well attended and well received.

Because I have worked in so many research centers that are stagnant in purpose, resistant to change, fearful of progress, and less than pleased when patrons arrive at their door, I urge each of you to examine your own operation to see if this applies to you.