

Tales from the Trenches—Part 2

Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett

Here are more stories and tales as told by government information professionals as part of the “Who are ‘We the People?’” survey conducted by Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett.

My favorite among many is: I had the chief of a Native American tribe ask to look at all of the Annual Reports of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from the early twentieth century. I told the chief that I was missing three or four years but would check with colleagues at other libraries to see if they would lend the material. Within ten minutes I had colleagues from Florida, New Mexico, and Colorado offering to send me volumes, one had started boxing them and knew my address. The chief was very impressed about the network of service the FDLs created and the collegiality. That is my favorite but I have a dozen more.

I on a regular basis was asked about patents when a GovDocs librarian, I loved helping people figure out if their ideas were patentable or direct them to people that could help (information on the USPTO.gov site). Liked it so much I became a trainer at UPSTO and then a patent examiner.

One of my most positive experiences as a new librarian was teaching government documents resources to a group of undergraduate journalism students. They responded very positively to the wide range of data available like the CIA *World Factbook* and all the legislative websites that make it easier to find information about current events.

This story grew out of a chance discovery of a volume in the serial set. Pilgrimage of World War mothers and widows. My library just happened to re-post the story as a blog today.

House and Senate Documents Date: December 12, 1929
Citation: 9225 H.doc.140: Committee on Military Affairs. House Committee on Printing. http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/out_of_the_box/2018/11/21/if-they-consent-to-leave-them-over-there-the-european-pilgrimages-of-world-war-i-mothers-and-widows-from-virginia/.

After a few years of working as a government information coordinator, I decided to conduct a survey at the academic library where I work to gauge the awareness and usage of government information. I reported the data from the survey in a conference poster presentation and also a featured published article.

I received encouraging feedback from those who viewed my poster and read my article, which motivated me to continue my efforts in increasing government information awareness.

At the University of Utah students are developing a plan to “daylight” Red Butte creek which runs through campus. They were having a hard time finding information about the creek because that data was in government information, municipal because it’s the city watershed, and State because the Utah Division of Environmental Quality was involved after an oil spill in the creek. In order to make progress on their project, the students needed to know what government agencies were involved and how existing policy had affected the condition of the creek.

Most Depository libraries carry tax forms as part of the banks, post office, and library program the IRS offers. And I have probably had as many tax form war stories I could tell as anyone. However, I would like to relate one particular tax form story that I always try to remember when I get interrupted to help someone with tax forms.

A number of years ago at the busy public depository library I was working at (Poplar Creek Library in Streamwood, Illinois) someone asked for help in finding a form that I was going to have to print off of the IRS CD or off of the internet.

Our printer at our GovDocs reference desk was on the blitz, and I was going to have to go downstairs to my office to use a different computer and printer to get the man his forms. But the librarian at our general reference desk was on break—I was covering both desks—and thus was going to have to wait until the reference librarian returned before I could leave to print out the forms.

I detected some minor anger from the patron at having to wait, so I asked him if he had ever been to a Depository library before—that he might want to take a look around while he was waiting. He asked what kinds of things a Depository library had. I started telling him, laws and regulations, business statistics, health statistics, military histories . . .

He stopped me at military histories and asked if we had anything on the Korean War. I took him to the Military History Institute section and showed him a few books on the Korean War. He said that he wanted to find out about a certain battle. He had fought in that battle for several days—not knowing how the battle fit into the scheme of things for the War or even what the outcome of the battle was.

He said that one day they just were told to move out. But since a number of his buddies had been killed, he said that he sure would like to know what they had been fighting for in the strategic scheme of things.

He found out all about the battle he had participated in from the books I had shown him. He stayed long after I got him his tax forms, and I saw tears running down his face as he read about the battle. He was very grateful and said that for the first time in over forty years he now had some idea about the battle he had participated in. He also photocopied a lot of descriptions of his battle and said he couldn't wait to share them with his wife and friends.

So when tax form frustrations begin to get to me, I think of the good public relations the tax form program can provide for Depository—or, for that matter, any library.—*Chuck Malone*

Well—before FDLP eXchange was named—I thought it should have been called Yenta.gov (someone else came up with Match.gov).

I am not allowed to reveal anything from the State Library or I would tell about two brothers who were trying to figure out their father's WWII service record. How could he have been through court martial and two years later promoted? It was great to help them track the information and learn that their father was mistakenly court-martialed for passing a bad check in Europe during WWII.

State gov info—a public defender was trying to find legislative intent for a very old law. She wound up going through the legislative branch's archival boxes for several years in late 1700s and 1800s. She actually found exactly what she needed to exonerate her client. That was a dedicated public defender.

I have another one but can't discuss it because of ongoing legal issues—but trying to find the original regulations for the Dawes Act was an effort by librarians across the country. I couldn't say what I needed—but could only request information by Circular number. The regulations were considered internal use only at that point and not distributed to depository libraries. I found two libraries with microfiche under one title and another

coordinator found two libraries with microfiche under a different titles. AND I CAN'T SHARE IT. So hard.

Reading old Census schedules I discovered (last week) that our Irish great-grandfather was born outside of Boston and returned to Ireland as a boy. I also learned that he didn't just paint church stained glass windows for Louis Comfort Tiffany—he was also a scenic artist in the new movie industry in New Jersey, possibly “The Perils of Pauline,” and is rumored to have died from aniline dye poisoning, related to his set-painting job. Since my grandmother was three when he died, we had very little info to go on.

Unfortunately, my stories are mostly about stupid documents. My favorite is when I was processing these as a library assistant and the pompous documents librarian gave a tour of the facilities. I was a lowlife and not supposed to speak but a gorgeous one crossed my desk at that precise moment: “Getting a job on the moon.” I held it up and deadpanned, “This is an example of a government document.”

I helped a railroad engineer who was trying to fix a leak coming out of a retaining wall next to the tracks. The Water Department was closed, so he tried at the library. Historical fire insurance maps indicated that the adjacent properties once had water mains and fire hydrants. But the “blighted” land was cleared in the 1950s. Sometimes they took out the water mains and sometimes they didn't. I was able to look in the local government publications of the Land Clearance Commission as well as their project reports. One had a map that showed the main had been left in place and only capped. Interesting question; challenging collection (the project reports were numbered and had no geographic or subject access/cataloging)—everything I love about government information librarianship.—*Sarah Erekson*

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