

Tales from the Trenches—Part 3

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.

The ALA Government Documents Round Table in the 1970s lobbied for the inclusion of Congressional committee prints in the depository library program and their chair was hired by the Joint Committee on Printing and she used their arguments to convince Congress to provide them to the libraries and the public.

I put together a Martin Luther King event, collaborating with Indiana Humanities, in April of this year. I introduced our guest panel and many attendees to the resources available in govinfo regarding Dr. King, including the establishment of the King holiday. All were interested and had no idea the primary documents were available online. All were pleased and said they would use govinfo in the future.

When I started working in my college library in 1986, there was a gentleman who would regularly come into the library and use our print government information (data, I believe). Thirty-two years later, I’m a librarian in that library and the same gentleman still comes in to get that data by using our computers.

At a previous position in a depository library, we had a woman come in to use the USGS topographic maps. Her nephew had gone missing while hiking in the mountains in Colorado and she wanted to see what the terrain looked like and whether or not she could figure out the route he might have taken. Unfortunately, the story does not have a happy ending; her nephew’s body was found some time later. But that story has always underscored how important it is to provide access to government information in all formats as well as professionals that know how and where to find it.

A student came to my office door and said, “I need to see the Constitution. I suppose you have a copy of it.” My response was, “yes” and I showed him where it was. He was thrilled.

Years ago a WWII veteran spent a long summer afternoon with us poring through volumes of the *U.S. Army in World War II*.

He found just enough detail to follow his division and unit through their campaigns, and you could see his eyes well with tears at times as the memories flooded back. It was a powerful reminder that government information can be central to the lives we live, and not only in the context of citizens’ engagement.

I am brand new to government docs so I don’t have any favorite stories yet, but any time I’m able to help someone by using government information I do feel a sense of accomplishment.

One of our staff members started partnering with the special collections unit to bring government documents into their popular library instruction sessions. During one class with prospective first generation Native American students, she showed off an early Serial Set volume that dealt with the “Ghost Dance,” an outlawed Native American religion from the late 1800s. One of the students got very excited and shared a video of his grandfather actually doing a “Ghost Dance” in the 1960s. It was just a remarkable moment of recognition and connection between a student and a sometimes “dry” government document. It’s still a special story because everyone in the room could tell that a very significant connection had been made.

My favorite document was really my first. It was a volume of the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of Rebellion*. This one included a small envelope of scabs. The story is a bit long, the FBI and the CDC got involved. I ended up doing some research for the CDC. I loved the research, learning more about the government and as a result I went to school to become a librarian. It was my introduction to government information and I’ve never turned back. I also know more about smallpox than the average person.

This is ancient history at my previous employer, but a faculty researcher was looking for a specific piece of census data. He was unable to find it, but I was able to identify where in the Census Bureau the data was held and arranged for him to get the information.

When shifting our government documents collection with the help of the entire reference librarian staff, many librarians commented on how much awesome information they never knew existed was in the government documents collection.

I just like the unusual items the depository has, like a book written by Teddy Roosevelt about bear hunting.

Watching the eyes of students and scholars light up when you're able to show them every hearing, in print, of the House Committee on Un-American Activities... or a full printing of the *Congressional Record*.

No specific story, but because we have such a vast historical collection, we'll often showcase the older stuff. Five years ago about this time, I displayed the *Presidential Papers* of JFK, specifically his last speech before he was assassinated. That kind of brings history alive and we get lots of interesting comments.

There was a man looking for his brother's testimony in the *Congressional Record* about the Vietnam War. He had heard stories that his brother had testified before Congress. The depository libraries that he visited only had the Permanent Bound Edition and his brother's testimony was not in there. He had the citation but it was not included in the bound volume. Our library still has the daily edition of the CR. I was able to send the requestor a copy of his brother's testimony. It was only a few lines, so I guess it was deleted from the permanent edition. I cannot explain how elated this brother was to get this information. His brother was not just telling a tall tale about testifying before Congress, he actually did!

One day, not long after the 9/11 terror attack, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Venom Response Team Captain Al Cruz came to the library requesting to see a book in our government document collection. The book is titled *Venomous Snakes of the Middle*

East (D 5.208/2:SN 1). He explained that he was asked by the US Southern Command to develop antivenin for our troops. Normally, government documents are room-use only, but we made an exception and lent him the book. He did return the book and he said it was invaluable.

For the Homecoming Parade in October 2018, my students took pictures of our Gov Docs collection and printed them out and used them to decorate our banner for the parade. I dressed up in an Uncle Sam costume and the Gov Docs students represented the library in the parade.

I found the posters and maps to be my favorite, there is one that is Space Force 2000 and it looks really neat with the astronaut.

There are many ways in which government information has helped people document changes. One that inspired me early in my career came about with helping a researcher who wished to document landform changes near Scranton, Pennsylvania. Being able to provide access to numerous editions of 7.5-minute topographic maps helped show the filling of a valley with waste rock and dirt from local coal mines and the subsequent development of the newly-flattened areas with schools and shopping centers.

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