

Tales from the Trenches—Part 4

Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett

This is the final installment of 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. We would like to thank you for joining us on this journey through the stories from those in the trenches. We hope you have recognized yourselves in some, giggled and/or shaken your head at others, and overall, simply enjoyed these tales. Our pilot survey has provided us with so much insight and information, but these stories really cut to the heart of our profession and what it is like being a government information professional. Thank you for your time and your tales.

In library school, during the very first class, my GovDocs professor, Cassandra Hartnett, told us all this story about how one of her students had loved the class so much that he got the FDLP logo tattooed on him. I thought it was a bit ridiculous, but it was also my first day in that class; how little did I know. Upon graduating with my MLIS, I too got the FDLP logo tattooed on my forearm as both a graduation gift to myself, and as a reminder of my love for the FDLP and the information it provides us, and as a reminder to myself to spread the word.—Charlie Amiot

My favorite story is a personal experience I had when weeding the collection. I came across a publication about Heceta Head Lighthouse in Oregon and found that at one time the property had two keeper’s houses. I love this lighthouse and have visited many times, but I never knew there had once been two homes on the property.

A history professor needed a Civil War–era Supreme Court decision. He was sure it was going to be difficult to impossible to access. He was delighted to learn that it was available digitally via the Libraries, and now can do some of the digging around himself.

A local patron was looking for import information for his business which competes with China and Taiwan. He found resources available for purchase, but that information would have cost thousands of dollars. After a little research we located the same information through the FDLP and the patron was able to access the needed information for free.

I moved 200k documents by myself and relocated them to another area due to a renovation/relocation project. Took me two weeks but it allowed for me to be able to put the documents in SuDoc order, and properly preserve and display them in a much nicer location. I felt very accomplished.—Angel S

One of my favorites . . . a patron asked for the religious make-up of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Eritrea was a relatively new country at that time. I checked several commercial reference books, but the one that had the answer was the *CIA World Factbook*.

Another one: Back in 2011, a masters student in Sweden contacted our library (because of a US government series we had digitized) to ask “for data on US crude oil imports Iran for the period 1965–1974.” This person said they had contacted several different US federal agencies, including the Census Bureau and the Energy Information Administration. I managed to find the information in volumes of the Statistical Abstract. Back then, the only free electronic resource for Stat Ab was PDF volumes from the Census Bureau. Via email, I walked the patron through how to get the tables they were interested in. The Swedish patron sent a very nice thank-you email. But the topper was that they sent me a bouquet of flowers a couple of weeks later as a thank-you!

We once had a visit from someone who wanted to check out “everything you have on NASA,” oh, and hurry, I have a taxi waiting. Since we had about three five-section ranges of NASA stuff at the time, plus drawers of microfiche, he left fairly disappointed.

Finding the rank and regiment information relating two of my ancestors who served in the Civil War in the National Park Service’s Soldiers and Sailors Database.

My favorite story is the time when someone was looking at vital statistics going back to the first annual report done by our state in the 1850s. Both the researcher and I spent hours reading the report which gave an incredible snapshot of the time. What people were dying from gave a big insight into the times and what conditions were like. Also, the style of writing, the text wasn’t written in governmentese. Someone wrote with passion and

involvement. Something that government information reports are lacking today. Reports are written by humans for consumption by humans. The lack of that contact makes for dull reading and an attitude by the public that the “government” doesn’t care. As Abraham Lincoln said “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” we need to keep that fact that government information is communication between people. Not faceless bureaucrats talking to the great unwashed masses.

Once a disabled veteran had contacted our depository. He was looking for information from the *Federal Register*—once I identified what he needed, I discovered we no longer had that information in print. I called a colleague from another nearby depository, and she was able to help him complete his task. Depositories working together to help patrons—it’s one of the things I love about my job!

Finding an answer in a *print* government resource. Older are better sometimes!

Not so much a story as it is a realization. Coming into government documents, I knew little as to what type of documents were considered “government.” Expecting endless pages of congressional hearings (which there are) but then ending up with so much more, has been incredibly satisfying. There are publications ranging from Architecture in Alaska to FBI cases, US Army campaigns during WWI to the illustrated history of the Eisenhower executive office building. There are even NASA technical reports on the math and science used pre moon landing. Amazing stuff that many don’t know exists or that they even have access to.

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