

Get to Know ...

Beth Downing

Gwen Sinclair

How many of us can say that we knew our chosen career at age sixteen? Beth Downing decided to become a librarian as a sophomore in high school. Originally, she aspired to be a children's librarian, but she ended up as an "accidental government documents librarian." Beth first moved into a gov docs position at the University of Wyoming when a staff member left and Beth took over. A few years later, she was hired as the government documents librarian at Idaho State University (ISU) when her family relocated to Pocatello in 2003.

Oboler Library at ISU has been a federal depository library since 1908 and its FDLP collection contains more than 500,000 volumes. Beth is responsible for cataloging, reference, instruction, and collection development for government documents. Much of her work involves cataloging and checking record loads. In her words, she has "a talent for finding problems" and she enjoys the puzzle of figuring out what is going on with cataloging records. She is now trying to figure out how to get records into her database in a MARCIVE-less world. She is not worried, though, because, "GPO has really smart people and they provide a lot of great training, especially if you're an accidental gov docs librarian."

Outside of work, Beth is an avid reader and she especially enjoys Louise Penny's Chief Inspector Armand Gamache novels and Karin Slaughter's Will Trent series. If you've ever seen Beth knitting at a conference you will agree with her husband's assessment that she is a "knitaholic." Her love of knitting's orderly construction could be related to her desire to "make things look pretty in the catalog so that people can find stuff for themselves."

Beth strongly believes that having access to printed documents is essential to understanding how government information is structured and to see its context. She fondly remembers attending a training on the *Federal Register* at an Interagency Seminar in which attendees used the printed volumes of the *Code of Federal Regulations* and *Federal Register* to learn how they are related. She noted that the online census data and other dynamically generated databases are more difficult to navigate. "If we can't figure it out, how is the general public supposed to figure it out?" she asked. Moreover, the potential discovery of related items is lost when browsing is eliminated.

She is doubtful that everyone will be better served by the digital transition. "Without the tangible [documents], even the best government information librarians are not going to see what is going on," because it is not feasible to review all of the new electronic records. "The rush to digital is short-sighted. It's great to have them available for the people who want to access them digitally," she said, but it is "really concerning to me, especially all of the things that were not online at all that we were getting, like the maps from Interior and the Forest Service, and those don't exist anymore."

Beth admits that she "gets sucked down the rabbit hole reading stuff." Her favorite print resources include the reports of the Hayden and Powell expeditions that explored and mapped the American West. As she related, "In one of the surveys is a description of [Shoshone Falls] and how, for a couple of days before they found the river, they could hear the cascade over the falls, and as they got closer they could see the mist. Shoshone Falls is referred to as the Niagara of the West. It's incredible, especially in the spring with the runoff, it's absolutely spectacular. To have that description of them suddenly coming upon the Snake River Canyon and Shoshone Falls and Twin Falls is just fascinating."

Curiosity about what is in the collection and interest in how government documents fit together are some of the qualities of good government information librarians, according to Beth. Paying attention to what is going on in the news is also important. Beth advises new government information librarians to "Ask lots of questions, take advantage of any learning opportunities that you have like training webinars, go to the depository library conferences, and learn about GPO's resources." Although she will miss physically reviewing new tangible documents, Beth's curiosity and engagement with government information will serve her well in the brave new world of the digital FDLP.

Gwen Sinclair (gsinclair@hawaii.edu), Chair,
Government Documents & Maps Department,
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library.