Understanding the Information Seeking Behavior of Genealogists: A Review of the Literature

Sheriann Volpe, Frances Marshall, Layne Aingell

Emporia State University

LI810 – Summer 2013
Abstract

Genealogists, or family historians, are a growing group of users in libraries, archives, and other repositories. These users need more specialized sources, online availability, and the ability to collaborate with others. The motivation of these users in researching ancestors is a major factor in the research process. Librarians, by increasing their knowledge of the specific information-seeking needs and preferences of this growing group, improve their ability to assist genealogical research. This literature review covers aspects that influence genealogists’ information seeking, including:

- the research process;
- information needs;
- collaboration between genealogists and library staff and other genealogists.

The literature indicates ways libraries can provide added value to current and potential library users in this type of research.
Understanding The Information Seeking Behavior

How Understanding Information Seeking Behavior of Genealogists Can Improve Library Service: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

Since the television production of Alex Haley’s Roots aired in 1977, genealogy has become one of the most popular and fastest growing hobbies among Americans (Latham, 2003). With the addition of internet websites such as Rootsweb.com, Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com, popularity is increasing dramatically over the last decade (Bishop, 2008). However, literature indicates librarians do not understand the information seeking behavior of genealogists and are unaware of how best to assist this group (Duff & Johnson, 2003; Darby & Clough, 2013).

For librarians and others assisting genealogists in libraries, archives, and other repositories, this presents a problem in helping users. What is the information seeking behavior of genealogists? What resources do they use in their research? What is the research process? How can libraries and other repositories better assist genealogists in their research?

Genealogists, or family historians, account for 50-90 percent of North American archives and special collections users (Tucker, 2007). Librarians, by increasing their knowledge of the specific information-seeking needs and preferences of this growing group, improve their ability to assist patrons with genealogical research. “Today, family historians who enter our repositories via the World Wide Web also change the way we will promote our holdings, and shape the education we give researchers who may become supporters” (Tucker, 2007, p. 129).

This literature review covers research into the information seeking behavior of genealogists and family historians, including

- the research process;
- information needs;
• collaboration;
• motivation.

Research studies involve interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and focus groups to gather data on the information seeking behavior of genealogists. Study results indicate areas of improvement for librarians when assisting genealogists in their research.

**Literature Review**

Articles for this literature review are obtained from searching in the Library Literature and LISTA databases, MOBIUS, and Google Scholar. Search results are obtained from keywords and partial words including

• genealog*;
• librar*;
• research;
• information seeking behavior;
• information needs.

Different combinations and variations of these words are used. From 39 articles, 12 are selected as representative of the larger body of literature on the topic.

**Research Process**

Genealogists’ research skills improve the more research they conduct. The participants in most studies in this literature review are amateur genealogists though Duff and Johnson (2003) interviews professional genealogists. Richards (2006) studies family historians and genealogists who are patrons at two United Kingdom libraries. Litzer (1997) surveys members of Ohio genealogical groups, usually a president, treasurer, or secretary. Darby and Clough (2013) interview 23 genealogists, mostly amateur, who practice genealogy research on an average of 10 years. Duff and Johnson (2003) see professional genealogists as able to give a broader view of genealogy research and the constraints of resources available. This creates a limitation as the sample is not representative of the majority of amateur genealogy researchers. Darby and
Clough (2013) describe the sample as self-selecting from two libraries and from family history groups. Fulton (2009) interviews and surveys 24 participants with the majority having the following demographics:

- married;
- college educated;
- over 50 years old;
- retired;
- middle class.

The author generalizes these demographics apply to the majority of genealogists.

Beginning genealogists, after collecting what information they can about ancestors from family sources, starts researching in libraries and other repositories to gather more information on their ancestors. The research process is difficult as genealogy needs do not match how libraries and other repositories are structured. Genealogists search for records and information by names and dates as opposed to the structure of libraries which are set up by classifying items, not necessarily the names within them. The “trial and error” searching, according to Darby and Clough (2013), is why the learning curve for beginning genealogists is so steep. They are not accustomed to using library materials.

As the research progresses, most genealogists broaden their searches beyond names and dates to information about the time period their ancestors lived in. This enables genealogists to identify other sources with relevant information. Searching an archive, for example, becomes difficult since archival information systems do not “always provide name indexes or facilitate name searches” (Duff & Johnson, 2003, p. 85). This results in genealogists changing their information request into location-specific, date-specific record types and then searching for names. Research gathering is not linear, as new documents may uncover facts about people already noted in the genealogy research. Libraries and librarians can improve genealogists’
research by evaluating current reference services to determine satisfaction of patrons’ experiences with genealogical queries, education programs for genealogists, and improving user access to materials (Sinko & Peters, 1983).

**Information Needs**

Genealogy research is name-driven and usually starts with name indexes or search engines to retrieve people, place names, and accurate dates. Genealogists consult older maps and gazetteers for searching places (Duff & Johnson, 2003). Genealogists appreciate what libraries do for them. Newer genealogists tend to turn more to librarians than do more seasoned genealogists. Libraries provide a springboard, especially through educational workshops in researching and internet usage (Richard, 2007). Experienced genealogists require access to records that are more difficult to locate and find reference librarians less able to help because of their lack of knowledge of the genealogist’s needs (Litzer, 1997; Duff & Johnson, 2003).

Darby and Clough (2013) develop a process-based model showing the information seeking behavior of genealogists. Their model includes 8 phases with phases 3-8 a continuous cycle:

1. Trigger event, or reason research starts;
2. Collect family information;
3. Learn the process (how to research);
4. Break in (to types of records);
5. Tree building (easy to find resources);
6. Tree building (medium – resources tougher to locate);
7. Tree building (hard to find resources);
8. Push back selected lines (targeted research of particular individuals).

One study (Sinko & Peters, 1983) evaluates the reference services, educational opportunities, and user access of libraries and find users satisfied with the library’s reference services, want education opportunities, and also want improvement of user access. Rubicam (1948) express similar user needs, such as staff members with local and family history training.
However, the library staff perception that genealogists are nuisances with unreasonable and time-consuming requests still persists (Sinko & Peters, 1983).

Duff and Johnson (2003) see the stages of genealogy research, the search process, tools, knowledge, and barriers as applicable to genealogists in general. They describe the information needs of genealogists in their research stages as

- collecting names;
- collecting detailed information about these names;
- collecting information on society.

“Knowledge about immigration patterns, major historical events, and different types of records is important information that the genealogist needs to know” (Duff & Johnson, 2003, p. 84). Genealogists need the ability to consult city directories, other location-specific records (deeds, census records), and maps. Dates for events are important factors as well leading Duff and Johnson (2003) to conclude an ideal search engine would include searches “by name, geographic area, and a range of dates” (p. 87). Other studies agree with this process (Yakel, 2004; Fulton, 2009). Primary sources (those made by witnesses of an event), such as birth, wedding, adoption, baptismal records, and deeds) are important information to genealogy research. Secondary sources (those created by someone who did not witness an event) are also important information (Latham, 2003). Fulton (2009) sees building on this knowledge central to the information seeking behavior of genealogists.

Genealogists have specific needs regarding organization. Documents, records, dates and places need accurate recording and system organization. Computer software programs such as Family Tree Maker and RootsMagic are helpful tools (Latham, 2003). Yakel (2004) also sees information management important.
Collaboration

Many of the studies (Duff & Johnson, 2003; Yakel, 2009; Darby and Clough, 2013) discuss the collaborative aspect of genealogy research. Genealogists like to work with and help others in their search and discuss processes and issues with other genealogists or library staff. This enables them to extend their knowledge of access tools and approaches to obtain more information on the people they are researching. This collaborative aspect occurs in person and online through blogs, chats, and queries.

Genealogists will interact with library staff when specific facts are needed rather than identifying specific records (Duff & Johnson, 2003). Normally, the genealogist research process evolves in such a way that certain strategies are used over again thereby bypassing library staff, unless help is needed with an unfamiliar process or area. Many questions are answered by other genealogists who are working nearby; for example, in the microfilm room showing how to load the film onto the viewer. This interaction between genealogists helps build expertise in genealogy research and promotes more collaboration between genealogists than with the library or archive staff.

In terms of education, most archive and library websites provide only how-to information for beginning genealogists (Tucker, 2007). If genealogists want assistance from archive or library staff, contact information is not easy to find. Rubicam (1948) discusses the apathy between genealogists and archival/historical professionals, and how genealogists are not legitimate researchers. According to Rubicam, genealogists feel library and archive staff do not see “the real value of genealogical investigation and consequently are uncooperative when requested to make available records in their custody” (p. 333).
**Motivation**

Genealogists have similar motivations for beginning genealogy research. Some are looking for information on a particular ancestor. Others are looking for connections with their ancestors. This connection enables the genealogist to place their ancestors in a historical setting (Yakel, 2004). Some research studies equate the genealogist to a family historian (Sinko & Peters, 1983; Yakel, 2004) seeing the genealogist role as an important part of their identity and family life. Bishop (2008) uses a self-administered survey asking genealogists questions such as:

- “How did you get started researching your ancestors?”
- “Tell me why genealogy is important to you.”
- “What did you know about your ancestors before you began researching them?” (p. 411)

Answers to these questions include a need to record family history for future generations and to create a family narrative. Many genealogists see genealogy research as a pleasurable activity (Fulton, 2009).

**Conclusion**

In this time when libraries are facing the challenge of staying relevant to patrons’ needs in order to remain viable, recognizing the value of genealogists and family historians is crucial. Genealogy is a growing area of interest. Librarians must take these patrons seriously and look for ways to improve services to them or they will abandon the library for more user-friendly ways to get help. In order to keep these patrons librarians must

- Make genealogists and family historians feel welcome and respected in their libraries;
- Educate themselves about genealogical research, the types of searches performed, and the various websites available;
- Collaborate with area genealogical societies and groups;
- Offer more varied and advanced classes/workshops in genealogy research.

One way of improvement is for librarians to ensure that patrons with interests in researching their family histories feel respected. While this may be a hobby or leisure activity,
the patrons who pursue it are very serious and committed to it. Librarians should take the patron’s search seriously and treat it with the same diligent effort that they would put into helping a patron with an academic search.

Secondly, librarians should educate themselves in the field of genealogical research. Genealogists are cooperative searchers, very open to offering advice about how and where to find the best record searches. To be of value and keep genealogists coming into the library, librarians must know how to help patrons search records, both U.S. and foreign records, as most experienced genealogists search for both, but they are less likely to find help for foreign country record searches.

Third, librarians must work to build connections with the local genealogical societies. Genealogists tend to be supportive of one another’s research and also supportive of institutions which offer them the most help. Libraries need to cultivate this interdependence and be an asset to the genealogical community.

Lastly, many libraries offer genealogy classes for beginners, but few are knowledgeable enough to provide advanced classes. Interest in genealogical research has grown to include beginning and experienced genealogists and libraries should offer more than introductory courses. Librarians must immerse themselves more fully into this research area so they can assist and add to the genealogy knowledge base.

In order to accomplish these improvements, librarians must know their patrons and the information seeking behavior of genealogists. They should use informal and formal surveys to determine the needs of the genealogists who use their libraries. The librarians can then determine what areas in their libraries the genealogists find the greatest difficulty in using and work to improve their ability in locating information. Devoting time to learning about the
information needs of genealogists is necessary for librarians and library staff to help these patrons with online or bibliographic searches.

This is an exciting time for libraries. They have a growing segment of patrons eager to research and to use the resources libraries have available. This is a time for libraries to focus on that population and help them realize the wealth of information that libraries have available to them and be willing and able to assist them in researching.
References


