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Accessing a World of Records

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Toni Benson, Local History Librarian for the Van Buren District Library in Decatur, was the featured speaker at the regular monthly meeting of KVGS on Monday, 15 October 2007, at the Portage District Library.

Experienced genealogists realize that only a very small percentage of genealogical data is available online. Most of us need documents and data from libraries, archives, and special collections that are a long way from our homes. Toni addressed this problem of how to access these "distant" sources in her talk, "Accessing a World of Records."

Toni discussed strategies to access records at the local, regional, state, national, and worldwide levels. She emphasized that there are always alternate ways to obtain what you want. For example, if you have trouble ordering something through the Interlibrary Loan Service of your public library, there is no law that says you can't contact a librarian personally to arrange for the loan of a book or microfilm!

Toni reminded us that it is always helpful to learn as much as you can about the area you are researching. Becoming familiar with libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and genealogical societies in a particular location can open many doors as you try to obtain records.

One of Toni's most useful suggestions was to use the online catalogs of distant libraries to obtain the citations of references you need. Then, use this information to try to track down the references at another, more convenient location. You should also consider searching for books and other documents through commercial websites such as Amazon.com.

Toni emphasized that searching online catalogs is somewhat of an art: often, you must "play" with the search terms and options until you find what you want. All online catalogs are different, and you shouldn't give up if you are not immediately successful!

Finally, Toni briefly addressed the issue of interlibrary Loan Service in Michigan. Budget cuts have canceled or curtailed the service. Toni hopes this is just a temporary situation (as we all do!).

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