

3-1998

Archival Chronicle: Vol 17 No 1

Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections

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Recommended Citation

Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections, "Archival Chronicle: Vol 17 No 1" (1998).
Archival Chronicle. 43.

https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/archival_chronicle/43

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March 1998: Volume 17, Number 1

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Electronic Research: The Inquiry



◀ *Typists at work in the Toledo Juvenile Court offices during the 1950s were responsible for maintaining a fast and efficient workflow. Manual typewriters were a technical innovation which improved legibility of records. The dictaphones seen on two of the desks allowed executives to compose their correspondence orally, even when a stenographer was not available to take shorthand. The photograph illustrates typical working conditions in an office secretarial pool in the mid-twentieth century. By the end of the century, computer workstations had replaced even electric typewriters and workers often had their own tiny offices called cubicles. Center for Archival Collections. Toledo Publicity and Efficiency Photograph Collection.*

Family history research has taken a step into the future with the many advances in computer technology. The Internet has provided opportunities for researchers to communicate quickly with one another, as well as to request information from archives, historical societies, and libraries. Responses often come immediately. Unfortunately, despite the expediency of e-mail (electronic mail), the quality of communication sometimes suffers. The following are some helpful hints for writing effective electronic and conventional inquiries.

The informal communication found in internet newsgroups and the freestyle browsing allowed on the World Wide Web make it easy to forget that an e-mail query to an individual or institution is much like a letter sent through conventional mail. In all correspondence, remember to include your return address and your full name. This is especially helpful when your account name is a nickname, a series of numbers and letters, or when you are using someone else's account. Many e-mail programs allow users to create a signature file which can automatically include this information.

Suit your query to the institution or individual you contact. The CAC's website describes the resources available here. Requests to "send me everything you have on the XYZ family" may be appropriate for another family historian who has a small file of gleaned information, but not for a library or archives where thousands of books, newspapers, and local government records must be searched. The institution may have geographical, subject, or time limits.

Be sure to use complete sentences and include all pertinent information. Full names, dates, and places provide clues to the identity of the individuals who are being sought in records. Be specific about the person you are looking for and what you want to find out. A specific date and location of death, for instance, can greatly reduce the amount of time an archivist must spend looking for an obituary in a daily newspaper. A brief outline of resources that have already been searched would be useful. Avoid including lengthy attachments, as computer programs are not always compatible.

Offer to compensate the individual or institution for copies, research, and postage. Electronic mail can be the perfect way to clarify questions about the amount and kind of material available, research and copying charges, and other details. While more and more information is available in electronic format, most research must still be done the old-fashioned way—by pulling out a volume and looking through its index (if there is one). The CAC charges \$15.00 per hour for research done by the staff (one hour minimum, two hours maximum), plus the cost of copies and postage. All results are sent through the U. S. Postal Service.

Before sending your e-mail message, proofread it to insure that it is coherent and error-free. Most important of all, remember that you are communicating with human beings. Be thoughtful and courteous.

Researching via the Internet can be a rewarding experience. While embarking on your journey through cyberspace always communicate thoroughly and thoughtfully.

—Stephen M. Charter