

Indiana Rooms: Start Your Local History Research Here!

By Cynthia Geiger

As a student pursuing a dual Master's degree in Library and Information Science who hopes to work in a public library someday, I am eager to learn as much as I can about where I want to spend my professional life. There is something about public libraries that speaks to my soul—the equal access to information, the wide variety of people found there, the community programs, the plethora of resources—I love it all! Over the last year, I have come to appreciate another service that public libraries provide: access to local history. I began volunteering in the Indiana Room at the Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) in the fall of 2011 and have become passionate about the role public libraries can fill in connecting people to community history.

I am aware that funding cuts are always possibilities in public libraries, but I suggest that local history rooms should never be on the chopping block. Why? They provide a valuable service to community members who are interested in doing research on local history. Where else can you find, among other resources: indexes of coroner's reports, obituary records, and census records; city directories; yearbooks; local newspapers on microfilm; or plat maps? Many Indiana Rooms collaborate with local historical societies to provide this information.

According to Christine Eykholt Friesel, the Indiana Room Coordinator at MCPL, "People are so surprised by the type of resources and quality of service that they come back, especially if they don't know where to start their research. When they think it doesn't involve local resources, we often point them to a local resource or place to start that is approachable and familiar to them. The solution is often right in their backyard; this delights them." In her opinion, local history rooms in libraries are important because, "Librarians are wired to organize information and feel compelled to put it in a place that is accessible. There is a lot of locally produced content that needs attention right now.

We help the community tap into local resources in a way that Google can't."

Friesel also states, "If our taxpayers increasingly dismiss public libraries as irrelevant due to the Web, then we have to be appropriately responsive: we have to be entrepreneurial, creative, and bold about promoting our local resources." One of the ways Monroe County Public Library has been creative with their resources is to create a timeline of Monroe County events for the county's bicentennial in 2018. Much of the information on the timeline comes from newspaper clippings the library has indexed, but Friesel's hope is that community members will participate in the project and add content to the timeline.

Those of us in the library profession should be proud of what public librarians around the state are contributing to local history research and to preservation of valuable resources through digitization. Projects like Monroe County Public Library's digitization of *The Smithville News* (<http://www.monroe.lib.in.us/indiana/smithville-news>) will make this old newspaper—lost in an attic nearly 100 years ago—accessible to the public. Indianapolis Marion County Public Library maintains several digital collections composed of oral histories, letters, postcards, and recordings. Visit <http://digitallibrary.imcpl.org/> for more information. Finally, public libraries in cities like Gary (<http://www.garypubliclibrary.org/special-collections/indiana-room/>), New Castle (<http://www.nhcpl.org/indiana-room/>), and Kokomo (<http://www.khcpl.org/glhs/index.html>) have notable Indiana Rooms that deserve a visit.

If you are a librarian in a public library, consider writing an article for your local newspaper or a blog entry about the services you offer to aide in conducting local history research.

Also consider setting up a display about a local historic site in your community, or, if information in this issue about the West Baden Springs Hotel has sparked your interest, a display on this historic site would be an excellent starting point. Library patrons may be interested in learning more about the West Baden Springs Hotel because it has been the site of many conferences and vacations for Indiana residents.

From my experience volunteering in an Indiana Room, it is clear to me that having dedicated space for local history draws people into the library. To the patrons looking for information on genealogy, community history, or historic places, Indiana Room librarians should proudly proclaim; start your local history research here!



This quilt featuring twenty-four Indiana authors was made by four Bloomington women in 1977 and is displayed in Monroe County Public Library's Indiana Room.

About the Author

Cynthia Geiger is a dual MLS/MIS student at the School of Library and Information Science at IU Bloomington. Before library school she was an AmeriCorps volunteer working with low-income families and adult learners. She hopes to work in Adult and Teen Services at a public library in the future.