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Using Family Connections to Create Community Connections: How a Genealogy Fair Can Benefit the Community and the Library

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Introduction

Genealogy has been touted as one of the top hobbies in the United States by *Time*, ABC News, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. However, while it can be fun, genealogy isn't easy. Successful genealogical research can require advanced research skills and a high level of information literacy. The Mississippi State University Libraries Genealogy Fair was founded to assist Mississippians with developing these skills; to encourage genealogists to use resources held by the Libraries; and to create community connections that would support donations of historical material to the Libraries.

Developing & Hosting MSU's Genealogy Fair

Mississippi State University (MSU) Libraries began holding an annual Genealogy Fair in 2006. The fair, named for E.O. Templeton Jr. in 2013, is geared for a general public audience, and features a variety of sessions, workshops, and research opportunities for history and genealogy enthusiasts. Attendees learn about genealogical resources held in the MSU Libraries' collections, develop and improve genealogical research skills, and pick up tips for preserving family history.

The E.O. Templeton, Jr. History & Genealogy Fair is held the first weekend of June every year. The fair committee begins planning the event in November of the preceding year in order to ensure successful booking of speakers and presenters, and because every part of the fair requires time and careful consideration.

The committee, comprised of faculty from Special Collections and Research Services, strives to create a fair that features information on popular topics in genealogy; that is accessible to all community members; that draws on the expertise available in the state and region; and that reflects the diversity of Oktibbeha County and the state of Mississippi.

Speakers are selected based on a variety of criteria, including topical expertise, the committee's previous experience with their work, recommendations from colleagues, and geographic proximity. Mississippi television personalities, representatives from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the archivist from a local public library, and faculty from Mississippi State and the University of Mississippi have all been speakers at the event. Members of the committee attend other genealogy fairs in the region to identify possible speakers and get ideas for programming, and, of course, to learn more about genealogy.

The topics of the hands-on workshops vary, but usually focus on “hot topics” in genealogy research. There is always at least one workshop about online resources and how to use them, which is led by MSU library faculty. Other topics have included identifying and using international sources, working with family narratives and unreliable narrators, working with archival materials in special collections, and preserving and organizing family history materials.

Until 2017, MSU’s fair followed a format of two speakers in the morning, at one hour each with a break between them, followed by lunch and library museum tours. In the afternoon there was one additional speaker and one to three workshops. In 2017, the committee added genealogy and local history themed entertainment to the lunch time offerings, and started giving away door prizes.

Lunchtime entertainment is provided by students from the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS) located nearby in Columbus, MS. Students who participate in the nationally acclaimed “Tales from the Crypt” program at MSMS conduct extensive research on an individual buried in Friendship Cemetery in Columbus, MS, and then write and perform a dramatic monologue about the person.

In addition to the student performances, attendees can use the lunch break to conduct research in the MSU Special Collections, or to tour the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library and the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana.

Door prizes were first offered in 2017 and included books about family history research. In 2018, a committee member solicited donations of door prizes from organizations identified as having products of interest to genealogists, with enormously successful results. Almost two dozen donations were received, including a DNA test from Family Living, D/2 Biological grave-cleaning solution, a Doxie Flip portable scanner, ‘My Family History’ archival starter kits from Gaylord Library Supplies, books, tote bags, t-shirts, and a mug - all genealogy themed.

Innovations for 2018 included opting for a panel talk instead of a second single-speaker presentation, giving away packets of information about the university and Oktibbeha County, and inviting the Barnes and Noble on campus to sell books at the fair.

The panel featured two MSU faculty members and one independent researcher. The independent researcher was from Michigan, so as a library on a slim budget, MSU had to get creative to find a way for him to participate. The successful solution involved setting up a screen in the auditorium and arranging for the panelist to Skype in. Trials were performed before the event to make sure everything was in working order.

The packets of information about MSU and Oktibbeha County included brochures for museums located in Mitchell Memorial Library, informational brochures from vendors who cater to genealogists, and flyers for discounts on products from the vendors who donated door prizes for the event. The packets were assembled by library events staff.

Books donated for door prizes at the 2018 fair were on the theme of understanding and using your DNA test to trace your family roots. Due to the number of books donated by publishers, the committee arranged for the first time to have the Barnes & Noble on MSU's campus have a presence at the fair to sell additional copies of the books that were donated as door prizes. This provided the attendants the option to buy books if they did not win one as a door prize.

The fair is promoted first via "save the date" cards sent out in early spring to previous attendees. In the weeks before the fair, information about the fair is shared on the Libraries' website, Facebook and Twitter pages, posters are distributed and posted on campus and in local businesses, and flyers are sent to all of MSU's consortium partners. In previous years, the event has been covered by the *Starkville Daily News* and other local news organizations.

At the end of the fair, attendees are asked to fill out a simple survey about the event. The committee uses those responses to assist with the planning of future fairs. The committee also considers information gleaned from their own conversations with attendees, and feedback received from the library administration.

Why Should an Academic Library have a Genealogy Fair?

As a land-grant university, MSU's mandate and mission is to provide educational resources to the people of the state of Mississippi. The genealogy fair supports this mission by offering research skills training to the general public and introducing attendees to research resources within the library.

The genealogy fair also offers opportunities for library faculty to make connections and develop relationships with community members, particularly with populations under-served by libraries and archives.

Furthermore, the fair is an opportunity to demonstrate to a community the benefits and purpose of donating family and other records to academic institutions.

Possible donors can see a practical example of how their records could assist other family history researchers in addition to supporting university faculty and students in their teaching and research. This is especially true of records of enslaved persons, such as receipts, probate records, and plantation records, which are vital for African-American genealogists as well as scholars of 19th-century America.

Donors can also see how papers are protected in a library, which offers secure, climate- and pest-controlled storage and professional attention, ensuring that their treasured records will be preserved for future generations. For some families, the library may qualify as "neutral territory" where access to records is not affected by familial politics and disagreements.

A genealogy fair is a perfect venue where librarians and archivists can demonstrate to donors that their papers don't have to come from a prominent or famous family to be valuable for research. "Average" is often better, as those papers will document and reflect a more common set of experiences.

Finally, the process of organizing the event facilitates making connections with other cultural organizations in the community, state, and region. Inviting colleagues and peers at other institutions to be speakers or to have institutional displays can lead to other collaborations in the field of genealogy or other areas of library practice.

Suggestions for Implementing a Fair at Other Institutions

For most institutions, funding will be a primary concern, and many of these suggestions are made with that in mind.

Whenever possible, use your own facilities. Not only does this save money, but it invites first-time visitors to become familiar with your library and feel “at home,” encouraging future use. You probably don’t need a huge space, especially if you’re holding your first fair.

Be realistic with your expectations. Unless you have a huge budget to throw around, you won’t ask Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to be your keynote speaker. Local genealogy enthusiasts, fellow librarians, and community historians often make your best speakers. Attendees love personal, local stories that relate to them and the people and places they know.

Attendees love variety. Fairs should include a mix of speakers, hands-on instruction at computers or with documents, panel discussions, interviews, and even performances. Try to offer something for everyone, from beginners to experts.

Don’t be shy about contacting businesses and online sellers for door prizes and flyers for your guests’ information packets. Many sellers are happy to promote their products and their brand in this way, and the worst they can do is say no. A handwritten thank-you card is always a nice touch when you receive the item. In addition, follow up after the fair by sharing links to pictures or recordings of the event. If you make a good impression, they’re likely to donate again.

Before the fair, test your set-ups and equipment. Make sure microphones are in good working order. Get computers started and logged in before workshops begin. Always have a back-up plan when it comes to technology.

Take advantage of social media. Make a Facebook event page; these get shared, and people see when their friends indicate that they’re interested in an event. Spread the word on Twitter, and post photos from the event on Instagram. Stream live video from your event on Facebook. Social media not only spreads the word leading up to your event, but it can get people excited about attending in the future.

If your library has the budget, it’s best to make this kind of event free and open to the public. The idea is to bring in people who might not normally visit or use your library.

Conclusion

Genealogy is a popular hobby that requires both advanced research skills and a high level of information literacy, and depends heavily on individuals and families contributing records to libraries and other cultural institutions. Holding a genealogy fair is a way for a library – academic or otherwise – to connect with their local community, and to demonstrate the value of library services, such as instruction in research skills and information literacy. It's also a way to promote the library's resources, and to encourage donations of historical material to special collections.

If you would like more information on hosting a fair at your own institution or want to schedule a genealogy workshop, you are invited to contact the authors.