PART I

Today’s Genealogist: Providing Value-Added History

by Missy Corley

The idea of genealogy and historical research may conjure images of dusty tomes and sepia photographs, but genealogy these days also includes digitization of records and blogging. Deteriorating family bibles and fading photos are joined by flashy presentations disseminated using social media.

The field is seeing an explosion of new interest. The debut this year of two national TV shows in the United States – Faces of America and Who Do You Think You Are? – has driven thousands of people to start investigating their family histories. It is being called the biggest resurgence of personal genealogy interest since Alex Haley’s Roots was made into a TV miniseries in the 1970s.

What some may see as a profession literally stuck in the past is experiencing a revolution of new technologies and trends. It’s the perfect opportunity for an independent information professional.

In fact, most genealogists and many historians are IIPs, they just don’t realize it. They meet all of the characteristics though: they often work for themselves, they serve a varied client base and they provide a wide range of information services – document retrieval, research, writing and editing, just to name a few.

Having a background in the information field can help one break down those brick walls that genealogists – amateur and professional alike – come upon once all of those nicely indexed online repositories have been searched without revealing the name of a great-great-great-grandmother. In another vein, a tech-savvy professional will understand the best way to organize all the evidence gathered and how to preserve the original documents and photos.

**Genealogy and the Independent Information Professional**

This is the point at which the IIP steps in. Value-added deliverables are just as lucrative in genealogy as they are in the other theaters in which IIPs operate.

Leave behind whatever stereotypes you may have about historians and genealogists as I introduce you to Thomas MacEntee. Thomas wears many hats in the genealogical realm. He runs High-Definition Genealogy (http://hidefgen.com/), a company that provides market research, consulting, education and other services to those in the genealogy and family history community. He has helped genealogists learn to use web-conferencing technologies and services such as Skype to further their research and educate others. Thomas also is the force behind GeneaBloggers (www.geneabloggers.com/), an online community boasting no less than 1100 active blogs by genealogists of every skill level, ilk, heritage and location. He keeps everyone motivated to write and research by using daily blogging prompts as inspiration, maintains a calendar of genealogy events around the country, searches out new genealogy blogs to highlight and basically provides the glue for the entire community. Thomas maintains multiple blogs including but not limited to the blog of the Illinois State Genealogical Society (http://ilgensoc.blogspot.com/) and one on his own family history (http://destinationaustinfamily.blogspot.com/).
Amy Coffin is another example of a genealogist and independent information professional (like me, she too is a member of the Association for Independent Information Professionals). Amy provides many traditional genealogy services, including family histories, grant-writing, consulting for genealogical and historical societies and copywriting. She also has been hired by Family History Expos (FHE xpos), a producer of regional events where genealogists gather to learn about the latest and greatest in genealogy technology. Amy is their new social media coordinator. In addition to her other activities, Amy now is tasked with using Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media services to help spread the word about FHE xpos and their upcoming events.

Amy’s WeTree blog (http://wetree.blogspot.com) was named one of Family Tree Magazine’s 40 best genealogy blogs last year. She has created a social media-ready series titled “52 Weeks to Better Genealogy,” which introduces followers to a new topic, service or skill to explore each week (examples have included the various library classification systems, military records and state archives). This series follows on the heels of 2009’s “Jump Start Your Genealogy Blog: 52 Ideas. 52 Weeks.”

Examples of IIPs Adding Value

How can a genealogist IIP add value to traditional genealogy research projects? I can provide some examples from my most recent client work.

The new operators of a bed and breakfast in my town recently hired me to research the property. They purchased the inn on foreclosure and knew very little about it other than the year it was built (1790) and the names of its original owners. Once I completed the full history of the property, however, I didn’t stop there. I wrote a narrative about the building and its past inhabitants. The innkeeper now uses the property’s story in the tours she gives to guests, and she included it in a pamphlet for a self-guided walking tour of historical buildings in the town. I also searched for and purchased photos of the property from the local historical society and included them in posters I designed and printed. They now hang where all of the B&B’s guests can see them. In short, I provided my clients with more than a list of facts and sources – I crafted pieces that were immediately useful to them in their marketing efforts.

A prospective client recently asked me if I could scan and digitize her old family photos to preserve them for the future. I said I’d be happy to do it, but I wanted her to consider how she can get the most value out of those photos once they were digitized. I asked her how she would like them organized (such as chronologically, by occasion, by family group). I told her to think about the storage options for both the digitized images (DVDs, online or digital albums that can be shared) and the original prints (acid-free storage boxes, scrapbooks or traditional albums). Once I know how much information comes with the photos (such as the names of those pictured, the circumstances) I can propose still more ways to capture this valuable information with the images.

Further Opportunities to Add Value

The above are just a few examples of how traditional and non-traditional genealogists and other IIPs in related fields can add value for their clients. Other possibilities:

- There are hundreds of genealogy products out there, and more are introduced every month. The need for thorough review of and training about these products is key, especially with so many fledgling genealogists experimenting with them these days.

- Copyright is a huge concern in the genealogy field – specializing in the rights and pitfalls of digital content is especially topical right now. Is it okay to snatch that photo of your great-great-great-grandfather off your distant cousin’s online family tree? They’re family, right, so how could they mind? Does that relative have the right to post the photo to begin with? What are your options if someone steals your content off the Internet?

- For those genealogists trying to set up a business, tasks like accounting and marketing can be daunting if not completely foreign concepts. Consultants familiar with the unique needs of a genealogist are needed to provide training and functionality in the basics of running a business.