Books We Own: A Look-Up Resource for International Genealogical Research
http://sites.rootsweb.com/~bwo/

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When I began to research my family tree in earnest in 1995, I was amazed and gratified by how helpful and giving so many researchers were - not only in sharing their data, but also providing helpful suggestions on where and how to find additional information. On the internet, this spirit of helpfulness is manifest in two significant ways. First, by the posting of free data and transcriptions (such as on the USGenWeb project and its related special projects).   Secondly, by the number of researchers who volunteer their time, effort and resources to do lookups for others. In this article, I will describe one such effort, the Books We Own project (http://sites.rootsweb.com/~bwo/).

The Books We Own project was born on June 17, 1991, when Larry Reed posted a text file to the ROOTS-L genealogy listserv. This file contained contributions by readers of ROOTS-L who were willing to do lookups from genealogical resources in their private collections. The BWO project continued for five years as monthly updates posted to ROOTS-L. In 1996, the project was moved to a web interface on Rootsweb. My predecessor, Michael Colvin, was largely responsible for creating the overall appearance, organization and templates that are still used on the site. I took over as List Editor in February, 1998. From the first group of 9 volunteers in 1991, the project has grown to over 2000 volunteers today. The project includes resources from all US states and territories, 10 Canadian provinces, and 49 other countries. Over 1000 surnames are represented. A number of historical resources, atlases, gazetteers, and directories are also listed.

The BWO project website is organized as separate pages for each state, country or topic. All categories are listed on the Library page (http://sites.rootsweb.com/~bwo/library.html). On US states' and Canadian provinces' pages, state- or province-wide resources are listed first under the "General Reference" county. Other resources are then listed alphabetically by county. On international pages, resources are arranged by the largest administrative division (for example, the Norway page is divided into "fylkes" - their county equivalent, while the Australia page is divided into states). Other pages are arranged in a (hopefully) logical manner. For example, the US History page is arranged chronologically, with resources categorized as "Mayflower history", "Pre-Revolutionary Period", "Civil War" and so on. On the US Religious Groups page, the groups appear alphabetically. New pages are created on an as-needed basis. For example, the Mayflower and Civil War categories outgrew their former location on the US History page, and now have their own pages.

When a volunteer joins the project, they are assigned an "Owner's Code". This code is generally their initials, often followed by a number. Every listing ends with the owner's code, which is hyperlinked to the Lookup Request Form for that volunteer.

Making a lookup request is a simple process:

1.   Locate a resource, either through the search engine (posted at the bottom of all BWO pages) or by browsing the Library.

2.   Click on the owner's code at the end of the listing to be taken to the Lookup Request Form.

3.   Follow the volunteer's instructions on placing a lookup request.

Here are a few tips for ensuring a successful request (additional tips are available at http://sites.rootsweb.com/~bwo/tips.html):

1.   Read the directions! Important tips and instructions for making a request are at the top of every lookup request form. In addition, many volunteers have special instructions related to their resources. These instructions will be listed immediately after their contact information on the form. Please read these instructions -- they are there to help both you and the volunteer.

2.   Be specific about your request -- volunteers generally won't answer requests to find "all SMITHS" in a book. Requests are limited to three specific names (unless otherwise noted). If you need information on "John SMITH," include any information you have to help the volunteer distinguish between multiple John SMITHs, such as birth/death dates or spouse's name. (I have one book that lists 15 Samuel McAFEEs and only one has a middle initial.)

3.   Very important: Make sure your e-mail address is entered correctly. It can be frustrating for a volunteer to spend 15 minutes typing out a biography of your ancestor, only to hit "reply" and have the returned "undeliverable."

4.   Most importantly, please acknowledge the efforts of volunteers after they have replied to a request. Even if they were unable to find the requested information, they still put some time and effort into searching for you. It makes my day when I can help someone and when they reply with a "thank you."

For both requestors and potential volunteers, please keep in mind that US Copyright Laws can restrict the types of lookups that can be done. For books

published before 1923, including all reprints in which no new information appears, there is no limit to the amount of information that can be extracted. This is also true for vital records (such as the death indexes published by state/county vital records departments). However, in order for a volunteer to photocopy/scan/transcribe information from books published after 1923, the volunteer must be either the author, must have written permission from the author/publisher, or the book itself must include a copyright-waiver clause. In all other cases, lookups are limited to providing very brief excerpts, or simply stating whether a particular individual is in the book, and provide information on how the requestor can obtain the book. More information on the Copyright laws are available at http://sites.rootsweb.com/~bwo/bwocwp.html .

I am always on the prowl for new volunteers for the Books We Own site! If you are interested in volunteering, please check the Contributor's Page (http://sites.rootsweb.com/~bwo/contrib.html) for more information about the project, and instructions on submitting your resources. I post updates to the website several times a week. I will always respond to all messages within one week. I welcome any questions or comments anyone may have about the project!