

Since autumn 1990, Bob Knecht of the Kansas State Historical Society has supplied an occasional humor column appearing on the front page of the *Dusty Shelf* from time to time. The following materials are excerpts from some of these articles. Some have been re-edited.

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"Send Me Everything You Have!"

Every institution with strong collections receives "send me everything you have on _____" letters. At the Kansas State Historical Society, the most frequently requested topics concern "Wild Bill" Hickok and John Brown.

One writer, desperate for a personal connection between John Brown and her own family, stated that she "would like to find out if he is a descendant of mine." She continued: "How is John Brown related to Peter Brown?" Of course, no additional information was provided about Peter Brown.

Another letter contained a classic series of mixed juxtapositions. It read: "I wonder if the Historical Society has any biographical material on the artist that made the painting or mural "Gateway to the West" at St. Louis. I have it in my mind that his name was Thomas B. Hart, and I think the "B" stands for Benton. I can't find anything on him in our library, so I may be wrong about his name. I can see the painting in my mind as plain as day and it seems to me he died not too long ago." Truman Library staff, beware! Your mural may have had a previous existence under the Arch in St. Louis!

One need not be unlettered to write amazing reference letters. Several years ago, we received a "classic" from a serious scholar who told us that "out of the mountain of existing manuscripts, I need to cull diaries which are dramatic, emotional, and personally insightful. I need to eliminate diaries . . . which are purely descriptive." Naturally, this person wanted us to send a list of those that met her criteria.

Some humorous letters are the result of our colleagues in other institutions. In 1981, the National Archives branch in Kansas City—an unlikely repository for the culinary arts!--received a letter requesting a copy of a recipe booklet titled *Take a Can of Salmon*. The writer was referred to the National Archives branch by someone from an area university.

People often expect us to do the miraculous. (Perhaps a tribute to past reference service?) One woman requested information on a soldier who allegedly wrote his initials "R.A.B." on a rock in south-central Montana in 1841. She wanted to know if R.A.B. served under Kearny or Mason at Fort Leavenworth, whether he was returning from visiting Father DeSmet in the Flathead Valley, or if he was coming back from Oregon. She requested that the "scout rolls" be checked to provide the needed data.

Finally, one of my favorite letters was written by a woman seeking information on the "Little Bohemian Indians" who inhabited Nebraska.

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Archives in Motion

When the Kansas State Historical Society moved to a spanking-new facility on Topeka's west edge, THE MOVE (always capitalized) involved relocating, from one site to another, approximately eight linear miles of library shelving; 400,000 books and pamphlets and 100,000 volumes of newspapers; over 9000 cubic feet of manuscripts; 25,000 maps and architectural drawings; 500,000 photographs; and some 28,000 cubic feet of State archives, between and among four major facilities. Fairly early, someone recognized that concrete steps would have to be taken to prevent the staff from "going bananas."

The consumption of intoxicating beverages and substances is prohibited on State property, so staff held a number of "attitude adjustment sessions" at a nearby facility. A committee was established to provide comic relief during THE MOVE.

The special MOVE newsletter focused on relieving stress once the moving began. Its "Top Ten Lists" reflected on our work and sometimes on us. One was the "Top Ten Screensavers Found on Computers at Packing Time," which included such all-time favorites as "You can't get a body like this in a bottle . . . unless you push REAL HARD!" and "Kansas is a great place for men, but it's hell on women and horses." Some screensaver messages reflected the move mentality: "That which does not kill us will only make us stronger," "They're coming to take us away," and "Change is good, but dollars are better."

The MOVE newsletter offered stress-relieving suggestions, including:

Use your MasterCard to pay your Visa bill and vice-versa.

When someone says "have a nice day," tell them you already have plans.

Pop some popcorn without putting the lid on.

Drive to work in reverse.

Go shopping. Buy new clothes. Sweat in them. Return them the next day.

Fill out your tax forms using Roman numerals.

Pay your August electric bill in pennies.

In the final issue, the newsletter reiterated the six phases of a project:

Enthusiasm

Disillusionment

Panic

Search for the guilty

Punishment of the innocent

Praise and honor for the non-participants.

Certificates were awarded at THE MOVE's end. A petrified Twinkie, found in the dark corner of a rarely-used stack area, was given to the Archeology Department for "not having to go into the field to find evidence of past civilizations." Terry Harmon won "The Golden Retrieval Award" for pulling the first archives box after the move. Matt Veatch won "The Jungle Gym Award" for scaling new heights without a vine (he supervised placing cubic foot boxes "two deep, two high" on shelves up to a height of eight feet, usually forsaking a ladder).

We found that when faced with an extremely difficult challenge, seriously considering the lighter side can help you cope. Occasional zaniness and favors went a long way toward improving morale in a stressful situation.

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Murphy's Law and Manuscripts

Knecht's Archival Axioms

This column was inspired (though some may doubt the accuracy of that term) by an article by Pat Michaelis on "archival headaches." In practicing archivery for over twenty years, I have found a number of archival variations of Murphy's Law that almost always seem to be the case. Therefore, I present Knecht's Archival Axioms:

Axiom 1: The box you want is always on the top shelf, just out of reach.

Corollary A: If the box isn't on the top shelf, it is behind another box.

Corollary B: If it isn't on the top shelf or behind another box, it is under six other boxes.

Corollary C: If it isn't on the top shelf or behind another box or under six other boxes, then it is wrapped in strapping tape and you didn't bring a knife.

Corollary D: If you're having a bad day, the box you want is on the top shelf just out of reach, behind another box, under six other boxes, and wrapped in strapping tape.

Axiom 2: The length of a reference letter is inversely proportional to the amount of information in it necessary to answer the request.

Axiom 3: The value or significance of a potential donation is directly proportional to the contrariness of the donor.

Axiom 4: The only accessing documentation that is ever needed in the future is that which incomplete or missing.

Axiom 5: The more a researcher needs guidance from a staff member, the less likely he or she is to ask for help or listen.

Axiom 6: The research significance of a collection is inversely proportional to the amount of detail in the finding aid.

Corollary: If there is no finding aid, the research significance is inversely proportional to the amount of extant documentation.

Axiom 7: The quantity of institutional records is inversely proportional to the age of the organization.

Axiom 8: Researchers with complex reference requests only contact archives on busy days.

Axiom 9: If archives staff are overrun with on-site researchers, the telephone won't stop ringing.

Axiom 10: The number of researchers on a given day is directly proportional to the number of staff members who are out of the office.

Corollary: Any staff member who is urgently needed will be out of the office.

Axiom 11: The magnitude of any disaster affecting records is inversely proportional to the competence of those present to deal with the problem.

Axiom 12: People needing assistance will invariably ask those least able to provide it.

Axiom 13: There is a direct correlation between the phases of the moon and the strangeness of patrons and requests, the greatest incidence being at a full moon, with a statistically significant but lesser incidence at a new moon.

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Most Frequently Requested

What Researchers Most Often Want from the Kansas State Historical Society

- 12.** All geographic/geomorphic landmarks in Kansas with color photos, directions, and nearby hotels.
- 11.** All records pertaining to Oklahoma.
- 10.** All Kansas Civil War sites, with descriptions of everything that can be found with a metal detector.
- 9.** List of all Santa Fe Railway employees, with complete personnel records, pedigree charts, and family group sheets.
- 8.** The book with all the Santa Fe Railroad routes, plans for all AT&SF structures, photos of all engines & rolling stock, and surrounding townsites, with original color schemes and translation to HO scale.
- 7.** The Dust Bowl Encyclopedia with names and residence of all persons living in Kansas during the Dirty Thirties, a short synopsis of how they managed, and addresses of survivors.
- 6.** Military service and pension records of all veterans from Kansas in the Union and Confederate armies during all wars.

- 5.** Index to every name and topic in all Kansas newspapers, 1854-present.
- 4.** Adoption records, pedigree charts, and medical records of all known or suspected adoptees with current addresses and phone numbers of all biological relatives.
- 3.** Names of all Cherokee Strip runners.
- 2.** Names of known Native Americans who lived in Kansas voluntarily or otherwise, with pedigree charts.
- 1.** Names of all persons who ever lived, migrated through, or thought about Kansas, with complete birth, death, naturalizations, deed, tax, and probate records, 1609-present.

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Last revised: