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Google, Shmoogle. Reference Librarians Are Busier Than Ever

Need blueprints to build a guillotine? Millions still turn to experts at the public library



The Carnegie library in Pittsburgh. Photo: Alamy Stock Photo

By James R. Hagerty

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PITTSBURGH—Sherry Yadlosky, a staff member at the Carnegie Library in this city’s Oakland district, answered the phone in her cubicle late in the afternoon of Nov. 1. A woman wanted to know who would be pitching for the Dodgers that night in the final game of the World Series.

Ms. Yadlosky consulted a sports website. “It looks like they’re going to be starting Yu Darvish,” she said. The caller asked whether Mr. Darvish was a good pitcher. Ms. Yadlosky thought about it for a moment, then said: “It depends on your definition of good.”



Sherry Yadlosky

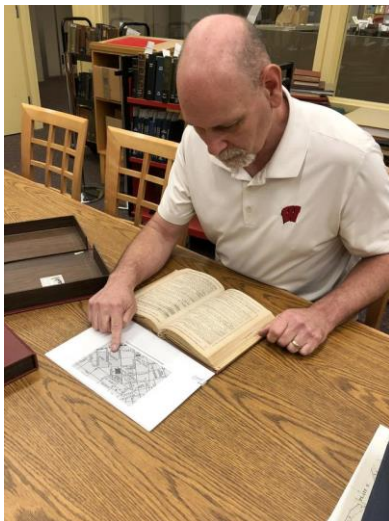
After taking the call, Ms. Yadlosky, 28 years old, recalled a library patron who once asked her whether bar codes on store merchandise contained the Mark of the Beast, a symbol discussed in the Book of Revelation. “Um, no,” she said.

Carved in stone over the library’s arched entrance is the motto “Free to the People.” That applies not just to books but to answers for almost any question posed to librarians.

Even in the internet age, reference librarians still dig up answers that require extra effort, searching old books, microfilm and paper files, looking for everything from owners of long-defunct firms to 19th-century weather reports.

Though online searches are now at the fingertips of most people, many still prefer to call or visit a library. Some can’t or don’t use computers; others recognize librarians have search skills and access to databases that search engines can’t match.

“I’m pre-Google,” said Kosmo Vinyl, who lives in New York and describes himself as an artist and cultural curator. “I don’t think you can find everything online, at all.” He is working on a project involving sports history in Atlanta. “The public library guys there have been fantastic,” he said. After consulting old city directories, librarian John Wright recently supplied Mr. Vinyl with details about vanished businesses and their owners.



John Wright, a librarian in Atlanta. Photo: Claudia Strange

Mr. Wright relishes the variety in his job. A woman from the Atlanta suburb of Alpharetta recently told him her teenage son had been seeing ghosts in their house. “He sees a man, a woman, a child and, interestingly, a dog,” Mr. Wright said. “I’ve never heard of people seeing dogs before.” He offered to research her neighborhood’s history to see if any past events might shed light on the apparitions.

Librarians generally are happy to receive questions, partly because serving lots of people helps them justify taxpayer funding. The Hennepin County public libraries in Minnesota calculate that they answer about 1.3 million questions a year. The county’s population is about 1.2 million.

Privacy is respected. When someone asked the Pittsburgh library how to build a guillotine, a librarian emailed diagrams from a German website without asking questions.

Many people need help applying for a job online, setting up an email account or finding social services. Some want a phone number; others seek medical or legal information. A few call in to ask for the weather forecast or help with household-budget calculations. Librarians sometimes provide recipes or instructions for making papier-mâché.

Even in Silicon Valley, where people might be expected to be search wizards, libraries get plenty of questions. One caller asked the Mountain View, Calif., Public Library for the address of the White House.

“There’s no really stupid question,” said Cat Bierling of the Des Moines Public Library, though some can be frustrating. A woman recently called to ask whether the hurricanes she had been hearing about were fake news. Ms. Bierling informed her that numerous credible news organizations had reported the storms.

Often it isn’t immediately clear exactly what the patron wants. A caller in Des Moines asked for the name of an actor who died of cancer after going to Mexico for treatment. Ms. Bierling did an internet search and identified the actor as Steve McQueen. The caller then asked for the name of a movie involving Mr. McQueen and a young boy. Ms. Bierling determined that the film in question was probably “The Reivers.” Did the library have the DVD? Ms. Bierling reserved it for the caller.



Reference librarian Cat Bierling of the Des Moines Public Library Photo: Sarah Scholten



Steve McQueen, Mitch Vogel in 'The Reivers,' 1969. Photo: Everett Collection

At the Hennepin County public libraries in Minnesota, Jonathan Copeland specializes in questions about pop music. He said one caller wanted to find a “nasty” song that John Lennon wrote about Bob Dylan. The librarian identified two printed sources referring to Mr. Lennon’s “Serve Yourself,” a sendup of Mr. Dylan’s “Gotta Serve Somebody.”

James Scott, a Sacramento librarian, said one woman woke up with a red blotch on her skin and wanted to know if it was in the shape of any meaningful symbol. He offered books on symbology.

“We’ll get folks that call up and say I woke up this morning and I had this trippy dream and I wonder if you have anything that can help me,” Mr. Scott said. He recommends books on the interpretation of dreams.



James Scott of the Sacramento Public Library. Photo: Pearl Skelton

By searching through microfilm or paper files, librarians can find news stories unavailable on the internet. Sarah McGowan, a librarian in the Mt. Lebanon, Pa., public library, was asked by a woman to help figure out whether her former husband was dead. Ms. McGowan couldn't give a definitive answer but found no obituaries for him.

A novelist recently asked librarians in Cleveland whether it snowed in northeastern Ohio on a certain date in 1837. After scouring old newspapers, they couldn't say for sure but did know that there had been snowy weather that week.

In Pittsburgh, librarians sometimes consult the "Standard Handbook for Secretaries," 1975 edition, to help patrons find the proper form for condolence notes or other types of letters.

Mary Phillips, a reference librarian there, recalls being asked how much clouds weigh. She tracked down a relevant paper from the National Center for Atmospheric Research and a podcast from Radiolab. "It was a satisfying multimedia search experience," she said.

She also has been helping a man who wants to know how the graphical design of instruction books for the tax form 1040 has evolved over the decades. She couldn't find many images of old tax booklets on the internet, so Ms. Phillips has requested help from archivists at the Internal Revenue Service.

"It's not a stumper," Ms. Phillips said of the form 1040 query, "but it's not easily unlocked."

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