‘Everyone has a story’
Genealogy & digitization efforts preserve the past — and bring it to life

For Curt Witcher, director of special collections at the Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center (ACPLGC), his passion for genealogy, even after 42 years, is still palpable. “I feel privileged,” he said. “It’s so cool — everyone has a story.”

Witcher jokes that he entered the genealogy field in the “B.C.” era — that is, Before Computers. “You literally had to physically go somewhere to do anything,” he said. “Now there are billions of records online.”

Although Witcher presides over a massive genealogy center, the second-largest of its kind in the United States, he says the best place is the one with the piece of your family story that you want — often the local library in the community where that part of your family lived. “It may not be a big library, but they have gems for their community, something no one else in the world will have,” he said.

Digitization

The “billions of records online” didn’t get there by accident. It was the concentrated work of many people. Libraries play a central role in digitizing records and ensuring they survive even as the physical item might degrade over time. Furthermore, it can make searching for records easier.

Jenny Johnson, head of digitization services at the IUPUI University Library, partners with community organizations to digitize their collections. In recent years, Johnson worked with the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site, Indiana Landmarks, Conner Prairie, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS), and the Indianapolis Recorder, the fourth-oldest
surviving African-American newspaper in the country, going back to 1895.

Early digitization projects were primarily document scanning. Now it includes 3D rendering. In a recent project, Johnson and her staff secured a Central Indiana Community Foundation grant to 3D model the Indianapolis Firefighters Museum (itself a former firehouse) and a firetruck. Similarly, Johnson worked with IMS to model out a garage and 3D scanned a car, creating a VR experience where the user can act as a mechanic.

The grant also financed 20 VR headsets, which allows them to take the headsets on the road and provide the public with more in-depth engagement.

Johnson believes that as the technology involved gets cheaper, it will become more commonplace even among local libraries. As both she and her staff had initial hurdles using 3D back in 2009, Johnson says a big point of emphasis has been creating workflow and best practice documents so others won’t have the same growing pains.

“One of my biggest goals is to make people see that it is possible to do this kind of thing, that it’s out there,” Johnson said. “There are so many things in our city that no one has access to — this is a unique way to provide access.”

**Why Genealogy Matters**

To those who might question the value of genealogy, Witcher points them to the research cited by Bruce Feiler in his RootsTech 2016 presentation, which found that children knowing their family history is the No. 1 predictor of a child’s emotional well-being and the belief that they could have an impact on the world around them. “We’ve heard from educators that say people who do their family history, who know their story, are better adjusted, succeed better in life, and can deal with change better,” he said.

To view some of the 3D models, visit the [IUPUI collection on Sketchfab](https://sketchfab.com).
Do people sometimes discover something in their family history that makes them uncomfortable? Yes, though far less than you’d think, according to Witcher. “Some people can get upset — maybe their ancestor ran a brothel or did bootlegging — but the overwhelming majority embrace it,” he said. “On a common level, it helps people understand, painting with a broad brush, that we’re all the same. There are times in our life where we haven’t been very productive or we’ve gotten down on our luck.”

The ACPLGC also has one of the largest collections of African American and Native American resources, an important initiative they’ve made a conscious effort to build. “We took a hard look at resources we were collecting, and there were a lot of areas that are underrepresented,” Witcher said. “We wanted to make sure we have everything that was being published, and we wanted as deep and rich a collection as possible.”

**Family history is a great way to get kids into history.**

Witcher says that it can often be difficult for African Americans and Native Americans to look into their history, as records are often scant and involve looking at property records to find their ancestors. “We wanted to tamp down the feeling that it’s too hard or there’s no records to be found,” he said. “We want this to be a place where everyone can come in and begin to find their story.”

Although there are several misconceptions about genealogy that Witcher expressed frustration with, one of the biggest was that it’s something only older people are interested in. “Young people do care, “We have not always made it convenient or comfortable for young people. But family history is a great way to get kids into history. We should be doing this in K-12 history education.”

**Bringing History to the Kids**

In at least one school system, they are in fact using genealogy to help students tap into history. Over the past five years, Michelle Houser, a school librarian at Bellmont High School in Decatur, has worked in conjunction with Bryan Lineberry, a social studies teacher, on a Topics in History course in which students research fallen World War 2 veterans who hailed from Adams County.

The project included diving into Ancestry.com, the National Archives, INGenWeb, Find a Grave, the American Battle Monuments Commission, and many other sources. In some cases, they interviewed living relatives of the fallen. “It helped bring them to a realization of what was going on in World War 2 — it brought history to life for them,” Houser said. “It also gave them an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the community.”

Houser added that it gave the students more skills. “It’s hard to get kids to do research these days,” she said.

For a few, they discovered they were even related to the veterans killed in action. “It was very meaningful for them,” Houser said.

To see more on their project, visit this site.