

Opening the Vault: One Year Later



The November/December 2005 issue of Family Chronicle, shown here, heralded the FHL's amazing announcement.

20 BILLION NAMES are Coming Online!

This was the headline in an article written by Halvor Moorshead for the November/December 2005 edition of *Family Chronicle*.

My mission, if I chose to accept it, was to find out the progress of this incredible project. To do so, I contacted Paul Nauta, Manager of Public Affairs for FamilySearch (FamilySearch.org is the website which will carry the information).

As I report what I learned, we'll go back to some of what was published a year ago and I'll chime in with updates.

FamilySearch Microfilm Digitized and Indexed

ONE YEAR AGO: *Twenty BILLION names! To give you an idea of how massive this is, the International Genealogical Index (IGI) currently contains about one billion names, while Ancestry.com claims 5 billion [in the original article this figure was 2 billion].*

These aren't simply wishful thinking: it has already started and it is going to change the way we conduct our genealogy in the future, courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and their genealogy efforts through FamilySearch and its website www.familysearch.org.

UPDATE: Whereas previously, as part of the pilot program, only volunteers associated with select societies could participate, the program has been expanded to include others who wish to volunteer. Nauta cautions that volunteers need to "be realistic" about the timetable for this. Basically, interested individuals can "register" their interest at www.familysearchindexing.org/en/index.jsp and then need to sit back and wait to be confirmed as a volunteer. An indexing project manager will confirm the volunteer's request by e-mail and give them a username and password, usually within a week.

The system is better able to handle enrollment, but it's not quite to the point where "open enrollment" of volunteers is possible. Look forward to an announcement later this year when the process has been streamlined and is considered robust enough to handle "any" interested volunteer. In the meantime, priority is given to individuals associated with societies and the LDS Church as volunteers, though, all volunteers are welcome. It's just not yet time to make a "world-wide announcement". As Nauta originally stated, and it is still somewhat true, "We do not have the administrative capacity with this first release to handle the onslaught of volunteers that we would expect with a formal public launch. Future releases will make it possible to handle larger volumes of volunteer enrollments worldwide. We expect there will be bugs in the system initially and we want to get these sorted out before the floodgates are open."

I found the sign-up phase painless. On the web page, the right-hand side gives you three choices — Volunteer, Install Now (the software) and Start Indexing. To volunteer, simply click on the word "volunteer". I submitted my information online and within a week, I received a very informative and straightforward e-mail explaining how to begin. This message included a detailed PDF document with images to walk me through getting started and provided indexing guidelines.

ONE YEAR AGO: Two volunteers transcribe each image. If there are discrepancies in the results, an arbitrator is shown the conflicts and decides which input is correct. This system allows anyone to volunteer, even if it is only for 10 minutes during lunchtime.

UPDATE: What better way to give an update on the volunteer experience than by being one! Other than a two-month gap from when I first signed up to when I actually did the indexing and realized that I needed to re-install the indexing software, it went smoothly and the required software was easy to download.

You will need to start the software, input your username and password and look for a project you are interested in from the available project list — you can then download a batch from that project. In my case, I got a 1900 census batch for New York. You have a split screen with the image at the top

and the data entry area on the bottom. The data entry area, as you click on each column, does two things for you: 1. It highlights the image to show where this data is found and 2. It gives you a written explanation of what data is to be entered. It's a nice feature that helps avoid confusion over terminology and data positioning. I found that



when entering a forename, if I put in Mary A., I got a red squiggle. I realized that this was indicating improper formatting, so I went back and put in Mary A (no period) and that matched the desired format. And, for fields like relationship, race, sex, etc., there are drop-down menus showing the most common terms. Also, once you start entering terms, like New York, for birthplace, it recognizes that and so, by typing N, it brought up New York and I could just tab to the next field. Obviously, if it needed to be New Jersey, you would then edit it.

I can report that I found both the registration and using the indexing software hassle-free. Given the challenges of actually reading and deciphering handwritten documents, without any knowledge of what the names or ages or birth places "should be", using the indexing program did not present any challenges. And, this experience reinforced for me how much I value any index that I ever use, no matter how much I sometimes grumble over finding or not finding people as I expected!

According to Nauta, beyond some of whom you might expect to be volunteering, such as retirees and very involved genealogists, he shared the following examples of volunteers:

- Executives who travel — e.g., they

An example of the split-screen interface volunteers will utilize when transcribing records. This particular image is from the 1900 US census.

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download a batch at the airport in Los Angeles before they depart. While on the flight to New York, they index the data, and upon arrival in New York, they upload the completed work. The executives find this valuable on a personal level.

- Youth — e.g., kids, as young as 12 years old and teens, who work on the indexing on the way to extra-curricular activities. Many are doing the indexing for fun.
- Families — e.g., use it as a project that the whole family can do. This helps create more connections while “giving back” in a meaningful way.

These are just a few examples of who is indexing!



The entrances to the LDS Church's vaults, literally carved into the side of Granite Mountain in Utah. It is here that they store the millions of rolls of microfilm that are being digitized and indexed for online access.

ONE YEAR AGO: Nauta was hesitant when asked how long this [film scanning] project may take. “The technology is moving so fast and the challenges are so formidable that each time we might try to make a guess, it would have to be revised because of new developments. We are also continuing to add records. With many new records, we are able to simplify the process: about a third of the new records being added from current filming projects in the field are captured using digital cameras rather than film.”

“It is estimated that there are over 20 billion names found on records in the FamilySearch vaults and that may include some duplication. Also, we should make it clear that FamilySearch does not have the right permissions to process all these records.”

Although the Church does have some idea of the percentage of “restricted” films, they do not release this figure publicly.

UPDATE: Nauta reports that “What can be digitized will be digitized. Fifty percent of cameras are now digital and hopefully by the end of 2007, the proj-

ect will have moved to only digital cameras in the field. This will give improved access to records. If they are captured digitally at birth, it will shorten the process to get these records indexed. And, FamilySearch is being judicious with the cameras being replaced — loaning or donating them to archives and projects of interest, along with education and training on preservation.”

ONE YEAR AGO: A pilot program in cooperation with the Ohio Genealogical Society and Georgia State Archives is already operating — they have started to index the 1900 US census. In a few months, these and other records will begin to appear online for use by volunteer indexers and additional societies will be invited to contribute to these early trials.

Nauta tells us that they expect societies and individuals generally will choose to index local records of interest from their area first. “It is far more exciting to transcribe records from your ancestral area than others, but most volunteers appear willing to help index whatever projects are available in the interim.”

He continued, “We want to emphasize that eventually we will be focusing on records worldwide — only a tiny fraction of the world’s non-English records have been indexed so far.”

If your society gets involved, typically FamilySearch will provide the digital images and software, and the society will provide the manpower to index the records, but these elements are negotiable based on the society’s needs, resources and desires. The software and service includes all the routing, tracking, data-entry and quality assurance functionality needed to conduct the indexing projects. FamilySearch provides the indexing system and the society reaps the benefits of the project and the finished data. It offers societies and their members a real win-win scenario.

UPDATE: In addition to the above mentioned programs, there are several other pilot programs involving the New England Historic Genealogical Society and the Indiana Genealogical Society. Nauta states that “there are more requests from records custodians than can now be handled.” It is expected that sometime in 2007, there will be better capacity to handle these local record index projects.

At www.familysearchindexing.org you will find a list of current indexing proj-

ects and contact information. Please contact the individual projects to find out how to participate. If you want to volunteer for a project, follow the instructions for becoming a volunteer. And, if a record custodian would like to start up a project, please contact Todd Jensen, project manager for FamilySearch Indexing, at jensentr@ldschurch.org.

What Does The Future Hold?

So, what does Nauta consider the biggest accomplishments of the program in 2006 and where is it going in 2007? Nauta states that this project is more than just about digitizing records; it encompasses "improving preservation of records, better collection management and improving access and user-experience". With that in mind, the real progress on the project in 2006 was finding out "what the technology is capable of and what the dependencies are!" It doesn't make sense to have lots of volunteers and no data available to index, just as it doesn't make sense to have enormous amounts of data and no volunteers to index it.

As for this year, 2007, Nauta envisions that there will be various "levels of access to the data. In the short-term, some digital images might become available without an associated index, sort of as a digital microfilm experience, and some indexes will become available and be linked to digital images." It is expected that a lot more indexing will take place and that will allow for "chunks" of indices/images to become available throughout the year. Any new additions of technology, data, services or utilities will be accessible through FamilySearch.org and FamilySearchIndexing.org.

Family Histories Online

We also discussed the second part of this initiative — web access to the family histories that are held by the LDS Church.

ONE YEAR AGO: *The second part of this initiative involves the 170,000 family histories [the original article stated 200,000] that are held by the Church. These are being digitized currently and linked to an every-word index.*

Although the family histories are held by the Family History Library, this part of the program is being operated in cooperation with the Church of Jesus Christ's

Brigham Young University. Only those publications without reprint or distribution restrictions will be processed. These histories are being scanned and indexed at a very rapid rate. Four thousand are already online and may be viewed at www.familyhistoryarchive.byu.edu.

To see an example of this collection, go to the website and enter the surname Gourley — the system will display the original scanned document (Paul Gourley: A Pioneer Father) in a PDF format. On the left of the PDF image is a search box into which you can enter anything you wish to examine: Names of people or places, dates, etc. These family histories can also be accessed through the FHL Catalog located at www.familysearch.org. Users will find links from the source listing in the catalog to the digital image if it has been digitized.

The family histories can be searched by name, author, title or geographic area. Imagine the potential power of this. Your family may not yet have its own written history, but searching the records of other families from the same area may contain vital information on your own genealogy. You can contribute to the growth of this collection by donating your published family histories to the FHL. For more information, call the Acquisitions Unit at 801-240-2337. Your permission allows your printed copy to be digitized and your history to be posted as part of the online collection.

UPDATE: Nauta now reports that "between 6,000 and 8,000 family histories are online. As more equipment is dedicated to this effort in 2007, there will be faster progress. It is anticipated that late in 2007, access will shift from the BYU website to FamilySearch.org, where they are already accessible via the Card Catalog."

When you perform a search in the catalog and click on a particular document, if there is a digital version available, you will see "To view a digital version of this book click here".

Now that the projects have a solid year under their belts, look for digital images and indices to start surfacing. They will be accessible from FamilySearch.org. And, anticipate a continuing stream of digitized family histories to be available at the BYU site and from the Family History Catalog.

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Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for almost 20 years. She currently does professional research in NC and has never lived where any of her ancestors migrated from or to and has visited many Family History Centers and even made one trek to SLC! So, she uses the Internet extensively for research and is very excited by this project. She can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy

