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## Genealogy: Looking Backward From the 21st Century

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# Editorial

## Genealogy: Looking Backward from the 21st Century

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Identity and history have become more critical questions since 11 September 2001. Before, we in the United States didn't have to think about things happening over there, wherever "there" might be. History was everything that happened to other people; genealogy was the province of self-aggrandizing dilettantes.

Suddenly, we have been dragged back into the mainstream. We have a powerfully public collective history since 11 September, but we also have individual histories. Newly aware of the certainty of our mortality, we have a heightened need to know who we are in every sense of that term. Part of that self-knowledge is an awareness of our ancestry.

Out of all the questions we librarians encounter, none are more deeply motivated than the genealogical queries so many of us dread. Our disdain is often justified: many of our clients approach genealogical research as an attempt to prove they are somehow better than their present circumstances. As librarians, we are dedicated to equal access to information. These genealogists, in their quests to prove themselves

somehow superior, seem to repudiate the very basis of our profession. Who cares if someone's great-great-uncle was a physician? (Besides, a physician didn't have the social cachet in the 1800's that the occupation has today.) We hurry along the reference interview, trying to determine as quickly as possible which other agency can be the fortunate recipient of our client's rapture about his or her great-great-whomever. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that existence precedes essence, and he made this the fundamental principle of existentialism. Genealogy attempts to connect many different existences into one essence that is a family and individual story—a story answering who we are, perhaps implying why we're here. Along the way, we see how interrelated all of us ultimately are.

This issue of the *Oregon Library Association Quarterly* looks at the past from the perspective of sometimes futuristic techniques. We librarians must be conversant in the technologies and the resources available for genealogical research, so that we can better guide those

who ask us about this topic. These articles will establish a basis in theory and articulate current practice, so that you can frame your knowledge in a structure that allows you to relate future learning to your knowledge base.

In addition to the articles in this print edition, an additional article will be available on our Web site, at <http://www.olaweb.org/>. That article, by Certified Genealogical Researcher Jacqueline E. A. Lawson, describes basic resources and techniques for African American genealogical research in Oregon. Ms. Lawson describes valuable local, statewide, and national resources.

—Fred Reenstjerna  
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*Guest Editor*

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