Allen County Public Library (ACPL) – Curt Witcher Conversations

I'm writing this for the SFA Board to add to information already given to help them with any decisions they need to make.

About 2 years ago I had heard there was a possible move of the SFA paper archives to the ACPL Genealogy department. The name of Curt Witcher, who is the Genealogy Center Manager of the ACPL came up and I called him to get firsthand information about what I had heard from the SFA members.

Curt and I talked mostly about the database conversion process. He told me that he had contractors who had already converted the SFGS database and it was online at a very private link. I had used this link and seen the database that I thought only Rose, Jeanne and a very few others could use. I remember being angry that my job of database conversion may have already been done and nobody told me. It turns out that the online conversion was from a version of the SFGS earlier than then one I received in 2011 and it was full of all the errors already in the database. Curt gave me the names of the contractors and I sent email to them and they never replied.

Curt and I also talked a little bit about storage of the files at the library and he said he had a place set aside to receive them. It was rumored that Rose, Jeanne and others had seen this location. Curt talked a little bit about extra requirements the SFA was requiring for the storage of the files. He explained how the temperature and humidity of the location kept mold and deterioration of material to a minimum. He was excited to receive the SFA archives but noted it would be one of hundreds of family archives he would be keeping. He said there may have been some requirements that would be impossible for him to accomplish as they were outside his control or too different than the other many materials he was managing.

More than a year later, after the Oberlin reunion, I drove to Fort Wayne to use the ACPL and research my Parsons family. I dropped in and asked if Curt Witcher was available for a short meeting. Curt and I met in his office and he was excited to hear about the progress I'd made with the data conversion.

Curt told me two stories that I think the SFA board needs to hear and think about. The first went like this. There was a recent accident in the news where railroad oil tanker cars rolled into town and exploded in a huge fire. The fire burnt down a few city blocks and destroyed many businesses. He said one of those places that was completely destroyed had just bought equipment to scan and archive all their ancestral files. He was making a point that accidents can destroy years of collected information.

The second story was about his experiences with collecting genealogical papers from families. He told me of families where the keeper of the data had an accident or moved to a nursing or retirement home. The kids, not knowing what all this paper was for, ended up throwing it in the garbage. He said this kind of event happened much more often than people would believe.

In our conversation Curt also expressed some reservations about getting the SFA archives without more information about it. He and his staff were experts in indexing information so his patrons could find information they wanted. He understood the Sheldon Numbering System and the SFA filing system was different than others he was using. He said it would be a nightmare for him to simply have all the files show up without knowing how to use them. We talked about the correct way to transition the SFA files from Rose's garage to the ACPL. He wanted to have someone meet with Rose many times to understand the system and document what and where things were. He said his responsibility was to his

patrons, the public, to index and share genealogic archives. I interpreted this as saying, if the SFA data wasn't to be shared with the public and couldn't be merged into the standard library indexing system, it wouldn't meet his requirements to be in a public library.

Looking back on my direct two conversations with Curt Witcher I have some comments. I believe the ACPL would be a great place to store our files, only if we allow them to treat them like the thousands of other genealogical files they care for. If we were to require them to do more or different things with our data they may not really want them. An example would be, if we required them to scan all of our documents this would be outside their normal process and they wouldn't want to meet that requirement and therefore not take our files. If we require them to only allow card carrying SFA members to view the files this too might be more work than they want to have our files.

I'm writing this to the SFA board so they can gain more first hand and personal information about the ACPL. I believe they need this extra information before they make a decision about the fate of the large collection of the SFA paper files.