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LDS To Put Microfilm In Vaults On Internet

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Submitted by – Shanna Jones

Ever wonder what's inside those secured vaults, owned by the LDS Church, positioned high inside the granite walls of Little Cottonwood Canyon?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is working toward allowing anyone with Internet access to learn more than they've ever known before about the information contained on 2 million-plus rolls of microfilm housed there. Currently, the church is compiling searchable indexes to that information and will eventually make it available for free through an automated database on the Internet.

The church excavated the vaults containing those records on property it purchased in the 1960s, providing a safe repository during the height of the Cold War for birth, marriage, death and census information it considers essential for the salvation of mankind after death. Now church leaders seek to make the information more readily available to the world.

"The goal is to create (Internet-accessible) indexes to all the films we have in the vault. That's a long-term process and that's a lot of films," according to Paul Nauta, manager of public affairs for church's FamilySearch.org website. "We've not announced when people will begin to start seeing" the indexes.

Those attending the annual Federation of Genealogical Societies' conference this week at the Salt Palace will get a "sneak preview" of the church's plans. As the project progresses over time, indexes to records from 110 nations previously stored on microfilm will become accessible to virtually anyone, anywhere, through the Internet via the touch of a few keystrokes.

"We're showing people how we'll be creating indexes from those films. Sometime in the future we'll ask people to help us create the indexes and make them publicly available, and little by little we'll start to index the films from the vault like we did with the 1880 (U.S.) Census.

"The challenge now is it takes a lot of people and a lot of time" to create such an index. "Currently, you have to look at images on paper or burn them on a CD and distribute those to index the data. We're moving the whole process to the Internet and this is a prototype of what that might look like. . . . That's what the biggest buzz is at the conference."

Conference attendees are using a lab at the Salt Palace equipped with a number of computers to demonstrate the new automated database. The microfilm information includes birth, marriage, death and census records.

New advances in indexing software utilities and applications mean the LDS Church "now has the ability to produce lots of indexes faster," than it did with previous data-bases it has digitized, including the 1880 U.S. Census. Making that database available online was a 12-year project, using tens of thousands of volunteers.

In the future, the new technology "will provide auto-mated indexing" for an ever-increasing number of microfilms "so people can readily search it from their homes."

As the number of family history researchers continues to grow — one study showed 40 percent of Americans have done research on their family history and another said 90 percent have expressed interest — demand for online indexes that simplify searching for ancestors has soared, he said.

How much time will it take to digitize all the films in the vault?

"Let's put it this way, it will depend on how much volunteer help we get," Nauta said. "I think we can digitize the films to be indexed to stay up with demand, but much will depend on how many volunteers we can generate world-wide to index their records of interest. If, in a couple of years, we could get a million indexers world-wide, we could put a big dent" in the massive undertaking.

The indexing demonstration and other planned improvements to the popular FamilySearch.org website are drawing standing-room-only crowds at the convention. The changes "will make great strides to simplify and increase the success of the family history experience," he said.

Just when the first indexed information from the microfilms will become available online has not yet been announced. "We don't want to be swamped with people before we're ready to handle it," Nauta said.

The new developments won't make more than 5,000 small family history centers housed in LDS chapels worldwide obsolete. Previously, those looking for information contained on the microfilms stored in the church's Granite Mountain Records Vault had to request that copies of information on the films be sent to their local center. At some point in the future, that likely won't be necessary any longer, he said, but "that will continue to be a role for a long time.

"Family history centers will continue to be a mainstay" for accessing information on the microfilms for some time to come.

As more of those records become digitized and indexes become available, the role of the local centers, he said, "will probably change. Some people have no Internet access, and they'll use them for that. The role of the family history centers will evolve over time to help people get started" with their research because "many people don't know how to do that. They will become more fundamental to help people get and stay organized, and to answer questions they have doing their research."

Many of those in town to attend the conference are also making use of the church's renowned Family History Library, less than a block from the Salt Palace. Hours have been extended to accommodate guests, with the library open from 8 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. through Saturday.

"It's an exciting time for family history," Nauta said. "Those just developing this kind of research as a hobby will never have any appreciation for how far this industry has evolved, even in the past 10 years."

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