



Beyond the Sources • Gratia Countryman

Using the information you gather on the web site, answer the following questions about the unit.

1. Often historians try to determine what the impact of a person they are studying may have been on the community where that person lived. The sources we provided here about Gratia Countryman can tell part of her story. What other sources might help us learn more about her and what she did in Minneapolis?

Letters that she wrote or that were written to her, her diaries or journals, newspaper articles about her, family photographs, and library records from the time she worked there might also give us more information about her.

2. One of the sources we provided was a graph showing the growth in distribution points for the library system between 1889 and 1977. As historians, can we give all of the credit for that growth to one person, Gratia Countryman?

No. There were many factors that contributed to the growth of libraries.

What other influences might have contributed to that level of growth?

The economy, government programs to fund reading rooms and libraries, and a stronger social emphasis on reading and more leisure time, are all other factors that might have contributed to the growth of libraries during this time.

What other sources might give us more information about why the libraries expanded during that time?

Records or laws about government support for libraries, labor records about the number of hours worked by the average worker, articles stressing the importance of being able to read might all provide us with information about why libraries expanded.

3. Newspaper articles can often tell us much about a person and their activities. The article about the book truck shows us that Countryman was involved in this project. Can we assume from the article and the picture that she was the only person in the library system who worked with the book truck?

No.

If we were to use only this one source for our research about Gratia Countryman, what mistakes might we make in describing her life?

We might think that the only thing she did was create this book truck.

What aspects of her life might be completely left out of our research?

We would know nothing about her family, other things she did at the library, how successful the book truck was, or what personal likes or dislikes she may have had.

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4. People who work on family histories (genealogies) often use obituaries as one of their sources. What kind of information might you learn from Countryman's obituary if you were a relative who wanted to know more about her?

You could learn about her birthdate and her parents, where she lived during her life, her occupation, whether or not she married and had children, and in some cases, how she died.

What other people or sources might that obituary point you to for further family research?

If you were searching for birth or death records, the obituary provides you with the dates and locations, which could lead you to a local historical society or courthouse to find the actual records. You may also wish to interview a former employer or look at employment records from her place of work, or find her wedding announcement in a local newspaper.

What would you do if information in an obituary didn't "match up" with (contradicted) other information you had gathered?

You could use other sources such as newspaper articles or government or family records to determine whether or not the obituary was incorrect.

How would you go about deciding which information was correct?

Often dates such as birth and death dates can be verified with county birth and death records or church records. Employment can often be checked with the employer's records. Other information might be more difficult to verify without personal records from your subject or without talking to the subject's family.