

## Quest for WWII-Era Certificate Shows Staff at Best

Vital Records Office Produces Buried Document, No Matter What

In a secure fireproof vault deep below a state office building in Lansing, a wartime marriage certificate eluded discovery by determined MDCH staff who sifted through clues from another era to try to pry it from the hiding place where it had spent the last 61 years. But find the document they did, using another source and, in the end, producing a very satisfied customer.

It was World War II, the man was in the service, and he was called away to duty before they could get married. That was a significant part of the problem with locating the record.

“We like to help,” said Sally Perry of the MDCH vital records staff. It’s a good thing. The certificate, out of sequence, not itemized in a convenient index, not on microfilm where it normally would have been, slipped through an initial search.

But the customer, the daughter of the couple whose marriage the certificate recorded, persisted. She sent a second request, which produced the same result – no certificate could be found.

Not content to hear that the state had no record of her parents’ marriage, the daughter sent a well-placed email to the MDCH director’s office. It was promptly referred to vital records, where Perry, acting supervisor of the search and request units, joined her staff to find the phantom document.

“She actually had a photocopy of the certificate from the county where it was issued,” Perry said. “Her brother had gotten it and had sent her a copy, but it wasn’t certified and couldn’t be used for any legal purposes. What she needed was a certified copy for herself.” The daughter had some previous difficulty with getting another certificate from the county, and the vital records unit had produced the document quickly. So, she turned to us for the marriage certificate. This one wasn’t that easy.

“They got the certificate in 1942,” Perry said, “but they didn’t get married until 1944.” It was World War II, the man was in the service, and he was called away to duty before they could get married. That was a significant part of the problem with locating the record.

But Perry and Linda Gray, one of her staff, noticed that the copy had been registered by a county employee whose name didn’t appear on any of the other 1942 certificates. “Then we knew we had to look somewhere else,” Perry said. “Linda is very good, very thorough. She almost has a sense of where to find something.”

She pulled out a reel of microfilm of later records from that era. Two hours later, after leafing through years of microfilm, the team shared huge headaches. A supervisor suggested they call it quits. Reluctantly, they stopped looking. Yet their job – fulfilling a customer request – remained incomplete.

Determined to finish the job, Perry worked with the county office to arrange the certified copy the customer needed. Reasoning that she, as an experienced professional, could more readily navigate the county system than the customer who had previously experienced problems there, Perry handled it quickly. The county will send a copy to the vital records unit, which will then issue the certified copy to the customer – and keep it on file where it can quickly be found for future reference. “It’s all in a day’s work,” Perry said. “All of the staff in the search and request units go out of their way to help customers every day. It’s one of the perks of the job.”

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But to the customer, it was a different story altogether. She lives out of state, it was an urgent request, and the response was anything but routine. “I would like to commend the efforts of your staff in trying to uncover this mystery,” she wrote in a later email. “Sally Perry and her staff have gone way out of their way to help me and I can’t thank them enough. I especially want you to know how hard Sally and her staff have been working and how much I appreciate their efforts.”

The vital records unit completes as many as 3,800 requests a week. At times, nearly a third need expedited service. It’s not always easy. Sometimes, people discover long-buried family secrets that open many new questions.

“You have to have a caring for people and their feelings,” said Perry, reflecting on the importance of the records the department preserves. “You’re talking about their parents.”

The search and request units work under the experienced direction of State Registrar Carol Getts and Dave McLaury, Director of Project Development and Implementation.

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