

Hints on Researching the West

Patricia McLinn has written more than a dozen books set in Wyoming, both contemporary and historical. As much as she loves Wyoming, her residence remains in Virginia. As someone living not far from the Atlantic, she's learned some tricks about writing about the West.

- 1.) Go there if at all possible. The air, the sky truly are different.
- 2.) Take a video camera if possible, and talk about your impressions of what you're smelling, what the air and the ground and the sagebrush feel like, along with what you're seeing and hearing. Let those adjectives spill -- when you get home you can pick out the few that really work.
- 3.) A still camera is also very useful. I take still pictures of all explanatory signs - much faster than taking notes and you're sure you have all the information.
- 4.) Meet as many people as you can, ask lots of questions. Get their addresses, phone numbers for future contact.
- 5.) Go to small-town museums. They're usually very specific to the area and have wonderful sources that are hard to get elsewhere.
- 6.) Go to the local library - especially if there's not a local museum. They almost always have a collection or exhibit of local interest items.
- 7.) Buy as many of those very local books as you can get your hands on (Hint: you can mail them back to yourself from a local post office at book rate - it's cheap and slow, so you'll beat the books home.)
- 8.) Gather up local newspapers, real estate guides, etc. (Ship them back with the books.) These give you insights into the community and potential contacts.

If you can't head West:

- 1.) Books, of course. Start with the more general books, then check the footnotes and bibliography for their sources - always searching for primary sources. Interlibrary loan librarians are angels on earth. They can find you the most amazing things.

- 2.) If the book you want is so rare that it can't be sent by interlibrary loan, ask for contact info on the library it's at, and ask the holding library if they will copy some of the book for you. Sometimes there's a "researcher" fee. OR look for an online buddy who lives where the book is, and might do this for you. Be willing to exchange this service.
 - 3.) Don't rely only on the most popular books. If everyone's read Monty Robbins's book, you're not going to get much out of it that would be fresh and new for your readers.
 - 4.) Order the free tourist information from the state(s) you're interested in - great info and provides leads on even more information.
 - 5.) Buy travel guides for the states. I particularly like the "Handbooks" (ie "Wyoming Handbook," "Montana Handbook") by Moon Publications. Call those local museums and libraries that you can't visit, explain you're a writer looking for material on their town and throw yourself on their mercy. Ask them for recommendations of books.
 - 6.) Also ask for contacts with people you might talk to - say a forest ranger or a rancher or a rodeo cowboy. (Don't expect the phone number right off. Make it clear you understand that they will probably want to check first with this potential source, and you will call back at a specified time—a convenient time for the person you're talking to—to see if the potential source is agreeable. When you contact the source set up a time that's convenient to them for a long talk. Be sure that you pay for all calls.)
 - 7.) If you're having trouble finding the local library, etc., try the local Chamber of Commerce - in rural areas this might be by county rather than town.
- Get some regional magazines (some large libraries carry them) and occupation-specific magazines (these you might have to order by the copy.)

The Internet

- 1.) Be skeptical about all information - always, always consider the source.
- 2.) Focus on museums and educational sites.
- 3.) But do look at official sites from towns and organizations (for example, the National Forest Service, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, etc.) The web sites are PR vehicles for the organization, so keep that in mind, but can be great leads to individuals to talk to.
- 4.) Use the Internet to find sources to talk to - but I would be very wary of interviewing over e-mail. First, you've eliminated a lot of people who don't have e-mail. Second, you can't hear inflection, rhythm and that's so important in getting the dialogue right.

Some favorite books off the top of my bookshelf

THE COWBOY AT WORK, by Fay E. Ward (from the 1950s, so beware of changes, but good for the basics.)

COWBOYS OF THE AMERICAN WEST, Principal Photography by Dudley Witney, Text by B. Byron Price

THE COWBOY DICTIONARY, by Ramon F. Adams. (This is old-fashioned, but fun and a good starting point.)

LETTERS OF A WOMAN HOMESTEADER, Elinore Pruitt Stewart (if you're writing historical or contemporary, this is a great view into a regional psyche.)

CAUTIONS:

Do not believe movies. Any movies. My "ranching consultants" are constantly laughing at the mistakes.

The West is a BIG place. And there are strong regional differences. A cowboy in Texas, a cowboy in Oregon, a cowboy in California, and a cowboy in Wyoming could use different terminology, different roping methods, and different saddles. They are likely to wear different hats, boots and spurs. So make all your research as specific to the area you're interested in as possible.

The West is a complex place. Both in historical times and contemporary, there have always been many forces at work (political, social, economic, geographic, environmental, etc.) and a great diversity of people. Don't fall for the clichés.