

Search Tips From SCSH Genealogy Club Members

All family history searchers come upon issues in their research that create almost insurmountable “roadblocks” to finding the information they need. For help finding the answers you need, consider joining our local SCSH Genealogy Club. Some club members will astonish you with their personal discovery journeys in their family history. They will also assist you in starting your own search.

These articles were published in the View, Sun City Shadow Hills’ monthly publication, during 2019 and 2020. They show the variety of issues that might arise doing research as well as some examples of the resources that are out there for you to use.

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Finding Artifacts – More Than Just Searching for Records

In the process of building your family tree, you may encounter family artifacts beyond the traditional birth certificates, marriage certificates, and photos of cemetery headstones. These “other” artifacts often carry significant stories of their own.

Family Artifacts

In our family collection, we have some interesting artifacts:

- A German bayonet that my grandfather brought home from the battle for Vimy Ridge in WWI.
- A handmade bench constructed by the brother of my maternal grandfather, David Hogg. He was a carpenter from Northern England who traveled to Canada to help my grandfather build a homestead.
- A lock of blond hair that my mother cut from my head when I was only a year old.
- A collection of some 160 handwritten letters that my mother wrote to my father during WWII. She lived in a small mining town, working and raising myself and my older brother while my father was at war, providing an amazing “picture” of my brother and myself growing up.

And, there are more “pieces of the past,” all needing to be protected, documented, and shared with family. Look around and capture these artifacts of generations past. They carry amazing stories.

Historical Artifacts

Judy stumbled out of the bedroom, somewhat bleary-eyed, to find the office light on and Greg bent studiously over his laptop. Concentrating so hard, Greg did not even hear her approach.

“What in the world are you doing on your computer at 3:00 in the morning? Do you know what time it is?” she asked.

“Oh, Judy, you will not believe what I have just found. This is so exciting. It’s a handwritten, personal letter from Abraham Lincoln to your fourth great grandfather, thanking him for his support in the 1860 election. Can you believe that?” Greg exclaimed.

Greg was clearly pumped. He went on “I stumbled across this document trail around midnight and I just could not stop. So, I kept on digging, digging and finally, I found this letter. Talk about history! I can’t wait to share this with the family. Who knew?”

It turns out that Judy’s fourth great grandfather, a lawyer and prominent Philadelphia citizen, had provided support to Lincoln through the election process as Lincoln fought for his second term as President. The letter would prove to be a dandy addition to family history.

The Changing Nature of Family and Its Impact on Genealogy

The old definition of family – Mom, Dad, kids – is changing and genealogists need to address these changes and the impact they have on their research. Here are some examples of the issues to be faced:

Adoptions and Family History

You were a teenager when your parents finally told you that you were adopted. Who cared? You were loved and protected, busy with life and who needed more. But, long after you had raised your own family and retired, the mystery of your birth parents remained. You have read the news articles and watched the TV clips of people who have found their birth parents, sometimes with great drama. Finally, with some free time you have decided to tackle the puzzle.

Where to start? Your parents are gone. You have no records. You have heard that some states have begun to open up adoption records. Other states are known to keep their records locked down hard. Maybe it was a “private” adoption? Then what? Can DNA testing help? How does that work?

Birth Certificates – Often More Complicated Than You Would Think

So, you have just found a birth certificate to authenticate the birth of one of your relatives. Well, birth certificates are becoming a more complicated area for genealogists.

In 2019, the top court in Quebec, Canada reversed a Quebec Superior Court decision that put a sperm donor's name on his child's birth certificate at the expense of a non-biological parent. In the case of Family X, the sperm donor to a lesbian couple sought to have his name included on the birth certificate. In May 2018, a lower court agreed to his request and ordered the name of the non-biological parent removed from the document and replaced with the name of the sperm donor. The Quebec Court of Appeals reversed, ordering the name of the sperm donor removed from his child's birth certificate.

This decision and others have raised a host of questions for genealogists including:

1. Does my family history software accommodate three parents?

2. What are the legislative requirements for birth certificate information in my state?

Learn more about birth certificates and other proof documents for your family tree by joining the Genealogy Club.

Genealogy and LGBTQ

There has been a revolution underway for at least the past 50 years. Many folks have a sexual preference for people of the same gender. In many countries, this was deemed undesirable, even criminal. Some countries still treat it that way. Organized religion has struggled with the concept.

Since 2005 in Canada and 2015 in the U.S., same-sex marriage has been legal on a national basis. Many of us have witnessed the advent of surrogate motherhood (1970's) and sperm banks (1952). Now, we have folks who are classified as Transgender and Q. What is next?

These events generate a host of questions for genealogists:

- How does my software handle transgender?
- How do I designate a surrogate mother?
- Do I designate a surrogate?
- How to enter a same sex couple in my tree?
- Can you track a sperm bank donor?
- Surrogates and sperm bank donors will show up in DNA results. How do I handle this?

Getting Information from Living Family Members

Igniting Interest in Your Older Relatives

Collecting family history information from family members can sometimes prove a bit frustrating. Although you can spend countless hours scouring the online resources, tracking down initial details of your own immediate family (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) can often prove difficult. If they are still living, they will likely not be found in any commercial databases. However, living relatives are your best source.

Fellow genealogist and Club member Greg Cave wrote letters to four aunts, seeking details on birth dates and locations, weddings dates and locations and more for his aunts, uncles, and cousins. The response was dismal. Only one reply! Has the art of letter writing totally disappeared?

Greg's Mom suggested that he try a small adjustment - extend the aunts' ages a bit to make them older than they actually are! One letter read "I have in my family history database that you were born in 1916." In fact, that particular aunt was likely born closer to 1920.

The responses were quick, instantly correcting the erroneous birthday of each aunt but also supplying loads of data on family members. It seems that age is a sensitive item in the family tree.

It Was Just A Birthday Party

Ron Gilmore's oldest cousin was celebrating her 85th birthday. The community hall was rented and over 50 folks attended with lunch, wine, hundreds of photo opportunities and the guest of honor. A head table, adorned with old family photographs, proved a constant attraction. After, most of the family retired to her nearby home.

Ron brought out his laptop and proceeded to invite every person present to spend a few minutes with him reviewing their segment of the family tree.

Within minutes, he was able to update a segment for each person, challenging their memory to recall their wedding dates, locations, their children's birthdates, etc. By the end of the evening, he had made a large update to his family tree.

Of course, his new data was purely anecdotal. Over time, Ron knows that he must secure "proof" documents for each item (for example, a birth certificate, a census record, etc.).

We all know that a family tree is not built in one day but birthdays and family reunions are major opportunities for gathering essential information.

Tools for Building a Family Tree

You never knew your grandparents and your father never mentioned your ancestors. But, you did watch a TV program once that traced the lineage of some celebrity. That was an interesting show, especially when she discovered some of her ancestors were actually slaves!

Now, you are retired and finally have some time on your hands. Maybe you can finally try to figure out your own heritage? How to start? What software tools are there for compiling genealogy information and which ones are the best? What online resources are available? How much is this going to cost? You suspect your family name is Irish but you were never sure. How to find out? So many questions and so few ready, reliable answers it seems.

Members of the Genealogy Club can help you build your own family tree. It will become an asset for your children and grandchildren and beyond.

DNA and Genealogy Research

So, you received a gift last year to have your DNA tested. You managed to deposit a bit of saliva into a tube and mail it off. Eventually, you received your “results” which indicated that your family came mostly from Western Europe. Big Deal! You knew that.

Now, you have been receiving emails from complete strangers, suggesting that you are related somehow. What do you do next? Do you have a documented family tree? Do you have a genealogy expert in your family? Do you really understand how this DNA thing works anyway? Were you adopted? We can probably bet that you have regrets for not talking more to your grandparents about your family history before they passed.

If any of the above sounds like your family, you are not alone. Many others have faced these questions. But, there are some answers! There are people and resources that you can access to help you find fascinating information on your family’s past and much more. Many of our members have pursued similar questions and advanced on some amazing personal adventures.

What Countries Did Your Ancestors Come From?

The following articles explore doing research for the records of specific countries –

Iceland

Iceland is an island nation of some 358,780 souls occupying 40,000 square miles in the North Atlantic. The island was initially settled by Irish monks and then peopled by the Vikings. Today, virtually everyone in Iceland is related.

Recorded settlement has conventionally been dated back to 874. Towards the end of the tenth century, Christianity came to Iceland. Iceland eventually fell under Danish rule until it gained its full sovereignty towards the end of World War II.

Today, you will find a national database entitled *islandeningabok* which is a genealogical database for the entire country, going back to the 9th century.

The www.islendingabok.is website hosts the online registry *Íslendingabók* (“The Book of Icelanders”). In it you can find information about the families of about 720,000 individuals who were born in Iceland.

Young dating Icelandic couples use the database for example, to make certain that the person they are dating is not a close cousin. Family historians use the database to trace back their individual family trees. Do you have an Icelandic heritage?

Ireland

How many folks do you know that claim to be part Irish? A large number is the likely answer. Millions of people worldwide have Irish forefathers, including many celebrities. Even Che Guevara's fourth great grandfather was Irish (his real surname was Lynch).

Yet, finding information and clues about your Irish ancestors can be a challenging task. Ireland remains a divided land and Irish records are scattered and partial. But the "Emerald Isle" holds a strong fascination for many. Ireland is a complex country, currently without a border between the Republic in the south and Northern Ireland.

The island resonates with history and legend. The Great Potato Famine caused a massive diaspora of Irish citizens to USA, Canada, Australia, and beyond. But there were many Irish who escaped Ireland before and after that great human tragedy. All left their footprints across the world stage.

Several of our members can help you find out what records can be accessed so you can flesh out the Irish segments of your family tree.

Jewish Family History

World War II witnessed the extermination of 6 million European Jews, literally eliminating three and sometimes four entire generations of families. Surviving family members found it almost impossible to trace missing relatives, either those killed in the death camps or those left wandering about a tattered and dysfunctional post-war Europe. Descendants were challenged by Swiss banks to produce non-existent death certificates in order to access family bank accounts. Through the tangled mess of a war ravaged continent, how could anyone find records to begin building a family tree? Are personal anecdotes and old newspaper clippings all that we have?

Where to start? You have no real official records, only a few old photographs and some faded letters. You cannot read German. Can DNA testing help? How does that work for Ashkenazi or Sephardic Jews?

Huge volumes of Jewish records have been recovered intact and are now accessible online. Club members can assist you in your search.

Claiming Membership in Historical Organizations

Several organizations require that new members prove one of their ancestors met certain required criteria. Examples include the DAR and the SAR – Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution. These articles explore the resources maintained by these organizations.

Colonial Dames (NSCDA)

Are you related to any of the colonial patriots? Were your ancestors settlers in the original colonies of America? Were they part of the creative and dynamic gene pool that created this great nation? You might be able to find out with the help of the Colonial Dames.

The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA) promotes the people, places and events that led to the formation of the United States of America. With 44 Corporate Societies and more than 15,000 members, the NSCDA has been a leader in preservation, restoration and the interpretation of historic sites. Society headquarters are located at Dumbarton House in Washington, D.C.

The NSCDA has more than 9,900 qualifying ancestors from whom its members claim descent. There are online biographies of the patriots.

Membership in the National Society of The Colonial Dames of America requires direct descent from an ancestor who resided in an American Colony prior to 1750 and who served his country in some official capacity before July 4, 1776.

Check out the NSCDA website at nscda.org.

Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)

Were your ancestors participants in the American Revolution?

The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) is an organization with a deeply rich history. More than 930,000 women have joined the organization since it was founded. They became members to honor their heritage as well as make a difference in their communities.

With some 3,000 chapters nationally and internationally, DAR has teams of volunteers who can assist you with your research. DAR also has a host of online genealogical resources. Examples include –

- Descendants Search database - more than 7,100,000 names
- Family Bibles - DAR has an immense collection of family history information gleaned from family bibles with approximately 40,000 entries

- Pension records from the revolutionary war contained in a database that was the created from 340 typescript volumes.
- DAR's Genealogical Records Committee Reports - began in 1913. The information in these 20,000 typescript volumes is predominately Bible and cemetery records.

Check out the DAR website at www.dar.org.

Sons of the American Revolution (SAR)

Are you related to any of the Sons of the American Revolution?

The National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR or NSSAR) is an American Congressionally-chartered organization, founded in 1889 and headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky. A non-profit corporation, it describes its purpose as maintaining and extending "the institutions of American freedom."

The members of the society are male descendants of people who served in the American Revolutionary War or who contributed to establishing the independence of the United States. It is dedicated to perpetuating American ideals and traditions

The National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution has a collection of genealogical reference material dating back to 1889.

Located in the Historic Museum District of downtown Louisville, Kentucky, the Library collection has grown to over 58,000 items, mostly covering the Revolutionary War period, but also containing other genealogical materials. The library collection includes family histories, state genealogy materials, federal censuses, Revolutionary War pension applications, and CD collections.

Check out the SAR website at www.sar.org.

Source, Source, Source

Almost all new genealogists make the same mistake and regret it later - they don't record their sources. It's critically important to record where information comes from.

If your aunt tells you your grandfather's birth date, don't just record the date. Record that your aunt told you the date.

Even better, ask your aunt how she knows his birth date and record her answer. It might sound silly, asking your aunt how she knows her own father's birth date. She may tell you she's always known it. But sometimes the day that a family celebrates isn't the birthday that's recorded on official documents.

The best thing would be to ask your aunt if she has any documents that show your grandfather's birthdate. Ideally, you should make a copy of them. (Making a copy can be as easy as taking a picture with your phone!)

When someone tells you a date, it's considered second-hand or derivative information. That doesn't mean it isn't true. It's just slightly less reliable than primary or original sources.

We know this might sound overly formal. You might just be a casual family historian, not a genealogy scholar. But like we said, most genealogists end up regretting that they didn't record their sources when they were first getting started.

If you use WikiTree, it's a requirement that you record your sources. For more on this, see WikiTree Help: Sources and Help: Uncertain.

Witches in Your Family Tree?

Recently, a cousin of mine unearthed a very interesting woman in his family tree who lived in Sweden. Initially, he had tracked down an Estonian stonemason in his family tree who had immigrated to Sweden and had been involved in the construction of several churches.

And, as a bizarre turn, the stonemason's oldest daughter (Anna Simonsdotter 1625-1676) was the second to last witch to be executed in Sweden. She was part of the mass hysteria that had swept Europe and America in the mid to late 1600's. Like many "witches," she had been initially accused, and then testified on, by her children. She was beheaded and her body burned on August 5, 1676 in the main square in Stockholm. Eventually, the authorities caught on that the children were lying and several were punished. The rest of the imprisoned "witches" were released.

In the USA of course, we had the similar tale of the Salem Witches. Any chance you have a witch in your family tree? When researching your family tree, you never know what you might find.