Note #A20   Researching your Family History at Busse Library

Step 1: Talk to your family

The first step in studying genealogy is discovering what you already know. Write down the names of all the relatives you know and anything you know about them (birth year, death year, residence, marriage, military service, and occupations). You will be surprised how much information you already have!

Once you have discovered what you already have, identify the gaps. Go to any living relative and start asking questions. If your grandparents or parents are still living, check with them first. They may be able to provide you with mountains of information that would be difficult to obtain from research alone. The more family members you can interview, the better. Also ask if there are any family Bibles, scrapbooks, or letters that might include family information. The best way to begin your research is through the people you love.

Important note: When you are studying the genealogy of females, try and find out their maiden name. This will give you greater access to birth records and marriage records.

Next, start an ancestor chart. There are many free ones on the web; look below for a few helpful links:

Ancestor Chart:
http://c.mfcreative.com/pdf/trees/charts/anchart.pdf (From Ancestry.com)

A Family Group Sheet can be really helpful in organizing your information. For a sample of a family group sheet, click the link below:
http://www.ancestry.com/charts/familysheet.aspx (From Ancestry.com)

> **Remember: When you are beginning to record information, use a pencil until you are certain of the facts.

> **Cite where you are getting each piece of information to make it easier to cross-reference later.

Step 2: Go to the web

Death Records

In your research, begin by searching death records first, then marriage records, and then birth records. These are referred to as "vital events," and most cities and towns began this type of recordkeeping in the 1600s. However, keep in mind, if your ancestor was living in a territory, not a state, it is possible that these records do not exist.

A good place to start is **the Social Security Death Index**. Go to http://www.ancestry.com/ps_ssdi?o_ps=ssdi&o_xid=21837&o_lid=21837&o_sch=Search to access the death index, which has over 85 million death records on file. This site will allow you to search by a first and last name, or social security number. It will tell you when the person was born, when they died, their last residence, social security number, and the state where their birth certificate was issued. You can start using these clues to find out more information. However, if the person you are searching for did not have a social security number, they will not be included

in this database. Social Security numbers were not issued until 1936, when the New Deal created the Social Security Program.

Census

The United States government has conducted a **census** every 10 years since 1790. From 1790-1840, only the male head of the household is listed on the census records. In 1850, the census began including the name, age, sex, race, occupation, and birthplace of every person in the household. It will also tell you how long the couple was married. In 1880, the census expanded to include relationships of people living within the household, and the birthplace of each person's parents. (A fire destroyed many of the census records from 1890.) Some things to remember when looking up census data:

1. Your family's name could be spelled many ways on the census, so get creative with your searches. Try sounding out your name, and thinking of ways people might interpret the spelling. Many families spelled their name phonetically, so search a variety of spellings.
2. Search nicknames as well as full names. Use various spellings.
3. Write your name down. Could the "f" look like a "p" if someone's penmanship was poor? Consider the different ways your name could be misconstrued.
4. Ages will range greatly, so search for +/- 5 years when doing your research. Sometimes people would round when talking to the census-taker.

Many census records can be found at https://familysearch.org/. Some census records are available by state at: http://www.census-online.com/links. These census records have been transcribed by volunteers, so expect a few errors and get creative with your searches.

Immigration Records

If you think your ancestors arrived in America between 1892 and 1924, search the Ellis Island database at http://www.ellisisland.org/ . The database gives you images of ship passenger lists, and millions of people are documented immigrating to America. This is a free service, but you must register on the site.

If your ancestors arrived in America between 1820 and 1892, you can use Castle Garden to search for their arrival. Go to http://www.castlegarden.org in order to access the free database.

Passenger Lists listing a number of nineteenth century immigrants can be found here: http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=GP44

Probate Records

Probate records are copies of wills of a family member. These can be useful because they will mention several family members in the will, giving you more information about for your family tree. Also, these records give you an idea of the economic and social condition of your family members, which is interesting as well.

Probate records are generally found at county courthouses. But some can be found online. You can try a Google search.

County and Town Histories

Many counties and towns, particularly in the Midwest, have recorded the history of their towns in the late 19th to the early 20th century. Many of these histories include biographies of the people who lived there. If you can pinpoint where an ancestor lived during this time period, you can use

these histories to find out more about them. Go to:
http://www.learnwebskills.com/family/countyhistories1.htm for a list of free county/town histories.

Obituaries and News Articles
Many newspapers have digitized their archives which makes searching for people very easy. If you are searching for an ancestor who died fairly recently, try searching newspaper databases for obituaries.

http://infoweb.newsbank.com (Newsbank.com)

http://www.lexisnexis.com (Lexisnexis.com)

http://search.ebscohost.com (Ebscohost.com, search the Newspaper Source)

http://www.tributes.com/cta/search/obituaries (Obituaries from the last 50 years)

Military Service

For a list of wars and military personnel service records, visit:
http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=GP23

Additional Web Sources

FamilySearch (http://www.familysearch.org) from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints offers access to online birth, marriage, death, census, church and other indexes.

GenWeb Project (http://www.usgenweb.com). This source, which is generated by volunteers, offers links to genealogical information, arranged by state and county. Special projects offer access to specific types of records.

RootsWeb (http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com) allows genealogists to share their genealogical research. This is a rich source of information, but all of the information is user-generated, so you will need to double-check its accuracy.

Mocavo (http:// www.mocavo.com) offers free access to documents and links to pertinent websites.

State Archives (http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/state-archives.html) Some of these collections are available electronically.

One more site that is very useful is Cyndi's List located at: http://www.cyndislist.com

> -You will find over 200,000 links to sites related to family history. Some of these include wills, adoption records, birth records, etc. Not all of these links are reputable, so sift through them carefully. However, the compilation of links can be very useful in your search.

The Family History Books archive (http://books.familysearch.org) includes over 40,000 searchable full-text documents. The archive includes histories of families, county and local histories, how-to books on genealogy, genealogy magazines and periodicals (including some international), medieval books (including histories and pedigrees), and gazetteers.

Google Books (http://books.google.com) includes many family histories and local histories. You can search the full-text of these books, so you can search by an ancestor's name.

Finally you can try using Google (http://www.google.com) to find your relatives. Using their full name and nicknames can bring up various pieces of information on them. However, be cautious with the information you find. The Internet is not necessarily an accurate source, and many people share the same name.

Online cemetary records can also be very useful sources of information. Find A Grave (http://www.findagrave.com) is an excellent source. Also try the Iowa Gravestones Photo Project (http://iowagravestones.org). To locate graves of Veterans go to http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/j2ee/servlet/NGL_v1

** You need to be careful when doing research on the web. Don't accept the first piece of information as truth. False genealogies have been recopied numerous times. Use information gathered from the web as clues, instead of facts.

Step 3: Ask a Librarian at Busse Library for assistance
The librarian may be able to suggest a number of other sources of information, specific to your family.

Step 4: Travel

If you run in to dead-ends and roadblocks, sometimes the only way to access records is to travel to the places where these people lived. Remember, many documents have not been digitized and are not available on the Internet. Different states have different archives for birth certificates, death certificates, and marriage licenses. They also have different policies for releasing these records to family members, so check with the department first.

Traveling and searching **local libraries** for archives of town newspapers or local histories can provide you with even more information.

If you know where someone was buried, visit the **cemetery** to find out more about their life. People are often buried with their family, so you can get more information about relatives by reading headstones.

Although travel is time-consuming and sometimes costly, it gives you insight into the life of your ancestor that you can't achieve with paper documents. When you are traveling, explore the town where he or she lived. Try and find the house where they lived and grew up. Genealogy is about appreciating your roots and your family history.