

# *GENEALOGY AND COMPUTERS*

For some people, genealogy is like greed. You never have enough information to satisfy you; you never have enough money. And just like people who brag about their wealth, genealogists are very boring when they go on and on about their ancestors or their research.

That said, genealogy is an immensely entertaining and educational hobby. You need a foundation of history and geography as it relates to your family, the skills of a detective to link together families, the charisma of a TV evangelist to persuade reluctant relatives to share family data, computer skills to make best use of the information available through the internet, and the stubbornness of a mule to stick with your research when you hit a brick wall.

The Internet is a fabulous source of information. Every week more data becomes available. You can share stories with long lost relatives all over the world. The Internet has revolutionized genealogy.

But before you hit the Internet, you have to do basic research so you know who and what you are looking for and where you are most likely to find pertinent information. The old-fashioned family group sheet is the cornerstone of all genealogical research. Here is one of the many versions available. It links spouses and their children together, generation by generation. A version of this form is used by all computerized genealogy programs.

## **How do you begin your quest to record your family history?**

Complete a family group sheet with facts about yourself, your siblings and your parents. Next complete sheets on your children and their children, and then your nieces and nephews and their children. If interested, your spouse can do the same for her/his family.

1. At this point you may want to enter this information into a computerized genealogy program. There are many, many versions available priced from \$10 up. I have two on my computer, **“Ultimate Family Tree”** by Palladium and **‘Family Tree Maker’** by Broderbund.
2. However, I only use these programs to import genealogical data from fellow researchers. For my own files, I prefer word processing. This is an unusual choice and I’m not suggesting you do the same but it works for me. My work is as much a history of the area where my people lived as it is a family tree with the usual names and dates.
3. My mother was from an 18-family island off the coast of Donegal. Both her parents’ families were from the next biggest island that had at its peak a population of 1500 people. My father’s family was from a 40-family village nearby on the mainland. They all belonged to the same Catholic parish but in Ireland, each parish has several churches. Because they only had access to people living within walking distance, they married their neighbors. As I began my research I found myself going back again and again to the same church and census records as I collected data about cousins by the dozens. In a moment of insanity I decided to do the history of all the families on both islands and my father’s village, called a townland in Ireland. I’ve been collecting data for about ten years, entering it into the Word Processing program as I go. The data for

each island is a separate section and each family name is a separate chapter. In addition, I have three chapters on the history of the area as it relates to my family. The book has grown to over 1000 pages and, like most genealogists; I am going to publish it just as soon as I record just a bit more information. Just like drunks find it hard to stop drinking, genealogists find it almost impossible to end their research!

4. Learn from my over-ambitious project and decide before you begin **how comprehensive** a family tree you want to document. The simplest, after you record the data on your parents, siblings, and descendants, is to go back in a straight line – parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. ignoring all of your ancestors' siblings and their descendants.
5. By doing this however, you may miss crucial information. For instance, if you can't find any documentation as to your great-grandmother's maiden name, you might find it by searching for information about her siblings.
6. Okay, you have entered into your genealogical program the information from the family group sheets. What next?
7. Interview your siblings and any older relatives and record their version of important family events. Don't be surprised if your brother's memories are different from yours. How a ten-year old views an event is usually very different than the memory of a teenager. When I was in Saigon and under curfew every night, to amuse myself I typed (it was 1967-68 and computers weren't available) what I remembered about my childhood and the stories my deceased mother told me. I sent a copy to each of my nieces and nephews. My brother, 4-1/2 years older, was incensed by my version of our family life. He felt I didn't give enough credit to our father or to him as the oldest son. He wrote a rebuttal that I copied and sent to all the family. His views were as valid as mine; just a bit different.
8. I can't emphasize enough the importance of **collecting all information possible from the family** – memories, pictures, stories, artifacts, etc. Don't be surprised if some of the relatives are reluctant to tell you about things they feel reflect badly on the family. I was pretty sure I remembered a tale about my grandmother being imprisoned by the British for helping IRA men in the days when the IRA was a respectable army fighting for their country's independence. My Philadelphia aunts denied this story. I didn't think my memory was incorrect so I wrote to their youngest sister in Ireland and asked her. She was only six years old when her mother was arrested and so traumatic was the event that almost seventy years later she could even recall the color of the dress she was wearing. When I showed Aunt Bid's version to my two Philly aunts, they admitted it was true. They didn't want to disgrace their mother's name!
9. You have done all your spadework and are now ready to hit **the Internet**. How do you find reliable information? Always remember there are three types of information available via computer:
  - a. Actual images of original documents such as the U.S. Census
  - b. Data bases compiled by a reliable source such as the Social Security Index
  - c. Information volunteered by unknown individuals which may be absolutely accurate and documented or a bunch of wild guesses. Who knows? Treat this type of information as nothing more than clues to be verified.

## Getting Started on the Internet

Attached is a list of **the 50 Best Databases** which was published in the April 2003 issue of Family Tree Magazine.

In addition to these sources of information, looking for information by location is also very valuable. For instance, Walsh is an extremely common name in both the United States and Ireland. To seek information about my Walsh family on a general Bulletin Board would result in hundreds of hits. It is much more productive to zero in on 'Ireland – Donegal' or 'United States – Philadelphia.' Another way is to type in the locality you are interested in. For instance, I'm trying to establish links between what I believe to be family members from Johnstown, Pa. I typed "Johnstown, Cambria Co., Pennsylvania" and found among other things an on-line book giving biographical information on some of those I'm interested in. Such searches by location also provide historical and geographical data, including maps, which provides background for your book. Also, on the Ellis Island Site you can search by former address of the immigrant. This is extremely useful if many family members emigrated from the same town.

### Bulletin Boards (BBs)

You can waste hours going from one Bulletin Board to another searching for family information. Many of the postings are too vague to be of use. It isn't unusual to see a heading that you think might be applicable to your research, open the file, and find garbage like, "My grandmother's name was Anne Walsh. Send me all the information you have about her."

Over the years I have made contact on Bulletin Boards with people who have been of great help with my research – but these useful contacts have been rare. I browse BBs only when I am too tired to do more useful work.

If you decide to post on Bulletin Boards, give yourself a fighting chance to receive useful information. Be specific about names, dates and locations. If the person who posted the garbage above had said, "Seeking information on my grandmother, Anne Walsh, who lived in Donegal (maybe Sheskinarone). She had at least nine children who married; they were all born from about 1890 to 1920."

### Documentation

As you begin to enter data, whether from family sources or the Internet, be sure to document your source. This is tedious and you will be tempted to skip this step. Do so at your own peril! In a year or two you will have forgotten where you found certain information. Then when you find conflicting information (and you will!), you won't know which source is the most reliable. Also, putting a footnote or endnote to indicate you received your information from Aunt Ida in a letter dated ..... Will please her no end. Always give credit to those who helped you. In addition, genealogists won't take your research seriously if you don't document your sources. Because of the 'whole island' type of research I am doing, I would be citing the same records hundreds of times in each chapter. Therefore, at the beginning of the book I list all the general records I used, including where they are located, film numbers, and all the other information necessary for someone else to find them. Then for information applying only to one person or family, such as U.S. Census information or death certificates or data provided by a family member, I use Footnotes to provide documentation.

### **Adding Photographs and Documents**

A book of just names and dates is boring! Add photographs of your relatives, of the places they lived and visited. Photos of even tombstone inscriptions can add interest. With a scanner you can even add copies of birth, marriage and death certificates. You can buy from the Ellis Island site a copy of the manifest listing for your relative and even a picture of the ship they arrived on.

### **Family Stories**

Try to add a few comments about each relative. Something as simple as a few words about Aunt Katie being a wonderful cook or Uncle Paul doing magic tricks can enliven your book and help readers see them as people, rather than just a name and dates. But while adding stories to your history, you also have to be sensitive to people's feelings. You might think it interesting that an aunt had a baby without benefit of husband but her descendants might be offended by you including such information. Suicides, drunks, neer-do-wells are in almost every family. Judge the reaction from your relatives before including such information. Also some people are very sensitive about age. I decided not to include any birth dates after 1930.

### **Breaking Brick Walls**

Never give up on your research! Sometimes to get answers you have to side-step a bit.

If you can't find any information about your grandmother's parents, try researching the records for your grandmother's siblings. Among their marriage license applications, death certificates, etc. you may find your answer.

Trying to document family stories can be a real challenge. I was 95% positive that the story about my grandmother being jailed by the British was true but I wasn't able to find any documentation. I wrote to every Irish Government Bureau I could think of with no results. Years later I came across a mention of a Pensions Bureau and decided to make another try. Months went by and finally one day I received an envelope containing gold. Not only did they send photocopies of all the papers in my grandmother's file but also included complete details of my father's service with the Republican Army and the IRA. And, wonder of wonders, they returned my check saying payment wasn't necessary!

### **Publishing Your Work**

Doing all this work and collecting all this information will help no one if you don't publish it! Today genealogical information can be disseminated in three ways:

Establish a Web Site for your information

Submit it via modem to a Site such as Family Search.

Publish it in hard copy and sell/give the books to the family. There are companies that specialize in printing Family Histories. Some of these companies advertise in magazines like "Family Tree Magazine."

### **Preserving Your Research Data**

I have spent years and many thousands of dollars obtaining records, photographs, and other documents about my family. I think I would come back from the dead and strangle the kids if they threw away this family treasure trove. I have made known my wishes that these

files be kept intact until someone wishes to carry on the family research, be it in their generation or one or two down the road. Just to emphasize how serious I am about this need to preserve the family history, I had my wishes written into my will!