

Finding Family – May 2018

US Census – the Cornerstone for Tracing Family

By Christine Dunn

In last month's column, US Census records were used to learn about the founder of the Goodman Library.

If “starting with what you know” by interviewing your relatives is the first step in genealogical research, the US Census is the cornerstone. So says Napa genealogist Mary Herzog.

Herzog is an inveterate genealogist who has been tracking down her family roots since her early retirement in 1984. She has pursued her mother's family as far back as the 1700s in Devon, England. “I feel very fortunate to have met many of my Devon cousins whose families did not immigrate to America,” said Herzog. When she hits a brick wall in her own family, Herzog takes a break by helping fellow genealogists with their research.

“The Census is a snap shot in time,” said Herzog. “It tells us where people were living, who was in the family and, depending on the year of the census, other important information about the family.”

The Constitution empowers the Congress to carry out the census as part of their bold and ambitious plan to empower the people over their new government. The plan was to count every person living in the newly created United States of America and to use that count to determine representation in the Congress.

In the first Census in 1790, only the heads of families were listed, by name only, with male or female indicated. Every subsequent Census has added just a little bit more information. People were put in age categories fairly early on but it wasn't until 1850 that each person was named. Not until 1880 was the relationship to the head of the household given in the Census. “In 1900, married women were asked how many children they had given birth to and how many of those children were still living,” said Herzog. The same question was in 1910; unfortunately it was not asked again.

The 1930 Census asked how old you were at your first marriage. “Unfortunately,” said Herzog, “not all Census takers understood how to ask the question nor did all the people who heard the question know how to answer it.” Genealogists look at the person's age to help determine if the person answered the question about their current marriage or a previous one.

The accuracy of the Census also depends on who is answering the questions. Census takers usually came during the day. If only the housekeeper or the maid was at home then the answers came from their limited knowledge.

Sometimes people were simply reluctant to deal with any government agency. “This was the case with my own grandmother,” said Herzog. “I found her in the 1900 and the 1910 Census. I have never found her in 1920 or 1930. When the 1940 Census came out I was very excited. I thought at last I will find her. I was able to find her because I knew her address and her husband's last name. The entry gave the husband last name and a little note, ‘refuses to

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answer'. My grandmother was listed as 'wife'. There was no other information on either of them."

Census records also have information about when a person immigrated to the United States or participated in the Civil War. Schedules of Union Civil War Veterans are among the fragments of the 1890 Census that survived a fire that destroyed nearly all of the records.

Sometimes enumerators put down more information than is asked for. Herzog said, "I have an ambrotype of a great uncle in his Civil War uniform and I have the homemade dominos he carried with him in the War. When I found him in the 1890 Veterans Schedule it also listed his wife. I didn't know he was married. It was even more interesting to learn that his wife was the widow of three other Civil War Veterans. "

Census records also can be the jumping off place for more in-depth historical research. Herzog was researching a family who moved from Indiana to Wisconsin in the 1850s. "I wondered why they moved," said Herzog. Looking at the 1850 Census, which does not include family relationships, Herzog found the family with a long list of children. At the end of the list were two infants, each with a different last name. Herzog persisted and, with more research, discovered that the family had two older daughters who had each married and had a child. Shortly after the birth of their children, the daughters and their husbands died of cholera. Historical research showed that the swampy area of Indiana where the family lived had been hit by a devastating cholera epidemic. This was probably the reason for the move to Wisconsin.

Herzog recommends starting your Census research with your closest relatives and the 1940 Census (the most recent one available to the public). All Census records are available online at no cost. "Even if you think you know all about your family, it is still valuable to look them up because of the bits and pieces of new information you will find," said Herzog. With luck, you may discover a few surprises to liven up the conversation at your next family gathering.

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Caption: The 1890 Census is the only one not available. Stored in the basement of the Commerce Building in Washington DC, the Census was destroyed in a fire in 1921.